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Keny Arkana: Hip-Hop Activism through Cosmopolitan Routes

Introduction

A case study on Keny Arkana's hip-hop activism opens the door for an investigation into global hip hop communities and their relation to cosmopolitanism. An analysis of her work will stimulate new conversations about national identity, citizenship, and cosmopolitanism in France. This paper suggests that the themes contained in her work challenge traditional models of citizenship by emphasizing cosmopolitan routes and solidarities, rather than national routes and solidarities. This unique form of cosmopolitanism stems directly from her sense of being *Marseillais*, and from her membership in the global hip hop movement.¹ 'Cosmopolitan,' being a word Marseillais routinely use to describe themselves² is critical to understanding Keny Arkana's artistic response to the current citizenship debate in France. For example, in an interview in *CQFD* (*Ce qu'il faut détruire*), Arkana says: "Here [in Marseille] no one is foreign. Here, no one is French, everyone is Marseillais. It's a little bit of the East in the West, a little bit of the village in Europe. Sadly, this is in the process of disappearing."³ Her message provides an alternative critique to the French "crisis of identity".⁴ Keny Arkana is especially suited to explore this topic because she is connected to communities that challenge the traditional model of the French citizen. She is a participant in hip-hop culture, a music-culture that often attracts audiences from disenfranchised communities. She is also from the port city of Marseille, the clandestine yet cosmopolitan rebel city. These positionalities have informed Keny Arkana's political ideology and social activism.

Cosmopolitan threads can be seen in many hip-hop communities as it has travelled globally due to what Halifu Osumare calls "connective marginalities" (63). Osumare constructs a

¹ Research on hip hop culture is now focusing on globalised hip hop. This paradigm shift was first acknowledged in *Global Noise*, edited by Tony Mitchell (2001). Anthropologist and linguist H. Samy Alim encourages us to look closely at the globalization and localization of hip hop culture. In reference to an analysis of diverse hip hop "scenes" he states "All of these scenes comprise the 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1991) known as the 'Global Hip Hop Nation (GHHN),' a multilingual, multiethnic 'nation' with an international reach, a fluid capacity to cross borders, and a reluctance to adhere to the geopolitical givens of the present." (3). In Alim, H. Samy, et al.,(2009).

² On Thursday, January 24, 2008, *Le Monde* featured an article titled "Marseille au centre du monde". During my second field research trip to Marseille from January-July 2008, many of my field informants described Marseillais culture as cosmopolitan—'cosmopolitan' and 'Mediterranean' becoming two important constructs. Michel Peraldi and Michel Samson (2006) also look at the "re-enchantment" of Marseille. They refer to a twenty year media campaign designed to clean-up the image of Marseille. This campaign had a large role in creating a 'cosmopolitan' Marseille whether real or imagined (114).

³ Arkana, Keny. "Je voulais juste comprendre ma colère." *CQFD* (*Ce qu'il faut détruire*), no. 53, 15 February 2008: 11. ["Ici, personne n'est étranger. Ici, personne n'est français, tout le monde est marseillais. Ce côté Orient dans l'Occident, ce côté bled en Europe, c'est en train de se perdre et c'est dommage."]

⁴ During the 2005 riots, President Jacques Chirac declared a "crisis of identity." This story was covered "Chirac in new pledge to end riots," BBC News Online. 15 November 2005 < <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/europe/4437206.stm> Published 11/15/2005>.

framework of four “connective marginalities” that include “culture”, “class”, “historical oppression”, and “youthful rebellion”. She defines these “connective marginalities” as “a conceptual frame that encompasses various social and historical realms that form the context for youth participating in hip-hop outside of the United States. These spheres of social experience interconnect and overlap, partially facilitating the explosion of hip-hop culture internationally” (69).⁵ It is through these “connective marginalities” that hip-hoppers in Marseille can find solidarity with hip-hoppers in other global movements- motivating people to activism on a local level all the while seeing how they are connected on the international terrain. I will explore Keny Arkana’s song “*Nettoyage au karcher*”, her response to the national political climate at the time of her work, the goals of her organization *La rage du peuple* (The Rage of the People), and the cosmopolitan threads that undergird the songs “*La rage*” and “*Jeunesse du monde*”.

