

10 | The Foundations of Rap Music and Post-colonial Emancipation

Guadeloupe Hip-Hop

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The Caribbean island of Guadeloupe became an overseas department of France in 1946. In this former French colony, colour-blind assimilation policies have led to political struggles against cultural domination and structures of power. In that context, post-colonial authors have addressed emerging identity issues in the present as well as historical accounts of the past. The adoption of hip-hop music and culture in Guadeloupe has built on this desire to challenge dominant discourses and to voice alternative narratives rooted in the realm of the political and social context. This intersection of global and local dynamics provided an empowering space for the youth and fostered the expression of specific linguistic and musical features. The choice of the Creole language to rhyme and the use of vernacular cultural references such as the traditional *gwoka* drumming and dancing are indeed central in the development of a localised rap form in Guadeloupe.

Guadeloupean rap has remained largely unknown in mainland France. It has never attracted the attention of national record companies, although France has become one of the biggest hip-hop nations in the world (McCarren 2013). It has also been understudied, despite the fact that there is today a large body of work on French hip-hop with an increasing number of academic research and publications (e.g. Hammou 2014, Djavadzadeh 2015, Sonnette 2018). This article aims to start filling this gap by providing an insight into the foundations of rap music in Guadeloupe at the end of the 1990s. Based on ethnographic data and grounded in both post-colonial and de-colonial theories, this chapter will explore the construction of narratives claimed and rendered from the silenced margins.

The first section describes how hip-hop in Guadeloupe has drawn upon American cultural markers to legitimise its contribution to the genre and upon local cultural politics to express new senses of belonging. The second section focusses on the lyrics of the rap song 'Awogan', released in 2001 on

the album *Pur Hip-Hop Gwada* by the group Gwada Nostra. After looking at the writing process of the lyrics, which operates through the construction of hybrid narratives, the third section analyses the music-video of this rap song and engages with de-colonial critique. The last section examines how binary thinking is challenged through music composition, leading to the redefinition of cultural identification.

Hip-Hop Culture in Guadeloupe

Hip-hop culture took root in Guadeloupe in the 1980s with the broadcast on French national television of a weekly show called *H.I.P.H.O.P.* This show was the world's first entertainment program dedicated to hip-hop culture with free styles, break dancing, graffiti artists, and special guests such as Surgarhill Gang, Afrika Bambaataa, Herbie Hancock, and Madonna, to name just a few. Many rappers recall the core importance of this programme, which showcased dance steps and rap music. As Guadeloupean teenagers started to teach themselves to dance and to rhyme on pre-recorded sounds, hip-hop became a medium of expression fostering the formation of crews in different neighbourhoods of Pointe-à-Pitre, the island's capital. The spread of hip-hop culture met the needs and conditions of Guadeloupean communities by engaging in a dialogue with localised experiences. Enriching rap music with their own identity narratives, Guadeloupean youth created a style of their own and a specific flow grounded in Creole language. By the end of the 1990s, a vivid local rap scene had emerged, enabling the rise of a local production industry with, between 1998 and 2010, the commercialisation of approximately fifty albums that were only locally distributed.

Guadeloupean rappers admired their American counterparts. Their inspiration came from American groups such as Public Enemy ('for their conscious lyrics') and Wu-Tang Clan ('for their madness').¹ These groups – and more generally American hip-hop culture – had a direct influence on the development of the Guadeloupean rap scene. For example, rappers from the neighbourhood Grand Camp chose the name Wu-Tang Park to identify their crew. Like American hip-hop artists, rappers in Guadeloupe developed strong relationships with their territory, from the neighbourhood they grew up in to the island of Guadeloupe as a space perceived from a non-French/Caribbean perspective. The names of hip-hop crews, albums,

¹ Personal interview between author and Guadeloupean rappers.

