2021 ACTA UNIVERSITATIS CAROLINAE PAG. 11–33
STUDIA TERRITORIALIA 2

CONTESTED MEMORIES IN CONTEMPORARY FRANCE AND THEIR REFLECTION IN RAP MUSIC

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Abstract
France's colonial past and its aftermath remain an "open wound" to this day. After a long period of silence, painful issues such as the role of France in the transatlantic slave trade, colonial crimes in Africa, and the Algerian War have more and more become part of public consciousness in France. Interestingly, many French rap musicians who are the children or grandchildren of immigrants from former French colonies frequently use their songs to remind France of its colonial past. However, their messages sometimes compete with remembrance of the Holocaust. The singers' condemnation of French colonialism becomes wrapped up in the Middle East conflict and Israel is portrayed as a new "colonial power." By analyzing selected lyrics of recent French rap songs this article aims to explore the complex and sensitive intersection of post-colonial and Middle East politics and set the lyrics in the broader socio-political context of remembrance culture in France. The article argues that the musicians' approaches to France's troubled past are an important form of self-affirmation for their communities in the postcolonial context. By bringing up previously silenced topics, they contribute to a more diverse remembrance culture and contest narratives that have been predominant for a long time.
Keywords: France; rap music; remembrance; colonialism; Algerian War; Middle East conflict
DOI: 10.14712/23363231.2022.2

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Introduction

In September 2020, a new debate about alleged anti-Semitic content in French rap music arose because of *La Menace Fantôme* [The Phantom Menace], the debut studio album of French-Senegalese rapper Freeze Corleone. Released (not by accident) on September 11, it turned out to be an immediate success in France. At the same time, it was quickly condemned as a work steeped in anti-Semitism, hatred of Israel, apologies for Hitler and the Third Reich, conspiracy theories, and Islamist rhetoric.[1] For instance, Corleone declares in his songs that he "arrives determined like Adolf in the 1930s," that he uses "the propaganda techniques of Goebbels," that he does not "give a damn about the Shoah," and that "like Swiss bankers, it will be all for the family" so his "children can live like Jewish rentiers." Furthermore, Corleone talks about "Zion Center" (Israel) and about the killing of "a life, a lord of war like Mullah Omar" (the former head of the Afghan Taliban and an anti-Semitic ideologue).[2]

It is therefore not surprising that shortly after the release of Corleone's album, the Paris prosecutor's office announced that it had opened an investigation of the rapper for "provocation of racial hatred." About 50 politicians, including many within President Emmanuel Macron's La République en Marche (LREM) Party, condemned the lyrics. Furthermore, Universal Music France announced that despite the album's commercial success, they were cutting all ties with the musician because "the release of the album has revealed and amplified unacceptable racist statements."[3]

In this context it must be emphasized that manifestations of anti-Semitism and Islamist rhetoric are a highly sensitive issue in contemporary France. Since the outbreak of the second Intifada in Israel in 2000, France has been particularly

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1 The album quickly rose on the French music charts and sold more than 15,000 copies in three days, attracted more than five million listeners on the Spotify platform within 24 hours, and very quickly amassed several million views on YouTube. See Ben Cohen, "The Holocaust vs. the Rest: A New Threat," *The Jewish Star*, September 23, 2020, https://www.thejewishstar.com/stories/the-holocaust-vs-the-rest-a-new-threat,19772.

2 Agence France Presse, "French Rapper Who Compared Himself to Hitler Dropped by Label," *The Jakarta Post*, September 19, 2020, https://www.thejakartapost.com/life/2020/09/19/french-rapper-who-compared-himself-to-hitler-dropped-by-label.html; and Idan Zonshine, "Wiesenthal Center Demands YouTube Remove Antisemitic French Rapper," *The Jerusalem Post*, September 22, 2020, https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/antisemitism/wiesenthal-center-demands-youtube-remove-antisemitic-french-rapper-643107.

3 AFP, "French Rapper."

affected by the problem of a rising "new" anti-Semitism.[4] The number of hate crimes, verbal insults, and physical attacks against Jews or Jewish institutions has remained high since then. They culminated in the assassinations of several French Jews. In 2006, young Ilan Halimi, a Frenchman of Moroccan Jewish ancestry, was kidnapped and later killed by the so-called Gang des Barbares. In 2012, an Islamist, Mohamed Merah, shot three children and a teacher to death in a Jewish school in Toulouse. In January 2015, another Islamist, Amedy Coulibaly, killed four clients of a Jewish supermarket in Paris in a murder connected to the fatal attack on the offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. In 2017, a retired Jewish schoolteacher, Sarah Halimi, was murdered in her apartment in Paris by a neighbor, Kobili Traoré. One year later, a Holocaust survivor, Mireille Knoll, suffered a similar fate, killed by her neighbor Yacine Mihoub.

It is striking that in all these cases, the alleged murderers were young men with a Muslim immigrant background, although not every one of them seemed to have been close to Islamist movements. Still, Mohamed Merah and Amedy Coulibaly "justified" their murders of French Jews by arguing that they wanted to "avenge" the deaths of Palestinians at the hands of Israelis.[5] The Middle East conflict and (ostensible) solidarity with Palestine undoubtedly play a significant role in current anti-Semitic resentments and actions. In such cases, young Muslims, and others, often identify the Palestinians as their "brothers and sisters," whereas French Jews are collectively identified with Israel and therefore considered to be "enemies."[6]

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[4] See, for instance, Michel Wieviorka, *La tentation antisémite. Haine des Juifs dans la France d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Hachette Littératures, 2005); Didier Lapeyronnie, *Ghetto urbain. Ségrégation, violence, pauvreté en France aujourd'hui* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2008); Dominique Reynié, *L'antisémitisme dans l'opinion publique française. Nouveaux éclairages* (Paris: Fondation pour l'innovation politique, 2014); Alexandra Preitschopf, "'Umkämpfter Raum.' Solidarität mit Palästina, Antizionismus und Antisemitismus unter MuslimInnen im zeitgenössischen Frankreich" (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Salzburg, 2016); Elodie Druez and Nonna Mayer, *Antisemitism and Immigration in Western Europe Today: Is There a Connection? The Case of France* (Berlin: Stiftung EVZ, 2018), https://www.pearsinstitute.bbk.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/FINAL-REVISED-ENGLISH-FINAL-REPORT-Nov-2018.pdf; Günther Jikeli, "Explaining the Discrepancy of Antisemitic Acts and Attitudes in 21st Century France," *Contemporary Jewry* 37 (2017): 257–273; Michel Wieviorka, "A New Anti-Semitism," *Jewish Political Studies Review* 29, no. 3–4 (2018), 43–46; Alexandra Preitschopf, "Frankreich," in *Antisemitismus in Europa. Fallbeispiele eines globalen Phänomens im 21. Jahrhundert,* ed. Helga Embacher, Bernadette Edtmaier, and Alexandra Preitschopf (Vienna: Böhlau, 2019), 55–126.

[5] See Preitschopf, "Frankreich," 79–83; Kimberly A. Arkin, "Talking about Antisemitism in France Before and After *Charlie Hebdo* and Hyper Cacher," *Jewish History* 32 (2018): 78–79; see further Ethan B. Katz, "Where Do the Hijab and the Kippah Belong? On Being Publicly Jewish or Muslim in Post-Hebdo France," *Jewish History* 32 (2018): 99–114.

