

The sound of liminality: MHD's afro trap, affective listening, and the (re)invention of Afropean identities in France

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Funding information

ESRC DTP Studentship, Grant/Award Number: ES/J500033/1

Abstract

This article is an exploration of the world making capacities of afro trap. Through an extended case study of MHD's discography, I ask what can be learnt about the liminal experiences of postcolonial black citizens, or Afropean citizens, in France, by listening to popular music. I argue that through embracing, reinventing, and (re)producing familiar Afropean soundscapes, MHD claims and creates from his liminal subject position. Going against the assumption that Frenchness and blackness are always mutually exclusive and in tension, this music sonically proposes a way of being otherwise in France, stemming from this liminality. I see in what I call 'the sound of liminality' an instance of 'queering ethnicity,' one which channels the affective capacities of sound. I propose affective listening as a method that, incorporating autoethnography to consider critical listening positionality, facilitates a renewed attention to sound as an object of sociological inquiry.

KEYWORDS

culture, music, popular culture, queer theory, race & ethnicity, sociology, sociology of Culture and media, sociology of popular culture

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1 | INTRODUCTION

What did home sound like? It sounded like mbalax (Youssou N'dour, Xalam) or other Senegalese music, Diogal Sakho in the evenings, Murid religious chants, khassaides, if my dad was the one setting the playlist. We would sing along, although I didn't always know the words. I don't speak Wolof, I catch familiar words here or there. My dad would be speaking Wolof, on the phone, or words to us, switching to French after a second. The CDs were actually my mum's, she was the one who really knew about this music. Rolling drums, sabars, loud and joyous brass section, kora-like guitar melodies. Outside, seeping into the apartment through the windows or the aeration vent, I would hear the typical sounds of living in a Parisian apartment – the rumbling of car motors, a delivery truck beeping, an ambulance siren in the distance, perhaps an occasional scream or resonant laughter. This layered assemblage forms the soundscape of my childhood memories.

*An uncle stops by on his way back from Dakar. He isn't really my uncle, just one of my father's friends who belongs to the constellation of Senegalese men coming in and out of the flat unannounced to pick something up or drop something off. They always seem in between two planes, and they temporarily store their excess luggage here. Half of our tiny basement is perpetually waiting to be taken to Senegal. The uncle brought me a gift, a bootleg copy of Youssou N'dour's latest album, *Alsaama Day*. I listen to it again and again, the silver rainbow side ends up all scratched, but it still works. I listen to it on the laptop and glance at Window Media Player's kaleidoscopic shapes as I do my French or History homework. I have no idea where this CD is now, and the album isn't on Spotify, so when I want to listen to these songs, many years later, I need to go to YouTube and hope someone uploaded a slightly higher quality version than last time. But someone always has uploaded recordings, and always I am grateful for this virtual community for making my memories tangible again.*

I've moved to England to go to university, but I'm back for Christmas. I find myself at this house party with people from my high school, the ubiquitous whiteness of the crowd so much more palpable than it used to be before I moved away. A fast tempo, kora-like melody and familiar rhythms come out of the speakers. This song just came out but I know it well, I've been listening to it from across the channel. 'I love this song,' I think. "This is your song!" exclaims this boy I barely know and never spoke to in years of going to the same tiny school. Just a tinge of humour in his voice, a hint of sarcasm. With this simple othering move, the white space of the party becomes thick around me. I want to enjoy my song, but I don't want to enjoy it here, with these people. The thing is he was right, this was my song, but not for the reasons he had in mind, for reasons that at the time weren't clear to me either. I'm still trying to make sense of it, this affective pull, this sense of community.

These autoethnographic vignettes illustrate some of the intimate ways in which music is lived, the fundamental role it can play in the formation and experience of identity. To quote Simon Frith "music seems to be a key to identity because it offers, so intensely, a sense of both self and others, of the subjective in the collective" (Frith, 1996, p. 110). He encourages us to think about how "music 'reflects' or 'represents' the people," but also "how [a particular piece of music] produces [people], how it creates and constructs and experience" (idem: 109). In Frith's work, identity is seen as inherently processual, and music as one of the conduits through which identity is expressed, constructed, and reshaped.

In this article, through an extended case study of rapper MHD's discography, I explore the ways that listening to the sound of afro trap can teach us about Afropean experiences in contemporary France. Born Mohamed Sylla in 1994 to a Senegalese mother and a Guinean father, MHD's career began online in 2016, when he released freestyles and music videos on social media, before encountering international success with his self-titled first album. He was the first French rapper to perform at Coachella, just after releasing his second album, *19*, in 2018. In 2019, after he finished filming his first cinema role, MHD was arrested and remained incarcerated for 18 months. He always claimed his innocence, was released under supervision in 2021, and is still awaiting trial. His third album, *Mansa* (2021) was released shortly after he came out of prison. He is considered the creator of afro trap.

