

Transnational and Transatlantic American Studies

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Hip-Hop in Europe

Cultural Identities and Transnational Flows

edited by

Sina A. Nitzsche and Walter Grünzweig

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In memoriam Andrzej Antoszek
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Contents

Hip-Hop in Europe as a Transnational Phenomenon: An Introduction <i>Sina A. Nitzsche</i>	3
Side A: Telling Their Stories: Hip-Hop Histories across Europe	35
Track 1 Hip-Hop and Cyprus: Language, Motivation, Unity, and Division <i>Mike Hajimichael</i>	37
Track 2 Mapping the Hip-Hop Transnation: A Brief History of Hip-Hop in Athens, Greece <i>Athena Elafros</i>	55
Track 3 Forgetting How to Swim: A History of Portuguese Rap <i>Sebastião Belfort Cerqueira</i>	71
Track 4 Hip-Hop in Russia: How the Cultural Form Emerged in Russia and Established a New Philosophy <i>Sergey Ivanov</i>	87
Side B: Bombing the Iron Curtain: Hip-Hop in Post-Communist Europe	103
Track 5 Breakin' Around the Bloc: Hip-Hop in the German Democratic Republic <i>Leonard Schmieding</i>	105
Track 6 In Search of the "Real" Czech Hip-Hop: The Construction of Authenticity in Czech Rap Music <i>Anna Oravcová</i>	125
Track 7 In the Global 'Hood': Slang and Hip-Hop in Present-Day Romania <i>Daniela Doboş</i>	145

Track 8	The Language(s) of Self-Presentation in Hungarian Rap Lyrics <i>Eszter Szabó Gilinger</i>	171
Side C: Re-Examining Multi Culturalisms in Hip-Hop from a Transnational Angle		189
Track 9	Merseybeatz: Hip-Hop in Liverpool <i>Brett D. Lashua and Yaw Owusu</i>	191
Track 10	Beyond Multiculturalism: The Transculturating Potential of Hip-Hop in Germany <i>Terence Kumpf</i>	207
Track 11	“Gheddos du Monde”: Sounding the Ghetto, Occupying the Nation from Berlin to Paris <i>J. Griffith Rollefson</i>	227
Track 12	Identity and Triple Liminality of a Young Hip-Hop Group in Tyrol, Austria: A Case Study <i>Verena Zelger</i>	241
Side D: Politics, Languages, and Identities in European Hip-Hop		255
Track 13	Hip-Hop Domesticated: On the Political Messages of Polish Rap and Hip-Hop Lyrics <i>Andrzej Antoszek (†)</i>	257
Track 14	Hip-Hop Ain’t Dead – It just Emigrated: Rap Music and Nationalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina <i>Rok Kovač</i>	291
Track 15	Graffiti Goes to Italy: Weaving Transnational Threads of All Sizes and Colors <i>Elisa Bordin</i>	307
Track 16	“Untergrund, kein Modetrend – 1995 Dortmund represent”: Too Strong and the Interrelationship between Global and Local, Graffiti and Rap Music in German Hip-Hop <i>Ina Lammers</i>	323

Side E: “Each One Teach One”: Pedagogy and Performance Inside and Outside the European Classroom		343
Track 17	Performing “the Other”: Rap as Social Change in the Danish Integration Project C:NTACT <i>Helle Bach Riis</i>	345
Track 18	Swedish Hip-Hop: Marginalized Youth and <i>Folkbildning</i> <i>Johan Söderman and Ove Sernhede</i>	365
Track 19	“A Hip Hop Haggadah”: The Transnational and Transcultural Space of Jewish Hip-Hop and Transnational Cultural Studies in the EFL Classroom <i>Philipp Siepmann</i>	385
Track 20	Immigrant Hip-Hop in Germany: The Cultural Identities of Migrants <i>Oliver Kautny</i>	405
Side F: ... and You Don’t Stop: Call and Response		421
Track 21	The Notion of Authenticity in International Hip-Hop Culture <i>Matthäus Ochmann</i>	423
Contributors		447
Index of Names		455

Track 11

“Gheddos du Monde”:

Sounding the Ghetto, Occupying the Nation from Berlin to Paris

J. Griffith Rollefson

On the 2006 track “Mi Barrio” (my neighborhood/my ghetto) the Oakland-based hip-hop duo Los Rakas represent their Panamanian roots and their San Francisco Bay Area home, articulating a connection between New World “barrios” and “ghettos” and gaining visibility in the city they call home. Their music draws on the sonic contours of the pan flute, symbol of pan-Latin, pre-Columbian indigeneity, the “boom-ch-boom-chick” rhythm of Panamanian Reggaeton, which sounds a history of Afro-Caribbean musical transfer, and the swing and swag of hip-hop which anchors their diverse music in the city of Too Short, MC Hammer, and the Hieroglyphics Crew. The video for the track moves from barbequeing on rooftops with wide-angle shots of Lake Merritt and Downtown Oakland in the background, to hanging out on the street with *paleteros* (popsicle vendors) from 12th Street to the Fruitvale BART transit station in the largely Latino neighborhood. All the while their lyrics move fluidly between English, Spanish, and Caribbean patois, while poetic images of flip flops, Nikes, and Zapatistas encourage us to imagine an Oakland that high school history has not prepared us for.

I start this comparative essay on Berliner and Parisian deployments of “the ghetto” in East Oakland to draw our attention to the ways that the sonic, the visual, and the textual help give shape to the specific politics of ghetto discourse in this cultural artifact. Importantly, through all of these features Los Rakas carve out and define a space for us to imagine the ghetto in a way that suits the particular cultural and political aims that the two MCs hope to accomplish. In short, MCs Raka Dun and Raka Rich are gaining visibility and *occupying* their city in order to occupy a particular place in the minds of its inhabitants and their diverse and mixed nation.

As they call out to others in Oakland on the bridge of “Mi Barrio”:

Pongan sus banderas en el aire
 Si usted estan orgullosos
 De ser de donde son
 De de donde son
 Let's go!

Put your flags in the air
 If you're proud
 Of being where you're from
 From where you're from
 Let's go!

(“Mi Barrio,” my translation)

In this case, by gaining visibility in Oakland, Los Rakas are both claiming and diversifying the city as a postcolonial site where African Americans, Filipino Americans, Panamanian Americans, Puerto Ricans, Jamaican Americans, Mexican Americans, and countless others are engaging in cultural and political work through the musical contours of hip-hop. Indeed, through the mediatized hypervisibility of their occupation, the Afro-Panamanian-American hip-hop group asks us to reconsider the imperial histories of US occupation, from the colonial slave trade and Monroe doctrine paternalism through the golden age of banana republics, to the current hegemony of military installments and globalized markets. Like so many other postcolonial hip-hop artists, they are inscribing themselves into the American nation – the body politic – and making their case by saying, as the saying goes, “we are here because you were there.”

In European hip-hop, this rhetorical turn and its implicit variations are commonly deployed by artists of minority backgrounds to rehistoricize their presence in Europe, articulate their dissent from dominant narratives of “immigration problems,” and claim their respective nations – not through assimilation but through difference. It is, of course, no coincidence that hip-hop and its template of African American musical protest has provided models for these critiques. W. E. B. Du Bois’s hundred-year-old question “how does it feel to be a problem?” echoes throughout the poetic and musical rhetoric of European hip-hop – from strategically essentialist and purposefully problematic gangsterism to eloquent moralizing and humanizing portraits that push back against the dehumanizing language of “aliens” and “immigrants.” And it is no coincidence that “the ghetto” serves as the backdrop for these critiques. As we will see, once *occupied* in geography, media, and/or discourse, the ghetto functions as a powerful site from which non-white Europeans can lay claim to their nations, diversify the (white) body politic, and call for the aid that has been withheld from their communities on the basis of legalized frameworks of citizenship.

In this essay I compare the ways that images of “the ghetto” are crafted and deployed in the hip-hop scenes of Berlin and Paris. In both cities the term draws on the iconicity of the African American inner city as cultivated in US forms of hip-hop – a puissant symbol of the ways that the marginal can become discursively, if not economically, centered. The larger argument, drawn from my book project *European Hip Hop and the Politics of Postcoloniality*, thus looks at how the model of US hip-hop, itself a development out of imperial and diasporic encounters, has served as a platform for gaining visibility in European national contexts. This platform and its creative strategies have ultimately aided subjects from the former colonies and peripheries of Europe in their struggle to gain voice, occupy cityscapes, and inscribe themselves onto their respective national bodies politic. In these ways, hip-hop speaks the truth of postcolonial diversity to Germany and France, suggesting that these nations are not who they think they are.