[6] Preitschopf, "Frankreich," 55–57. In this context, it should be mentioned that the French population today includes five to six million Muslims (8–10 percent of the population), mostly of

Returning to the debate sparked by Freeze Corleone, it is important to stress that controversial historical, and sometimes anti-Semitic allusions are nothing new in French rap music, although they are usually more moderate than his. Historic wrongs are frequently combined, as in one song by Corleone which commemorates Indians and Africans slaves as victims of colonialism[7] and vehemently criticizes France's colonial past. After a long history of denial, silence and repression, painful issues such as the role of France in the transatlantic slave trade, colonial crimes in Africa, and the Algerian War have more and more become part of public consciousness and discourse in France. Besides academics, journalists, and politicians, French rap musicians have also raised these issues. Many of them grew up in the socially deprived suburbs (banlieues) of large French cities, as did Freeze Corleone in Seine-Saint-Denis near Paris. They are often children of immigrants, mostly of North African Muslim or sub-Saharan African origin. They or their ancestors often came from former French colonies. Accordingly, they use their music as a medium to remind France of its colonial past as well as of current problems of integration in French society. Moreover, condemnation of France's colonial past sometimes goes hand in hand with allusions to the Middle East conflict, portrayals of Israel as a new "colonial power," and references to the Palestinians as "the new colonized" with whom they declare their solidarity, as will be shown below.

I aim to approach this complex situation by analyzing selected lyrics of recent French rap songs and by setting them in their broader socio-political context. This research draws on a qualitative source and discourse analysis conducted between 2012 and 2016 for my PhD thesis in contemporary history, which focused on pro-Palestinian solidarity, anti-Zionism, and anti-Semitism among Muslims in contemporary France.[8] Besides various other texts, the lyrics of around 60 rap songs, mostly released between 2000 and 2014, were included

Maghrebi or Sub-Saharan background from former French colonial territories, and about half a million Jews, many of whom also have origins in the Maghreb.

7 Maxime Delcourt, "*La menace fantôme* de Freeze Corleone est-il l'album que le rap français attendait?" *Canalplus*, September 11, 2020, https://jack.canalplus.com/articles/ecouter/la-menace-fantome-de-freeze-corleone-est-il-l-album-que-le-rap-francais-attendait.

8 Preitschopf, "'Umkämpfter Raum,'" see in particular the chapter on discourses in rap music, "Musikalische Diskurse: *History-re-telling*, Palästina-Solidarität, Antizionismus und Antisemitismus in den Texten französisch-muslimischer RapperInnen," 445–526. For the concept of critical discourse analysis as developed by Margarete and Siegfried Jäger, see especially Margarete Jäger and Siegfried Jäger, *Deutungskämpfe. Theorie und Praxis Kritischer Diskursanalyse* (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2007); Margarete Jäger and Siegfried Jäger, *Medienbild Israel. Zwischen Solidarität und Antisemitismus* (Münster: LIT, 2003); and Siegfried Jäger, *Kritische Diskursanalyse. Eine Einführung* (Duisburg: Unrast, 2001).

in the study. This corpus was primarily gathered with the assistance of the comprehensive "rap encyclopedia," *genius.com*, which archives the vast majority of existing song lyrics and allows searching for specific keywords among them.[9] Search terms and selection criteria for the songs were focused on the following topics: 1) French colonial history and/or the Middle East conflict, as well as Israel and Palestine, Islamophobia, racism, and conditions in the banlieues in contemporary France, as expressed by 2) French rap musicians with immigrant backgrounds in former French colonies (especially the Congo, Senegal, Algeria, Tunisia, and Guadeloupe).[10] In most cases these rappers also define themselves as Muslims and/or allude to Islam in their lyrics. 3) Another focus was on the social impact of the songs, primarily those produced by well-known mainstream rap musicians. Purely "underground rap" was not sampled.[11] In a next step, the selected song lyrics were analyzed with regard to recurrent images and patterns of argumentation, with the aim of determining which lines of argumentation were similar and reappeared in different songs by different musicians.

Of course, it should be noted that this analysis is by its nature selective and merely illustrative, due to its purely qualitative methodology. Furthermore, the selected musicians do not constitute a homogenous group, but are individual artists with different political views, attitudes, and approaches to religion. Finally, it is essential to keep in mind – regarding the linguistic level of the lyrics – the fact that provocations, exaggerations, insults and "dirty language,"[12] as well as the construction of "enemies," are stylistic devices that are common in rap music and should not be taken too seriously. In short, the limits of "sayability" are certainly more flexible in rap music than in other public spheres.

Bearing all that in mind, this study is nevertheless based on the assumption that rap songs, and the musicians behind them, can and should be considered

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[9] Keywords such as colonial, colonialism, slave trade, Algerian war, commemoration, Maghreb, Africa, Palestine, Israel, Zionism, Islam, Islamophobia, racism, racist, banlieues, and discrimination were typed in the search engine and relevant results (lyrics) were flagged for further examination when more than two lines or the whole song dealt with one or more of the research topics.

[10] This concerns primarily the following 24 rappers or music groups: Abd al Malik, Alpha 5.20, Ärsenik, Bakar, Booba, Diam's, El Matador, IAM, Kenza Farah, Kery James, L'Algérino, Lefty, Lorenzo, MC Solaar, Médine, Monsieur R., Sefyu, Seth Gueko, Sniper, Sofiane, Soprano, Tunisiano, Youssoupha, Zebda. In terms of gender, the overwhelming majority of the lyrics were by male rappers. Only a very few examples of female rappers were found (Diam's and Kenza Farah).

[11] In this case the indicators were the number of albums sold, appearances in mainstream French media, and the number of clicks on the YouTube platform (for some songs this was up to 3-4 million views).

[12] See already Georges Lapassade and Philippe Rousselot, *Le rap ou la fureur de dire. Essai* (Paris: L. Talmart, 1990), 122–123.

a part of societal discourse and relevant "discourse carriers." They reflect widely held ideas and images, and at the same time consolidate and disseminate them, which gives them a degree of influence and discursive power. Including these new sources from the sphere of popular culture in research into contemporary history will provide a more complete perspective of the complex and multi-layered issue of public remembrance. This particularly applies to the connections between memory, identity construction, and perceptions of the Middle East conflict. Despite multiple existing studies of French rap music,[13] those connections have hardly been considered thus far.[14]

For that reason, this article aims to answer the following questions. How is remembrance culture in contemporary France related to the forms of social protest present in rap music? What discourses and counter-discourses are reflected in the selected lyrics? How do the lyrics express criticism and commemorate past and present victims? What do they imply about the identification and self-representation of the musicians, and the commercialization of their work?

To answer these questions, I will first talk about French rap as a means of expression of social protest. Second, I will outline important current developments in French remembrance policy and culture, especially with regard to France's colonial past. Finally, I will point out how those developments are

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[13] Recent publications include Karim Hammou and Stéphanie Molinero, "Plus populaire que jamais? Réception et illégitimation culturelle du rap en France (1997–2008)," in *Les Publics des scènes musicales en France (XVIIIe–XXIe siècles)*, ed. Caroline Giron-Panel, Solveig Serre, and Jean-Claude Yon (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2020), 125–144; Stéphanie Molinero, "Rap Audiences in France: The Diversification and Heterogenization of the Appeal of Rap Music," in *Made in France: Studies in Popular Music*, ed. Gérôme Guibert and Catherine Rudent (London: Routledge, 2018), 151–162; Christian Béthune, "Towards a Greater Appreciation of the Poetry of French Rap," in *Made in France*, 163–172; Steve Puig, "Redefining Frenchness Through Urban Music and Literature: The Case of Rapper-Writers Abd Al Malik and Disiz," in *Post-Migratory Cultures in Postcolonial France*, ed. Kathryn Kleppinger and Laura Reeck (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018), 131–146; Chong J. Bretillon, "'Double discours': Critiques of Racism and Islamophobia in French Rap," in *Post-Migratory Cultures*, 147–165; Karim Hammou, *Une histoire du rap en France* (Paris: La Découverte, 2012).

