

The Voice in Rap

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The years spanning from 1990 to 1995 have seen the consolidation of rap music in France with, amongst the most representative rappers of that period, Assassin, IAM, MC Solaar, Ministère AMER and NTM. Based on the analysis of a corpus of songs by these rappers, this study will examine the concept of voice in rap, and more specifically in French rap. From the methodological point of view, the principles of pragmatist aesthetics will be assumed, insofar as it legitimates rap as a contemporary popular art form.¹ Although the complexity of rap undoubtedly invites a number of different approaches, the chosen focus of this article will be the analysis of voice as a category which integrates the musical, textual and performing aspects of songs, with the aim to demonstrate the extent to which the voice in rap can be defined as a blurred, non-melodic, highly rhythmic, free and self-referential voice. Considering the vast potential developments of this subject, the reflection developed in this work might be taken further through the study of other national rap scenes.

Rap stands at the antipodes of purity, whether one considers its process of creation or its musical, textual or ideological components. Georges Lapassade and Philippe Rousselot (1996) define it as the “diction, half spoken half sung, of elaborated texts, with rhythm and rhyme, uttered over a musical basis made of music samples and other sound sources” (p.9 [my translation]). This definition clearly shows the hybrid nature of this form of expression made of words and music, of rhythm and speech, both oral and written, caught between singing and scansion. Rap is part of hip hop culture and occupies a unique place in the vast horizon of contemporary popular music. Since it is both a cultural object and a commercial product sold in a global market, rap must be considered in its heterogeneity, taking into

¹ With regard the legitimization process of rap and popular art forms in general, see Shusterman (1991).

account the cultural, aesthetic, musical, literary, social, economic and political dimensions at stake.²

As for voice, it constitutes one of the most useful parameters for the study of performance arts. Indeed, it reflects the unique fusion of text and performance which characterises the various lyric forms, amongst which popular music. Voice must be considered as a textual and musicological, but also philosophical category; standing at the intersection of poetry and music, according to Vincent Vivès, it “reveals a body in its historical, political and epistemology inscription” (Vivès, 2006, p.10 [my translation]). From the original language of Rousseau, from the Greek *musikê* where poetry and music were merged into one and the same concept, to the heterogeneity of its postmodern dimension, the human voice thus appears as a cultural construction, constantly evolving: it was the manifestation of the divine breath and of the unwritten truth in the Ancient world; the symbol of individual and political power in Rome; the polyphonic expression of community values in the Middle Ages; a means of individualisation for rationalism; and a vehicle of transcendence, of communication superior to speech, a metaphor of the unconscious in Romanticism. In this historical continuum of visions of the human as conveyed by the voice, where does the voice in rap stand?

As a fully contemporary heir of tradition, as a product of post-industrial society, transcended by postmodernism in its transgressions and marginality, as a way of actualising and transcending linguistic meaning (speech), the voice in rap has an aesthetic and semantic function in which performance and the body are essential. This voice which, according to Barthes, is characterised by its “grain” – “the grain is the body in the singing voice (Barthes, 1977, p.1441 [my translation]) –, represents for Richard Middleton (2004) a “surplus in the game of meaning – what Barthes calls *signifiance* – which offers the listener the possibility of *jouissance*” (p.775 [my translation]).³ The voice conveyed by performance allows us to escape the obsession with the written word and find a physical union between a text and its interpreter. As an immediate link between the interpreter’s body and the linguistic sign, the voice thus constitutes:

the sum of a series of components which striate, intersect and superpose one another, creating in their multiplicity the representation

² The book by Georges Lapassade and Philippe Rousselot (1996) is an excellent introduction to the subject of hip hop. See also Bethune (1999), Rose (1984) and Perkins (1996).

³ See also Middleton (1990).

of a continuum of body and language, of language and meaning, where individuation is never at stake.