By reading European hip-hop simultaneously as an African American art form and a postcolonial practice I highlight the ways that Europeans of color have looked to US hip-hop for material and inspiration while at the same time decentering the narratives of American exceptionalism that have shielded the United States from critique as an imperial power. In so doing, I work towards an understanding of the transatlantic continuities between postcolonial structures and hip-hop’s critiques thereof. I track the ways that European performances of the art form can offer new insights into hip-hop as both local “resistance vernacular” and global commodity and better actualize American hip-hop’s purportedly global (but often myopic) consciousness (Potter). In short, a transatlantic and doggedly historical postcolonial frame helps us to learn from each other about the discursive and legalistic structures that reify ideal nations at the expense of de facto realities and examine how hip-hop offers alternative discourses that are poking holes in these (il)logical structures and gaining currency every day. Indeed, hip-hop continually reminds us that the African American project of occupying the nation remains an incomplete one. While it may come as a surprise to some readers of this collection, for many US citizens “American” still means “white” despite the nation’s manifestly non-white reality – a slippage that reveals the truth that the US also continues to misread itself.

In this chapter I focus on two commercially successful and nationally available ghetto statements – one from Berlin and the other from Paris – noting how the two craft and deploy “the ghetto” to achieve culturally and politically specific goals. While the Turkish German Eko Fresh and his Tunisian German collaborator, Bushido, paint a bleak picture of dehumanization in the Kreuzberg district of Berlin on their 2006 track “Gheddo,” the Malian Parisian Oxmo Puccino’s 2001 hit “Ghettos du Monde” paints a warm and humanizing picture of Paris’s 19^{ième} *arrondissement* (district) and the adjacent Parisian *banlieues* (suburbs). The wide

discrepancy in musical style and lyrical content is due largely to the politics and policing of the term “ghetto” and its discursive availability in the two cities. In brief, what we will see emerging as we catalogue and analyze the sonic, visual, and textual elements of these ghetto statements is an evolution of rhetoric suited to the specific historical state of ghetto discourse in a given locale. This historical trajectory stretches from rappers militating to gain voice and mediatized visibility in relatively poor and working class ethnic enclaves, to humanizing pictures that serve as correctives for the overwritten ghetto once these cities and their nations begin to recognize the ways that structures of geographically located racisms and underdevelopment persist.

I do not want to oversimplify these histories, but would like to remain cognizant of how the 2005 Parisian *banlieue* riots sparked more than just a debate, ultimately forcing France to reexamine its egalitarian image of itself. Indeed, this introspection also happened in London in the aftermath of the 1981 Brixton riots – for better and for worse – as British citizens across the UK sat transfixed on images of their nation burning on TV. Of course, such introspection is an ongoing and uneven process, and one that repeated itself in the summer of 2011 as the racialized uprising against police brutality known as the Tottenham “riots” spread across the country. Famously, such violent racialized protest throughout the 1960s and beyond has continued to force self-reflection in the US. It is notable, then, that Germany still has not yet endured widespread “race riots” – the media euphemism for anti-racist revolution. Perhaps this is taken as proof to bolster the official claim that Germany does not have ghettos. But whether this will hold remains to be seen.

Eko Fresh and Bushido’s “Gheddo”: Militating for Ghetto Visibility in Germany

Eko Fresh and Bushido’s 2006 track “Gheddo” epitomizes German hip-hop’s newly dominant politics of street authenticity. “Gheddo” appeared on Eko Fresh’s 2006 concept album *Hart(z) IV*, which calls attention to socio-economic problems in the Turkish German enclaves across Germany. Above all, the album documents the existence of ghettos of poor and non-white Germans in a nation that eschews the practice of naming poor ethnic enclaves “ghettos.” The track – a melancholy ode to street life – begins with a lonely monodic piano line over an atmospheric track of rain and quiet thunder before Eko enters with the lines:

Eko Fresh, Ghettochef, Junge denn es muss sein
Köln-kalk, Hartz 4, komm in meine Hood rein.
Komm und guck was es heißt im Block hier zu wohnen
Wo man leben muss von Drogen oder Prostitution.