[14] Beyond the French context, there are several other studies of anti-Semitism in rap music. For Germany, see for instance recent publications by Jakob Baier: "Judenfeindschaft in Kollegahs *Apokalypse* (2016)," in *Rap – Text – Analyse. Deutschsprachiger Rap seit 2000. 20 Einzeltextanalysen*, ed. Dagobert Höllein, Nils Lehnert, and Felix Woitkowski (Bielefeld: transcript, 2020), 187–201; Jakob Baier, "Die Echo-Debatte: Antisemitismus im Rap," in *Antisemitismus seit 9/11. Ereignisse, Debatten, Kontroversen*, ed. Samuel Salzborn (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2019), 109–132. For the Dutch context see Remco Ensel, "'The Jew' vs. 'the Young Male Moroccan'. Stereotypical Confrontations in the City," in *The Holocaust, Israel and "The Jew": Histories of Antisemitism in Postwar Dutch Society*, ed. Remco Ensel and Evelien Gans (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 378–413.

reflected in French rap music. This third part will be divided into two subsections: one with reflections on colonial history and the phenomenon of *concurrence victimaire* (competition between victims), and a second addressing solidarity with Palestine, anti-Zionism, and their connections with colonialism.

It should be noted that the rap lyrics which will be quoted in this article represent only a small sample of the corpus of data available for analysis. However, the chosen extracts and musicians are representative of important matters: the family backgrounds of the rappers in different former French colonies,[15] the experience of life in the banlieues, the musicians' experiences as popular figures in France and its rap scene, and therefore their influence on public opinion.

French Rap as a Means of Expression of Social Protest

Rap music has been performed in France since the early 1980s. After being dominated by U.S. musicians,[16] a specifically *French* rap has developed since the 1990s. Its development was to some extent even promoted by public cultural funding[17] in the context of the promotion of French music culture by the French state. For instance, an annual *Fête de la musique* was initiated in 1982, and music halls, stages and music studios for young amateur musicians were created.[18] Today, France is one of the largest producers and consumers of rap music in the world.[19] Rap culture has become relatively widely widespread in French media,

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[15] The musician Médine has Algerian roots. Tunisiano, a member of the group Sniper, has Tunisian roots. Monsieur R. and Ärsenik are of Congolese, and Sefyu as well as Freeze Corleone are of Senegalese descent. Kery James is originally from Guadeloupe.

[16] Julien Barret, *Le rap ou l'artisanat de la rime* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008), 11.

[17] Dietmar Hüser, "Sex & crime & rap music – Amerika-Bilder und Französisch-Sein in einer globalen Weltordnung," in *Rap – more than words*, ed. Eva Kimminich (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004), 67–96, 76; Dietmar Hüser and Linda Schüssler, "Klänge aus Algerien, Botschaften für Frankreich – Der Rai-*Beur* als Musik französischer Jugendlicher aus maghrebinischen Migrationskontexten," in *Frankreichs Empire schlägt zurück. Gesellschaftswandel, Kolonialdebatten und Migrationskulturen im frühen 21. Jahrhundert*, ed. Dietmar Hüser (Kassel: Kassel University Press, 2010), 299–329, 318–319. See also Mary Breatnach and Eric Sterenfeld, "From Messiaen to MC Solaar: Music in France in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century," in *Contemporary French Cultural Studies*, ed. William Kidd and Siân Reynolds (New York: Routledge, 2000), 244–256, 251; Pierre Mayol, "The Policy of the City and Cultural Action," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 27, no. 2–3 (2002), 221–229, 225–228.

[18] Hüser and Schüssler, "Klänge aus Algerien," 318–319.

[19] Susanne Stemmler, "Rap-Musik und Hip-Hop-Kulturen in romanischen Sprachwelten: Einleitung und Perspektiven der Forschung," in *Hip-Hop und Rap in romanischen Sprachwelten. Stationen*

not only on TV and radio but nowadays especially on the Internet.[20] Besides the commercial aspects of rap already mentioned, French rap has gained an influential role as the "carrier" of ideas, resentments, and in some cases, hate speech. However, rap is naturally an artistic expression of rebellion and social protest,[21] which allows musicians to vehemently express their disappointment with society as well as their expectations for a better future. Significantly, the American philologist Samira Hassa describes rap as "a sort of refuge in which a marginalized group or minority can express freely who they are, what they suffer from, and their dreams and hopes."[22]

This is especially important considering that in France, rap artists are very often the children or grandchildren of immigrants, mostly from former French colonies in North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa.[23] Many rappers have grown up in the poor banlieues of large cities like Paris, Marseille, Lyon and Strasbourg and are marked by their experiences in that environment. As a result of the great waves of immigration that peaked in the 1960s, big tenements filled with modest, cheap apartments were constructed on the outskirts of French cities to house as many immigrants as possible. Beside the "practical" aspects of this kind of urban planning, the creation of these so-called *cités* or *cités-HLM* has led to "ghettoization," urban violence, and from time to time, youth revolts. Since the 1980s, many French suburbs have gradually turned into sites of separation and exclusion accompanied by high unemployment, poverty, criminality, and frequently discrimination and racism against their migrant or Muslim populations.[24] Accord-

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einer globalen Musikkultur, ed. Susanne Stemmler and Timo Skrandies (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2007), 13–31, 16; Samira Hassa, "*Kiff my zikmu*: Symbolic Dimensions of Arabic, English and Verlan in French Rap Texts," in *Languages of Global Hip-Hop*, ed. Marina Terkourafi (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 44–66, 44.

[20] Stemmler, "Rap-Musik und Hip-Hop-Kulturen," 15; Puig, "Redefining Frenchness," 132.

[21] Barbara Lebrun, *Protest Music in France: Production, Identity and Audiences* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 4; Dietmar Hüser, *RAPublikanische Synthese. Eine französische Zeitgeschichte populärer Musik und politischer Kultur* (Köln: Böhlau, 2004), 11.

[22] Hassa, "*Kiff my zikmu*," 44.

[23] Arno Scholz, "Kulturelle Hybridität und Strategien der Appropriation an Beispielen des romanischen Rap," in *Rap – More Than Words*, ed. Eva Kimminich (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004), 45–65, 55.

[24] Robert S. Leiken, *Europe's Angry Muslims: The Revolt of the Second Generation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 44–47; Michel Wieviorka, *L'antisémitisme est-il de retour?* (Paris: Larousse, 2008), 81–82; Dietmar Hüser, "Plurales Frankreich in der unteilbaren Republik. Einwürfe und Auswüchse zwischen Vorstadt-Krawallen und Kolonial-Debatten," in *Frankreich Jahrbuch 2006. Politik und Kommunikation*, ed. Deutsch-Französisches Institut (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2007), 9–28, 17. See furthermore Andreas Tijé-Dra, *Zwischen "Ghetto" und "Normalität": Deutungskämpfe um stigmatisierte Stadtteile in Frankreich* (Bielefeld: transcript,

ingly, many rappers denounce their experiences of exclusion in the banlieues as well as discrimination and Islamophobia, especially since 9/11.[25] As Chong J. Bretillon significantly notes, rap musicians "demonstrate how a revised image of the feared immigrant is emerging in media depictions of the young inhabitants of the banlieue. He is no longer simply the unemployed North African migrant, nor rioting youth, but, as we shall see, the Muslim, the international terrorist."[26] Generally speaking, French rap has gradually developed into an "oral, visual and artistic expression of the struggle and resistance of the immigrant youth of France."[27] At the same time, it is striking that many rap artists present themselves in their music as proud Muslim *banlieusards*, criticizing the social problems of the French suburbs but also giving a more positive image of their inhabitants. As the German historian Dietmar Hüser points out, the banlieue fulfils a dual function in French rap: on the one hand it gives rise to complaints and social criticism, while on the other hand it provides a basis for a counter-image to stereotypical ideas of a failed, violent, and "non-integrable" suburban youth.[28]

The strategies used by rap artists to cultivate their public images and for "self-promotion" should be taken into consideration in this context – especially the image of the politically conscious Muslim "banlieue rapper." As literary scholar Jules Barret argues, rappers criticize France less to change its society but more to make money out of it.[29] According to him, this is the result of a general

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2018); Bettina Ghio, "Rap et récits 'banlieusards': enjeux de la représentation fictionnelle des espaces urbains périphériques," *Romance Studies* 36, no. 1–2 (2018): 32–45.