Afropeanity in this study isn't a normative or aspirational term, pointing towards a dreamed transnational community. Rather, it is an uncomfortable shorthand for black postcolonial citizens (Hannoum, 2019) in Europe (France in this case), who were born and/or grew up here. Building on a burgeoning literature on European/French hip hop and identity (El-Tayeb, 2011; Rollefson, 2017; Yousfi, 2022), I propose affective listening as a methodology for attending to popular music while channelling critical listening positionality (Robinson, 2020) and argue that through embracing,

reinventing and (re)producing familiar Afropean soundscapes, MHD claims and creates from his liminal subject position. Going against the assumption that Frenchness and blackness are always mutually exclusive and in tension, this music sonically proposes a way of being otherwise in France, within the liminal space of Afropean identity. I see this artistic proposition as a worldmaking practice, an instance of postcolonial queering of ethnicity (El-Tayeb, 2011). Moreover, while most existing research focuses on 1990s and 2000s French rap (El-Tayeb, 2011; Hammou, 2014; Rollefson, 2017), I explore a more recent corpus (MHD's first album came out in 2016, his last one in 2021) in order to attend to some of the changes in the sound French rap over the past 10 years which I believe open up new areas of reflection, perhaps all the more relevant to contemporary France.

2 | MUSIC IS THE MESSAGE: RAP, RACE IN FRANCE, AND THE SOCIAL LIFE OF SOUND

As mentioned in the introduction, an emerging body of work turns to hip-hop and rap to explore questions of identity in postcolonial Europe (El-Tayeb, 2011; Rollefson, 2017; Yousfi, 2022). In the case of France, in particular, where public discussions of race and identity are so stifled by the universalist ideology central to the Republic, rap has become a crucial space for these discussions to take place. Republican universalism “rejects any differentiation or distinction among its citizens, and purports French identity as the most significant identification” (Beaman, 2022, p. 408). It is responsible for the “lack of ethnic statistics, or government-measured racial categories in France” (idem), or the shared idea in French public discourse that since “race” isn't a scientific reality, it should not ever be acknowledged or mentioned. Public discussions of race are always entangled in debates around immigration and integration, and even evoking allegiance to an identity marker that isn't Frenchness is seen as treacherous, threatening national cohesion. Simultaneously, Frenchness is racialised as white (Beaman, 2017, 2019). Blackness and Frenchness are therefore conceived as antithetical, and routine denials of Frenchness are integral to racialised people's lived experience in France. Indeed, research exploiting the results of the 2009 *Trajectoires et Origine* (TeO) study¹ found that 65% of immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa and 56% of their descendants feel that their Frenchness is denied to them (Simon & Tiberj, 2012, p. 17). Against this background, Afropeans' social position is characterised by a conundrum. We are seemingly left with “only two, impossible options” (El-Tayeb, 2011, p. 169). On the one hand, we can “identify as an insider of the national community,” (idem) knowing that this status will always be questioned, as it clashes with our assigned Otherness. On the other hand, we can accept the Outsider status, and identify as a foreigner. This option comes with its own set of problems, however, as when going back to the imaginary home that is our parents' countries of origin, we will be perceived as European and as an outsider. “Both positions create a conflict that cannot successfully be resolved within the system of colourblindness, because this system makes it impossible to name its root.” (idem).

Needing to negotiate these two impossible options, Afropean subjects in France exist in a liminal space, between or belonging to two different places. The concept of liminality is central to the study of rites of passage in anthropology, where it is seen as a “creative phase of anti-structure” (Barnard & Spencer, 2010, p. 618), necessarily temporary and deeply transformative. What happens, then, when liminality becomes permanent? One possible outcome is what Fatima El-Tayeb coins as “queering ethnicity,” the strategies second or third-generation postcolonial citizens in Europe put in place to live with this impossible social positioning. “Queer” here references “processes of constructing normative and non-normative behaviours and populations.” (El-Tayeb, 2011: xxxvi). Queer theory's long tradition of exploring the resistance techniques of subjects whose identity has been made unthinkable by the dominant order is channeled here to understand the situation of racialised Europeans, with a focus on vernacular culture (idem: 29). “Queer” indicates inventive practices of deconstructing identity, through which these citizens “[use] the tension of living supposedly exclusive identities and [transform] it into a creative potential, building a community based on the shared experience of multiple, contradictory positionalities” (idem: xxxvi). These practices of queering ethnicity are then the way we make a home in this liminality, they enable us to live our black identities in France as a “coherent (if

not always stable) experiential sense of self." (Gilroy, 1993, p. 102). Rap is one of these means of queering ethnicity. As Maboula Soumahoro puts it:

French rap, as an artistic offering endowed with its own innovative aesthetic, counts among the few spaces of postcolonial France where questions linked to immigration, identity, dual culture, race, and the idea of the multiple homes one can claim can be addressed without hesitation (Soumahoro, 2022: 63).

