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“I’m a Businesswoman/Come and Make Me Coffee*”. How Power Relations Informed the Social Mobility of French Female Rappers in the 1990s

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

* Sarazz, "Sarah", Street-Zone production, 2017.

Fig. 1



Princess Annès, a rapper who began her career in the 1990s, here photographed by Hélène Tilman for the "Dédicace" exhibition.

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Introduction

- 1 Beyond the image it sometimes conveys, is rap a means to achieve social mobility? In the media, rappers are routinely presented as aspiring to economic success or as social climbers—and social scientists have likewise argued this. In addition to the rap stereotype of ostentatious consumption, some authors have claimed that there is an affinity between “the hip-hop ethic” and “the spirit of capitalism” (Guibert 2000), and between some strains of independent rap and “guerilla capitalism” (Jouvenet 2006; Brugière 2018). More broadly, investment in hip-hop culture, of which rap is one of a number of artistic expressions, has been described as offering a form of “illegitimate cultural capital”, liable to thwart downward social mobility or boost upward mobility (Clech 2016).
- 2 In the rap lyrics I have picked as a title for this article, a stereotypical phrase is disrupted by the feminization of its terms: Sarazz gives us a rhetorical performance as a “businesswoman”, not a “businessman”, in an environment where women are in the minority. What types of social mobility do female French rappers experience, and how does their engagement in rap play into that experience? The classic sociological examination of social mobility, if we reassess its conceptual tools, offers a valuable way to explore how different power relations combine in individual trajectories, and shape one’s experiences. In the case of French female rappers, these experiences turn out to be far removed from dominant representations of their commitment to a practice in which men are largely overrepresented.
- 3 The term “social mobility” refers to the moves and non-moves made over time by individuals (or groups) between the “hierarchized positions” that characterize a society

(Merllié & Prévot 1991: 19). In most research, “social mobility” has been approached as a (social) “class” mobility, and both are seen through the lens of the transformations of professional affiliations (Siblot *et al.* 2015: 9). Yet, class relations are not the only type of power relations to produce unequal positions in social space.

- 4 While racialized individuals have played a key role in the history of rap in France (Hammou 2012), I will also zoom in on the trajectories of women here. This obviously requires considering the gender and race-related social hierarchies that have a bearing on social mobility, as these hierarchies are explicitly brought up by most interviewees. By shedding light on multiple experiences of minority (Guillaumin 1972) in the trajectories of these women, I am revealing the essential role of these power relations in phenomena of social mobility in general.
- 5 Spurred on by the spread of the concept of intersectionality in French academia, many studies have examined the joint effects of various social hierarchies¹. This article partakes in this effort. However, I share the criticisms voiced by a number of female researchers concerning the extensive uses of the concept of intersectionality. Many of these uses largely fail to do justice to the originality of the intersectional approach (Ait Ben Lmadani & Moujoud 2012; Kocadost 2017), while the effort to take phenomena of “complex inequality” (Bilge 2010) into account is both broader and older than the intersectional approach. Despite the strong ties between the two traditions (Joseph 2015; Juteau 2016), this particular research is informed by an approach consisting in examining the joint impact of different types of power relations (Pfefferkorn 2007: 371 ff.) It draws on a theoretical perspective that calls for analysing complex inequality in terms of power relations, defined as lasting, cross-sectoral systems of social differentiation that organize relations between hierarchized and antagonistic social groups (Devreux 2004; de Rudder 2019).
- 6 Moves within different social hierarchies operate in different ways. To sum this up crudely, classic studies on social stratification have yielded a distinction between a “caste” and a “class” model (Merllié & Prévot 1991: 13). The caste model is based on positions that are assigned at birth and unchanging save for exceptional cases. The class model, on the other hand, refers to positions acquired over time. It would be tempting to consider that race and gender relations reflect a caste system whereas age and class relations reflect a class system. But many studies, some decades-old, have shown how social class relations and the associated statuses tend to reproduce (Bourdieu 1979), whereas race relations do not entirely prevent significant mobilities from occurring (Ndiaye 2006). Likewise, the essentialization of the binary sexual categorization has been challenged by materialist feminism (Delphy 1998) and queer studies (Halberstam 1998). Anne-Marie Daune-Richard and Anne-Marie Devreux have formulated a theoretical and exploratory definition of the concept of “gender mobility”, on which this article draws:

“The interactive play of the practices and representations of social actors [leads] men and women to position and reposition themselves in relation to their sex group. This is what we have called gender mobility.” (Devreux 2004: 156)
- 7 Emmanuel Beaubatie (2017) has also shown that gender mobility can also be observed between sex groups. Additionally, all of these “classificatory systems” are dynamic, just as the social relations that produce them: they reproduce by transforming themselves (Devreux 2004). These findings suggest that there is little theoretical value in distinguishing a priori between different types of power relations when approaching

social mobility. On the contrary, they encourage us to conceive these social hierarchies as producers of a “plurality of boundaries” (Delon 2019a), carving spaces for a myriad of unequal social positions in which a variety of status elements can interweave (class origins, ethno-racial background and spatial hierarchies, life cycle and generation, gender and sexuality, etc.), between which moves are thinkable and observable: these may be vertical, but also horizontal, along multiple axes (or dimensions) (Dhume 2019; Hajjat 2019).