[25] Hisham Aidi, "Let us be Moors: Islam, Race and Connected Histories," *Middle East Report* 229 (2003), 42–53, 47; Hassa, "*Kiff my zikmu*," 45. See also Jeanette S. Jouili, "Rapping the Republic: Utopia, Critique, and Muslim Role Models in Secular France," *French Politics, Culture & Society* 31, no. 2 (2013): 58–80; Eva Kimminich, "Rap: Vom Chanson enragée zum soziopolitischen Multimedium," in *Das französische Chanson im Spiegel seiner medialen (R)evolutionen*, ed. Fernand Hörner and Ursula Moser (Würzburg: Könighausen & Neumann, 2015), 239–258; Puig, "Redefining Frenchness," 142. Regarding Islamophobia in general, see for instance Dorian Bell, "Europe's 'New Jews': France, Islamophobia, and Antisemitism in the Era of Mass Migration," *Jewish History* 32 (2018): 65–76; Eva Kimminich, "Rassismus und RAPublikanismus – Islamismus oder Welt‚bürger'tum? Geschichte, Wahrnehmung und Funktionsmechanismus des französischen Rap," in *Hip-Hop meets Academia. Globale Spuren eines lokalen Kulturphänomens*, ed. Karin Bock (Bielefeld: transcript, 2007), 59–74, 66–67. In this context it is striking that many young people living in French banlieues have converted to Islam in the last years. This is due to the work of several Islamic welfare organizations which have increasingly gained influence in poor suburbs. See Eva Kimminich, "Ton-Macht-Musik – Populäre Rap-Lieder und die französische Gesellschaft," in *Frankreichs Empire schlägt zurück*, 342.

[26] Bretillon, "'Double discours'," 149.

[27] Hassa, "*Kiff my zikmu*," 46.

[28] Hüser, "Sex & crime & rap music," 87.

[29] Barret, *Le rap,* 25.

"commercialization" of the "banlieue image" per se. Young middle- and upper-class French people sometimes imitate the "banlieue style" of clothing and language, and listen to "banlieue music" in order to distinguish themselves from their bourgeois parents.[30] At the same time, rap seems to have to fulfill certain criteria to sell among the "banlieue youth." Remembrance and victimhood, in the historical as well as in the contemporary sense, are important *topoi* and identity markers not only for the musicians themselves but also for their audience.

Current Developments in French Remembrance Policy and Culture

Regarding representations of France's colonial past and their role in the construction of identities, the Romance philologist Eva Kimminich speaks of a so-called "re-telling of history" by French rappers. They question the official French historiography and demand belated recognition in it of their own ancestors, their history, and their suffering.[31] This demand is also directed at education and school curricula. However, as Steve Puig argues, no real effort is being made in France – despite the growing numbers of ethnic minorities – to teach those aspects of national history in school. Therefore, popular culture plays an important role in conveying the history of French colonialism. Rap songs and other means of cultural expression are a kind of counter-narrative that is contributing to a redefinition of France's collective identity in the twenty-first century.[32]

For deeper insight into the central historical issues to which rap musicians often allude in their songs, the following review is useful. As a former colonial power in Africa and the Caribbean Antilles, France was involved in the global slave trade from the middle of the seventeenth century, when the first French trading posts were established in Senegal, Réunion, Guadeloupe and Martinique.[33] In the eighteenth century, the Kingdom of France, along with England, the Netherlands, and Portugal, was a leader in the so-called Triangular Trade. One important part of that lucrative business was sale of people from France's African colonies to be slaves in its colonies in America.[34] Slavery in France itself was finally abolished in

[30] Ibid., 12.
[31] Kimminich, "Ton-Macht-Musik," 339.
[32] Puig, "Redefining Frenchness,", 142.
[33] Jean-Yves Camus, "The Commemoration of Slavery in France and the Emergence of a Black Political Consciousness," *The European Legacy* 11, no. 6 (2006): 647–655, 647.
[34] Ute Fendler and Susanne Greilich, "Afrika in deutschen und französischen Enzyklopädien des 18. Jahrhunderts," in *Das Europa der Aufklärung und die außereuropäische koloniale Welt*, ed. Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2006), 113–137, 116.

1848, when the French Empire was on its way to becoming the second largest colonial empire in the world. At its height its power extended to an area of 12 million square kilometers, covering large parts of West Africa and the Maghreb, and areas in Southeast Asia (Indochina) and the Indian Ocean.[35]

France retained its colonies in West Africa until the early 1960s. Indochina (today's Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos) gained its independence in 1954, Tunisia and Morocco in 1956. The struggle for independence was particularly difficult in Algeria, where about one million European settlers (the so-called Pieds Noirs) lived. There were numerous bloody clashes between the French army and the Algerian independence movement, the Front de libération nationale (FLN), during the Algerian War (1954–1962). However, the conflict had already begun before that, at the end of the Second World War, when on May 8, 1945 the French army brutally suppressed a local uprising demanding the end of French colonial rule in Algeria in the town of Sétif. The death toll of the massacre is estimated at more than 15,000 persons. The Algerian War itself claimed about 30,000 victims on the French side and at least 500,000 on the Algerian side. About 8,000 Algerian villages were razed to the ground, almost one million Algerians were deported, and hundreds of thousands were taken prisoner.[36] The serious human rights violations committed by France under the pretext of combatting the FLN are particularly controversial. They included systematic torture using electric shocks and extralegal killings or "disappearances" of Algerian people.

The fate of the Harkis, Muslim Algerian auxiliary soldiers who fought at the side of the French army, is a particularly tragic story. They were abandoned by France to their fate in Algeria after the Treaty of Evian (which officially ended the war and granted Algeria its independence). Tens of thousands of them fell victim to brutal acts of revenge by FLN supporters. They were publicly humiliated, tortured, mutilated, and often murdered.[37] Some Harkis managed to escape with their families to France, but they found it difficult to be accepted into French society, and lived for years in reception camps, often faced racism and social

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[35] Günther Haensch and Hans J. Tümmers, *Frankreich: Politik, Gesellschaft, Wirtschaft* (München: C.H. Beck, 1998), 247.

[36] Günter Liehr, *Frankreich. Ein Länderporträt* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2013), 57. See also Benjamin Stora, "Der Algerienkrieg im Gedächtnis Frankreichs," in *Verbrechen erinnern. Die Auseinandersetzung mit Holocaust und Völkermord*, ed. Volkhard Knigge, Norbert Frei, and Anett Schweitzer (München: C.H. Beck, 2002), 75–89, 79.