(Vivès, 2006, p.192 [my translation])

The voice in rap stands out from other types of voices. Sung, scanned, “chewed” or “thrown”, it is irregular and unpredictable. It is first of all a lyrical and poetic voice (a voice that is *sung*), but also a political and social one (a voice that is *spoken*). The scale which ranges from speaking to singing can thus be covered, in any direction, within a single song. As we will see, rap has created a new style of voice which has become an enunciating sign of its aesthetics. In addition, the entire body of the rapper accompanies the words, which are themselves transformed by the voice. Delivered with rage or passion, deconstructed in their phonetics and syntax, the words conveyed by the voice are no longer the written words. Indeed, the voice actualises the written text in each performance, thus becoming itself the new text: this is why the terms “text” and “voice” are used as synonyms, the term “text” being defined as the superior unit of meaning which encompasses that of voice. As a singular expression and a socio-cultural, historical and philosophical sign, the voice in rap is recreated and reinvented with each new performance, thus making any standardising characterisation impossible.

Nevertheless, and despite the inherent paradox of any genre analysis, the following pages will aim to present the voice in rap as the metonymy of an aesthetics which seduces both by its originality and its opposition to an idealist aesthetics.

The aesthetics of difficulty

Listening to rap is not easy. The uninitiated public faces a barrier that prevents immediate understanding of the lyrics and the meaning of the song. The overall impression is usually blurred, followed by a feeling of misunderstanding and also often rejection: if the text rejects the listener, the listener rejects the song. Thus, rap songs immediately stand as being radically different from other genres in popular music, mainly due to the difficulty associated with their perception. These comprehension problems are caused by the delivery (which is often too fast), the abundant noise (sound effects, vocal layering, etc.), the tone of the voice (angry, too loud, exaggerated), the deviance from standard French (*verlan*, argot, subversive linguistic images) and by many other factors which ultimately contribute to making rap a musical, textual and vocal genre that challenges the standard principles of communication. In *Le Rap*

français: esthétique et poétique de textes, the aesthetics of rap is defined as original and paradoxical: it is a radically postmodern artistic manifestation relying technically and theoretically on sampling, but it is also strongly rooted in the Afro-American tradition and French popular culture, especially French song or "*chanson française*".⁴ It is also an aesthetics of commitment, of criticism, of revolution, of messianism even, but one which remains definitely commercial; it is violent and agonistic, deeply self-referencing, sexist, often simplistic, but also paradoxically complex.

These are the general features of the aesthetics of rap. However, a classification or typology of rap can be established, such as the one developed by Adam Krims (2000 and 2003). Indeed, Krims identifies two genres or subgenres: "reality rap" and "knowledge rap". The former is characterised by a superposition of layers in a dense and complex sound material, which sometimes makes threatening, violent sounds and which is usually assimilated to American gangsta rap. In France, Ministère AMER et NTM represent this particular type of rap.⁵ The violent sounds in reality rap are seen to express the difficulties of life in urban ghettos – layering thus becoming both a sound and semiotic strategy. For Krims, the sound profusion and the threatening force of this type of rap suit the subjects dealt with in the lyrics of the songs perfectly:

That encoding is a classic case of musical semiosis, and it can be seen both in interviews with rap producers and in the consistent pairing of the musical technique with semantic references to these dangers and devastation. The hip-hop sublime frames for the listener fears and pleasures of the black, inner-city ghetto that both fascinates and horrifies rap fans and our popular culture generally. In other words, this particular musical strategy has served, in rap music culture, as a figure for the view of inner-city menace and despair from the point of view of a trapped underclass.

(Krims, 2003, p. 146)

⁴ For a more detailed description of the aesthetics of rap, see Marc Martínez (2008).

⁵ Ministère AMER is a hardcore group from the Paris outskirts, which became very successful between 1990 and 1995. Representing a radical vision of *negritude*, their style is aggressive and provocative. NTM, from Saint-Denis, is one of most famous groups in French rap. Its members, Joey Starr and Kool Shen, are known for their provocative discourse and their egocentrism. Both Ministère AMER and NTM have had to deal with censorship and the judicial system.