Breakout on the Scene

Keny Arkana gained notoriety during a volatile political backdrop in France. Prior to the release of her first official album in 2006 (*Entre Ciment et Belle Étoile*)⁶, she was a part of two rap collectives in Marseille called *Mars Patrie* and *Etat-Major*⁷. She released her first street album, *L’esquisse* (sketch,) in 2005.⁸ She began to rap in 1996 at the age of 12 or 13, during what many would call the golden age of Marseille hip-hop.⁹ It was during this golden era that she received her hip-hop education. She participated in rap workshops at *La Friche de Belle Mai* taught by Prodigé Namor,¹⁰ and performed at open mics (in the neighborhood of *Noailles-La Plaine-Opéra*) at local venues such as *Café Julien*, *Bar de La Plaine*, and *La Maison Hantée*.¹¹ It was in these open mics that Arkana was schooled by the best of Marseillais rappers, old school heads like *Troisième Oeil*, *Fonky Family*, *Faf Larage*, and IAM (*Imperial Asiatic Man*). So it is no surprise that she has risen to fame and become one of few female MCs to be signed to a label and have a major distributor (the other two being Princess Anies and Diam’s in Paris).

But it was the backdrop of the riots¹² in 2005, which led to the 2007 presidential elections that provided the fertile ground for Arkana to plant her hip-hop activism. In search for answers to

⁵ See *The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip-Hop: Power Moves*, (Osumare 2007: 69).

⁶ *Between concrete and the stars*. The title of this album can also be thought of as *Between the System and Utopia*.

⁷ Siankowski, Pierre. “Keny Arkana.” *Les Inrockuptibles*, no. 540, 4-10 April 2006: 6.

⁸ Siankowski, Pierre. “Keny Arkana.” *Les Inrockuptibles*, no. 540, 4-10 April 2006: 6.

⁹ The years of 1991-1999 represent the golden age of Marseillais rap. Two key albums were released during this period: *L’Ecole du micro d’argent* by IAM (1997), the highest selling French rap album, and the only concept album in French rap; and *Chroniques de Mars* (1998), the first compilation album of Marseillais rap. This confirmed in personal interviews with Faf Larage, 8 July 2008, and Gilles (manager to Faf), 17 June 2008.

¹⁰ *La Friche la Belle de Mai* is a center of arts, music, and theatre in Marseille. Radio Grenouille (an independent radio station that plays some rap music) is housed here, along with a DJ workshop and rap workshop. IAM (the group that started the French hip hop scene) used to house their studio at *La Friche* during the ‘90s. Arkana bio from Arkana, Keny. “Vie intérieure.” *Groove* March/April 2008: 52+.

¹¹ Arkana, Keny. “Vie intérieure.” *Groove*, March/April 2008: 54.

¹² The riots first occurred in the *banlieues* of Paris and quickly spread. The riots did not touch Marseille. In an interview with Sista Micky (a local rap/reggae/raga artist), she said that Marseille is one of the only cities in France that does not have an official *banlieue*. She also emphasized that “No matter what neighborhood you

the riots that erupted in the *banlieues* of Paris, Lyon, and Strasbourg, government officials and sociologists scapegoated rap artists and hip-hop communities. The central question on politicians' minds during this time was: "Does rap cause violence?"—which positioned rap music as the soundtrack to a *banlieue* collective conscious. Hip hop culture, especially rap music, was put on trial, bringing censorship suits against seven rappers and rap groups in France.¹³ The coverage on the riots and the aftermath of events by the press garnered international attention to the citizenship debates in France, and the disputes regarding national identity. For many who lived outside of France, France's color blind politics and universal ideals (and the actuality of their outcomes) were cast in doubt for the first time. The freedoms in France seemed to be myths.¹⁴ The aftermath of the riots led President (at the time) Jacques Chirac to declare a "crisis of identity" in France. An identity crisis that is inextricably linked to two major discourses: 1) communitarianism, and 2) the debates on immigration and integration. For many, the riots were proof of failed integration, proof of the threat communitarianism poses to a cohesive national identity, and proof of the incompatibility of difference with French citizenship.