and song titles were directly inspired by the borough/ghetto/streets from which a given group originated. For instance, a track by the Lauricisque-based rapper Fuckly is called 'Lauricisque Zoo' (1999). In the chorus of this hometown anthem, the rapper connects his neighbourhood to the American hip-hop map: 'If Pointe-à-Pitre was New York / Lauricisque would be Brooklyn'.² This track is also a direct reference to the song 'Brooklyn Zoo' by American rapper Ol' Dirty Bastard from the album *Return to the 36 Chambers: The Dirty Version* (1995). Besides referring to urban landscapes, the lyrics and the names of groups are also deeply connected with the island of Guadeloupe as a whole. Guadeloupe is often referred as 'Gwada' or by its Amerindian name 'Karukera' as in the Karukera Crew of rappers founded in 1991. Renaming Guadeloupe or reclaiming its Indigenous name has been a way for rappers to redefine the relation between them and their land and to challenge the past colonial narratives by revalorising place-based Indigenous ontologies.

Guadeloupe's colonial history began when Christopher Columbus first set foot on the island Karukera in 1493 where native Amerindians lived. The Spanish settled on the island until the French expelled both them and the local population, officially claiming Guadeloupe as a colony in 1635. In 1946, Guadeloupe was declared a French overseas department by the French National Assembly. Since then, Guadeloupeans have occupied an ambiguous position as French citizens of African descent in a country that does not recognise ethnic groups. Indeed, French 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983) is based on the concept of cultural assimilation, a model anchored in the idea of integration through the adoption of French language, culture, beliefs, and values. Through cultural assimilation, the French state attempted to deny the historical background of Guadeloupeans. Ever since public schools were established in the 1880s, Guadeloupeans have been taught that their ancestors were the Celtic Gauls.

The cultural assimilation policy and the non-ethnic citizen ideology were challenged by Guadeloupean activists in the 1970s. In a context of growing disillusionment linked to the overseas department status, Guadeloupe saw the creation of many separatist parties and unions. Culture and music became an arena for political confrontation and constituted the terrain on which to address issues of belonging. The Creole language and the traditional drum dance called *gwoka*, which had been constructed as an explicit target against the French assimilation policy,

² This and all other lyrics in this chapter translated by the author.

articulated the cultural politics of race, nation, and ethnicity. From the 1970s, the independence movements raised awareness for these then-marginalised cultural expressions, which got entangled in the deployment of anti-colonialism and in the articulation of their nation-building project. Although the nationalist, anti-colonial movements did not politically succeed, the quest for identity they fostered played a major role in the construction of an Afro-Guadeloupean identity.

Most of the first Guadeloupean rappers, many of whom still perform, were born at that time. Their generation grew up confronted by the ways in which the persistence of socio-economic disparities between mainland France and Guadeloupe, high unemployment rates, and urban renewal projects combined to create tough living conditions for the youth. In addition, like elsewhere in the Black Atlantic world, the disillusionment with the state 'imagined community' and its failed promises paved the way for the construction of new identity discourses.

Hybrid Narratives

At the turn of the millennium, there was a thriving underground hip-hop scene in Guadeloupe. Rap music served as a medium of self-expression with conscious, as well as party-oriented lyrics. Rappers expressed frustration fuelled by discrimination, social injustice, and lack of empowerment. They also articulated their own localised experience towards race and ethnicity with the diasporic transnational history of Black people.

More specifically, rap music in Guadeloupe has been used as a weapon to fight cultural domination practices and narratives, which had created a class division among Black Guadeloupeans. With the colony of Guadeloupe becoming an overseas department of France in 1946, the post-colonial social order stigmatised the African heritage as inferior, advocating for an integrated, equal, colour-blind France. By so doing, the colonial social/racial stratification hierarchy was being reproduced inside the former colony, while still revolving around assertions of cultural differences. Therefore, race, social status, and culture remained tightly interwoven. As Ramón Grosoguel (1999, 411) states, 'global racial discourses shifted from biological racism to cultural racism'. In short, the post-colonial social stratification associated French language with the Black middle class and Creole language and African-derived traditions with the lower classes. The borders among these two population groups were blurred and re-signified through

rap music as the track 'Awogan' released in 2001 on the album *Pur Hip-Hop Gwada* by the group Gwada Nostra illustrates.³