On the other hand, knowledge rap is directly inscribed in the continuity of oral Afro-American traditions. With its didactic objective, it avoids the sound effects of reality rap, choosing instead to follow an almost melodic line which recalls the Afro-American musical heritage. It seems logical that a song with a pedagogical aim should have less bizarre sounds, and would be easier to listen to. In France, Assassin or IAM belong to knowledge rap, with the clear messages of songs such as “Tam tam de l’Afrique” (IAM, 1991) or “Écrire contre l’oubli” (Assassin, 1995).⁶

However, in nearly every rap song, even if the sound base is not complex, the uninitiated listener faces a problem of comprehension. The first difficulty lies in the rapper’s diction, which is sometimes so fast that the understanding of the lyrics becomes compromised – it is as if the voice were rushed forth, propelled by the urgency of the message. Moreover, many lines are delivered in an unusual manner where standard intonation or accentuation is not followed. Thus, depending on the rhythmic line, words are extended or shortened, deformed or cut, so that there is a noticeable gap between the written words and their performance. In this respect, the transcription of the lyrics represents one of the main problems when studying rap. Indeed, the version given on the disc covers often does not correspond to the actual breaks in the interpreter’s voice. That is why the written lyrics cannot reveal the modulations of rhythm and sound. In addition, the tone adopted by the MC (challenging, burlesque, angry, desperate...), like that of an actor or an opera singer, provides further meaning, highlighting and reshaping the signified of the written text. “Sacrifice de poulet” (Ministère AMER, 1995), where a grating demoniacal voice creates a truly threatening atmosphere turning a racial incident into a kind of Biblical apocalypse provides a good example. This is also the case of “Paris sous les bombes” (NTM, 1995), where the lyrics evoke the classical *ubi sunt* (“il fut une époque à graver dans les annales” / “there was a time to be remembered in the annals!”; “où sont mes bombes, où sont mes bombes” / “where are my bombs, where are my bombs” [my translation]), describing in nostalgic terms the times when spray bombs would conquer the streets of Paris. But the voice, husky and excessive, transforms the evocative words into an imminent attack. Thus, the voice, as a

⁶ IAM, the most representative rappers in Marseille, is the most widely recognised group by the public and critics alike. Their style is less American, and more conscious of their Mediterranean origins. IAM’s songs invite reflection more than action. Assassin is one of the pioneers of hip hop in France and has created its own label. During the years 1990-1995, Assassin released several albums that are considered canonical, presenting educational and political concerns as well as an ego-trip attitude.

singular but symbolic interpretation, like the skin surrounding the skeleton of written words, constitutes an integrating category, caught between the written and the oral, the singing and the speaking; it is a hybrid and essential concretion, which proves indispensable for any interpretation.

The difficulty associated with the voice in rap is no doubt inherent to the aesthetics of hip hop: on the one hand, it is imposed by a linguistic density, tensed by the rhythm of the music. On the other hand, it stands out as a voluntary challenge on the part of the rapper to attract public attention. Indeed, the public has to make an effort to understand in what can be described as a ritual of initiation. When the first barrier falls, the listener is rewarded: he/she has access to the encoded message and thus enters the hip hop community. Faced with everyday speech and the words of boredom used by the establishment, he/she ultimately finds a linguistic space of true communication. After the decoding process, the listener feels the satisfaction of "intelligence", a response to his/her expectations. The pleasure he/she experiences could thus be likened to that experienced by the reader of a Baroque poem upon decoding its hidden references.

Nevertheless, and despite the primary role of the performance, of the voice, it should be noted that the difficulty of comprehension encountered urges the amateur to read the written text. Whenever something is hidden, it attracts curiosity. Responding to a sort of logic of difficulty, rappers make a message complex by blurring sounds and / or speeding the delivery in order to repel strangers but also so as to tease and feed the public's intelligence. The movement goes then from the oral, from the voice, to the written, and vice versa. When the public is able to sing along with the artist, when listeners, individually or at concerts, can identify with the message, they are integrated into a community where they feel respected and protected. These feelings of belonging are reinforced by the marginal origins of rap and by the marginality of the aesthetics and ideology characteristic of hip hop.