- 8 Based on this approach, I will evidence the role of a factor that is rarely highlighted in analyses of musicians’ careers: advancing age, from childhood to adulthood². Indeed, it appears that in the trajectories of the rappers I interviewed for this research, age relations play a crucial role in social mobility in that they are liable to reconfigure other social hierarchies, including gender-related ones.

Methodology

- 9 The materials on which this research draws—essentially in-depth biographical interviews, controlled and complemented by documentary data when the artists have left biographical traces (press interviews, recordings, promotional documents, etc.)—will restrict the scope of this paper. The main concern here is these women’s perceptions of their trajectory within a social space that will itself be shaped by their own point of view. This article thus proposes the “alternative” promoted by Daniel Bertaux (1993) in the study of social mobilities, requiring us to retrace “social genealogies” through “life narratives” (Bertaux 1997). This method allows us to reconstruct artists’ careers, not only in the narrower sense commonly used by interviewees (“make a career in rap”), but also in its broader sociological sense of “typical sequences of position, achievement, responsibility [and] the moving perspective in which the person sees his life as a whole and interprets the signification of his various attributes, actions” (Becker 1963: 102). I was thus able to link together the objective and subjective dimensions of careers, but also to identify career turning points occurring before the start of “artistic careers” in their ordinary sense (the beginning of the practice of rap) and after they have come to an end (by looking at the social positions occupied by these women once they have stopped rapping).
- 10 For the purposes of having sufficient hindsight and a “good knowledge of the era and the milieu being discussed” (Peneff 1994: 29), this research draws on biographical interviews with rappers who started performing in the 1990s³. The study was done in two phases. First, I conducted around thirty interviews with both male and female rappers. I got in touch with most of them after having met them as part of an ethnographic observation in venues of the social world of French rap in Paris and Marseille between 2000 and 2004 (Hammou 2012). In the second half of the 2000s, I began complementing this initial corpus by specifically meeting female rappers who were active in the 1990s. The goal at the time was to conduct an in-depth study on the gender inequalities that might explain the marginalization of women on the French rap scene. To do this, it appeared necessary to not only focus on the women who were part of the semi-professional rap circles that I had been doing ethnographic observations on in the early 2000s. In fact, in the 1990s, while women made up roughly a third of rap audiences (Molinero 2009: 14), my inventory of all nationally released rap LPs between 1990 and 2004 puts the proportion of albums made by a woman or by a band including

at least one female rapper at under five per cent. In other words, my concern was to not only look at the artists who had managed to make a name on the rap scene, especially by releasing a record, but also to consider those who were unable or unwilling to move on from “discreet” practice (Perrenoud 2007: 22) to such a relative level of fame. In addition to the rappers whose name I knew from the occasional track on a mixtape, a compilation, or a short-play record (single or EP), I contacted several others as a result of informal exchanges in the rap world between 2005 and 2015, which revealed the existence of rap careers that predated other community or professional commitments in the rap world. I also took advantage of the snowball effect, as some of my interviewees had themselves kept in touch with former female rappers.

- 11 The concept of career is used in this analysis as a tool of objectivization (Darmon 2008). It allows me to systematically compare trajectories that, as they are atypical, are often experienced (and recounted) as exceptional. The first means of distinguishing between the seventeen rappers I interviewed for the purposes of this study, who are referred to here with a fictional first name⁴ to preserve their anonymity, consists in forming two groups: one comprising eight women who had a career of “integrated professional” (Becker 1982) in the rap world and the other comprising nine who did not. A second way of distinguishing them consists in comparing six women who had a long professional career (Sofia, Noémie, Lynda, Sandrine, Delphine, Victoria)⁵, six others who had a semi-professional career⁶, leading them to spend at least a few years in the social world of French rap (Céleste, Émilie, Léa, Jade, Asma, Amina), and yet five others who had an amateur career, without gaining any public fame as a rapper (Faty, Nadia, Marina, Claire, Cathy).⁷
- 12 This article opts for an inductive approach to the tangle of power relations that emerges from the life narratives of the interviewees to evidence the diversity of social logics that inform “the exercise of taste” and the “actualization” (Perrenoud 2007) of the musical proclivities of these female rappers of the 1990s. For the vast majority, however, rap worked as a matrix for the denaturalization of multiple social hierarchies (related to racism, territorial discriminations, class or generation), liable in turn to denaturalize other power relations—starting with gender relations—in the course of careers whose most important landmarks occur from childhood to adulthood.