This track is an ode to the Creole language. The lyrics display a process of writing that is not a linear narrative but a fragmented structure, which discloses the rappers' experience of oppression within the linguistic and discursive practices that came to be associated with French colonial and post-colonial rules. The colonial enterprise was achieved not only by brutal, physical subjugation, but also by the establishment of a cultural ideology, which firmly inscribed, legitimised, and naturalised Western canons of thought-supposed superiority, especially through the colonial and post-colonial education system. Founded during the colonial period, the education system was conceived on a French colonial mind-set and implemented colonial linguistic and cultural practices. Creole was referred to not only by negative terms such as 'broken French' or 'dialect', implying inferior status, but also as a racial ascription: Creole was the 'language of the Negroes' (Wiltord 2011).

The Gwada Nostra rappers' education in such a system explains their lyrics. In school, they learnt from the same curriculum as the children in mainland France. The history of the French colonial empire was erased and the Creole language was forbidden. The rappers unveil the colonial roots of these educational and language practices by creating a multi-layered hybrid text. The first verse opens with:

Celebrate the Creole language!
The language of the Negroes who lived on the sugar cane plantations
The words of the despised Negroes
Negroes with no education.

The lyrics are rooted in the rappers' historical experience of cultural domination. They are directly tied to the colonial narratives that surrounded the artists while they were growing up and which composed a stereotypical image of the Creole language and the Black people who spoke it. The lyrics engage in post-colonial thinking through the use of heterogeneous structures of references. They create a new discursive space, the 'Third Space of enunciation' theorised by Homi Bhabha, where it becomes possible to empower the Guadeloupeans who had been socially, culturally, and linguistically marginalised. By reminding listeners that the Creole language was referred to as 'the dialect of the Negroes', as unworthy of respect, as in need of eradication, the rappers reclaim these colonial

³ The music-video can be seen on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=zBr4a1IC9zM.

narratives and honour their own history, language, culture, beauty, and power. The lyrics subvert former and then still-existing negative and dismissive representations assigned to the Creole language by weaving a critical awareness of the colonial discourses to alternative orders of knowledge. Challenging the previous structures of power and the narrative they produce, these counter-narratives refer to Bhabha's concept of hybridity:

[T]hrough the repetition of *partial presence* [emphasis in original], which is the basis of mimicry, articulates those disturbances of cultural, racial, and historical difference that menace the narcissistic demand of colonial authority. It is a desire that reverses 'in part' the colonial appropriation by now producing a partial vision of the colonizer's presence (Bhabha 1984).

The lyrics demonstrate an awareness of history and, in particular, France's colonial past. Their hybrid counter-narratives are rooted in the realm of Creole's linguistic historical context. Rappers embrace the need to voice the silenced past of the Creole language that emerged as a direct consequence of European slavery. Creole languages originated in the European sugar colonies in the Caribbean where African people were enslaved to work. Creoles have emerged from colonial contact situations in which vernacular forms of language have developed through the combining of elements from both European (in this case mainly French) and African languages. During the colonial era, the Creole language was held in great contempt by the colonial authorities. A colonial hierarchy firmly identified French language with power and high social status and assigned Creole to a subordinate position and no social power. This linguistic imperialism did not end when Guadeloupe was integrated into France in 1946. Rather, it was reinforced through cultural assimilation practices glorifying French and discourses stigmatising the Creole language.

The lyrics do not only evoke the history of the Creole language. They also engage in a process of reshaping distorted colonial visions of the past. The 'Third Space of enunciation' allows other narratives to emerge, here in relation to the colonial memory, which is mentioned in the lyrics, as they claim the value of the Creole language: 'She [the Creole language] has already suffered a lot, which brings out her inner beauty / Listen how beautiful it is to hear the people who have been subjected to these tribulations.' These hybrid narratives also enable the rappers to express how they chose to take matters into their own hands: 'History is a serious subject / Now we are alone, and we have to write it'. Rappers embrace their history as a worthy legacy through a process of writing that discloses what Stuart

Hall refers to as 'the histories that have never been told about ourselves, that we could not learn in schools, that were not in any books, and that we had to recover' (Hall 1997, 52).

