

Decolonizing the Ear: Echolocating “Race” in French Rap Music

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes using Pauline Alexis Gumbs’ re-definition of “Echolocation” in *Undrowned* (2020) as a means of re-thinking music intertextuality in the French Rap songs analyzed here. This process aims to identify discourses across transnational music by focusing on issues pertaining to race and environmental racism in the context of the French refusal to use the socially constructed term “race” to address racial discrimination in the country. This enables French rappers to inscribe their work within a discourse that embraces this vocabulary.

KEYWORDS Rap Music; Abd al Malik; Pauline Alexis Gumbs; Marine Life; Echolocation; Aimé Césaire

Introduction

Though the French National Assembly recently voted unanimously to remove the word “race” from the Constitution—and the use of this term in French has a complex history in comparison to its Anglophone cousin—it is impossible to erase the stark reality of racism in Francophone societies. For this reason, a Post-Racial France can be understood as a utopia in the sense of the Greek etymology of the term signifying a non-(existing)-place. This article will read intertextuality in two songs by rapper Abd al Malik as “echolocation” based on Pauline Alexis Gumbs’ use of the term in her recent work *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* (2020). This paper suggests that through intertextual practices, described as echolocation, rap music becomes a crucial way in which people in France express issues pertaining to “race,” notably in a context in which this social construct is not accepted in French public and political discourse, and therefore erases raced and racialized realities in the hexagon. By highlighting how Abd al Malik’s songs “Gibraltar” (2006) and “Césaire (Brazzaville via Oujda)”

(2008) inscribe themselves within a tradition of African-American emancipatory music and one of Francophone decolonial thought, I argue that there is an attempt to create a new (musical) language to illuminate France's attempts to erase daily racial discrimination.

This sounds familiar: echolocating as intertextuality

In *Undrowned*, Gumbs investigates nineteen lessons that can be learned from marine mammals. At the outset, the author explains how this examination began through her curiosity about whales. This interest evolved into a study that became a “guide to undrowning [that] listens to marine mammals specifically as a form of life that has much to teach us about vulnerability, collaboration and adaptation” (Gumbs 7). Echolocation appears in the first lesson of the book which is on the practice of listening: “How can we listen across species, across extinction, across harm? How does echolocation, the practice many marine mammals use to navigate the world through bouncing sounds, change our understanding of ‘vision’ and visionary action?” Echolocation plays an essential role in a new practice of listening, that “is not only about the normative ability to hear, [but] it is a transformative and revolutionary resource that requires quieting down and tuning in” (15). Similarly to music, which can be transformative and permits one to communicate what is difficult to articulate and listen to, echolocation permits new interspecies ways of communicating in the way Gumbs’ describes above. The author also notes that “[e]cholocation and communication overlap but they also diverge. Sometimes the sounds I make are about measuring my surroundings. Sometimes there is something I need to tell you” (17–18).

Hence, supplementing the practice of listening with (echo)location transforms the practice of listening as a spatial and physical engagement with one’s interlocutor and environment. By adopting Gumbs’ definition of echolocation here, I outline a type of musical intertextuality that permits artists to situate, or (echo)locate, themselves within traditions of resistance and emancipatory practices while literally echoing sounds, rhythm and words within said traditions. This can be understood as akin to intertextuality, as defined in literary studies in works such as those of Julia Kristeva, itself based on Mikhail Bakhtin’s and Ferdinand de Saussure’s work. However, echolocation adds to this literary practice, first, a sense of physicality, related to its use for movement, second, a relation to active engagement given the transformative listening that Gumbs discusses above, and, third, a connection to our current climate crisis. Indeed, Gumbs situates her work in the context of anthropogenic climate change and the lessons to be learned from marine mammals serve to teach us new manners of breathing. “Breathe” is the second lesson in this guide:

Breath is a practice of presence. [...] The adaptations that marine mammals have made in relationship to breathing are some of the most relevant for us to observe, not only in relationship to our survival in an atmosphere we have polluted on a planet where we are causing the ocean to rise, but also in relationship to our intentional living, our mindful relation to each other. (21)