Feminists in the Cradle?

- 13 Ordinary media narratives depict female rappers as rebels on a mission against the gendered order, who rap to “make a difference”, to radically challenge a purely male world and its machismo. This narrative, which is an extension of the stereotype of the rap world as an inherently and distinctively sexist one (Lesacher 2013), considers the investment of women in rap as evidence of an “advancing gender mix”⁸, and focuses on these women’s relationships to feminism, sometimes pre-emptively assigning them that label. This normative stance comes with the forms of ambivalence that characterize such approaches to knowledge (Passeron & Grignon 1989): those who do not fit the label or act in ways that do not reflect what observers define as “feminism” are stigmatized, like Diam’s in the late phase of her career, during which she publicized her engagement with Muslim religious practice, or those who fall under the category of the “hypersexualized American rapper”, whose behaviour is considered as antithetical to respectable femininity (Djavadzadeh 2017; Dalibert 2018). To avoid this pitfall, I have

opted here for a comprehensive approach that is mindful of the actors' self-definitions and of the stakes of the "local discourses" (Gasquet 2015) that are relevant in their social spaces. I have also been careful not to force the gender issue into the interviews.

- 14 What narratives do the women I have interviewed produce regarding their musical investment in rap? Roughly half of them are bringing up gender as a crucial dimension (often among others), like Claire, who expresses a defiant femininity here:

"My mother always told us [my sisters and I] to never get pushed around. Even less so by a man, sorry. For me being some guy's 'girlie' or whatever was out of the question. And girls were relegated to that rank then, as trophies for men. "But me... Claire? Not even in a dream!" I had to have my own crew, my own thing... It was out of the question for a guy to decide for me, or to play second fiddle to a man." (Claire, amateur⁹)

- 15 This is also the case of Noémie, whose investment in rap was informed by a commitment to a distinctive femininity:

"I was a tomboy. [...] It's my character, too. And I spent more time with my two older brothers, since my sister's ten years older than me so... maybe that was a part of it. When we were kids, we didn't play with dolls. We'd have rock wars, we'd throw rocks at each other's faces... boys' stuff. We played with cars, sometimes we'd go to strange houses, break the walls, run out..." (Noémie, pro)

- 16 This older sister became a counter-example; Noémie judges her harshly: "She's a dumbass. She was good in school, and then she messed up. She got married, had three kids, and then nothing." Whereas Émilie, Jade and Lynda present their investment in rap as a challenge to the role assigned to women (for instance their lack of exposure in the rap world), Noémie, Sofia and Léa, on the other hand, emphasize their rejection of incentives pertaining to femininity, and Claire ties the two together in her retrospective narrative. In both groups, reversed gender dispositions can be found (Mennesson 2004): Sofia, Jade, Émilie, Léa, Marina have practised boxing and played football and/or rugby; Lynda and Noémie describe themselves as "tomboys". In several cases, the interviewees also described a socialization and cultural transmission that are characteristic of the figure of the "missing boy" (Daune-Richard and Marry 1990) in entirely female sibblingships (Émilie, Marina, Claire) or in instances where the only boy does not meet the family's expectations of success (Lynda, Jade) :

"My brother had a bad relationship with my father, who really asked a lot of him. He was really pushing him when it came to football... Like he wanted to make a star out of him, but my brother wasn't into the whole thing, and... as far as school goes, he didn't make it that far; actually, he dropped out in secondary school. Now he's in [a town in the South of France], he's a caretaker." (Jade, semi-pro)

- 17 Still, in a significant number of careers, gender is not a motivation to turn to rap. Céleste for instance describes rap as an answer to the experience of racism and of the stigma of poverty:

"My sister and I grew up in poverty, but my mother was a cleaner in a building of that one sort of fancy neighbourhood, and we were the only Blacks in school, they'd point fingers at us at recess, we had holes in our shoes, you know what I mean? There was a real gap... So as far as I'm concerned, what really felt good when I got into hip-hop culture, is that those were the first people like me, and I was sixteen mind you, that I was able to hang out with. There were West Indians, Africans, things were open wide, especially in terms of identity: 'Wow! Fuck! Finally!'" (Céleste, semi-pro)