Rappers create counter-narratives, which disrupt dominant representations by showing the perspectives from the other side of the power relationship. They celebrate the accomplishment of Black Guadeloupean people who started with nothing and acknowledge the strength of Black Guadeloupean women. They emphasise racial pride and cultural empowerment through hybrid narratives that do not suppress the colonial discourses but accept them as part of the process of redefining oneself. As Bhabha (1984, 30) states, the lyrics create 'a discourse uttered between the lines and as such both against the rules and within them'.

De-colonial Critique

Directed by the Guadeloupean filmmaker Janluk Stanislas, the music video for the track takes place inside the classroom of a school. The rappers are seated behind pupils' desks. Two classroom situations are simultaneously displayed in the video. On one hand, the scene reproduces a classroom setting in which the learning of French (both language and culture) under the national curriculum is presented as the only way out of poverty and to upward social mobility. The only words the teacher pronounces are in French and are directed to a misbehaving pupil: 'Sir, Wake up!' The teacher is depicted in a position of legitimate authority allowing him to work on pupils' conduct as a form of social control. This position is exemplified through the subject matter lesson written on the blackboard: 'Instruction is the key that opens the second door to Liberty'. The mastery of French language and assimilation of French culture through education is presented as the only way to emancipation.

On the other hand, the video suggests another learning situation. In this situation, Creole is the medium of instruction and the language spoken in the classroom by the rappers-schoolmates. The history of slavery is part of the school curriculum as displayed by one of the pupils reading 'Code Noir' (Black Code), a decree passed by the Kingdom of France in 1685 defining the conditions of slavery in the French colonial empire. In this colonial ordinance, sixty articles regulate the enslaved people's life, death, purchase, religion, and punishments by their proprietors in all French colonies. This other schooling situation also emphasises different classroom practices. In the third verse of the track (3:00), the school desks have been pushed aside

and the circle formed by the schoolmates becomes the new learning space where vernacular culture as a tool for education is emphasised. Indeed, the circle appears as a common ground displaying hip-hop and traditional *gwoka* dancing steps and moves accompanied by drummers and the clapping of those in the circle. The classroom becomes a space where knowledge sits in bodies and local histories.

The classroom is the locus of enunciation of an abstract Western form of thinking and at the same time, the locus of enunciation of local non-Western embodied knowledge. The use of this dual narrative unveils the border between dominant and subaltern epistemologies and enables the emergence of a de-colonial critique. This de-colonial critique operates through 'border thinking', which brings to light 'colonial differences' (Mignolo 2000) here located at the centre of the process of knowledge production. Expressing these critiques from the margins of the classroom is a way for the rappers to re-signify and transform dominant forms of knowledge from the point of view of their subjectivities produced from border epistemologies: they are rapping from the subaltern side of the colonial difference.

French cultural assimilation politics reproduced the 'coloniality of power' (Quijano & Ennis 2000) and the 'coloniality of knowledge' (Mignolo 2011) which had established and imposed both French language and culture on to the colonised Guadeloupeans through national institutions (e.g. legal systems, education). After Guadeloupe became a French overseas department, France's government assigned a central role to the education system in the nation-building project by enforcing Western knowledge over non-Western ones, and Cartesian Western forms of teaching over non-Western practices of learning. Rapping from the classroom not only constitutes a critique of modernity from the geo-political experiences and memories of coloniality (Mignolo 2000), but also opens a space from where scorned cultural values are re-established and new forms of knowledge devised. As Mignolo (2000, 50) writes, 'the colonial difference, in other words, works in two directions: rearticulating the interior borders linked to imperial conflicts and rearticulating the exterior borders by giving new meanings to the colonial difference'.

Reworking of Cultural Identification

The lyrics and video of the track 'Awogan' engage with post-colonial thinking and de-colonial critique leading to the disclosure of alternative

epistemologies grounded in hybrid narratives and ‘critical border thinking’. As we are going to see now, this track also challenges binary oppositional categories.

