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FRENCH MOVES

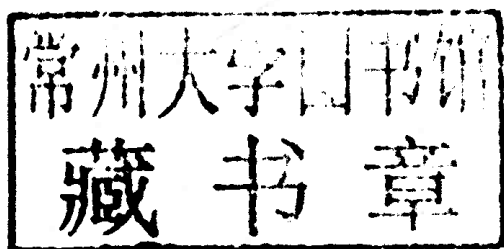
FELICIA MCCARREN

THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF LE HIP HOP

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Felicia McCarren



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For Adil Amedeo, my hip hope.

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French Moves: The Cultural Politics of le hip hop

Felicia McCarren

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INTRODUCTION: "FRENCH"? CIRCULATION, IMMIGRATION, AND ASSIMILATION

I am walking up the street in a suburb of Paris: Montreuil, Mali's second biggest city. After Bamako, there are more Malians living here than in any other city in the world. Today, a Saturday morning, more are heading up the slope coming from the metro terminus than going down to work. In front of the foyer (Montreuil's principal residence for single workers whose families are not living here in France) that houses a good number of Malian and Senegalese men, some of them, wearing the *gandoura* and sandals, are loading or unloading foodstuffs, bags of goods wrapped in plastic; others are working on their cars; and still others are crossing the street to use the phone booth or heading over to the post office a few blocks away.

Having recently returned from a year in North Africa, I understand for the first time how these men are Malian yet living in France; even residing and working in France, they remain Malian. They bring their culture with them and will some day probably take it back to Mali with them. This is an alternate model of migration to the one that has been discussed under the banner of integration in France over the last forty years. When, on another day, a Friday shortly before the beginning of Ramadan, I see the residents of the foyer butchering two lambs in the courtyard, I think I see why stereotypes about Muslim immigrants and religious practices have endured in France, in spite of long-term assimilation and the very different experience of second- and third-generation immigrants born in France. I understand better than before one Parisian student, who came to Montreuil to take a hip hop dance class, telling me that she cannot tell her Malian family, who lives across Paris, that she dances, and that her father has one family here but another wife, another family in Mali. To her hip hop she brings this rich cultural background and in her hip hop she seems to escape from it or from her family, joining a youth movement and a performance community unknown to her family, one that allows her to dance "French."

Later the same day, I am walking down a street next to the Bastille and am drawn by some drumming; in fact, it is not a strike or demonstration but a carnival, a long parade of groups of musicians and dancers representing the various DOMs and TOMs, French overseas *départments* and territories, and some former colonies. Most of these groups are wearing the garb representing the Antillean island they call home; there is also an Indonesian group, one from Trinidad, and several from Guyana, as well as the Antillian groups, dancing African-style dances and wearing historic French costumes, African tribal costumes, or Indian saris. Many of the young people accompanying the parade wear hip hop clothes—a style called *baggies-baskets* in French—and I realize that in their dancing the *hip hoppeurs* have incorporated not only dance forms visible on Paris stages but also the moves of their dance cultures. These cultures parading down the street are dance cultures, and all of these Parisians representing some country they consider their other home know how to dance to the Caribbean rhythms being played.

Hip hop dance forms arrived in France in the early 1980s and were taken up first in suburban and immigrant communities, becoming a forum for debate on assimilation and multiculturalism. Break dancing and the various styles referred to as *la danse debout* were practiced in and associated with mixed immigrant communities and had to negotiate local cultural practices often (also) brought from abroad: Islam and its practice in France; Antillean carnival culture; traditional dance forms surviving in communities in exile.

The Tunisian-born head of a French *association* for immigrant mothers with French children tells me that immigrants do not return home; she is working from the now generalized model of immigration from francophone Africa and North Africa. Her organization makes possible “inter-generational” voyages within France that educate the mothers about the country that is their children’s if not their own and discourages the great expense of returning whenever possible to the *bled*. One can only conclude that there are many layers of immigration in France: some staying and others returning. Some cultures integrate and other cultures remain distinct; some are performance cultures and others are ostensibly opposed to certain kinds of performance. The cases explored in this book consider hip hop dance developing in the context of the particularities of these groups, sometimes referred to in French as *groupuscules*, coming to terms with the state’s *universalism* that does not recognize minority groups. I work through this question through what might be called the “universalism” of dance performance in France, dance’s civic status, strategically deployed in the socialist choice to use this dance as part of a *politique culturelle*, and its choreographic language.