The absence of melody

One of the most frequent prejudices held against rap is to not consider it as music, but rather as noise assembled in an inharmonious way. Like rock or punk⁷ in their first stages, rap has become the target for idealist critics and a symbol for postmodern

⁷ See the already classical work by Greil Marcus (1990).

criticism.⁸ But these very accusations can help understand the characteristics of rap. For example, the so-called lack of musicality (musicality having been assimilated to melody in the Western tradition) is one of the main features of the aesthetics of rap. In fact, rap songs do have melodic lines, but they are usually restricted to choruses, especially in knowledge rap. Rap music is built on samples of previous recordings (melodic and unmelodic ones such as crashes, claxons and other special effects) mixed together and reconstructed by the DJ to serve as a sound base over which the MC can deliver his text. When a melodic line is recognizable, it represents a more or less straightforward and deliberate homage to the original song – in a somehow similar way to a quotation inserted in a text. For instance, IAM used the sample of Stevie Wonder's "Pastime Paradise" when composing "Tam tam de l'Afrique", and the underlying melody is very easily recognizable and recalls African-American musical traditions. The text is also easy to understand, the voice loud and solemn, because the objective is clear: to deliver a message that denounces slavery and hails the creation of the utopia of *negritude*. Melody thus serves the educational function of the text. However, these concessions to melody (to accessibility) are less frequent in "old school"⁹ rap than in more "commercial" rap like MC Solaar's. On the contrary, intertextual referents (sound intertext) are usually deliberately hidden, relocated; for example, the technique of scratching, which is so essential to rap, could be seen as a stylistic metonymy of many songs: to deform one single note or idea as much as possible. One can therefore assert that hardcore rap, like reality rap, refuses to use melody as an organizing principle of the musical and vocal material. Voice in this kind of rap is thus deliberately unmelodic.

Semantic rhythm

To identify music and melody is obviously a false simplification, and whichever definition of music we adopt, rhythm will always be essential. If rhythm is the basis of every rap song, then which rhythm is it precisely? The musical or the linguistic? Or both? And to what extent? Indeed, the voice in rap results from both the linguistic and the musical material, which become indissoluble during the

⁸ Schusterman (1991) elaborates a defence of popular art against idealistic critics (Adorno, Benjamin and the Structuralists).

⁹ "Old school" refers to authentic rap, from the publication of *The Message* by Grandmaster Flash in 1981 until 1995. Afterwards, rap has followed a process of fusion, of reconsideration, leading to products which could be quite different from "Old school" ones.

performance. One only has to listen to a rap song and compare the voice to the written text to observe that the former profoundly alters (even contradicts) the latter. Even when accepting that rap songs are written in free verse and that they therefore do not respect an established metrics, a prosodic and metric study of the written text is invalidated by the actual performance. Indeed, it is voice alone, as the only integrating category, which can constitute the object of analysis. In this respect, a musical and textual methodology, such as the one developed by Jean-Marie Jacono (1996), should be privileged.

The rhythm in rap is identified with the rhythm of its voice. This rhythm is thus at the intersection of the oral and the written, of song and speech, of discourse and poetry. Taking Verlaine's famous saying to an extreme – “de la musique avant toute chose” / “music before everything” –, rap cannot be assimilated to written poetry, or at least not in the first place. One can refer here to Henri Meschonnic who considers that rhythm is “the organisation of speech by a subject” (Dessons and Meschonnic, 1998, p.28 [my translation]); Meschonnic clearly separates poetry from music, as well as the rhythm of performance from poetic rhythm, which is exclusively textual. He also divests his concept of rhythm of any musical base. However, by giving rhythm a primary semantic function as a structuring principle of the subject, he points out its essential role far beyond mere stylistic effects. The subject in rap,¹⁰ as a poetic subject, imposes his aesthetic, cultural and political identity to the text. He transgresses the rules of standard French prosody according to his aesthetical, political and social transgression. The subject imposes himself on traditional accentuation to the point of destroying standard prosody. However, this destruction is in itself a creation: the new rhythms convey a new aesthetics of a new subject.