Breathing is central when considering both its role in rap music and how that type of singing requires a different regulation of one's breath, as well as in the context of the "mindful relation to each other" as Gumbs notes here. The latter's careful and caring consideration of all human and extra-human life has been absent in a time of accelerated extinction rates as we witness our current sixth extinction, and is further absent in the context of our socio-ecological crisis and its globally disproportionate impact. The reality of environmental injustice, exacerbated through different urban, rural and insular practices of segregating selected communities in more polluted, more toxic and more dangerous spaces, effectively makes breathing more difficult for marginalized communities.¹

The echolocation in Gumbs' understanding also brings to the surface that which cannot be seen, or, in the context of this paper, that which continues to be forcibly made unseeable in French rhetorical erasure of racial dynamics:

I took my cue from the many marine mammals that echolocate. I had to focus not on what I could see and discern, but instead on where I was in relation, how the sound bouncing off me in relationship to the structures and environments that surround me locates me in a constantly shifting relationship to you, whoever you are by now. (6)

What happens if these constructed structures enable certain groups to locate themselves in relation to exploitation and violence, whether cultural or physical, despite the formal lack of recognition that such structures exist? I suggest, then, that echolocation permits us to identify these material structures—perpetuations of racism and discrimination—even though the word "race" itself is not utilized or is made to be unusable. It is worth clarifying early on that continuous victims of racism and discrimination understand these oppressions and do not need echolocation to identify these structural and systemic issues. Rather, I aim to identify echolocation as a tool to discuss these issues that are entangled within socio-economic, political, social and environmental issues in our lives—structures made further difficult to identify when discourse erases keywords to discuss these, such as is the case for the term "race" in French. I also would like to note here my own limitations in entering a discussion pertaining to this reality, given that my race, white, has not made me encounter these

entangled discriminations, and this certainly will mean errors in my analysis and inability to fully grasp and articulate the material and epistemological reality of racism.

From sampling to echolocating: “Gibraltar” (2006) and “Césaire (Brazzaville via Oujda)” (2008)

Russell A. Potter identifies the role of “sampling” as central to the development of African-American music: “the rap DJ evolved from the party DJ, whose ostensible role was merely to play pre-recorded music for dance parties.” As Potter notes, “in a sense the hip-hop practice of ‘sampling’ pre-recorded sounds constitutes its founding gesture” (Potter 36). One can sample for many reasons, though inscribing oneself within a specific tradition can be seen as a political move; especially, as noted by Magali Nachtergaele, in the context of rap: “Le rap en cela est un miroir de la contemporanéité, au même titre que l’art contemporain, dans la mesure où il engage une relation active avec son temps en faisant œuvre de commentaire, dénonciation, provocation ou appropriation, tout en touchant un public quantitativement bien plus important” (Nachtergaele 5). In the consideration of French-Congolese rapper Abd al Malik’s work in particular, the socio-political agenda has been described by Míde Ní Shúilleabháin as a creation of *new narratives of Frenchness*: “The highly literary style of al-Malik’s rap is employed in an effort to try to think a ‘Frenchness’ in which the place of immigrant populations and their descendants is fully acknowledged and embraced” (Shúilleabháin 116). This idea could be problematized further by considering issues of migration. Indeed, while some of the subjects included in this more comprehensive understanding of “Frenchness” may be recent immigrants, many French citizens and residents—including the problematically named “overseas” departments and territories—should not be labelled as “immigrants.” Some may be descendants of people that were forcibly removed from different parts of the African continent and enslaved on Caribbean islands to permit France to develop over time and become the wealthy and privileged nation-state known today, who then migrated from a former colony to the metropole. Some may have undertaken this same travel from the north or sub-Saharan parts of the African continent occupied and exploited by France in the nineteenth century. Other areas of the world may be relevant to consider when thinking of French colonial global expansion, however, for the purpose of this paper focusing on rap and hip hop in France, the African diaspora from the continent and the Caribbean are more central given that “[a]s many have noted, hip hop in France is multiethnic, involving children of minorities from sub-Saharan

Africa, the Caribbean, and North Africa” (Charry 9). This raises an issue that Aimé Césaire tackled himself while mayor of Martinique and campaigning for the departmentalization of the island, which took place in 1946, in the hope that Martinicans would be considered as equal to other French citizens if the island became a department of France. However, departmentalization did *not* create this equality and many contemporary Antillean authors continue to challenge the resulting socio-economic and political unevenness existing between the hexagon and “its overseas” spaces.