[37] Phillip Chiviges Naylor, *France and Algeria. A History of Decolonization and Transformation* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 45; Martin Evans, *Algeria. France's Undeclared War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 326–327. See also Vincent Crapanzano, *The Harkis: The Wound That Never Heals* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

exclusion.[38] Until recently, the torture, killings, and the fate of the Harkis were hardly ever discussed in public in France.[39]

This history has to be seen in the wider context of the French state's remembrance policy, which is strongly marked by silence and then slow recognition of the "dolorous" aspects of the past. Similarly sensitive subjects include the Holocaust and its aftermath, especially the question of the responsibility of the French for the deportation and assassination of French Jews. As the historian Henry Rousso puts it, collective memory of the Holocaust in France was marked by a long *phase de silence* after 1945, in which public debate was largely avoided or repressed.[40] A gradual "reawakening of Jewish memory" began in the 1970s. It gained momentum in the late 1980s, and even more in the 1990s.[41] In July 1995, then-President Jacques Chirac formally recognized France's responsibility for the enactment of anti-Jewish legislation by the Vichy Regime and the deportation and subsequent gassing of 76,000 French Jews.[42] In general, and similarly to other Western European countries such as Germany and Austria, the memory of the Holocaust in France is nowadays "institutionalized" (in the form of commemorations, public memorials, museums, etc.). Moreover, it has become part of the collective consciousness of French culture via literature, films, and documentaries.[43]

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[38] Christoph Gunkel, "Frankreichs algerische Hilfssoldaten. Gefoltert, ermordet, vergessen," *Spiegel Online*, July 7, 2012, http://einestages.spiegel.de/external/ShowTopicAlbumBackground/a25130/l1/l0. See also *Isabelle Clarke and Daniel Costelle, La blessure. La tragédie des harkis* (Paris: Acropole, 2010).

[39] Benjamin Stora, *Histoire de la guerre d'Algérie 1954–1962* (Paris: La Decouverte, 2004), 96–101. See also Christiane Kohser-Spohn and Frank Renken, *Trauma Algerienkrieg: Zur Geschichte und Aufarbeitung eines tabuisierten Konflikts* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2006).

[40] Henry Rousso, *Le syndrome de Vichy (1944–1987)* (Paris: Seuil, 1987); Hervé Coutau-Bégarie, review of Le syndrome de Vichy (1944–1987), by Henry Rousso, *Politique étrangère* 53, no. 3 (1988): 784. More recently, see also Henry Rousso, *La dernière catastrophe. L'histoire, le présent, le contemporain* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012), and Henry Rousso, "From a Foreign Country," in *Ego-histories of France and the Second World War. Writing Vichy*, ed. Manuel Bragança and Fransiska Louwagie (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 89–103.

[41] Jean-Marc Dreyfus, "Eine nie verheilende narzisstische Wunde? Die Kollaboration im französischen Gedächtnis," in *Grenzenlose Vorurteile. Antisemitismus, Nationalismus und ethnische Konflikte in verschiedenen Kulturen. Herausgegeben im Auftrag des Fritz-Bauer-Instituts* (Frankfurt am Main: Fritz-Bauer-Institut, 2002), 167–188, 176; Pieter Lagrou, *Mémoires patriotiques et Occupation nazie. Résistants, requis et déportés en Europe occidentale, 1945–1965* (Paris: Editions Complexe, 2003), 240.

[42] Dreyfus, "Eine nie verheilende narzisstische Wunde?", 169.

[43] Andreas Schmoller, *Vergangenheit, die nicht vergeht. Das Gedächtnis der Shoah in Frankreich seit 1945 im Medium Film* (Vienna: Studien Verlag, 2010), 179; Patrick James Soulsby "'History Takes Its Time ...': Anti-Racist Temporalities and Historical Memory Cultures in France, c. 1980–1998," *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d'Histoire* 28, no. 4 (2021): 549–569, 561, doi: 10.1080/13507486.2021.1904839.

Other minority groups in France, above all people with Maghrebi/Algerian or sub-Saharan-African backgrounds, began to copy this trend in order to gain acceptance and integration of their suffering (or the suffering of their ancestors) into the French national narrative and memory culture.[44] This was reflected on the political level in the *Lois mémorielles* (Laws of Remembrance), beginning with the *Loi Gayssot* of 1990, which officially criminalized denial of the reality of the Holocaust. More than ten years later, in 2001, the *Loi Taubira* declared the slave trade a "crime against humanity."[45] It was not until June 1999 that the French National Assembly officially acknowledged that a *war* had taken place in Algeria. In 2012, President François Hollande officially acknowledged the "unjust" and "brutal" nature of France's occupation of Algeria for 132 years.[46] Before that, a law passed in February 2005 dealt with the "Algerian question" but caused considerable controversy. It expressed "grateful recognition" of the French Nation for the contributions of repatriated Algerian-French people and other former settlers in the French overseas colonies. In its controversial Article Four on school curricula and historical research, the law even envisaged highlighting the "positive role of the French presence on other continents," especially in North Africa.[47] After several petitions and protests, especially from French historians, Article Four of the law was repealed in February 2006. As the French academic Jean-Yves Camus put it, this "apology for colonialism has become a major subject of public debate because it is an open insult to both the French Muslim population and the blacks from Africa and the Caribbean who consider it to be a glossing over of France's actions before the abolition of slavery."[48]

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[44] Schmoller, *Vergangenheit*, 179; Alice Ebert, "Frankreichs Umgang mit belasteter Vergangenheit – Die Debatten und Kontroversen um das 'Kolonialismusgesetz' von 2005," in *Frankreichs Empire schlägt zurück,* 189–216, 190. See further Sonja Dinter, *Die Macht der historischen Handlung. Sklaverei und Emanzipation in der britischen und französischen Erinnerungskultur seit Ende der 1990er Jahre* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018).

[45] "Loi et mémoire," *La documentation française. La librairie du citoyen*, October 23, 2006, http://www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/dossiers/d000078-loi-et-memoire/introduction.

[46] Ebert, "Frankreichs Umgang mit belasteter Vergangenheit," 190; "François Hollande acknowledges Algerian suffering under French rule," *The Guardian*, December 20, 2012.

[47] Sonja Klinker, *Maghrebiner in Frankreich, Türken in Deutschland. Eine vergleichende Untersuchung zu Identität und Integration muslimischer Einwanderergruppen in europäische Mehrheitsgesellschaften* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010), 107.

[48] Camus, "The Commemoration of Slavery," 651. It should be noted, however, that the legislation not only granted recognition to the so-called repatriates but to all "civilian and military victims of the events connected with the achievement of the independence of the former Départements and overseas territories" and condemned "any glorification of the crimes committed against the *Harkis*."

Remembrance in French Rap Music

Colonial History and Concurrence Victimaire

Given the highly emotional and politicized public debate on colonial crimes and especially on the Algerian War, it is not surprising that rap musicians have taken up the subject in recent years. One of the most popular and well-known examples of this is the French-Algerian rapper Médine. In 2008 he released the song "Fils du colonisé" together with the French-Congolese rap musician Monsieur R. In the first couplet of the song, Médine alludes to the torture that was meted out by the French Army during the Algerian War and to deaths of prisoners disguised as suicides. Moreover, he evokes a tragic incident on October 17, 1961 in Paris. On that day, following a call by the FLN, about 30,000 Algerians demonstrated peacefully against a curfew for Algerian people imposed by the Parisian police prefect Maurice Papon. During an operation against the demonstrators, the French police killed about 300 Algerian protesters and threw their bodies into the Seine. The incident was hushed up for years and was only examined at the end of the twentieth century.[49] Médine holds up a mirror to France, the former colonial power, accusing it of "false probity":

> Général Massu déguise les crimes en suicides / Dans leurs cellules, électrocutés, jusqu'à l'homicide / Ainsi mon histoire, une si belle histoire / Et les donneurs de leçons sont placés faces à leur miroir / Leurs propres reflets reflètent leur fausse probité (...) / Pareillement au Tiers-Monde, j'ai le cancer du colon / Remplit nos poumons avec l'eau de la Seine / Nous jette depuis les ponts.
>
> General Massu disguises the crimes as suicides / They have been tortured in their cells by electrical shocks culminating in intentional killing / This is my history, such a beautiful history / And those who give lessons are confronted with their mirror / Their own mirror images reflect their false probity ... / Like in the third world, the cancer of colonialism grows in me / fills our lungs with water of the Seine / throws us from the bridge.[50]

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[49] See Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison and Nils Andersson, *Le 17 octobre 1961. Un crime d'État à Paris* (Paris: La Dispute, 2001).