A decade-long project, my work on hip hop dance in France was at first inspired by the French revolutionary rhetoric, and modern practice, of universalism: I have seen hip hop as a practice of inclusion, with the early motto of solidarity *black blanc beur* and of valorization of a popular form even while developing an aesthetic as *la danse urbaine*. This was how *le hip hop* was promoted by politicians, *fonctionnaires*, and cultural agents at the national, regional, and local levels in France, with the goal of using culture to address social problems: with funding, and in sync with dance institutions (state and local festivals, regional centers for choreography and dance training, national and city stages), hip hop developed into a form of concert dance, *la danse urbaine*, recognized globally as French (or European). I have emphasized, under the rubric of a particularly French universalism-in-dance, that hip hop there, because of such state funding and support, developed differently from its US predecessor. But the universal, humanistic values expressed in this dance form, not unlike other forms of hip hop worldwide, respond in France to a legacy of universalism that is now acknowledged as problematic. Coming into these communities in France, hip hop became part of the discussion about identity, postcoloniality, and globalization: it was a mode through which the discussion about multiculturalism and minorities took place, using performance first to remark on social differences and, eventually, to posit a broader equality moving beyond social status or difference, arrived at through acknowledgment and understanding of such differences, largely ignored in the universalist rhetoric of the French Republic.

By noticing that these men from Mali cling, in Paris, to some of their Malian-ness even as the Malian-born Parisian student seeks to escape her family via hip hop; by seeing the cultural links to dance present for people of many cultures living in Paris; and by understanding that hip hop did not arrive into a vacuum, my analysis participates in the theory of the circulation of cultures, from acculturation to transculturation. But in this context, my analysis also explores how a discourse of difference in France is an acknowledgment that the “universal” ideal of *égalité* has not created equality, although my Tunisian-born French friend who is helping her fellow immigrants integrate clearly believes it can still be achieved. Hip hop dance, I argue, suggests that it can only come through acknowledgment and valorization of difference rather than culture-blind assimilation. This idea is often described as an “Anglo-Saxon” model of particularism and associated with US identity politics. (See Figure 0.1) I now understand many French hip hoppers’ choice to identify with US black culture as a way to bring attention to their inequality, a difference that has not otherwise found expression in the universalist rhetoric that denies the existence of



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Figure 0.1

The "Anglo-Saxon" model of particularism.

"Feedback" form distributed to the public at the Greenwich Dance Festival, London, summer 2011.

race, even as racism, sadly, shapes and limits their daily lives. While cultures may circulate globally, locally—in the French suburbs—access to certain kinds of culture remains an issue. While French hip hop values inclusiveness, hip hoppers have themselves been excluded. While French socialist governments remade French social space with high-tech architecture and infrastructure, *banlieusards* were largely left out. As Amizagh Kateb, the son of Algerian French writer Kateb Yacine, sings (in English) with his (French) band Gnawa Diffusion on their album *Algeria*: "I live in the *banlieue* without...information."

While hip hop is a global form, imitated worldwide via the media, as well as through contact and live performance, its specific development in France into a form of concert dance, facilitated by an omnipresent dance culture and the financial support of a *politique culturelle*, also suggests a counterexample: the aestheticization, rather than mainstreaming and marketing, of this form, adopted from the US. Sociologist Roberta Shapiro describes this process surrounding French hip hop as part of a general phenomenon of “artification,” or valorizing a practice as art.¹ This was my study’s opening paradox. Invited by Shapiro to join a group of researchers working on hip hop dance in France in 2000, I found a divide: on the one hand, a popular form, almost a sport, linked to parties, battles, the *banlieue*; on the other hand, a new influence in choreography and concert dance, with master classes given in state-funded dance centers, performances on big “national stages,” and companies touring in France and overseas. While this team of sociologists was studying how “hip hop dancer” became a *statut civil*, a job description entitling *intermittants du spectacle* to unemployment compensation, and how the form is transmitted and how it is aestheticized particularly by dance reviewers in the press, less attention was being paid to the choreographies themselves. This became my focus: the development of hip hop concert dance in France.