Eko Fresh, ghetto boss, man it’s gotta be
Cologne-Kalk, Hartz IV, come into my hood
Come peep what it means to live here in my block.
Where one must live by drugs or prostitution.

(“Gheddo,” my translation)

Here Eko establishes his street cred(ibility) and more importantly, situates himself within a lower-income housing project (a “Block”) where employment opportunities are limited and which is seldom-visited and thus misunderstood by outsiders. This is our introduction to Eko’s “Gheddo.”

Importantly, the album title *Hart(z) IV* is a reference to Peter Hartz, a Volkswagen corporate executive chosen to head the government commission that designed cutbacks in the German welfare system. As a 2004 *Economist* article explains:

His name has become a sort of expletive, just because he headed a government commission that has blown a hole in Germany’s cherished social safety net. From January, Hartz IV, the deeply unpopular final phase of the commission’s lawmaking, will force the rich-but-struggling economy’s long-term unemployed to find work or face a new level of (relative) poverty. (“Peter Hartz, Germany’s workforce reformer”)

Hartz’s government austerity reports have also stated that Germany has no ghetto problems like its Northern European neighbors. Notably, for Eko and Bushido the Hartz Report’s rhetoric constitutes a double threat. On a moral level it constitutes a real misunderstanding of issues of poverty, racism, and access in ethnic ghettos and on a commercial level it threatens their street authenticity and therefore their status as real gangstas.

Adding specificity to his initial request for the listener to come “peep” (see) his ghetto, the first verse concludes with Eko asking Hartz himself to come visit the Germany he knows. The verse builds to a climax as Eko gulps and gasps in between urgently delivered lines, as though he is running out of air. He raps: “Why not take a look at my street, Peter Hartz / Fifteen years of German rap, but no one does it like Eko / They all have rich parents and say: ‘Germany has no ghettos!’” (my translation) The first verse is thus a litany of grievances and petitions that implicates Germany’s wealthy society – which happens to include his young CD-buying audience – and Hartz as complicit in a misunderstanding about Germany’s invisible (and impossible) lower-class ethnic ghettos. And even more than the rhetoric, the performance embodies a close-to-the-edge urgency that conveys Eko’s frustration. For him, Hartz is focused on numbers and statistics when he should be looking at people and visiting communities. The track’s chorus ends with the lines: “I pray each day / That I’ll get out / Please, Mr. Peter Hartz / come to my ‘hood just once.” (my translation)

Interestingly, the name of the welfare reform legislation Hartz IV is reformulated and appears on the album as *Hart(z) IV* – a reference to a “hard four” or high risk and high reward roll in craps, the American ghetto game *par excellence*. The message of this wordplay has two possible interpretations: first, that Peter Hartz is playing a dangerous game with people’s lives and second, that ghetto life in Germany is itself a risky venture. The video for the hit single, which was an MTV favorite during 2006, preferred the latter reading.

The clip, in a fittingly moody black and white, tells the doomed story of two young boys who live in the ghetto. As the video begins, the camera enters an adolescent boy’s bedroom where we see a microphone resting on a copy of the 1994 CD *Born Dead* by the American gangsta rapper Ice-T and his group Body Count – an album dedicated “to all the people of color throughout the entire world [...] that white supremacists would love to see born dead” (*Born Dead*, liner notes) (Figure 16).



Figure 16: A Microphone Resting on a Copy of Body Count’s 1994 *Born Dead* (“Gheddo”). Screenshot: *YouTube*.

Notably, by placing the microphone on top of the CD case we learn that the boy is an aspiring rapper and that one of his influences is the African American gangsta artist from the Crenshaw district of Los Angeles. As we will see, this well-composed still life – which also includes a headshot photo of Eko, another idol – is also a foreshadowing mechanism in the clip’s dead-end narrative of structural inequality and institutional racism in Germany’s ghettos.