Activist and scholar Steve “Fola” Gadet, inspired by Aimé Césaire’s famous essay *Discours sur le colonialisme*, recently published an essay entitled *Discours sur le néocolonialisme*, in which he identifies the continued legacies of France’s colonization of the Caribbean in contemporary departmental politics:

Je ne veux pas de l’égalité réelle. Gardez-la ! [...] Si cette égalité devait avoir lieu, elle aurait eu lieu en 1946. Si 60 ans plus tard, on en est encore à demander cette égalité, c’est que ce n’était pas le projet de départ. [...] Si les fers sont tombés, il y en a d’autres fers, qui eux, ne sont pas encore tombés. Ces fers sont invisibles mais bien réels. (Gadet 47)

Thus, my argument here is that sampling as a form of echolocation in “Gibraltar” is a political move which attempts to, in Shúilleabháin’s words, create “new narratives of Frenchness” (Shúilleabháin 116), while also destabilizing current narratives of Frenchness more broadly.

Abd al Malik sings his spoken word lyrics in his song “Gibraltar” over the sampling of the piano riff in Nina Simone’s version of “Sinnerman.” The repetition of the sampling culminates in “a bridge that sounds like John Coltrane’s pianist McCoy Tyner in the early 1960s” (Charry 19), creating an additional narrative reinforcing the main one contained in Abd al Malik’s lyrics. In other words, by echolocating the story of “un jeune noir” that the song tells with that of a tradition of African-American Jazz and Blues music, the song situates itself in a discourse about race and racialization that is absent in France’s public sphere. In particular, the choice to use Simone’s version of “Sinnerman” can be motivated by a number of reasons, including its recognizability, which would permit this identification and the echolocation of one’s work within a tradition of music-activism of which Simone took part, and which existed before her. This prehistory is also contained in the choice of the song itself, given the many different recordings that exist of “Sinnerman” (or “Sinner man”), and which reminds us of the song’s existence and development within a specific tradition of African-American musical production.

Additionally, reading this echolocation in conjunction with Gadet's *Discours* adds another layer to this intertextual practice. According to the author of this essay, "[l]es Français sont amoureux des Noirs-américains" and in all this admiration for the African-American community, they do not learn lessons that France could use: "Ils n'arrivent pas à faire le lien entre la conditions des Noirs aux États-Unis et en France" (Gadet 24). One could thus inscribe "Gibraltar"'s echolocation within Jazz and Blues as a practice that allows the song to address issues of race in a US-based contextual discourse. This becomes crucial when illuminating different racial and racialized dynamics in France.

Finally, the song also reverses the usual South-North migration that sees people from the North of the African continent cross the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe. This migratory pattern, present in the mind when issues pertaining to immigration are raised in Europe and France, is unsettled at the end of the song when, on the Strait of Gibraltar, the unidentified "jeune noir" whom the song follows begins to "Vogue vers le Maroc tout proche / Vogue vers ce Maroc qui fera de lui un homme / [...] Vogue, vogue vers le merveilleux royaume du Maroc." Throughout the song, the listener follows the character's transformation from a youth, whose identity does not feel whole and who feels homeless, to one ready to grow into his own person as he journeys to Morocco. The song begins with three lines informing us that past the Strait he will find his dream, but it is then unclear whether the dream he seeks bring him North or South: "Sur le détroit de Gibraltar y a un jeune noir / Qui pleure un rêve qui prendra vie / Une fois passé Gibraltar." Once the end of the song makes clear that the young man is southbound, several lines in the song take on a new meaning as one listens to them again, especially the following, which implies the young man's inability to find a home in Europe: "Il cherche comme un chien sans collier / Le foyer qu'il n'a en fait jamais eu / Et se dit que peut-être bientôt, il ne cherchera plus." The comparison between a collarless dog and the young man might also emphasize the racism the latter likely faced in Europe, a feature he hopefully leaves behind as he crosses the Strait. Additionally, this focus on racism and the departure from France aligns with a broader tendency in French rap to challenge the country's universalistic and nationalistic ideals, as Cannon notes about this musical genre: "ideological underpinnings of racism in France are also dissected and rejected: there is a vehement anti-nationalism, an explicit rejection of the integrationist 'republican' model of 'race relations' in France and of colonialist and imperialist attitudes, which shape French education, distort African and Maghrebi history, and reinforce economic domination" (Cannon 162).