The events of the riots exposed more than a failed integration. It exposed a wide sector of the population that had been disenfranchised, and excluded from citizenship rights and national structures, an exclusion that seemed to be based on race, class, ethnicity, and religion. To these disenfranchised communities the question was more complex than whether or not to integrate. Though France has spewed color blind politics and universal ideals many residents of African, Caribbean, and Arab origins have been cast as second class citizens. This has been the topic of many rap songs in the Parisian scene. For years rappers have condemned the violence of forced integration, the unaccounted for nature of France's problematic colonial past, and the economic crisis in the *banlieue*. These stories have been told in songs that recount forgotten immigrant histories (i.e. Bakar "*Mémoire immigrés*"), songs that celebrate the cultural roots of a first generation and the *métisse* of a second generation (Rim-K "*Tonton du Bled*"), songs that critique integration (Sniper "*Brûle*"), songs that incite the youth to protest (NTM "*Qu'est-ce que'on attend*"), and songs that condemn institutionalized discrimination (i.e. Doc Gynéco's "*C'est ça la France*", Monsieur R's "*FranSSe*", and Kery James', "*Hardcore*").

Consequently, when the time came to respond to the riots and backlash from the media, the hip hop community was ready. There were two responses in the hip hop community in France to

come from, you are still Marseillais." In this sense, the issues that plague Paris are different from the issues that affect Marseille. Interview with Sista Micky, 18 April 2007.

The cosmopolitan character of the city may be another reason why riots did not break out in Marseille. In 2005, NPR labeled Marseille "the antidote to French racism," and more recently in *Smithsonian Magazine Online* (1 Feb. 2008) journalist Andrew Purvis described Marseille as an "ethnic bouillabaisse". Purvis, Andrew. *Smithsonian Magazine Online*, December 2007 <<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/marseille-200712.html> *Smithsonian.com*>. Poggioli, Sylvia. "Diverse Marseille Spared in French Riots." NPR, 10 December 2005 <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5044219>>.

¹³ Freelance writer and journalist, Miles Marshal Lewis "Paris Noir: No Replastering...The Structure is Rotten" in *Pop Matters*, 5 January 2006 <<http://www.popmatters.com/columns/lewis/060105.shtml>>.

¹⁴ In informal conversations (April and May 2008) with Christian Kane (president of PACA CRAN-*Conseil représentative des associations noires* or the Representative Council of Black Associations, and leader in PACA *Groupe pour la memoire de l'esclavage*), he often spoke on the problem of representation. The number of elected officials who are of African descent are sparse. An issue CRAN is actively trying to change.

these riots. The dominant response (coming out of the Parisian community) focused their hip-hop activism on inserting marginalized communities into national structures, and garnering more civil rights. Their focus was on translation and acceptance, focusing the conversation at the national level. This activism was carried out in a CD compilation project titled *Ecoute la rue Marianne* (*Listen to the Street, Marianne*, 2007), and various get out the vote campaigns spearheaded by popular rappers. In Marseille Keny Arkana spearheaded the response to the riots. Her focus was on a global social justice movement, woven with the threads of cosmopolitanism. Her response sought transformation (of existing structures and systems) and accessibility (to rights and resources). Her activism focused on building bridges across disparate communities all in the name of justice, and elevating the conversation to an international level by emphasizing large scale solidarity more than national objectives. Arkana's hip-hop activism was carried through in the release of her first official album *Entre le ciment et bell étoile* (2006), namely her hit track "Nettoyage au karcher", and the development of a network of activist in an organization called *La Rage du Peuple*.