In the video’s opening frames, we see shots of a bulbous Turkish samovar teapot on the stovetop and a satellite dish outside the kitchen window, establishing that the household is a Turkish German one. Later scenes of the two adolescents in unruly classrooms, riding the bus, being hassled by police, and hanging out on the roofs of Berlin’s public housing projects, establish the basic visual grammar of city life for the video. A street shot of a two-cheek greeting kiss further establishes

that they are of immigrant origins. When one of the boys shows off to his friends by brandishing a gun, which proves to be a cigarette lighter, the plot goes into motion. The boys witness two (white German) undercover police officers hassling someone in the neighborhood and proceed to give them the middle finger. Later, the officers happen upon the two kids in a dark parking lot. After the one boy jokingly brandishes his novelty lighter, he is shot by a nervous cop.

Surprisingly, the video is as notable for its effectiveness as it is for its platitudes. It delivers a message that is as morally black and white as the images, and in so doing closely approximates American mediatized narratives about race and poverty through which anyone in the world could understand who is on the just side and who is not. While a couple images contextualize the story’s conflict as ethnic Germans vs. non-ethnic Germans, there are no musical signifiers of Turkishness. Here the signifiers of otherness are the African American sonic elements of hip-hop beats, the melancholy minor tonal environment, and visual cues of Turkishness coupled with icons of the American ghetto: hoodies, pit bulls, housing projects, headphones, and graffiti.

In addition to the explicit role that icons of Turkishness play in the video, the importance of Berlin to German gangsta rap asserts itself at a number points through the same signifier, the number 36 – the old postal code of Kreuzberg’s Turkish section – emblazoned on Eko’s stocking cap and one of the boys’ T-shirts (Figure 17).



Figure 17: The Handgun Cigarette Lighter in Action on a Rooftop Marked as a Berlin Housing Project by Graffiti and a Kreuzberg T-shirt (“Gheddo”). Screenshot: *YouTube*.

Notably, the number was also taken on as the symbol of Kreuzberg’s Turkish German street gang, the 36 Boys. Since the video is ostensibly by a Cologne rapper with a Berlin-Tempelhof guest, the nod to Kreuzberg comes off as pure

homage to the Mecca of German gangsta rap and the neighborhood constructed as most authentic. Indeed, although no street signs indicate the video's location, a few well-placed geographic cues indicate that it was filmed around the Kreuzberg Zentrum housing project just north of the district's central Kottbusser Tor U-Bahn (subway) station.

Kreuzberg's status as a vibrant center for rap music has declined in recent years as the district has gentrified. However, as Eko and Bushido's contemporary example of racialized street authenticity indicates, Kreuzberg's decline as an active center of hip-hop life is due in large part to the expansion of such claims of authenticity to other parts of the city and indeed to other parts of the country. Today, rappers no longer have to be from Kreuzberg 36 to claim ghetto authenticity. Nonetheless, Kreuzberg's role as the imagined center of Turkish life – and therefore ghetto life – in Germany remains secure as the video for "Gheddo" indicates.

Of course, most Berliners are aware of Kreuzberg's gentrified realities, and include this knowledge in commonplace dismissals of such ghetto statements as mere commercialized resistance music. Yet, as George Lipsitz has argued, we should not be surprised that postcolonial art is full of cultural politics that are perceived as inauthentic and contradictory by our neoliberal societies. Lipsitz writes:

Hip hop expresses a form of politics perfectly suited to the post-colonial era. It brings a community into being through performance, and it maps out real and imagined relations between people that speak to the realities of displacement, disillusion, and despair created by the austerity economy of post-industrial capitalism. (36)

Indeed, I argue that hip-hop is not only perfectly suited to articulating the real and imagined affiliations between postcolonial Europeans and African Americans, but that it is a product of those postcolonial contradictions that simultaneously claim and marginalize citizens. As Lipsitz explains, hip-hop's contradictions are best understood through Antonio Gramsci's notion of the "war of position" that works "through existing contradictions" rather than militating to seize state power (Lipsitz 35). Thus, it should come as no surprise that a postcolonial art form such as hip-hop would engage those same commercial structures that first engineered racialized structural inequalities in chattel slavery and continued to dehumanize labor through globalizing government projects like Germany's "guest worker" program that brought in Turkish laborers to rebuild the nation's now dominant economy. In short, to argue that Eko and Bushido's cultural politics are commercialized and inauthentic is to engage in a myopic, ahistorical, and typically neoliberal mode of dismissal.