In fall 2000, at a lunch for cultural actors in the hip hop community (“urban cultures”) at the la Villette festival, I described hip hop as borrowed from the United States, and the response from French participants was: “ah, for you it is a question of acculturation,” because they did not see it that way. The festival itself consecrates the “founders” and the “old school” and screens films on dance history and the civil rights movement in the United States; however, it is not focused on US culture or cultural domination but rather on the immigrant communities in France. The leading sociologists argue that the multicultural margins of French cities and French society do not resemble the US inner cities identified as the place where hip hop was first mixed. But at my hip hop dance class in the suburbs of Paris, my teachers say “this dance comes from there....” Yet they do not understand why its founders are not famous and they do not understand the lyrics to the rap songs they like. At the round tables, too, I find that people do not know that much about the United States and don’t really understand how things work—or haven’t worked—there. So the United States is there at the “beginning” of the story, but it is not the only reference, is not the only language, and, in fact, is less than ever the foundational point or reference against which hip hop dancing in France is measured. Presenting my work in California in 2012, I found that the break dancers in the audience know the French hip hop “champions” now respected all over the world.

Readers may find it strange that my investigation of the global form of hip hop focuses on a nation and a national choreographic specificity. In emphasizing the special case of France, I do not want to suggest that US hip hop, or global hip hop, is less complex or less interesting, nor do I assume that, when state-supported French hip hop is sent on cultural embassy to other places, for example, the United States or the Caribbean, it is received unproblematically as “French.” But the French model of state “recuperation” of the form is both unique and groundbreaking and—along with European but also especially Belgian cultural institutions—has led the way for its choreographic and even national development in other countries and other contexts. With hip hop dance companies rising up all over the world, a French influence is evident—for example, in the Laotian company Lao Bang Fei, following a French model while incorporating local (national or ethnic) movement traditions, representing a new opening (in Laos) to Western music and influence but also, significantly unlike the French model, danced by a middle-class or upper-class elite. In a recent report by French television, TV5MONDE, the young Laotian dancers’ discourse sounds like the French one of the past twenty years: solidarity across the group and individual self-expression using the entire body.²

In France, *le hip hop* has not been about gangs and guns. It refers to US culture without reproducing it in any simple way. Nor has it been about “bling.” As I turn the pages of *Hip Hop Weekly*, a glossy magazine produced in Miami reproducing “iconic images” by photographer Chi Modu of music stars from 1980 to 2010 and advertising the First Annual Hip Hop Weekly Music Awards (to be held in 2011), I see again how far what we call “hip hop” in the United States is from what is called *le hip hop* in France. Fans of US hip hop music may be disappointed by what they find here: this book is not about how the French public has embraced rap music or hip hop culture in general. It is not analyzing *Hip Hop Weekly*-style accounts of the music industry and the private and performing lives of its stars. Nor does it say anything about US inner-city histories or realities, except as they are imagined or represented at French hip hop festivals.

The French word *hip hop* refers *primarily* to dance. It refers to the African American dance idioms incorporated in it, as well as the pan-African dance forms represented by French dancers’ culture, training, and exposure to the myriad forms of African and other dance accessible in France. This dance was, as I will discuss here, “protected” from the commercialization that has marked hip hop in the United States. In France, its potential countercultural force was channeled by the state, and by local educational and social structures, toward the realm of noncommercialized artistic expression. The

moves themselves remain radical, but they are produced, taught, and consumed in a very different way in France.

At the same time, France is a heavily mediatized nation, with rapid expansion of media and broad access to telecommunications, television, and Internet across the same decades that brought hip hop. Although high-tech modernization did not “trickle down” to the suburbs as planned, most French hip hop dancers have now moved into the information age and use digital video, YouTube, and social networking as part of their art. The “global” accessibility and diffusion of moves on the Internet, the opportunities for the promotion of one’s choreography or music, and the global reach of the online community are also significant factors in the development of a specifically “French” hip hop even as it focuses on local communities and national problems through the structures called *associations*—not-for-profit, often neighborhood-based groups.