[50] Médine and Monsieur R., "Fils du colonisé" (2008), https://genius.com/Medine-fils-de-colonise-lyrics. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted. The French general Jacques Massu admitted in 2001 in an interview with *Le Monde* that he had tortured Algerian soldiers during the

In 2012 (50 years after the end of the Algerian War), Médine released another song, "Alger pleure", which dealt even more explicitly with war crimes such as torture, collective reprisals, human rights violations, and the tendency to keep silent about them:

> Pensiez-vous qu'on oublierait la torture ? / (...) / On ne peut masquer sa gêne, au courant de la gégène / Électrocuter des hommes durant six ou sept heures / Des corps nus sur un sommier de fer branché sur le secteur / On n'oublie pas les djellabas de sang immaculées / La dignité masculine ôtée d'un homme émasculé / Les corvées de bois, creuser sa tombe avant d'y prendre emploi / On n'oublie pas les mutilés à plus de trente endroits / Les averses de coup, le supplice de la goutte / (...) On n'oublie pas les morsures du peloton cynophile / Et les sexes non circoncis dans les ventres de nos filles / On n'omet pas les lois par la loi de l'omerta / (...) Et les centres de regroupement pour personnes musulmanes / Des camps d'concentration au sortir de la seconde mondiale / On n'oublie pas ses ennemis / Les usines de la mort, la villa Sésini.
>
> Did you think we would forget all about the torture? / ... We can't hide our shame from the shock of torture / To electrocute men for six or seven hours in a row / Naked bodies on an iron mattress connected to the mains / We can't forget the blood-stained djellabas / The removed masculine dignity of a castrated man / Wood-picking up chores, to dig one's grave before putting it to use / We can't forget those who were mutilated in more than thirty spots of their body / The hails of kicks, the Chinese water torture / ... We can't forget the bites of the dog-squad / And the uncircumcised genitals in our daughters' bellies / You can't silence the laws with the law of silence /... / And the detention camps for Muslim people / Concentration camps at the end of the Second World War / We can't forget our enemies / The factories of death, the Sésini Villa.[51]

"Concentration camps" and "factories of death" for Muslim people at the end of the Second World War are probably an allusion to the massacre at Sétif,

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Algerian War. See Henry Frank Carey, *Reaping What You Sow. A Comparative Examination of Torture Reform in the United States, France, Argentina, and Israel* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012), 146.

[51] Médine, "Alger pleure" (2012), https://lyricstranslate.com/en/alger-pleure-algiers-cries.htm. In the Villa Sésini in Algiers, (alleged) members of the FLN were imprisoned and systematically tortured during the Algerian War. See Raphaëlle Branche and Sylvie Thénault, "Justice et torture à Alger en 1957: apports et limites d'un document," in *Apprendre et enseigner la guerre d'Algérie et le Maghreb contemporain. Actes de l'université d'été organisée du 29 au 31 octobre 2001 à l'Institut du Monde Arabe*, ed. Dominique Borne, Jean-Louis Nembrini, and Jean-Pierre Rioux (Paris: Institut du Monde Arabe, 2001), 44–57, here 54, https://media.eduscol.education.fr/file/Formation_continue_enseignants/48/9/algerie_acte_111489.pdf.

and inevitably recalls the Holocaust and Nazi extermination camps. Similar references can be found in several rap songs. They serve as a stylistic device for emphasizing the atrocities described. Interestingly, Médine includes the French perspective. He points out in "Alger pleure" that many French people wanted the same for Algeria as they wanted for France during the Second World War before it was liberated from occupation by Nazi Germany. He emphasizes that not everyone in France agreed with official French policy in Algeria or was part of the "war machine" and suggests that not only the fate of Arab people should be commemorated. On the contrary, he refers to crimes committed by the FLN and to the Harkis and Pieds Noirs who had only "the choice between a grave or a suitcase" as they were forced to leave their homes.[52]

Such a comparison with the past does not relieve the contemporary French state of the ultimate responsibility for the Algerian tragedy. Another example of this rap genre is the lyrics of "Lettre à la République." This song was released in 2012 by the well-known rapper Kery James, who was born in Guadeloupe. It is less of a "letter" than an angry indictment directed at the historical and the contemporary French Republic. James accuses France of hypocrisy, betrayal of its own values, discrimination, racism, Islamophobia, social inequality, and misery in the banlieues, to say nothing of its crimes in the colonies and their distortion and disguise in history. Accordingly, the lyrics express bitter disappointment with the lack of respect for the republican values of France and its ideal of the "one and indivisible" nation. At the same time, James emphasizes his identity as an immigrant and a Muslim, who has been "betrayed" by the Republic, but is still proud of his origin and religion:

> A tous ces racistes à la tolérance hypocrite / Qui ont bâti leur nation sur le sang / Maintenant s'érigent en donneurs de leçons / Pilleurs de richesses, tueurs d'africains / Colonisateurs, tortionnaires d'algériens / Ce passé colonial c'est le vôtre / C'est vous qui avez choisi de lier votre histoire à la nôtre / Maintenant vous devez assumer / L'odeur du sang vous poursuit même si vous vous parfumez / Nous les Arabes et les Noirs / On est pas là par hasard /Toute arrivée a son départ ! / Vous avez souhaité l'immigration / Grace à elle vous vous êtes gavés, jusqu'à l'indigestion / Je crois que la France n'a jamais fait la charité / Les immigrés ce n'est que la main d'œuvre bon marché / Gardez pour vous votre illusion républicaine / De la douce France bafouée par l'immigration africaine /Demandez aux tirailleurs sénégalais et aux harkis / Qui a profité d'qui ? / La République n'est innocente que dans vos songes.

[52] Médine, "Alger pleure."

To all those racists with hypocritical tolerance / Who built their nation on blood / Now setting themselves up as sermonizers / Looters of wealth, murderers of Africans / Colonizers, torturers of the Algerians / This colonial past is yours / You are the ones who chose to tie your story to ours / Now you must take responsibility / The smell of blood is chasing you, even though you wear perfume / We, Arabs and Blacks / We are not here by accident / Each arrival has its own departure! / You wanted immigration / Thanks to it, you stuff yourself to indigestion / I think France never did charity / Immigrants were only cheap labor / Keep your republican illusions to yourselves / From the sweet France flouted by African immigrants /Ask the Senegalese infantrymen and Harkis / Who has taken advantage of whom / The republic is innocent only in your dreams.[53]

Even more vitriolic words about the French state can be found in the song "FranSSe," released in 2004 by the above-mentioned rapper Monsieur R. As the title suggests, Monsieur R compares France to Nazi Germany (in the form of the Nazi Schutzstaffel, or SS) and argues that Muslims in France are hated nowadays like the Jewish population was in the 1930s and 1940s. Generally, this idea is quite recent among some Muslims when it comes to modern Islamophobia in Europe. At the same time, Monsieur R. openly reflects his own hatred for France. However, he emphasizes that his song is not directed against the French people but rather against the historical and contemporary rulers of the state:

La France est une garce / N'oublie pas de la baiser / Jusqu'à l'épuiser / Comme une salope / Faut la traiter, mec (...) / La France est une mère indigne / Qui a abandonné ses fils sur le trottoir (...) / Mes frères musulmans sont haïs / Comme mes frères juifs à l'époque du Reich (...) / Quand je parle de la France / Je parle pas du peuple français / Mais des dirigeants de l'Etat français.