Dominant Response by the Hip-Hop Community: Translation and Acceptance

The Parisian hip hop community confronted these issues on the national terrain. In Paris, a community of hip-hop artists (along with the inclusion of some Marseillais artists) articulated their side of the story on a compilation CD. The objective of their hip-hop activism was translation and acceptance. The Parisian scene promoted an album titled *Ecoute la rue Marianne* (2007). In the liner notes to this album, *verlan*¹⁵ slang was coupled with its standardized French equivalent in parentheses. It was clear that this album was intended for an insider and outsider audience. The goal of *Ecoute la rue Marianne* was to explain (translate) the viewpoint of the *banlieue* to the métropole, so that the métropole would accept the *banlieue*. In 2007 as the presidential elections¹⁶ approached, rappers began to mobilize voting campaigns to get youth involved. Diam's (a popular female MC in Paris) organized a get out the vote campaign called *Notre voix, notre voie* (Our Vote, Our Way), and distributed leaflets and flyers in her CD's and at concerts. Joey Starr (from the rap group NTM) and actor comedian Jamel Debbouze raised awareness through a community organization called *Collectif Devoirs Memoires*.¹⁷ Rim-K and Kery James¹⁸ released an album, whose proceeds were donated to the families of the two youth whose deaths sparked the riots.¹⁹ The focus of hip-hop activism in Paris was on national inclusion and organizing around national politics. In the rising tide of Islamophobia and the tension around immigration, many felt the need to mobilize youth to vote in order to have some of influence over the 2007 presidential elections. While there are many significant issues to explore further, I will focus on the response in Marseille.

¹⁵ A type of slang that reverses the syllables in a word. For example, *femme* (woman) becomes *meuf*.

¹⁶ The months before the 2007 elections were a fearful time. Many in the hip-hop community remembered the elections in 2002 and how *Le Pen* (a candidate in a far right political party) made it to the second rounds.

¹⁷ Bounaïm, Siham. "Keny Arkana Hasta La Muerte." *Groove*, no. 22, July/August, 2006: 38-39.

¹⁸ Two rappers who are a part of the *Mafia K'1 Fry* rap collective. *Mafia K'1 Fry* is African Mafia in *verlan* slang.

¹⁹ Bounaïm, Siham. "Keny Arkana Hasta La Muerte." *Groove*, no. 22, July/August, 2006: 38-39.

Keny Arkana Spearheads Activism in Marseille

In Marseille, it was Keny Arkana who mainly spearheaded the response to the riots. She recorded a song titled "*Nettoyage au Karcher*" (a direct critique of French politics), and organized a network of activist called *La rage du peuple* (named after her 2004 hit single "*La rage*"). The riots were fertile breeding ground for her creative revolutionary voice and provided the platform where she could push forth her hip-hop activism linked to an anti-globalization or alter-globalization movement. This movement seeks to create new emancipator structures and ways of existing in the world. This movement is largely organized around forum meetings held in various cities. For example, the World Social Forum met in Bamako in January 2006 under the slogan "*Un Autre Monde est Possible*" (Another World is Possible).

Activism in Marseille: Citizenship through Cosmopolitan Belonging

Right before the riots, tensions mounted when Nicolas Sarkozy promised to "clean up the *banlieues* with a power hose" (*nettoyer au karcher les cités*²⁰), and in another statement he used the word "*racaille*"²¹ (scum) to describe the communities that live in the *banlieues*. This was one of the most controversial moments in the citizenship debate. These two phrases together leaned to close to the idea of racial or ethnic cleansing, and whitewashing.²² Arkana turns Sarkozy's statement on its head by using this phrase as the title of her anti-establishment political anthem, "*Nettoyage au Karcher*". She appropriates the word "*racaille*", using the term to describe not the communities in the *banlieue*, but the French government officials. In a direct critique of the government and their response to the riots, Arkana urges all protestors to march towards *Le Palais de l'Élysée* and hose it down because "it's *l'Élysée* that hides the biggest scum."²³ So in order to "cleanse" France, the lyrics to "*Nettoyage au karcher*" demand that hip hop activists "cleanse *l'Élysée*".