These issues are also present in Abd al Malik's song "Césaire (Brazzaville via Oujda)." This song begins by informing the listener that its narrator is in Morocco. This connects back to the character from "Gibraltar"'s North African destination: "J'étais allongé dans une chambre d'hôtel au Maroc et Césaire était mort." The song, as the title also indicates, focuses on Aimé Césaire's work and legacy and it dates from the same year as the Martinican poet passed away, hence the opening line which sets the scene in a post-Césaire time. The song also considers another author whom, along with Aimé Césaire and the Guianese Léon Gontran Damas, was one of the forefathers of the *Négritude* movement: "Quelle image avions nous de nous-mêmes au temps de Senghor." Senegalese poet and scholar Léopold Sédar Senghor was in Paris in the 1920s with Césaire and Damas when they developed one of the most contested and crucial concepts in Francophone postcolonial studies. Coined for the first time in 1934–1935 in a journal that the three founded, called *L'Étudiant noir*,² *Négritude* has since evolved and provoked many debates. Césaire himself, in a paper delivered at a conference at the University of Miami in 1987, confesses his own struggle with it:

[J]'avoue ne pas aimer tous les jours le mot Négritude même si c'est moi, avec la complicité de quelques autres, qui ai contribué à l'inventer et à le lancer. Mais j'ai beau ne pas l'idolâtrer, en vous voyant tous ici réunis et venus de pays si divers, je me confirme qu'il correspond à une évidente réalité et, en tout cas, à un besoin qu'il faut croire profond. (Césaire 80)

The strength of *Négritude* lies in the radical act of adopting and desacralizing racist and racialist terminology that perpetuated and reinforced (material) violence imposed on people of African descent and other indigenous groups by the dynamics of colonialism, slavery and imperialism. It has been argued that the use of such a loaded term merely inverts the racialist binary rather than deconstructs it: "the often quoted remark of Wole Soyinka that 'a tiger does not proclaim its tigritude' [... places] its finger squarely on the essential flaw of Négritudinist thought, which is that its structure is derivative and replicatory, asserting not its difference, as it would claim, but rather its dependence on the categories and features of the colonizing culture" (Ashcroft 123). However, *Négritude* remains a crucial concept and the ontological revolt it represented marked the necessity for intellectuals to engage politically, especially in the French Antilles. Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant in *Éloge de la Créolité* propose an alternative hybrid identity that seeks to move beyond *Négritude*, though they recognize the vital importance of the concept, and Césaire himself: "La Négritude césairienne est un baptême, l'acte primal de notre dignité restituée. Nous sommes à jamais fils d'Aimé

Césaire” (Bernabé 18). Césaire thus becomes a central figure for decolonial Francophone thought to rally around, though one may or may not fully embrace his philosophy, as Abd al Malik’s song highlights halfway through in a verse opening with a repetition of the first line: “J’étais allongé dans une chambre d’hôtel au Maroc et Césaire était mort / Mais de Fort-de-France à Oudja, de Cayenne à Brazzaville, il rassemble encore / Intellectuels, peuples des cités, Noirs ou Blancs, je vous salue de la part du ‘Nègre fondamental’” (“Césaire ...”).

Césaire’s legacy in Abd al Malik’s song is not limited simply to the content of his poetic and activist work, but also to his scholar-activist practice: “Césaire évidemment aurait pensé que la poésie est toujours une question d’entre-deux / Une sorte de trait d’union qui interpellant l’histoire en la tutoyant dirait « je » / Entre l’absence et la présence comprendre qu’être subversif c’est passer de l’individuel au collectif” (“Césaire ...”). The focus on the role of connection and collectivity across these lines interprets Césaire’s poetry as an in-between and a “hyphen” connecting verse and history, fiction and non-fiction, and taking over the writing of history through familiarity (“la tutoyant”). This identifies both Césaire’s collective praxis as well as his project on challenging how history is written through France’s imposition of their archive, in which only white French people’s histories are recorded; consider Césaire’s pondering on the problematic education of “overseas” territories based on an understanding of genealogy and history reaching back to “mes ancêtres les gaulois” (Césaire 51). Subversive practice, grounded in collective action, is explored by the song’s narrator, possibly Abd al Malik himself given the identification of his own socio-political responsibility and his artistic collaboration with his brother Bilal, with whom he had formed the rap group N.A.P (“New African Poets”): “Lorsque je rentrais dans ce genre de réflexion, non point que j’étais craintif / Mais un questionnement profond quant à la responsabilité m’interpellait sur ma fonction / [...] Et Bilal à quelques milliers de kilomètres de là composait la musique que vous écoutez” (“Césaire ...”).