France is a beast / Don't forget to fuck her / Until exhaustion / You have to treat her / Like a bitch .../ France is an ignoble mother / Who has left her sons on the sidewalk ... / My Muslim brothers are hated / Like my Jewish brothers at the time of the Reich ... / When I speak of France / I don't speak of the French people / But of the rulers of the French state.[54]

[53] Kery James, "Lettre à la République" (2013), https://genius.com/Kery-james-lettre-a-la-republique-lyrics.
[54] Monsieur R., "FranSSe" (2004), https://genius.com/Monsieur-r-fransse-lyrics.

Whereas Monsieur R. speaks of his Jewish *brothers* and draws a parallel (albeit exaggerated) between anti-Semitism and contemporary Islamophobia, such comparisons can lead to a kind of competition with the memory of the Holocaust. The Holocaust holds an important place of respect in France's collective memory, more so than the crimes of the colonial period. Many rappers believe Jews are regarded as more "privileged" victims than people of their own ethnic group. This societal phenomenon is often referred to in French as *concurrence victimaire* (competition between victims).[55] For example, in 1998 the rap group Ärsenik (consisting of two brothers whose family originated in the Congo) protested in their song "Ils m'appellent," "I've been told to forget about slavery ... / The Jews are not told to forget about Auschwitz."[56] Similarly, the rapper Booba criticized the school curricula in France in his 2002 song "Ma définition." He argues that students learn too little about the history of Africa and colonialism in comparison to the Holocaust. "I wanted to know why Africa is doing badly / from the first grade to the next to last they told me about the Mona Lisa and the Germans."[57] Another French rapper of Senegalese descent, Sefyu, calls on his listeners in his song "Césarienne" (2011): "In school, they'll tell you about history / About the Cro-Magnon, Julius Caesar, prehistory / From Cleopatra, the pyramids to Auschwitz / But don't forget to tell them about the original inhabitants [of Africa] and about slavery."[58]

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[55] See Pascal Blanchard and Isabelle Veyrat-Masson, *Les Guerres de mémoires. La France et son histoire. Enjeux politiques, controverses historiques, stratégies médiatiques* (Paris: La Découverte, 2008); Geoffrey Grandjean and Jérôme Jamin, *La concurrence mémorielle* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011); Esther Benbassa, "La concurrence des victimes," in *Culture post-coloniale, 1961–2006*, ed. Pascal Blanchard and Nicolas Bancel (Paris: Autrement, 2005), 102–112; Shmuel Trigano, "'Abus de mémoire' et 'concurrence des victimes': une dépolitisation des problèmes," *Controverses. Revue d'idées* 2 (2006): 39–44; Emmanuel Droit, "Die europäische Erinnerung an die Shoah im Zeitalter der Opferkonkurrenz," in *Die Shoah in Geschichte und Erinnerung. Perspektiven medialer Vermittlung in Italien und Deutschland* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2015), 127–138. See also the following statements by French historians in the French media: Henry Rousso, "Mémoires abusives," *Le Monde*, December 24, 2005; Esther Benbassa, "La guerre des mémoires," *Libération*, January 5, 2006; Michel Wieviorka, "Quand le récit national est fragmenté par la mémoire de l'esclavage," *Le Figaro*, May 10, 2006; Dominique Borne, "Éviter la concurrence des victimes," *Le Monde*, September 16, 2011.

[56] In the French original: "On m'a dit oublie l'esclavage (...) / On demande pas aux juifs d'oublier Auschwitz." See Ärsenik, "Ils m'appellent" (1998), https://genius.com/Arsenik-ils-mappellent-lyrics.

[57] In the French original: "J'voulais savoir pourquoi l'Afrique vit malement / Du CP à la seconde ils m'parlent d'la Joconde et des Allemands." Booba, "Ma definition" (2002), https://genius.com/Booba-ma-definition-lyrics.

[58] In the French original: "L'éducation nationale te parlera de l'histoire / Des hommes de Cro-Magnon, Jules César, la préhistoire / De Cléopâtre, aux pyramides à Auschwitz / Mais n'oublie pas

As mentioned above, Freeze Corleone, who claimed "not to give a damn about the Shoah," produced one of the latest examples of allusions to the Holocaust in French rap. Corleone is not the only rapper who draws his inspiration from Dieudonné M'bala M'bala, a controversial and well-known French comedian with Cameroonian roots who is widely considered to be vehemently anti-Semitic.[59] In 2012, Dieudonné released a song with the title "Shoahnanas," a play on words that combined the word Shoah and the French word for pineapple. The song title is pronounced in French like *chaud ananas* (hot pineapple). Characteristically for Dieudonné, who constantly relativizes and ridicules the Holocaust,[60] the song was meant to mock the remembrance of the Holocaust.[61] In his work generally, the comedian plays different minorities off against each other, above all pitting France's Jewish population against young people with Muslim and/or African backgrounds. He has even argued several times that "the Zionists" (ergo, "the Jews") were the main profiteers of the slave trade.[62] Although Dieudonné's rhetoric is no doubt extreme, it must be noted that he seems to be very aware of the concurrence victimaire in contemporary society and uses it in his controversial comedy routines – knowing the limits of what can be discussed in public and therefore be "marketed" as "counter-culture," especially among some young people living in and beyond the banlieues.

Solidarity with Palestine and the Demonization of Israel

Returning to rap music, the phenomenon of pro-Palestinian and anti-Zionist rhetoric should be addressed. As already indicated above, several rappers not only commemorate the fate of their own ancestors as victims of French colonial crimes, but also recall the problems of their "Muslim brothers and sisters" in Palestine. In both contexts, the song lyrics are directed against nation-states – France and Israel – but not necessarily against their populations as such. The musicians criticize Israeli policies, such as the Jewish settlements in Palestinian

toi de leur parler des indigènes et de l'esclavagisme." Sefyu, "Césarienne" (2011), https://genius.com/search?q=C%C3%A9sarienne.

[59] Zonshine, "Wiesenthal Center Demands YouTube Remove."

[60] Marc Knobel, *Haine et violences antisémites. Une rétrospective: 2000–2013* (Paris: Berg International, 2013), 58; Camus, "The Commemoration of Slavery," 652; Michel Briganti, André Déchot, and Jean-Paul Gautier, *La Galaxie Dieudonné. Pour en finir avec les impostures* (Paris: Syllepse, 2011), 30–31.

[61] See Dieudonné M'Bala M'Bala, "Shoahnanas" (2012), https://genius.com/Dieudonne-shoahnanas-annotated.

[62] Briganti, Déchot, and Gautier, *La Galaxie Dieudonné,* 55–56.

areas and the death of innocent civilians during military operations in Gaza. At the same time, however, the image of Israel that recurs in their songs goes well beyond mere criticism. Israel is usually portrayed, and even demonized, as a hardline occupier, and above all as a new colonial power, a "heartless," "bloodthirsty" aggressor and "murderer" of innocent people. Moreover, in some songs the rappers reproach the "Western World," especially the United States and the Western media, for their alleged unconditional support for Israel and indifference to the fate of the Palestinians. Consequently, their rhetoric attributes the extremely complex and complicated conflict in the Middle East to a single cause that declares the State of Israel and its "accomplices" to be the only parties that bear responsibility.