The musical composition of the track is firmly embedded in the traditional music of the French Caribbean islands. The creation of the beat over which the rappers perform is based on a clarinet sample borrowed from a Martinican carnival *biguine* looped over an eight-bar beat and a bass line. The sample is an extract of the *biguine* sang by a Martinican singer Max Ransay in 1988 and called ‘La route Chanflo’. The use of a Martinican *biguine* sample engages with local cultural politics and addresses identity issues. Indeed, the *biguine* had become a site where politics of representation had been elaborated, performing forms of exclusion traceable to colonial legacies.

The *biguine* is a popular form of dance and music that developed in the French Caribbean islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe after the abolition of slavery in 1848. Like Trinidad calypso, Cuban *son* or Jamaican *mento*, *biguine* combines musical features of African and European descent entangled through a creolisation process, which arose during colonisation. The *biguine* is said to have emerged gradually through the reinterpretation of European dances such as waltzes, polkas, and mazurkas by Black musicians. The lyrics were political, satirical, or sentimental and the genre came to be identified by its binary syncopated rhythmic structure (Guilbault 1993, 59–63).

By the end of the nineteenth century, the city of Saint-Pierre in Martinique had become a vibrant commercial and cultural centre. A retrospective of Saint-Pierre’s carnival celebrations was described by the *New York Times* on 10 July 1902, a few weeks after Mont Pelée volcano erupted destroying the entire city and killing about 30,000 people. Similar features as observed in Trinidad’s carnival around the same time occur as masquerading, composing satirical songs, and dancing to musical accompaniment in ballrooms or dance halls (Cowley 1996, 108–13). These French Creole musical and cultural traditions, which had evolved in the city of Saint-Pierre prior to Mont Pelée’s volcanic eruption, set the tone for trends observable in the following decades not only in the French Caribbean colonies but in mainland France as well.

In the aftermath of the First World War, there was an abundance of Parisian activity featuring the French colonial empire, the climax being the *Exposition Coloniale* (Colonial Exhibition) that opened on 6 May 1931. At the Guadeloupean pavilion, the Antillean band led by the Martinican clarinetist Stellio and supported by a group of dancers in Creole clothing

played for thousands of visitors (Boulanger, Cowley & Monneray 2014). As the colonial world was being offered up as spectacles, human zoos, and entertainment shows, the French Caribbean colonies were established and constructed as a geographical fantasyland, underpinned by a series of clichés such as beaches, coconut trees, sun, sugar, vanilla, and eroticism. Within that context, *biguine* and its lively beats comforted the metropolitan listeners' exotic representations of the colonies. Subjected to the colonial power categories, *biguine* was regarded as carefree, light-hearted, and frivolous and rendered as a kind of Antillean folklore. Through this process, the political struggles of the colonised people were obscured and a distorted reading of day-to-day life *in the tropics* was encouraged. By dislocating *biguine* from its historical context and reducing it to the simplicity of essentialist stereotypes, the colonial narratives were inscribing politics of power in cultural expressions and positioning *biguine* as an example of the benefits of colonisation, shaping new musical genres displaying promising signs of advancement from savagery to civilisation. Half a century later, rappers were to play an important role in deconstructing these exotic and colonial representations of *biguine*.

After 1946, as the old colonial hierarchies were being reproduced (Grosfoguel 1999), music was used as a terrain on which to exercise authority and to sustain political hegemony. Furthermore, 'music signalled racial origins, social status, and level of education' (Cyrille 2002, 67). As African-derived traditions remained more than ever a target of power, *biguine*, with its European roots, was used as a symbol of assimilation. Strong ties were shaped by the dominant discourse between music, cultural capital (Bourdieu 1970), and social status and served to perpetuate the colonial socio-racial groups by reproducing a division inside the former colony between assimilated and non-assimilated Guadeloupeans.