What are these “French moves” and what is the so-called *mouv’*—the social movement they give legs to?

In the first part of this book, I focus on choreographies that manifest new identities for their dancers through the poetics of dance’s figural language. I argue that in the choice and elaboration of this language, dancers are enacting new roles for minorities, changing the discourse and terms for discussion of race and identity in France: first, through reference to US culture and second, through a specifically “French” choreographic language. In the second part, I consider choreographies (and their conditions for creation in classes and studios) that elaborate these identities via new technologies as well as new dance figures. In these choreographies, there are references not only to the US origin of the forms and the European *politique culturelle* that developed them but also to the global culture and global media that have influenced them. In these examples we see dance poetics as *poesis*, creation, responding to an idea of *techne* not based in a tool but in the gesture of its use and an idea of technique that can include dancers as well as engineers. Simultaneously “high tech” and “low tech,” featuring the dance technique that is a form of bodily knowledge or practice and in some cases the use of image technologies for choreography, these choreographies stage the fascination and fear that technologies generate, as well as their proposed new possibilities for bodies.

From my perspective as a US-trained dancer and academic, the French embrace of US black culture seemed at once both refreshing and patronizing. While African American music and dance forms contributed to our American uniqueness in France—in line with a long performance history—the French perspective seemed to me at times confused. First,

the dance form seemed closer to funk music and to jazz dance forms than to a specific well-defined category of US hip hop; second, it was already mixing with modern dance choreography and being performed on dance stages for a dance public. Nobody was talking about dancing “in the break,” which dancers in New York still used to define the basics of “break dance.”³ Finally, it was being funded by the Ministry of Culture and *studied* and taken seriously by dance critics, sociologists, and other academics.

When I took up this work in 2000, I was amazed to find, in the hip hop dance world in France, many of the moves and beats familiar to me from modern jazz dance in Chicago in the 1970s and 1980s. This hip hop built, in the dance studio, solidly on a jazz dance vocabulary. Many of its teachers in France now have that background and receive diplomas in that form, one that has become standard “show dancing” in many genres of entertainment. Although breaking and head spinning were not things I had done before in jazz, I had learned elements crucial to them in modern dance, contact improv, and gymnastic Pilobolus-inspired group work. In many ways, nothing here was new to me.

In the United States, I felt that I knew nothing about hip hop: I was far from the music, and I began by reading Nelson George and bell hooks; but in France, somehow, I was completely at home in the form and found its ownership being projected onto me. I approached my work as a comparatist and dance writer and, perhaps most importantly, as a dancer. French hip hoppers, finding out I was American, would spontaneously utter a few words of English, take me under their wing, and recognize some immediate kinship. From their perspective, this had to be “my” dance. Whereas in the United States I am a professor in a discipline that takes no account of my dance training, in France, the fact that I was white or an academic was secondary to my being American and a dancer. My response to those dancing hip hop in France then ranged from feeling a sense of inclusion to feeling a sense of proprietary defense of a US culture that in no way belonged to me.

French hip hop is homage to African American popular culture, but it is also a *displacement* onto the United States of the nondialogue with peoples of African descent within France. Because there has not been historically any significant discourse about the postcolonial status of immigrants from former African colonies into France or of Antillian French citizens of African descent, Pap N'Diaye has argued, this discourse took shape using the United States as an example.⁴ The use of the word *black* (rather than *noir* or *les noirs*) in this discourse in French, adopted from English, reveals the arc of this displacement. Yet in spite of this evident homage to US black culture, more than a simple gravitation toward the prevalence of global popular