Her next point of critique is directed towards Western ideology (i.e. the Enlightenment, and the "Rights of Man" doctrine) and French republicanism. She berates France for its hypocrisy, claiming that the "rights of man" and enlightenment theories were made invalid, once France colonized Africa. She chastises France for its historical amnesia on the role that immigrants played in the building of the country. She also reserves a space of critique for police repression. In a metaphor about a one eyed ogre, and a kingdom led by the blind, she attacks far right political parties such as *Le Front National*.²⁴ Despite her engagement with national politics, she doesn't drop her analysis here. Towards the end of the song in the last verse, Arkana draws parallels between national politics and international structures. She links Sarkozy to the World Bank, then critiques liberalism, and the general move towards privatizations she sees as leading France towards a pro-Bush regime (symbolizing global capitalism). These are all structures she sees as lacking democratic agency. Keny Arkana's work places the demand for full citizenship outside of realm of national politics and into a global struggle.

²⁰ "Timeline French Riots" in BBC News Online <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/world/europe/4413964.stm> BBC news online 11/14/2005>.

²¹ "Timeline French Riots" BBC News<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr//1/hi/world/europe/4413964.stm>>.

²² Prof Babacar (DJ with *The Beat Jewelers*). Personal interview. February 2008.

²³ "*Nettoyage au karcher*," lyrics: *c'est à l'Élysée que se cachent les plus grand des racailles.*"

²⁴ Gilles (manager to Faf LaRage, Marseille rapper). Personal interview. 17 June 2008.

Keny Arkana's response to the crisis is in stark contrast to the response by the hip-hop community in Paris. In "*Nettoyage au karcher*" there is a direct critique of existing national structures, but no request asking France to accept its unwanted citizens. Instead the lyrics focus on delegitimizing the authority of the national government by calling to light what Arkana calls "France's schizophrenia", "selective memory", and "amnesia." Arkana's lyrics implicate Sarkozy, French politics, and *l'Élysée* at the national level; and the World Bank, liberalism, privatization, and global capitalism at the international level with the situation of injustice in the world. She has joined a larger movement of global social change that is alter-globalization, working towards transforming the system rather than being included in the system. The platform to citizenship and rights is placed outside of the national terrain as civil rights mapped onto human rights. Accordingly, the accessibility to full human rights is needed, but can only be manifested in a transformed world, in networks that do not yet exist.

The insertion of a local conflict in a larger global conflict is also apparent in her track "*La rage*." She dramatizes the local and global visually in the video to "*La rage*". In the video, scenes shot in Marseille with Keny and her crew, and images of French police repression are partnered with a stream of images with various scenes of global civil unrest. The fast paced editing of all of these images together makes it difficult for the viewer to actually place the images in a rooted context, or place. This loss of place, (the fact that every image is deterritorialized) emphasizes a shared struggle—an interwoven freedom. What happens far away could also happen at home. The scenes in "*La rage*" become a travelling image that viewers elsewhere can also plug into. This video is one that is distributed widely on the web through daily motion, You Tube, and other websites. Media technology allows viewers to cultivate solidarity (in an international fan base). Every time a fan watches "*La rage*" on You Tube, visits a Skyblog page, or listens to a CD, they are not only consumers buying into the international hip-hop industry, they are also participants in a global hip-hop community and social justice movement. Media technologies create a venue of sociability in which cosmopolitan ethics can travel.