Crucially she is talking about rap as *an artistic offering endowed with its own innovative aesthetic*. Here, turning to rap for insight about wider society is not a way of reproducing the violent distinction consisting in seeing rappers not as artists in their own rights, but as spokespersons for the issues of the banlieue youth, so pervasive in media discussions of the form, especially in its early days in France (Hammou, 2014). Rather, it is because rap is an art form that it can give us insights, and it is in its aesthetic innovation that we find the most poignant discussions of identity. In this article, I am particularly interested in paying attention to the sonic fabric of afro trap as a space in which we can better understand how French Afropeans, black postcolonial citizens invent and (re)invent identity, propose ways of existing which differ from dominant discourses.

This insistence on sound is crucial. Indeed, discussions of rap in scholarly circles tend to focus only on lyricism, separating it entirely from the form in which it is performed, recorded, and experienced. However, when we separate lyrics from performance, we deaden hip hop. As articulated by Louisa Yousfi, in her essay *Rester Barbare*, "under the neon lights of research, rap has deserted"² (2022: 37). According to her, the interest of rap doesn't lie in semantics but rather in the event of performance, the crucial question being "what takes place within rap?" (idem: 38). Rap's singularity, its power, is located not in decontextualised lyrics but in the totality of the song, in practice and flow, in the way words and music are entangled, and in the delivery. There is always an excess in music, a part which evades discourse (Eshun, 1998), and it is often in this excess that *something* happens, hence the need to strive to analyse rap holistically, and not piece by piece, after taking it apart.

The need to decenter rap lyrics when attending to hip hop in academic works was also articulated by J. Griffith Rollefson in *Flipping the Script*. Building on the writings of Fred Moten and Paul Gilroy, he advocates for scholarship that performs "'hip hop close readings' in both form and content" (Rollefson, 2017, p. 10, emphasis in the original) in order to take seriously the idea that "black music is scholarship" (idem). Furthermore, attention to sound

will allow us to feel hip hop more intensely, attend to the immediacy of hip hop's presence (in terms of geography, emotional urgency and frequency response), and examine the understudied subject of *sometimes it's not what you say, but how you say it*. (...) The performance-centered approach will help us decenter hip hop lyrics to help us understand the relationship of text to beats and will help us understand that the beats have their own sonic rhetorics, underpinning or providing contrast to those texts, visual cues, and movements that grab our attention most readily. (idem: 11)

While Rollefson is writing from the field of musicology, perhaps more ready to recognise the importance of tending to sound itself, I argue in this article that the same careful attention to sound can be extremely productive from a sociological point of view. Indeed, in everyday life, "music has power" (DeNora, 2000, p. 16). It is experienced as dynamic and agentic, and plays a crucial role in the construction of one's sense of self (idem). Music marks time, shapes memories, and consolidates group identities. This resonates with the findings of scholars working on European hip-hop as a space for the negotiation of identity, with Fatima El-Tayeb, for instance, arguing that "young artists [use] hip-hop as a tool to analyse and name their positionality as minoritarian Europeans within a continental system that continued to define them as foreigners" (El-Tayeb, 2011: xli). In this article, I therefore think of music not as representing the way Afropean subjects live their life in France, but instead as a force acting on people and being acted upon by them, as an affective medium enabling the construction of identity.

By referring to music as an affective medium, I am thinking of affects as embodied, non-discursive forces (Guattari, 1996, p. 160) which flow through and between bodies. This circulation is a sticky process: affects stick to, and encounter sticky bodies, and both leave their impressions on each other (Ahmed, 2004). Affects also shape bodies, twisting and orienting them in certain directions, creating the conditions for experiencing the world (idem). Similarly, music is experienced as embodied, and flows through bodies, as it “consists of sound waves, vibrations that the body may feel even when it cannot hear” (DeNora, 2000, p. 86). It also has “organisational properties” (idem: 151), as it can condition the way we experience the world and construct our own identity. It can for instance bring up memories and “capture emotions entirely separate from the lyrical content” (Baily & Collyer, 2006, p. 168). Moreover, it is an “aesthetic material” through which we become “capacitated”: it orients us as it “affords perception, action, feeling, corporeality” (DeNora, 2000, p. 153). Music is thus deeply affective, and a particularly good medium to focus on when trying to understand questions of identity. It is experienced in ways that can be difficult to put into words, and it can also speak to feelings that are hard to express or explain.