The obsessive omnipresence of rhythm calls up a primitive conception of poetry, only transmitted by performance. This oral poetry, close to ritual, had in the past and still has today a mesmerizing effect on the public. At this point, one should acknowledge that its African-American origins are essential. African-American music, including rap, is based on a regular rhythm which conveys an essentially narrated signified. Like African *griots* (or, *mutatis mutandis*, ancient bards or evangelic preachers), rappers reproduce the obsessive rhythm of primitive songs. They have a power over their public, who feel included in the community and free from rationality and established order. The subject achieves an alteration of rhythmic and prosodic rules according to his own vision

¹⁰ During the period studied, women's presence was not relevant in the French hip hop scene.

of the world, by creating a rhythm which is omnipresent and regular with regards to music (sound), but totally unpredictable as far as the text is concerned.

In general terms, it can be asserted that rhythm helps the ludic encoding of the texts, the ludic-cryptic function being one of the most relevant in rap poetics. With regard the organisation of rhythm, Christophe Rubin (2002) considers that writing in rap is conditioned by the creation of vocal effects in performance, "where sounds, games of sounds corresponding to certain types of articulatory movements are privileged, and the organisation of rhythms is achieved" (p.267 [my translation]). However, these remarks are limited to the written text and, as we have already seen, comparing what is heard to what is written shows a lack of correspondence between the musical rhythm and the written text. Indeed, if we put the voice over the texts, it appears that rap songs are built on a 4/4 time-signature, stressed on the second and fourth beats. This rhythm is essential to rap, above all because it is not a type of music where the interpreter sings as such since the voice very rarely follows a melody. In rap, this 4/4 rhythmic structure is the base, but each line displays its own rhythm. Thus, despite the obsessive repetition of this beat, it is impossible to predict where the performance will be stressed. Sometimes, the lines follow this beat, like in "Tam tam de l'Afrique", which stands as an example of regularity and coherence between musical and linguistic rhythm. Conversely, songs like "Flirt avec le meurtre" by Ministère AMER (1997) do not follow any musical time-signature, any rule, as a different rhythm is created in each line, showing an absolute gap between the accents in the sound base and the prosodic and syntactic accents. By combining balance or clarity with obscurity and strangeness, rhythms are chosen in order to create an effect which matches the main poetic function of the song. In a scale of variation, texts can range from relative regularity (which characterises some songs by IAM or MC Solaar) to rhythmic anarchy (Ministère Amer or NTM). Thus, in songs with a clear educational function, the voice is strong, virile (as mentioned earlier, women's presence was not relevant in the French hip hop scene during the period studied), a voice that should be respected because it comes from a poet, a master of ceremonies who controls the rules of hip hop. These songs follow the musical rhythm more easily; their tone is stronger, their diction more intelligible, relatively calm. On the other hand, in songs of rebellion or destruction (always symbolic), the voice adopts more extreme tones. It is interrupted by interjections, it transgresses regularity and becomes unpredictable; its tone becomes threatening, hyperbolic, violent. It becomes a cry. In conclusion, the subject, be it rebellious or messianic, imposes on the voice its own rhythm as a semantic structuring principle.