"La rage" and *La rage du peuple*

By thoroughly delegitimizing the nation, local engagement is not read as 'national', but as 'community'. Arkana's hip-hop activism is not directed towards a national politics, but rather it mobilizes local action in combination with a global consciousness. This link is consistent with her placement of citizenship from the national terrain onto the international terrain. An emphasis on locality is also unique to a Marseillais point of view (despite its cosmopolitan undertones). This is what is communicated when residents say "it's a village here" or "it's family" in Marseille. These phrases were commonly used by field informants to refer to social interactions. Keny Arkana also remarks on this collective ethic in an interview in *Groove Magazine*:

We are not individualists. We have a village mentality here [in Marseille]. There is no 'I', 'I' means 'we'. Like in a family, when there's one of us that succeeds everyone is happy and when one of us goes under, well everyone tries to help.²⁵

²⁵ Arkana, Keny. "Vie intérieure." *Groove*, March/April 2008: 54. ["*Il n'y a pas de 'je', le 'je', ça veut dire 'nous'. Comme dans ne famille, quand il y en a un qui s'en sort, tout le monde est content et quand il y en a un qui coule, et bien tout le monde essaye de l'aider.*"]

She organizes her hip-hop activism around the familiar slogan “think global act local”. Therefore, as an organizing tool the “local” in Arkana’s hip hop activism is not focused on the nation-state, but instead it is based on “community”, “neighborhood”, “association”, or “collective” that is always linked to an international struggle.

These values are revealed in the song “*La rage*” and in an organization she created called *La rage du people*. Solidarity is built by tapping into a collective consciousness through ‘rage’. In an interview with French hip-hop journalist Olivier Cachin, Arkana explains what she means by ‘rage’. She says, “The rage of the people, it’s a collective, but also a state of mind, a way of life. It’s being connected to a collective conscience.”²⁶ At the conclusion of her track “*La rage*” she says,

Anti-capitalist, alter-globalization, you who searches for truth (in this world), the resistance of tomorrow, God willing, on the eve of a revolution, globalized and spiritual, the rage of the people, the rage of the people because we have a rage that will make societal norms tremble (because we have the rage). Rage has taken the masses, and the rage is enormous.²⁷

In response to the 2005 riots, Arkana and several other musicians in Marseille started an organization called *La rage du people* (a network for activists, with cosmopolitan threads throughout its manifesto). The objective of this collective was to organize a space for local activism and artistic endeavors like free media, concerts, collaborative projects—using the slogan “think global, act local.” This was largely an internet based forum. While the emphasis was placed on working on local projects, any viewer on the website could read a report on another project or find links that directed them to the World Social Forum, or other projects in Montreal, Bamako, Paris, Conakry, Buenos Aires, Marseille, etc. This local-global relationship can be seen in some excerpts from the *La Rage du Peuple* manifesto:

We are agents of social change, we act local and think global and we wish to humbly learn all we can from the world’s people: their struggles, their ancestral traditions, their lives.²⁸

And in another paragraph,

Though we are a network of citizens of the world, we exchange our ideas, our experiences, and our alternatives apart from political party and lobby.²⁹

The ‘rage’ that Arkana describes is the “rage of the people”—it belongs to all who could possibly be in a situation of vulnerability. The objectives of *La rage du people* takes national conflicts and place them on the international stage by marrying these issues to a larger revolutionary movement- one that is alter-globalization. By re-routing the path to civic belonging beyond the confines of the nation (making the local the focus on community, neighborhood, or city rather than nation-state) then reaching out to global networks, Arkana infuses cosmopolitan leanings into her activism.

²⁶ Cachin, Olivier. “Kenya, bio,” <<http://www.because.tv/presse/keny-arkana.html>>. [*“La Rage du Peuple c’est un collectif, mais aussi un état d’esprit, un mode de vie. C’est d’être connecté à la conscience collective.”*]

²⁷ Arkana, Kenya. “La rage.” *Entre ciment et belle étoile*. Because Music, 2006.

²⁸ *La Rage du Peuple* manifesto <<http://laragedupeuple.org>>.

²⁹ *La Rage du Peuple* manifesto <<http://laragedupeuple.org>>.