Finally, music has a capacity of expressing what *could* be. Through its artistic propositions, “music may serve as a resource for utopian imaginations, for alternate worlds and institutions, and it may be used strategically to presage new worlds” (DeNora, 2000, p. 159). In that sense, it has been linked to the idea of worldmaking, an “ongoing collective practice of enacting ‘the radical aspirations of queer culture building’” (Duong, 2012, p. 379). Jodie Taylor, 2012, p. 42, using music as the starting point for her study of queer worldmaking, notes that “popular music and its associated subcultural and scenic sites have long operated as critical modalities of symbolic resistance to cultural hegemonies” (2012: 42). Because music as an artistic medium is rather “popular, democratic and far reaching in both production and consumption” (Baily & Collyer, 2006, p. 168), it enables marginalised communities to make interventions into the cultural sphere in a way that literature, for instance, does not permit. When thinking about black music in particular, and the way it has always been intimately tied to liberation, music teaches us, outside of dominant epistemologies, about the otherwise. In the words of Katherine McKittrick:

I learn that aesthetic labor – music, groove, text, poem, photo – provides the conditions to imagine and live who and what we are outside of what they think we are. I learn that the song helps us think consciousness without being distracted by the demand for clarity. Song, story, invite the “ability to feel-with”. We feel-with. (McKittrick, 2021: 70)

Therefore, whether it is to think about identity construction, or worldmaking practices, music is helpful in addressing the fact that, as Gilroy claims, drawing on CLR James, “ordinary people do not need an intellectual vanguard to help them to speak or to tell them what to say” (Gilroy, 1993, p. 78).

For all the above reasons, in this article I use music both as a guide and as a resource for my analysis of identity in the sound of afro trap. Kodwo Eshun writes that “far from needing theory’s help, music today is already [conceptual], pregnant with thought probes waiting to be activated, switched on, misused” (Eshun, 1998: –003). These thought probes, I will argue, are often more apt at expressing certain ideas or concepts than writing (especially academic writing). The scholar’s task, then, is to find ways to attend to these ideas, to listen to them and learn from them, and to find a way to meet them with our own writing.

3 | LIVE ‘MANSA’: DIASPORIC LITERACY AND AFFECTIVE LISTENING

The video of the “Live Session ‘Mansa,’” posted to MHD’s YouTube channel on the 14th of October 2022 (MHD Officiel, 2022), came just over a year after the release of his third album, *Mansa*.³ MHD didn’t tour for this album, potentially because of the ongoing investigation which also led to his previous incarceration, so this live video was the first time his audience could see him perform in a few years. This is even more noteworthy when considering that live performances and international tours (including to the US and West Africa) were an integral part of MHD’s project

before his incarceration. At the time of writing this article, the video has over 1.2 million views on YouTube. In this set of just under 25 min, MHD performs eight songs from the latest album, accompanied by a band (guitar, keyboard, drums, bass, and crucially kora) and 4 backing singers.

Throughout this performance, MHD showcases the range of sounds present in his latest album: from the honeyed 1990s R&B beats of "Elle" to the afro cuban drums and brass of "Beyoncé," this live sounds out blackness as diasporic, in constant dialog, and makes sense of being black in France as an exercise in diasporic literacy. Coined by Vèvè Clark, the concept of diasporic literacy refers to a 'reading practice that investigates and shows how we already do, or can, illuminate and connect existing and emerging diasporic codes and tempos and stories and narratives and themes' (McKittrick, 2021, p. 6). According to McKittrick, 'these literacies function to expand the text outside itself' (idem). I want to think of the sonic practices at work within afro trap as such expansions. In "Beyoncé" for instance, the combination of clave rhythm and punctuating, echoey brass accents (played through a keyboard) immediately place the song in conversation with a long Afro-Cuban tradition, itself a diasporic hybrid genre, emblematic of the Democratic Republic of Congo but which travelled throughout West Africa and was central to diasporic nightlife and musical life in France and Belgium in the 1980s and 1990s. The liberal use of autotune, on the other hand, as well as the large amounts of singing rather than strictly rapping signals an anchoring in contemporary French rap, post-Booba and PNL.

This practice of weaving new sound from a multitude of diasporic references is most apparent in the performance of the song "Sagacité," the third song in this showcase. At the end of the previous song, the lights dim, a spotlight on MHD makes the singer's white shirt and platinum-dyed hair glow. The camera zooms in on his head, and, staring into the camera, he tells the audience "attachez vos ceintures" (strap in), before the beat drops, a coupé-décalé rhythm layered with a minor dissonant synthesised hook, reminiscent of late 2000s/early 2010s urban genres such as UK grime. The light flashes, the camera pans out, and the MHD starts rapping. During the chorus, as the backing singers come on, the kora melody picks up, mixed into the general production. Around 7:45, there is a switch: MHD takes his sunglasses off, winks into the camera and the drum beat stops. With no backing track but the echoey kora melody, he self-referentially raps the following lines "on t'a parlé t'as douté/et t'as fumé ma moula t'as toussé/à tout moment frère ça peut péter/c'est la sagacité." "T'as fumé ma moula t'as toussé" is the hook in MHD's first hit, "La Moula," the opening track to his first self-titled album released in 2016, which can be considered the first afro trap song, and was very influential at the time. "A tout moment frère ça peut péter" is the opening line to the opening song of MHD's third album, "Petit Coeur." With this song, and these lines put to the fore of the performance, the artist signals that his musical production is still inscribed in the wider project of afro trap, an evolution of his style. With three orchestral hits on the keyboard and the drums picking back up (reminiscent both of 1980s hip hop and of MHD's vocal signature, 'paw paw paw') the song starts again, and while the coupé décalé rhythm and the kora melody remains, the absence of the dissonant synthesised hook changes the sonic atmosphere of the song entirely. After the bridge, another shift happens, and the song ends up sounding very similar to West African hybridised genres of the 80s, such as early Nigerian Afrobeat or early Senegalese Mbalax, due to the specific guitar picking. Still, the coupé décalé beat remains. Each shift is exciting to me as a listener, as it brings a whole new field of diasporic references to the fore.