These sentiments are clearly reflected in the song "Jeteur de pierres," released in 2003 by the French rap group Sniper. In a musical allusion to the second Intifada, Sniper directly addresses both Israel and the Palestinians:

> Voilà le résultat / D'une puissance colonisatrice / Aidés de l'Occident / Ils ont tué et chassé / (...) Laxiste, le monde laisse faire et se défile / Pendant que tu tues des civils / Et les appelle terroristes / (...) Jeteur de pierres / Le monde sait que ton pays est en guerre / Pas d'aide humanitaire / Vu que les colons te volent tes terres.
>
> This is the result / Of a colonist power / With the help of the West / They killed and chased people away / ... The world is slack, it lets it happen and cops out / While you are killing civilians / And calling them terrorists / ... Stone Thrower / The world knows that your country is at war / No humanitarian aid / Given that the colonists are stealing your land.[63]

The song accuses Israel of deliberately preventing and "poisoning" every chance for peace since its founding in 1948. According to Sniper, instead of admitting its "guilt," Israel presents itself as a permanent "victim" and "whitewashes" all its "crimes." It would be impossible, especially in France, to criticize France's ally Israel without being accused of anti-Semitism: "If you disagree with the Zionists, you'll be considered an anti-Semite within two seconds."[64] This statement inevitably begs the question of *whom* Sniper means by Zionists. In anti-Semitic discourse, the term "Zionists" is often used as a synonym for "Jews" in general, accompanied by the idea of a powerful "Zionist censorship." Nevertheless, Sniper concludes

[63] Sniper, "Jeteur de pierres" (2003), https://genius.com/Sniper-jeteur-de-pierres-lyrics.
[64] In the French original: "Contredis les sionistes et tu passes pour un antisémite en deux secondes." Ibid.

their song with disclaimer of any bias or anti-Semitism – anti-anti-Semitic rhetoric that can often be observed in pro-Palestinian discourse: "To say Inshallah, bonjour, shalom and salaam ... / If in your eyes we take sides, you should understand / That we don't speak as Muslims, only as human beings."[65]

In contrast to their strident criticism of Israel, the rappers portray the Palestinians as oppressed and colonized, but at the same time faultless, upright, and admirable people who are (Muslim) martyrs. The problems of Palestinian terrorism and especially terrorist acts by Hamas are not mentioned at all, and if they are, are romanticized as brave resistance. In his song "Avec le coeur et la raison" (2009), the rapper Kery James, for instance, expresses all of his respect and affection for the Palestinian people and literally declares his love (in French and Arabic):

> Malgré tout ce qu'ils subissent / Les Palestiniens résistent, les Palestiniens existent / J'ai rarement vu un peuple si courageux / Sa fierté brille comme le soleil même par temps orageux (...) / Hozn fi Qalbi / Hozn fi Qalbi / 'Aandi hozn fi qalbi / Lemma ou fakar fi falastine / 'Aandi lorfa fi qalbi / Wa ana nhabekom / Wa ana nhabekom.
>
> Despite everything they have suffered / The Palestinians resist, the Palestinians exist / I've rarely seen such brave people before / Their pride beams like the sun even in stormy times ... / There is such sadness in my heart / There is such sadness in my heart / When I think of Palestine / There is fear in my heart / And I love you / And I love you.[66]

Médine also pays his respects to the Palestinian people in his song "Gaza Soccer Beach," released shortly after the beginning of Israel's Operation Protective Edge in the Gaza Strip in July of 2014. As the title suggests, the song alludes to the football World Cup (held in 2014 in Brazil) as well as to the death of four Palestinian children playing football on a beach in Gaza who were killed during the Israeli operation. Médine transfers the Israel-Gaza conflict into football and sports metaphors. He not only accuses Israel of killing innocent people in a "highly unfair match" but also, like Sniper, condemns the "world public" and the media for standing by as spectators. In contrast, the Palestinians are portrayed as brave players on a "soccer beach of martyrs," who have no chance

[65] In the French original: "Dire Inchallah, bonjour, shalom et salam (...) / Si à tes yeux on prend position, comprend bien / Qu'on parle pas en tant que musulman rien qu'en tant qu'être humain." Ibid.

[66] Kery James, "Avec le coeur et la raison" (2009), https://genius.com/search?q=Avec%20le%20coeur%20et%20la%20raison.

against Israeli superiority. This image is followed by a clearly political appeal at the end of the song to oppose Israeli settlements, the blockade of the Gaza Strip, Israeli military strikes, and finally, Zionism itself.[67] Although it is without a doubt legitimate to raise one's voice against the tragic death of innocent children, the last expression brings into question the very existence of the State of Israel.

The appearance of this kind of pro-Palestinian narrative is hardly surprising in the context of rap music. Neither is the lack of pro-Israeli statements or Israeli perspectives on the conflict. Like vehement condemnations of French colonialism, declarations of solidarity with Palestine and anti-Israeli positions seem to be *expected* from Muslim rappers. This is, again, closely related to the question of what "sells" in French rap and what statements must be avoided because they could harm a rapper's image rather than promote it. The images of Israel and Palestine depicted by the rappers are far from unique or specific to their music and their world. Rather, they are recurrent, common *topoi* which can be found on a global level in many anti-Zionist discourses.[68] Rap musicians refer to these ideas and spread them among their audience, and they certainly are aware that they are already widespread there. The question inevitably arises, to what extent rappers sing about Palestine for reasons of personal commitment and concern and to what extent their lyrics should be interpreted as a strategy for cultivating their public image.

Conclusion

It is striking that when it comes to the question of remembrance and victimhood in French rap, there seems to be a rather narrow set of *topoi* that recurs in their songs and that appears to be almost a "matter of duty" for the musicians: references to the slave trade, colonialism, and the Algerian War, as well as the drawing of parallels to the Palestinians' fate. Even though the rappers allude to Jewish suffering and the Holocaust in several songs, the lyrics serve, as in the case of Freeze Corleone, as a provocation or a (competing) comparison to the

[67] Médine, "Gaza Soccer Beach" (2014), https://genius.com/search?q=Gaza%20Soccer%20Beach.

[68] See, for instance, Armin Pfahl-Traughber, "Antizionistischer und israelfeindlicher Antisemitismus," *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, April 30, 2020, https://www.bpb.de/politik/extremismus/antisemitismus/307746/antizionistischer-und-israelfeindlicher-antisemitismus. See also Christian Heilbronn, Doron Rabinovici, and Natan Sznaider, *Neuer Antisemitismus? Fortsetzung einer globalen Debatte* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2019).

rappers' own fates and history. In this context, it is highly probable that the way the rappers wish to represent themselves, create their public images, and pursue their sales strategies play a significant role in their motivations. The musicians present themselves as voices of oppressed peoples of the past and the present, and as vehement critics of the old and the alleged new colonial powers. They know how to provoke controversy, and they sometimes stimulate wide public debate and therefore find themselves at the center of attention.

Despite the commercial aspect of their work, the musicians' approaches to France's troubled past are certainly an important form of self-affirmation for their communities in the postcolonial context. By bringing up previously silenced topics, they contribute to a more diverse remembrance culture and contest narratives that have been predominant for a long time. They recall the inhuman and unjust treatment of people from the African continent and the dominance and enrichment France as a colonial power through illegal exploitation of others. They recall the victims of torture, war crimes, and expulsions. They highlight today's problems with integration and discrimination and show that having a (Muslim) background from "the banlieue" need not prevent one from feeling proud and self-confident. In that way, rap musicians offer their audience an important means of group identification and belonging. This enhances feelings of community, especially among young people with a migrant and/or Muslim background, who often feel excluded from or discriminated by the French majority and who can recognize themselves in the lyrics.

In any case, an analysis of rap music can serve as an indicator of the fault lines that underlie contemporary French society. Competing memory discourses, different processes of building collective identities, and the mutual demarcation of the boundaries of minority groups, sometimes mixed with anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic resentments, are a major challenge for the unity of French society. A significant effort to improve France's integration policy is therefore more important than ever.