"Jeunesse du monde"

While engagement with a local struggle is emphasized, part of Arkana's response calls for "youth," "third world peoples" and "the forgotten in the first world" to act on a global consciousness and unite in one common struggle. This is evident in the track "*Jeunesse du monde*". In the first stanza she raps:

Youth and people of the third world we march by your side
Your struggle is our struggle, just as our struggle is your struggle
Justice and liberty for all the inhabitants in the world

And in another stanza:

We are billions who want to turn the wheel in the other direction!
From the forgotten countries, to the forgotten in our country
Marginal of the rich countries, what are you waiting for? We can no longer allow them to continue
what they have been doing
The struggle is necessary! In other words, they want to *uck us, brother!

In this piece Arkana evokes a shared experience of struggle as a unifying factor that the "oppressed" and "forgotten" can rally behind. Justice is used as an organizing tool in which to find the like-minded, similarly to how she uses 'rage' as a construct to tap into a collective conscious.

In this song the struggle is shared because the enemy is a shared enemy. The institutions and systems of governance that she critiqued in "*Nettoyage au Karcher*" and "*La rage*" (i.e. the World Bank, global capitalism, the French government, and government sponsored privatizations that have adopted an international corporate business model) are collectively represented in the song "*Jeunesses du monde*" by the term 'Babylon'.³⁰ Complicit with the rise of neo-liberalism and neo-colonialism, Arkana characterizes these institutions as Babylon, acting in implicit opposition to 'Zion'³¹ which represents the will of the people, the utopia or transformation she is working towards. This distinction between Babylon and Zion is an effective rhetorical tool, and a distinction between the already existing cosmopolitanisms that are indicted in her songs as oppressive (lacking democratic agency) and the cosmopolitan network of revolutionaries she hopes to create (the transformation of structures to make rights and resources more accessible). Here is an example is the last chorus in "*Jeunesse du monde*" and its transition into an ending bridge:

Resistance! Now's the time of neo-liberalism and its concrete wars
Resistance! Now's the time of neo-colonialism and its new conquests
2X

Babylon, Babylon! Understand that our anger is rising

³⁰ These terms come out Rastafarian-reggae music culture. The reggae/raga crowd often mixes with the hip hop crowd. 'Babylon' was a recurrent term in my interviews with several participants in Marseillais hip-hop.

³¹ In the Rastafarian-reggae crowd 'Babylon' is mentioned with 'Zion' in song lyrics. Keny Arkana does not explicitly say 'Zion', probably to avoid problematic associations with current conflicts in the Middle East.

The forgotten of the West and the forgotten of the Third World
Babylon, Babylon! You tell us to march or die
So we march together against you, to push forward our dreams

While the term 'Babylon' may seem to cloak the 'oppressor' in a shroud of anonymity, this term actually unifies oppressed communities. The non-specificity of the term Babylon makes the oppressor relevant to everyone. 'Babylon', as a generic term, allows hip-hoppers in Marseille or Paris to relate situations of social inequality in France to situations of social inequality in global contexts.

Kenya Arkana aligns her message in "*Jeunesse du monde*" with the goals of the anti-globalization or alter-globalization movement. In the liner notes next to the lyrics for "*Jeunesse du monde*", there is a quote that reads, "Another World is Possible: World Social Forum in Bamako, January 19-23, 2006."³² The World Social Forum is a major international platform for alter-globalization activists working on a similar project Kenya Arkana is committed to. Arkana's link to the alter-globalization movement is apparent in the DVD documentary distributed with the album *Entre Ciment et Belle Etoile*. This documentary shows clips from various meetings from the World Social Forum and explains the objectives of this movement. Fans, who were unable to attend the meetings in Bamako in January 2006, are still able to receive the message and watch it in the comfort of their own homes. Arkana's album *Entre Ciment et Belle Etoile* (2006) is not just a musical project, but it is also a form of activism. In union with the alter-globalization movement, Arkana's message calls for transformation (of existing world structures), and accessibility (to rights and resources). This is what is unique in Arkana's work. Arkana would remind us not to forget that we are "just one link in the chain."³³