Freedom and self-reference

The voice in rap is a free voice because it is not forced to follow a melody or standard linguistic rhythms. Despite the fact that it belongs to a defined genre, which is easily recognizable in its opposition to other genres in popular music, it can explore every possible evolution of interpretation, with the exception perhaps of traditional singing. As long as a text is not completely sung, the rapper is free to attempt and do anything he likes. In addition, technology being at his disposal, he can manipulate his voice in every possible way. Technology has become the new and basic instrument for rappers, who very often do not have any formal musical education; they do, however, always consider themselves as professionals in their art: “je suis un poète au même titre que La Fontaine l’a été” / “I am as much a poet as La Fontaine” (Assassin, 1991 [my translation]); “l’univers de la rue a fait naître deux poètes” / “the streets have given rise to two poets” (NTM, 1991 [my translation]). As far as voice is concerned, the microphone (“*le micro*”) becomes the technical symbol of its strength. As a necessary tool to the mediated voice, texts often refer directly to the microphone. Therefore, when the subject-interpreter mentions this instrument – “Je suis tenace, me mets en face du micro” / “I am tenacious, I stand before the microphone” (MC Solaar, 1994 [my translation]) –, he intends to magnify his voice, of course, but he is more specifically referring to his performance. This physical and verbal act symbolizes a “*prise de parole*” (taking up speech) and the will to communicate with his public. Indeed, contrary to other types of electronic music,¹¹ rap likes exposing itself physically during concerts. Concerts – even though no instrument is played live – constitute the paradigmatic space and time for true communication, where the subject can transmit his message to the public, a public which is no entelechy but a vibrating crowd, led by the sounds conveyed by the microphone. Rap is not a solipsistic creation, but a real communication act, tangible, carnal, incarnated by the voice, where voice is a physical manifestation that can be perceived by senses.

The role of performance in rap should be stressed as being aesthetic and communicative, as illustrated by the following lyrics: “Assieds-toi, écoute-moi, je pose ma voix, attention” / “Sit down, listen to me, here is my voice, pay attention” (Ministère AMER, 1997 [my translation]). Conveyed by voice, a performance reveals a deliberate intention to

¹¹ Rap is electronic music, as its exclusively composed through electronic means, just like techno, house or trip hop.

have an effect in the real world. Even the linguistic text refers to this intention explicitly:

Puis pénètre de ma voix ton univers privé, / Le fleuve lyrique qui coule à
flots influe sur ta façon de penser.
Then I penetrate your private universe with my voice / the lyrical stream
flows and influences your thinking.

(Assassin, 1992 [my translation])

Nos voix pénètrent des endroits où les keufs ne font pas un pas.
Our voices penetrate places where cops don't set foot.

(Assassin, 1995 [my translation]).

The voice has such power that it is likened to a weapon: "Ma voix sert de colt, pousse à la révolte" / "My voice is a colt, it leads to rebellion" (Ministère AMER, 1997 [my translation]). It is a strong and virile voice, capable of great things: "la voix de basse, la voix de basse brouille les pistes" / "the bass voice, the bass voice blurs every trace" (Ministère AMER, 1997 [my translation]). The subject is thus conscious of the fact that his voice is an instrument of power and communication. But these examples also show another feature of the voice of rap: self-reference. According to rap aesthetics, the voice deploys itself in a conscious way; it alludes to itself, exploiting its stylistic resources knowingly. Listening to songs like "Sacrifice de poulet" (Ministère AMER, 1995) or "Qu'est-ce qu'on attend" (NTM, 1995) makes it clear that the modulations of the interpreters' voices are full of meaning.

There is a limit inherent to the attempt to explain with words an object which is not exclusively verbal. Therefore, to understand the voice in rap, it is essential to listen to it. Only an attentive, empathetic listening can reveal its richness and its particularities: often obscure, situated in the margins of traditional lyric codes, defiant, melody-free, organised according to a new rhythm, self-referencing and conveying a message, the voice in rap creates an aesthetic, symbolic and ideological space opposed to the multiplicity of voices in post-industrial societies. Rap (old school rap and new national scenes) can offer a means of expression to marginalized sectors of society. Thus, rapping has become a political act ("*prise de parole*") but above all an aesthetic act ("*prise de voix*"). In fact, the prevalence of aesthetics over ideology, reinforced by the commercial control of rap by record companies (excluding a few examples of self-production) limits the political and revolutionary reach of the hip hop voice. Therefore, even though it represents a means of expression (and recognition) for those forgotten by power or history, as a poetic voice (essentially fictional

beyond its rebellious and prophetic nature), the voice in rap remains marginal, neatly separated from the spoken words of political discourse, far from the words of power.

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