All of the elements pulled apart here happen simultaneously, seamlessly, in the performance. The production of identity, this sound of liminality I want to think about with MHD's work is harduous to articulate in writing, but evident while listening. I can pull the elements apart by engaging in affective listening, but spelling out the distinct elements which make the song sounds like it does in a close reading will never live up to the articulation of identity which takes place within the sound itself.

I borrow the idea of close reading from Rollefson, taking it as an approach which minutely attends to the sonic details of a song's waveforms, to its "beats, rhythms, acoustics, notational moods, frequencies" (McKittrick, 2021, p. 151) but also to specific words, semantic fields, sentence constructions and plays with language. In *Flipping the Script*, Rollefson excavates the layers of meaning and sonic references in a song, and points to what we can learn from attending to music in such a careful, intimate way. He demonstrates this technique by performing a close reading of Sefyu's 2006 song "En noir et blanc." This close reading, I believe, can be a very generative approach. Nonetheless,

I also see its limitations, which I try to remedy by mobilising another concept, coming from the realm of indigenous sound studies: critical listening positionality (Robinson, 2020, p. 9).

Much like positionality, critical listening positionality enables us to do away with the myth of objectivity or perfect neutrality when engaging in any intellectual inquiry. As Robinson writes, “engaging in critical listening positionality involves a self-reflexive questioning of how race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and cultural background intersect and influence the way we are able to hear sound, music, and the world around us” (ibid). Furthermore, “as part of our listening positionality, we each carry listening privilege, listening biases, and listening ability that are never wholly positive or negative; by becoming aware of normative listening habits and abilities, we are better able to listen otherwise” (ibid). Who we are informs what we hear, and in turn what we find meaningful within sound. Therefore, engaging with critical listening positionality becomes crucial to the work we produce. Although Rollefson does spend some time situating his research in his introduction (mentioning his whiteness or Americanness for instance) he doesn't ask how this whiteness might shape his listening. At times, a lack of critical engagement with his listening positionality leads him to erroneous conclusions, notably in his listening analysis, when misunderstandings or mistranslations make his analysis ring false.⁴ Without arguing that critical listening positionality would solve all issues of interpretation, I am intrigued and involved in its project, in the way it “prompt[s] questions regarding how we might become better attuned to the particular filters of race, class, gender, and ability that actively select and frame the moment of contact between listening body and listened-to-sound” (Robinson, 2020, p. 9), and I strive to integrate these crucial questions to my practice of affective listening.

I call affective listening a critical methodology that consciously draws on the researcher's lived experience, channels their “listening privilege, listening biases and listening abilities” (Robinson, 2020, p. 9) to study pieces of music. Grounded in situated knowledge, the idea that “the only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular” (Haraway, 1988, p. 590), this approach makes the researcher's positionality visible and draws from it in order to create the close readings discussed above. Personal biographies and relationship to music shape our listening positionality, and music is always excessive, always comports a part which escapes discourse (Eshun, 1998). Sound evokes memories and prompts emotional responses that can never be fully captured, but might be approached through methods such as autoethnography. “Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (...) personal experience (...) in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 1), and seeks to produce “evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience” (idem). While this approach isn't uniquely tied to sociological inquiry, sociologists, notably feminist researchers and black sociologists, have highlighted the importance of personal histories when analysing society, and especially when seeking to understand the experiences of marginalised subjects within society, and have done so since the early days of the discipline. W.E.B. Du Bois, for instance, explored this approach throughout his career, but especially in *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Towards an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (2007), where the attention to the personal is clear even in the title. Lived experience is similarly central to Patricia Hill Collins's sociological exploration of black feminist thought and black feminist epistemologies (Hill Collins (2008 (1990)). It is from these thinkers that I take my cue in thinking that my own lived experience as a black person of West African (Senegalese) descent in France is a valuable resource in this research.