Oxmo Puccino's "Ghettos du Monde": Humanizing the Ghetto in Paris

In many ways Oxmo Puccino's 2001 hit "Ghettos du Monde" eschews the strategic essentialisms and awareness raising representational politics of "Gheddo," instead closely mirroring the sonic attitude and cultural work that Los Rakas are engaged in on "Mi Barrio." The track begins with a lilting major key flute line in parallel thirds that sets a very different tone than Eko and Bushido's "Gheddo." It turns out the gentle line is from Isaac Hayes 1972 recording of Al Green's "Let's Stay Together" and soon we hear the title line that encourages pan-ghetto solidarity across the "four corners of the world." Speaking about his 19th *arrondissement* neighborhood, Oxmo enters with the line: "People who grow up here harden quickly, *or so they say*" (my emphasis), but he continues: "Come from the ghetto: a certain pride, psychology of stone / If you make it, you're guaranteed indestructible." The lyrics evoke this sense of pride of place – much like Los Rakas on "Mi Barrio." The chorus of "Ghettos du Monde" proceeds:

C'est pour les ghettos du monde
Pour la bouffe et le lait
Toutes les fous qui plaisent
Ghettos du monde
Lève ta main et respecte
Pour ta mère et ton père du bled.

This is for the ghettos of the world
For the food and the milk
All the booty you want
Ghettos of the world
Raise your hand and respect
For your mom and your dad back home.

("Ghettos du Monde," my translation)

Despite the trials of the ghetto and 'what people say' about it, Oxmo is here setting the record straight and writing with nuance against the idea of a totalized, dehumanizing, and dead-end ghetto – one that the previous generation of Parisian MCs, like NTM, in fact worked hard to create. Oxmo goes on to note: "Trop de rappeurs décrivent une vie grise / Des violons qui font pitié, écrivent comme Anne Frank." (Too many rappers describe a gray life / with violins that play pity, writing like Anne Frank). In referencing Nazi racial terror and the Holocaust, Oxmo goes where Eko and Bushido could not, lest they relativize their own much less grey ghetto experience. For the term "ghetto" – like the German word *Rasse* (race) – is

a term that is highly policed in Berlin. To even broach the subjects of racism and ghettoization in Germany, one invokes Hitler's specific white supremacist project and therefore diminishes the imagined impact of contemporary structural racism in our current age of austerity.

Indeed, through his Anne Frank reference Oxmo is able to evoke this relativism in his humanizing project on "Ghettos du Monde." By invoking the violin, he even gestures to the excessively lonely and pitiful sonic contours used to buttress previous French ghetto statements – a statement that could easily apply to the melancholy piano line and quiet thunder of Eko and Bushido's "Gheddo." Indeed, instead of cultivating sympathy on "Ghettos du Monde," Oxmo *engages in artistic play*. Where Eko and Bushido function as ghetto reporters in brutally straightforward language, Oxmo's music spends much more time building rhetorical and musical nuance with allusion, intertextuality, homophones, double entendre, and assonance. Before proceeding I would like to restate that I understand these differences not as expressive of differing levels of artistic ability between Oxmo and Eko and Bushido, but rather as the particular results of musics attuned to their time and place and the respective development of their discourses about national identity. In short, I find artistry in the brutal gangsterism of "Gheddo," but it is an artistry of a different order with distinctly different needs vis-à-vis ghetto discourse.

There is no video for "Ghettos du Monde," but in a sense a video would detract from what Oxmo is doing on the track. Not including a narrative visual element encourages a much more open reading than the overlaid narrative and overdetermined gravity of Eko and Bushido's "Gheddo." Here are the first two quatrains of Oxmo's second verse in which the MC plays with his language and images through the use of a number of poetic devices.