The metatextual reflection on music production in collaboration with another artist emphasizes the broader echolocation practice of this work: an echolocation, in “Gibraltar,” with African-American music traditions and artist-activist Nina Simone and, here, with other Francophone artists and decolonial thought. The song further echolocates itself with other artists, for example in the quoting of French rapper Youssoupha’s song “Rendons à Césaire” lyrics from his album *À chaque frère* (2007), a title reinforcing feelings of brotherhood: “Mais il faut rendre à Césaire ce qui appartient à Césaire” (Youssoupha). This echo(location) of Youssoupha’s song, which adapts and decolonizes the phrases “Render unto Caesar” by

playing on the French similarity between the pronunciation of “César” and “Césaire,” also introduces the citation of Césaire’s poem “dorsale bossale,” part of his collection *Moi, laminaire...* (1986; 2006) with which the song concludes.

Moi, laminaire... is a collection that challenges colonial discourses negatively racializing peoples and objectifying land, separating them on a binary, and disrupting ecosystemic relations. At the beginning of the poetry collection is a notice informing the reader of the breakdown of western geographic and geological understanding of the world that the poems will undertake. The notice ends by stating the time has come to “régler leur compte à quelques fantasmes et à quelques fantômes” (96). The connecting etymology between the terms “fantasy” and “ghost” (“phantom”) highlighted here identifies the colonial construct of “otherness” imposed on formerly colonized people and lands as spectral and immaterial realities that require undoing. Identifying himself with algae (“Moi, laminaire...”) and other critical elements of Antillean ecosystems (mangroves and volcanoes, for instance), this collection mends ecosystemic relations previously undone intellectually and materially by colonial ontologies and practices. Thus, Abd al Malik’s citation of the poem “dorsale bossale,” which compares Antillean collective revolts with volcanic activity,³ and aligning Antillean identity with the African continent (“bossale”),⁴ can be seen as echolocation highlighting rap music’s responsibility as a type of activism,⁵ one recalling past Francophone decolonial struggles and identifying their presence in contemporary France. This is done primarily through a genealogy of environmental racism, as when Abd al Malik puns on the liquid and musical flows in which the laminaria algae moves and tangles: “Moi, laminaire, je reprends le flambeau avec mes flows, avec mon coeur, avec ma bande” (“Césaire...”).

Conclusion

This brief article has attempted to use Gumbs’ re-definition of echolocation, based on marine life and used to teach life lessons in a time of climate crisis, as a way of re-conceptualizing intertextual relations across music productions. In focusing on two songs by French rapper Abd al Malik, the use of echolocation becomes crucial for connecting his practice to a time of exacerbated environmental injustices and racism, within a context of contemporary French refusal to use crucial terminology in addressing its racial and racialized issues. This paper has argued that by echolocating with and within African-American music traditions and Francophone decolonial thought and rap music, the songs analyzed here

attempts to situate their tackling of racial discrimination in France within discourses that do utilize the social construct of “race.”

Notes

1. See more in Esthie Hugo, “A ‘Violence Just Below the Skin’: Atmospheric Terror and Racial Ecologies in Ben Okri’s ‘In the City of Red Dust,’” *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 2021, pp. 1–14.
2. See Mary Gallagher, “Aimé Césaire and Francophone Postcolonial Thought,” *Postcolonial Thought in the French-Speaking World*, edited by Charles Forsdick and David Murphy, Liverpool UP, 2009, [pp. 31–41] p. 31.
3. See Jean Khalifa, “Césaire volcanique,” *L’Esprit Créateur*, Vol. 45, No. 2, 2005, pp. 52–61.
4. See more in Giulia Champion, *Extractivism and Climate Crisis in Latin American and Caribbean Literatures: Consuming the Américas*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023 forthcoming.
5. See Suzanne Nossel, “Introduction: On ‘Artivism,’ or Art’s Utility in Activism,” *Social Research*, Vol. 83 No. 1, 2016, pp. 103–105.

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