In practice, this meant closely listening to the songs in my corpus, focussing on rhythms, instrument sounds, melodies, and other sonic markers while also paying attention to and recording my own affective responses to the music. Actively listening with affect and for affect, and using my situated body as a research tool, I listened for echoes, resonances, dissonances, and discomforts. What feelings did a particular rhythm evoke? Which memories were awoken by multilingual lyricism? Which sounds felt comforting, familiar, intriguing? Which parts of the songs left me standing aside or wanting more. And how did all of these responses inform my critical listening practice? These questions guided my listening as inquiry, and enabled me to engage more deeply with the material at hand. The autoethnographic vignettes which opened this piece were also a way to draw the contours of my specific listening positionality as it pertains to the object of my research, and also showed the type of memories and feelings which can be brought up by engaging in affective listening. It is this affective listening practice which enabled me to pick up on

the coupé décalé rhythm as a through line in “Sagacité” for instance, or attuned me to the fact that the synthesised brass in “Beyoncé” mattered, signalled an inscription within the tradition of Afro-Cuban rhythms. It also enabled me to recognise the limits of my positionality when elucidating the song, for instance when hearing words sung in a West African language I don’t recognise or understand, showing the limits of my own diasporic literacy.

Moving on from these methodological considerations explored via close reading, I now turn to more general considerations on afro trap and identity.

4 | THE SOUND OF LIMINALITY: MUSICAL SYNERGY AND IDENTITY

The first 7 seconds of “La Moula,” the opening track on MHD’s debut album (2016), contain all the central components of afro trap: the fast tempo, the kora-like looped guitar pattern, the central place of rolling drums, emulating various West African percussion on an afro diasporic *clave* rhythm, and the artist’s vocal signature of echoey onomatopoeia interjecting in the background. In fact, the entire first album can be viewed as a manifesto to this new genre and its hybrid ethos.

Afro trap is a fundamentally diasporic project, down to the name itself: coming from the French rap landscape, this name consists of the suffix afro affixed to trap, the Atlanta-born hip hop genre which emerged in the late 1990s. In this sense afro trap is both a transatlantic genre, bearing the influences of afro diasporic North American hip hop cultures and Caribbean rhythms, and a cross-mediterranean one, reflecting traditional West African sounds as much as postcolonial contemporary genres which travelled through more recent migration flows, as we will explore. In interviews, the rapper has stated that this was inspired by the music he grew up listening to – Congolese *rumba*, *soukous* and *ndombolo*, Ivorian *zouglou* and *coupé-décalé*, Senegalese *mbalax* or Mande sound (Seck, 2020). The connection between African music and French rap isn’t new, one can, for instance, think of the 1999 collective album *Racines*, released by Bisso Na Bisso, a collective of Franco-Congolese rappers and singers, in which backing tracks featured sampling of Congolese songs and rapping in Lingala. More recently, rapper Youssoupha rapped over a sample of his father, singer Tabu Ley Rochereau’s song “Pitié” on the track “Les disques de mon père” (2012). This turn towards African diasporic influences rather than the US and Caribbean influences that characterized earlier hip hop is not limited to France either, and can be witnessed in the UK through prominent artists’ collaborations with Afrobeats musicians for instance (Skepta and Wizkid on “Energy (Stay Far Away)”, “Wow”, “Longtime”; Dave and Burna Boy on “Location”). MHD’s afro trap, however, feels different. Rather than pure sampling, or featurings, the various influences are distilled, digested, appear in the sounds in synergy, infused rather than superimposed, and the site of encounter is Hexagonal France, Paris 19e, Cité Rouge to be exact. When discussing the first album with the rapper in a radio show, the journalist described the enterprise as follows: “this is no longer our parents’ African music – you brought it into the French ghetto.” (La Sauce, 2018, p. 13:57). MHD’s career was an immediate success, in France and beyond (Amrani, 2017), afro trap has had a considerable impact on contemporary French rap, and MHD has been described as influencing more established rappers such as Booba to embrace a new sound (Oliver, 2020). This influence is most visible in tracks such as Booba’s 2017 hit single “DKR,” which displays similar sonic characteristics, the kora-like looped guitar melody and the complex rhythmic patterns reminiscent of Senegalese *sabar*. In MHD’s second and third albums, *19* and *Mansa*, his sound evolved, perhaps matured in a way, as he expanded the meaning of and explored the possibilities of the project of afro trap. Although the afro trap series begun in the first album continues across his entire discography, with “Afro Trap Pt. 10 (Moula Gang)” on the second album, and “Afro Trap Pt. 11 (King Kong)” on his latest album, the latest albums also feature more tracks where MHD sings rather than raps (reflective of a more general shift in mainstream French rap in the second half of the 2010s), and songs where he explores new influences such as more explicitly Afro-Cuban sounds (“Beyoncé” on the third album, as mentioned) or Afrobeats (“Pololo (ft. Tiakola)” on *19*).

There are several ways in which MHD’s music (re)creates and (re)invents the familiar soundscapes through which, I argue, Afropean identity in France is negotiated and constructed. One is the integration of various languages in his

lyrics, another is the lo-fi, multilayered quality of some of his songs (especially his *Afro Trap* series), but the one that I focus on here is the synergy of various afrodiasporic musical traditions (Central and West African, French and North American).