In the 1970s, the *biguine* repertoire was dismissed by political and cultural activists advocating for Guadeloupe's independence from France. Many nationalist supporters had been studying in French universities where they had reflected on the Antillean political situation while sympathising with other people of African descent. Back in Guadeloupe, their political struggle articulated a discourse of anti-colonial 'nationalism' in which the form of the nation-state framework was taken over and thought of in terms of a radical Marxist project of liberation. Nationalist supporters helped identify Guadeloupeans as those rooted in the land, connected with a rural non-assimilated culture as opposed to the European-oriented culture imposed by the French government through the educational system, which continued to inculcate contempt for anything African-derived.

Guadeloupean political activists articulated their struggle for a Black consciousness awakening to their nation-building project through numerous social and cultural actions. They undertook an extensive census of agricultural production. In the 1970s, they formed the first rural labour unions representing the poor peasants and sugar plantation workers. They sponsored education in rural areas via the establishment of local cultural yards. They valued the workers' culture created by and around sugarcane agriculture, the Creole language, and *gwoka*. They began expanding the documentation on Creole and collecting *gwoka* rhythms, lyrics, and melodies. And most of all, they spoke Creole in public spaces, challenging patterns of power. This subversive use of Creole fostered local pride among members of the poor working class, highlighted their racial and ethnic identity, allowed for alliances between the middle class and the masses. In so doing, they were distancing themselves from the social dictates that had established both French language and culture as the norm.

Guadeloupean political activist focus on Creole and *gwoka* as both the site and the instrument through which to de-colonise mind-sets proved to be successful: they enabled these cultural practices to become strong symbols of Afro-Guadeloupean identity within twenty years. The choice of rapping in Creole builds on this critical and political language awareness. The title of the song 'Awogan' refers to the creolised French word *arrogant* which means 'bold'. The French word *arrogant* was used in schools to characterise pupils who dared to speak Creole even though it was forbidden. The stigmatising term is here reclaimed, creolised, and turned into a term of dignity and assertion of humanity. The boldness of Creole acknowledges the prowess of this language that has resisted domination and challenged the structures of power:

Today, Creole has its national day
We know how to speak it, how to write it, in many different ways
Creole, the language of the Negroes
A language which is harsh and bold.

'Awogan' displays how Guadeloupean rappers have addressed political issues in a different way to their elders. Guadeloupean political activists had rejected the colonial power by turning back the discourse of race foregrounded in one of nationhood. By doing so, they created an essential link between race, nation-building, culture, and ethnicity. This oppositional thinking led to a discourse that re-inscribed and perpetuated the binary oppositions of 'us' and 'them'. Without replicating these hierarchic structures, the rappers recognise the binary opposites fostered by dominant

discourses but move beyond antithetical thinking. In 'Awogan', the use of the clarinet sample emblematic of the *biguine* repertoire, as well as live *gwoka* drumming samples, articulates a means of breaking down the reified dominant categories of musical genres, which had embodied a class divide within Black Guadeloupeans. 'Awogan' challenges the way *biguine* has been constructed as an exotic form of music by dominant discourses and then firmly rejected by Guadeloupean nationalist activists by reclaiming the *biguine* repertoire as part of their cultural heritage as much as *gwoka*. They offer an alternative vision of cultural identification, which disrupts essentialised dominant discourses, transgresses rigid conceptual boundaries and destabilises binary logic. By bringing *biguine* and *gwoka* together, they suggest a hybrid category of belonging in an empowering act of self-definition. They actively partake in the transformation of identity categories by redefining their content and borders rather than reversing them.

The track 'Awogan', and more generally hip-hop culture, has enabled Guadeloupean rappers to question and redefine categories of identities and senses of belonging in a country marked by colour-blind assimilation politics. They have disrupted normative social values and dislodged the perception of racial and ethnic differences grounded in a set of fixed, unchanging essences. Rapping hybrid counter-narratives from the border has allowed them to imagine alternative worlds where people, both individually and collectively, have the capacity of agency to define themselves *through* rather than outside existing structures of power. As stated by Paul Gilroy (1993), hip-hop became a powerful site of critique in Guadeloupe as well, where subaltern epistemologies have unfolded a 'diversality' (Glissant 1990) of non-essentialist responses to cultural domination and political subordination.

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