Personne peut nous empêcher briller en cylindrée par millions
 A chaque équipe: Toulouse, Marseille, Paris, Lyon. Rarr! (Lion
 sound)
 Élégants jusqu'au bout des ongles
 Télé cablée vue du lit superposé
 Car nous, on pisse sur des lit/lis superposés
 Jusqu'à X pîges inéligibles vie d'illégalité
 J'ai dit ghetto. Répète! Même si t'y es pas j'ai dit ghetto.
 Ha ha ha ha ha!

No one can stop us from shining, displaced (or: in big cars) by millions
 To each team: Toulouse, Marseille, Paris, Lyon. Roar! (Lion sound)
 Elegant to our fingertips

Cable TV watched from the bunk bed
 For us, we piss on bunk beds (or: on the imposed lily)
 Until X ineligible years of illegality
 I said ghetto. Say it again! Even if you're not there I say ghetto.
 Ha ha ha ha ha!

("Ghettos du Monde," my translation)

From the outset we get a sense of shining pride despite colonial displacement. But like Eko and Bushido, here we also see a contradiction voiced through a double entendre that pits the postcolonial reality of diasporic movement against the image of rolling through Marseille or Paris in a big, shiny car. What is more, the assonance of L sounds across the first couplet establishes a subtle and ingenious rhyme scheme that results in another double entendre of relocated African lions in the French city of Lyon. In fact, the displacement of former African colonial subjects into "teams" references the famed French national football team *Les Bleus* which was recast as *Les Blacks* in the late 1990s – giving the French body politic a highly visible sense that she is not who she thinks she is.

Another inversion gesture to French *patrimoine* (patrimony, heritage, or paternalism) and cultural symbolism comes as Oxmo highlights the homophones *lit* (bed) and *lis* (lily). Here he works with the familiar housing project image of the cable TV watched from the cramped bunk bed – another symbol of ghettoized diaspora like the Turkish German satellite dish. But the second time the *lit superposé* is mentioned it seems that it is not a bed being pissed on, but a super-imposed lily. The clever and almost imperceptible redirection subtly critiques the imposition of the lily-white French national imaginary. Oxmo is not pissing on bunk beds, but on the *fleur-de-lis* and along with it, the racialized idea of "France for the French" and the racist sloganeering of Jean-Marie Le Pen and his *Front National* party.

But more than the apparent textual density on "Ghettos du Monde," it is the musicality that I want to highlight here. It is not what Oxmo is saying, but how he is saying it. His lyrics about colonization, displacement, race, and ghettoization are enacted and embodied in the musical performance on "Ghettos du Monde." From the lilting syncopated flutes to the fluid and laid back delivery of Oxmo's verses on the track, "Ghettos du Monde" reestablishes and romanticizes the warmth and humanity of France's ghettos. Indeed, the one visual cue we have associated with the track features young black and brown boys sitting shirtless and contented on a stoop that could be any ghetto in the world. The faces in the image convey a range of emotion from beaming and playful to stoic, but unlike the doomed narrative of the "Gheddo" video, the camaraderie and apparent "psychology of stone" seem to bode well for these boys. The child sitting behind Oxmo's name gives us the thumbs up (Figure 18).



Figure 18: Cover Art for the Single Release of "Ghettos du Monde."

Despite the difficult realities of the ghetto, life continues apace – even thrives. Oxmo's sonic and rhetorical ghetto is a place of human love and play where real people seem to live and die, celebrate and grieve together. Indeed, it is a redemptive place that alienated upper and middle class whites from both sides of the Atlantic have been attracted to for decades through the sounds and stories of black music.

To be sure, this is not the grey, street reporting of Eko and Bushido. We might consider that Oxmo is just a different type of artist with a different set of aesthetic goals. But by looking closely at these two cultural artifacts and the discursive contexts in which they were produced (or which produced them) we can discern a shift from the literalizing, authenticating political needs of the German MCs to the poetic, humanizing, and de-essentializing politics of the French MC. To be sure, these are but two examples from national culture industries with thousands of artists. But as I argue, this is largely because of the difference in the state of discourse around race, xenophobia, labor, poverty, and "ghettos" in the two nations. In short, since Oxmo does not need to make the case that France has ghettos, he is freed from a certain burden of representation. His political work, like that of Los Rakas, moves from victimization to celebration, and in doing so takes a next step in what we might call the musical politics of ghetto representation.

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