The first way in which the synergy of various musical traditions is made clear in MHD's discography is through collaborations. From the get-go, he chose to work with African artists and musicians from the diaspora. The first album featured Beninese singer Angélique Kidjo and Congolese singer Fally Ipupa, established figures who've been pillars of West and Central African music since respectively the 1980s and 1990s (Seck, 2007, 2008). On the second album and third albums he collaborated with contemporary Afrobeats and Afropop singers Wizkid, Yemi Alade, Naira Marley, and Adekunle Gold, all figures of the Nigerian scene, and with other Afrodiasporic European artists such as the London-based grime artist Stefflon Don or French rappers Dadju and Tiakola. Through these collaborations, MHD traces the contour of an afrodiasporic musical tradition, rooted both in Africa and in Europe, within which he anchors himself and which he is in conversation with just as much as, if not much more than US hip hop.

Most importantly his second album, *19*, opens with "Intro Mansa" a solo track by Salif Keïta, the 'king' of Malian music who revolutionised the scene in the 1980s (and in fact, mansa means king in Bambara). The atmospheric song is short, barely 2 min, and the production is quite stripped back, mainly featuring an atmospheric kora melody with the introduction of some percussion about halfway through, leaving all the space for Keïta's unmistakable voice to resonate. Giving away the introductory song of the album to Keïta is a form of musical citation (Rose, 1994), a way of claiming the singer's legacy. This collaboration was always a desire in the artist's mind, as he said in an interview: "We were supposed to work together on my first project, but it was made in such a short period we didn't have time to do it. For *19*, he was the first artist we contacted, and I gave him the intro directly." (MHD in Sylla, 2018). This is a very evocative and meaningful choice. Keïta is such an established figure that hearing his voice immediately evokes an emotional response in listeners familiar with West African music. This opening track moves me and makes me feel at home within the album, as it evokes a common field of references, integrated into a contemporary French work. As evoked in the first autoethnographic vignette in this article, the West African music our parents listened to was often part and parcel of the familiar soundscapes of our own Afropean youths. Indeed, music plays an important role in immigrants' lives, as one of the more easily transportable and accessible cultural forms (Karlsen, 2013), and is therefore often used as a way to maintain links to the homeland and transmit parts of one's cultural heritage to the new generation (idem, Baily & Collyer, 2006). But, as it moved across space, it became part of Afropean citizens' cultural repertoire. Our affective connection to this sound goes beyond nostalgia to integrate the sonic tapestry of our liminal experiences. Therefore the musical synergy at the heart of the project of afro trap facilitates a feeling of community, captures a shared experience.

Beyond citations/collaborations, the musical synergy happens in the sonic fabric of the music itself, as discussed in the close reading of the Live Mansa performance. The songs' producers (Dany Synthé, DSK ON THE BEAT, Junior Alaprod) integrate "traditional" West African instruments and manipulate electronic sounds and "Western" instruments to emulate a kora, a mbira, or various West African percussions, such as sabar or tama or shakers. In general, percussion is given a central place, almost dominating the tracks, and featuring characteristic polyrhythmic patterns from various West African and Afrodiasporic genres: koutou, a form of beatboxing, on "Rouler" (La Sauce, 2018), the ubiquitous clave rhythms central to Afro-Cuban music on many of the songs, Ivorian coupé-décalé beats, and the fast tempo, rolling percussive rhythms reminiscent of Senegalese sabar (for instance on "Afro Trap Pt. 11 (King Kong)").

In *Flip the Script*, Rollefson builds on the contrapuntal analysis proposed by Edward Said in 1993s *Culture and Imperialism* to account for the "hybridity, contradiction and paradox of colonial entanglement" (Rollefson, 2017, p. 37) palpable in the song he studies. This contrapuntal approach, which "must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it" (Said in Rollefson, 2017, p. 37), is key to understanding the meaning of the synergy proposed by afro trap. Indeed, I am not exploring the integration of Central and West African musical traditions and sonic markers to reproduce a tired discourse of two identities existing side-by-side, or of children of immigration lost between two worlds, rather I wish to show that the sound of MHD's work, by integrating, reimagining and re-offering musical traditions that are *already* hybridised, un-complicates the question of identity, sounding

out a lived experience which is never captured in dominant discourse in France. To give an example, mbalax, in many ways, is already imbued with colonial encounters and postcolonial states of being (how could it be any different?). Its use of guitars (plucked in a way reminiscent of kora but undeniably distinct) or expansive brass sections allied with traditional percussions, although seen as a purely Senegalese music genre (Topouzis, 1988) in fact exposes the myth of neatly bound nations and national cultures, demonstrating that “imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale” (Rollefson, 2017, p. 37). MHD and his producers’ artistic proposition with afro trap is then a new iteration of this remixing, of identities made and remade through music.

Thinking back to El-Tayeb’s idea of queering ethnicity, I’m struck by the way afro trap sonically captures and (re)creates ‘community based on the shared experience of multiple, contradictory positionalities.’ (El-Tayeb, 2011: xxxvi). Unlike official and dominant discourses about our positionality as postcolonial French citizens, afro trap’s inventive artistic propositions—what I call “the sound of liminality”—echo our sense of self, the fact that we have made a home in this liminality.