culture, it has always seemed to me that the French are somehow missing the point of the American sources and sites of hip hop dance. The history of the development of hip hop in France suggests that the United States was never really the point; it was a *politique culturelle* aimed at the specifically “French” mix of multicultural immigrant (or immigrant background) populations in the suburbs. The state’s cultural and social structures seized on this interest in US black culture to encourage art, addressing economic and social inequality in France, displacing the form into the French context, and developing it as state-funded art—seemingly at the antipodes of the US form. And yet ultimately, because the state cannot control the choreographies it was producing, the hip hoppers have gone beyond this mandate and have made works that work metaphorically, transformationally, and transcendently. If French hip hoppers relate to the gangs at the root of a US counterculture, the dance form early on left aside the terrain of gangs. For the most part, hip hop in France has not been about violence or commercialism but about cultural production as a vehicle to a different, better civic engagement. Only recently has the term *violence inter-communautaire* been used to call attention to the internal violence in *banlieue* communities.

During my research, I was shocked to arrive in dance class in a suburban housing project, announce to the teachers that I was on a mission from the Ministry of Culture, and find that such an announcement created little stir. I was equally shocked that dancers who didn’t understand the words could dance to hard-core rap songs, interpreting them musically with no concern whatsoever about the meaning or content of the lyrics. I couldn’t believe children’s hip hop dance classes were also accompanied by such songs. I was convinced that the situation in the French suburbs had nothing to do with America and that it was a paradise of arts funding, social security, and *multiculturalisme*. The events of 2005 forced me to rethink this perspective.

THE MOVES AND LE MOUV'

In the beginning, there was the rage needed to dance this dance—“il faut avoir la rage pour danser”—said the Lyon-based Company Käfig founder, dancer/choreographer Mourad Merzouki, in an interview on film in 1995. There was the rage over the stories this dance form had to tell—about civil rights (a concept that, I am told, is untranslatable in French), political disenfranchisement, technological-industrial disempowerment, and the events leading to emigration. There was rage about the invisibility, unrepresentability, or incommunicability of the situation of immigrants in

France, often second-generation immigrants seeking the language in which to speak about the failures of decolonization, integration, and assimilation. How did this dance form come to “speak” French, to speak of the French version of these global ills—the legacies of colonialism, the impossibility of “minority” discourse in the face of the rhetoric of universalism? How did it come, above all, to speak *differently* even in a culture that has emphasized universalism over difference, and to represent a kind of freedom often traded in for the acknowledgment of difference in the French Republic?

In the case studies this book considers, hip hop is a figure for the rage of those still referred to as *issus de l’immigration*, a figure for the madness of colonization and the continuing effects of European racism for so-called postcolonial minorities. It is also a figure for the expression made possible in French, by a European forum, for debate about colonial histories and their neocolonial aftermaths. If this book argues for French urban dance as a particular language within a global movement, it is because the rage that sparks it does not entirely characterize it. If *le hip hop* is dancing out rage, it is also a dance of catharsis, which has staged but not solved the social problems to which it gives expression. Raising the problem of disempowerment and bringing to view what hadn’t been discussed, at first, the subject of French urban dance was unquestionably the problems in the *cités*. But in elaborating a movement vocabulary, in the past decade, this dance has come to speak about other things: to figure its dancers as something or someone else, to include dance forms from other cultures, to travel—metaphorically, to speak about global culture and global movement of people and information.

US journalists reviewing early French hip hop choreographies on tour in the US saw both similarities and differences with American black culture. The “French-Algerians” of Compagnie Käfig, for example, had not only funding, but also a recognizable style that made them different. Yet their *situation* as immigrants and minorities in France is understood as comparable to that of the originators of hip hop.

As early as 1999 Shayna Samuels pointed out, in *The New York Times*, that European hip hop dance shared significant terrain with the U.S. original, but wasn’t a copy. The Lyonnais Compagnie Käfig, performing in the U.S. for the first time, replayed in reverse the arrival of American ballet companies in France, “ballet’s original home turf.” But Samuels adds that “the troupe’s arrival will also be making a kind of multicultural statement—that no one place owns hip-hop anymore.” Qualifying Käfig as a troupe that “melds French, North African and Spanish—specifically Andalusian—elements” she describes their practice as “cross-pollination” and sees their New York performance of “Recital” in a program shared with Bronx-based Full Circle