Conclusion: Transformations and Accessibility

In this sense the riots were proof that national identity and citizenship must be dressed in a new rhetoric, paired with more pluralist objectives, and linked to more just institutions that will result in equal distribution of rights, resources, and opportunities. Kenya Arkana offers us such a possibility. Arkana articulates a uniquely Marseillais response to the citizenship crisis in France. This hip hop activism plugs into a global project that is about transformation—"Un Autre Monde est Possible," (Another World is Possible)—a restructuring of the world powers and systems into emancipatory networks. Music is the forum she uses as a platform for activism. This hip hop activism is woven with cosmopolitan threads, creating open spaces that allow for transformation and greater accessibility to rights and resources. On the national terrain, Arkana moves us to further consider the effects of what Miriam Feldman calls the "politicization of citizenship" (31) that has occurred in France; as well as a move to "new citizenship" (49) which is the separation of citizenship from nationality. This is a dialogue that can only come out of Marseille (founded in longstanding principles of cosmopolitanism that are ubiquitous among the Marseillais). A city that is perhaps what Derrida calls "a city of refuge," (4) one that embodies the "hospitality ethic" (5).

³² ["*Une Autre Monde est Possible: Forum Social Mondial de Bamako du 19 au 23 Janvier 2006.*"].

³³ Arkana, Kenya. "Je voulais juste comprendre ma colère." *CQFD (Ce qu'il faut détruire)* 15 February 2008: 10. ["*Une conscience collective: agir local, penser global, et ne jamais oublier qu'on n'est qu'un maillon de la chaîne.*"]

In the Marseillais hip-hop community, there is a change in the way people are conceiving of cosmopolitanism and how it can intersect with difference, communitarianism, transnational networks, national identity, and internationalism with Keny Arkana being the main proponent. Marseille, a city where the riots did not take place, where “integration is impossible”³⁴, where cosmopolitanism is integrated into the creation myth of the city, and a city where the “crisis of identity” maybe just isn’t a crisis at all; presents a consciousness that is about shifting and permeable borders. Residents often equate Marseille with the Mediterranean as a construct that is a more inclusive, cosmopolitan zone encompassing Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. Marseille becomes the “soul of France”³⁵ and the “cradle of the Mediterranean.”³⁶ Marseille is a cosmopolitan roundtable where everyone is invited to sit, contribute, belong, and participate. This idea is also reflected by a statement made by Queen K (the director of *Don’t Sleep DJ’s*). When I asked what a cosmopolitan Marseille means to her, she replied, “Marseille is like a large plate of various foods, where everyone can take part.”³⁷ Her statement, like Keny Arkana’s body of work, seems to be about accessibility—equal access to what’s available and the sharing of those resources (i.e. “food” in her example). So in Marseille where “integration is impossible”, one is not asked to integrate, but rather, to participate.

³⁴ In an interview with Queen K (director of *Don’t Sleep DJ’s*, an organization committed to the preservation of hip hop history and culture in Marseille), she explained how national identity issues were not significant in Marseille. The imperative towards integration is not as strong as other areas of France. Residents would ask integrate to what, or who? She also remarked upon the diversity of the city, claiming that “integration is impossible.” Queen K (*Don’t Sleep DJ’s*). Personal interview. 19 July 2008.

³⁵ Many of the people I interviewed had some sort of unique phrase, or metaphor that they liked to use to describe Marseille, or Marseillais culture. Patrick described Marseille as having ‘soul’, something that can counterbalance French rationality. Patrick (RESF-*Réseau éducation sans frontière*). Personal interview. 13 March 2008.

³⁶ This was the phrase Fabian used to describe Marseille. Fabian is a local rapper (unsigned, and underground). He also taught a rap writing workshop for teenagers at a local community center called *La Mille Patte*. Personal interview, 15 April 2008.

³⁷ Queen K (*Don’t Sleep DJ’s*). Personal interview. 19 July 2008.

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