There is a certain radicality to this proposition, as commercial and mainstream as MHD’s music is. Indeed, as Gilroy wrote in *The Black Atlantic* (1993), “where racist, nationalist or ethnically absolutist discourses orchestrate political relationships so that these identities appear to be mutually exclusive, occupying the space between them or trying to demonstrate their continuity has been viewed as a provocative and even oppositional act of political insubordination.” (Gilroy, 1993, p. 1). Without being explicitly political, MHD’s entire musical project occupies, and creates from, the liminal space which French postcolonial citizens inhabit. Furthermore, it puts it into sound, channelling the affective, creative capacities of music as a medium and ‘uncomplicating’ this liminal position. As such, it is an act of worldmaking.

5 | CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Throughout this article, I have asked how the sonic characteristics of afro trap could help us understand Afropean experiences in France. Under the hegemonic rule of republican universalism, Frenchness and blackness are seen as antithetical, mutually exclusive markers of identity. And yet this frame of thought clashes with the “coherent experiential sense of self” of French Afropeans, who have made a home in the liminal space to which they are confined. In MHD’s discography, various techniques are used to sonically claim the unhyphenated aspect of Afropean experiences, “un-complicated” or rendered evident by the affective power of music. This music is a loud, creative disruption of the established order, a refusal to fold oneself into the shapes deemed acceptable by hegemonic Frenchness. In that sense it is a powerful means of queering ethnicity in contemporary France and demonstrates the possibility of being French otherwise. With affective listening, I propose a methodology that, building on previous work, acknowledges the importance of sound in the sociological study of musical genres and engages with authors’ critical listening positionalities to yield new understandings. I hope that this methodological contribution will be helpful to other sociologists interested in paying attention to the sonic fabric of the cultural objects they may engage with.

Paying attention to the worldmaking capacities of the sound of popular music in the context of race studies, informed by queer of colour studies, is an approach that could very productively be applied to other national contexts in Europe, perhaps with a comparative approach. It would also be really interesting to look at the ways similar post-colonial dynamics unfold in the musical productions of other liminal groups in France, and at the cross-pollination of these various traditions in the French context. Working with a larger corpus would also enable one to account for the way gender, class, sexuality, or geographies play a role in the development of these worldmaking practices.

I wanted to end on a personal note. It was a feeling that led me to start this project, the feeling that afro trap captured my experience in a coherent way, “un-complicating” it. A feeling that there was something powerfully affective and creative in music. But I couldn’t explain this feeling. It is difficult to write about what you can only feel, but throughout this project, applying academic rigour to my analysis while remaining passionate allowed me to learn so much from my corpus. It helped me put into words the power that I felt in this music and gain a renewed respect and admiration for the artists whose work captures, and creates from, the liminality of our Afropean existences. For that, I am grateful.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All writing is collective work, and this article was no exception. I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful and generative comments. Thank you to my doctoral supervisor, Dr Ali Meghji. His guidance and support throughout the writing of this article were indispensable. Thank you to Dr Margarita Aragon for her feedback on an early version of this research project. Thank you also to Ruari Paterson-Achenbach for their support and for the many conversations that helped me translate feelings and thoughts spurred by music into words.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

I have no conflict of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ In the absence of official ethnic statistics, the 2009 TeO study, which focuses on trajectories of immigration to analyse questions of identity is one of the only large scale studies which engages with questions of race and identity. Although its approach is necessarily limiting and limited (as racialisation and immigration don't neatly map onto each other), it nonetheless provides some interesting material to work with.
- ² Author's translation
- ³ While I will do my best to capture the music studied here in words, I encourage readers to stop throughout the article and listen to (even just some of) the songs mentioned. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, part of music always evades discourse, and encountering the songs directly will give you a much better idea of what it is that we are talking about.
- ⁴ For instance, Rollefson explores the line "Le noir et le blanc sont complémentaire, kif-kif," which he translates as "Black and white are complementary, luv-luv," arguing that the term kif stands as a metonym for cultural mixture, based on the Arabic word for pleasure *kif*, part of French slang (Rollefson, 2017, p. 59). This could be a compelling argument and surely sounds very convincing to a reader less familiar with French. Indeed, kif is part of French slang, and means pleasure and enjoyment. Kif-kif, however, does not. Entering French vernacular by way of Moroccan Arabic, kif-kif means same-same, simply. Therefore, what Sefyu is really saying is "Black and white are complementary, same-same." And the section on kif as a metonym doesn't hold up anymore, showing how a lack of familiarity can induce the researcher in error.

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How to cite this article: Niang, S. M. (2023). The sound of liminality: MHD's afro trap, affective listening, and the (re)invention of Afropean identities in France. *Sociology Compass*, e13116. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.13116>