- 18 Likewise, for Nadia or Victoria, engagement in rap or hip-hop served as a resource to deal with an experience of minority in contexts of isolation or racism (Madzou & Bacqué 2008: 194-195).
- 19 Additionally, a surprising gap can be observed according to the degree of professionalization in the rap world. Only a third of the women who did not have a long rap career cite gender as a notable dimension of their investment in rap. On the contrary, two thirds of those who had a long career mention it as an important factor. While from an objective (external) standpoint, these women appear to have entered that world in defiance of its lack of mixing, and even perhaps to have subverted the social prohibitions surrounding an activity that is connoted as male, this dimension of a gender-related challenge is not systematically found in the memories of the interviewees, and when it is it takes various forms. This is consistent with the theory formulated by Anne-Marie Daune-Richard and Anne-Marie Devreux in the early 1990s, based on observations of young women in professional training programmes where men make up a vast majority:
- “Some followed paths of socio-professional promotion that were traditional in their milieu, without fully realizing the sexual transgression inherent in being a high-level industrial technician as a girl [...], others, on the opposite, deliberately and knowingly entered in the opposition, and therefore the struggles, that the relation between the sexes constitutes and as part of which access to the occupation of high-level technician in these ‘virile’ streams is a ‘challenge (a term often used by these girls themselves) to the men who work these jobs, but also and at the same time a challenge to the men in their families and an upgrade from the usual fate of women among their relatives, and especially of their mother” (Daune-Richard & Devreux 1992: 22)
- 20 As illustrated by this, comprehending cases of sexual mobility (and any form of social mobility, more broadly speaking) requires combining objective and subjective career experiences, but also looking into several types of power relations to analyse the social attribution of a gender (male, female) to a practice or a social area of activity (Garcia 2015). This in turn here sheds light on the gap between the women who had a short rap career and those who had a longer career.

Things to Say: Rap as a Generational Matrix of Politicization

- 21 The case of the young women studied by Daune-Richard and Devreux also raises questions as to the role of family legacies in the construction of these careers. While many women in male-dominated training courses pursue “paths of socio-professional promotion that are traditional in their milieu” (*ibid.*: 21), how can the engagement of these women in rap be explained? It is, indeed, difficult to argue than rap, a vocal performance specialty that did not exist in France before the late 1980s, constituted a traditional path of professional socio-promotion, i.e., a career inspired by the careers of parents or elder siblings. In a broader sense, it is worth asking whether these female rappers might have invested in rap as a vocal performance job, and in that particular sense in some cases followed in their parents’ footsteps. This is for instance the case of Léa:
- “My mother’s a singer so considering that, it wasn’t difficult to feel like singing ... [...] When [my mother] saw me make music, right away she wanted to dig her claws

into me, she wanted to produce me and all... I told her: 'No, mom, forget it, I'm underground! [laughs]" (Léa, semi-pro)

- 22 Such cases do, however, remain rare. In others, a climate of cultural socialization in the family can be observed (Octobre *et al.* 2010), characterized by a working-class emphasis on the value of literate culture, to which rap is associated as an art and/or a writing practice (Zegnani 2004; Brugière 2018: 146):

"For me, music began... with Saïd M, a guitarist from the projects that everyone in my generation knows. He would pick up his guitar, gather all the neighbourhood kids and make up songs. [...] So I think I've always liked good storytellers thanks to that man and to my brother [her older brother, a rapper], because they truly inspired me. [...] And since my father worked for Hachette, the publisher, I also think that the meaning of words, the taste for language, the taste for paper too... He would bring so many books home. Ancient history, astronomy too... science books... Books all over the place. Even under my bed." (Amina, semi-pro)

- 23 Yet, in Amina's artistic career, another dimension is also significant—a generational effect, i.e., the mark left on a group by "the time and space of [its] socialization" (Fournier 2008: 119). Amina switched from listening to practice by joining the rap group created by her older brother, who is five years older. Likewise, for a majority of the women I met, the opportunity to rap came primarily under the guise of a generational effect.

- 24 Jade also discovered rap through her older brother. Her investment in the genre was more largely informed by sociability between peers:

"After the *Rapattitude* compilation came out [in 1991], I remember that French rap really blew up; I knew the lyrics by heart, everyone listened to it in middle school, that compilation... [...] I loved Sai Sai, 'Les rouleurs à l'heure'. There was... Assassin, 'La formule secrète'. Even the guys in my class knew that one by heart. There was also 'Enfant du ghetto', by Saliha. That was the girls' song actually." (Jade, semi-pro)

- 25 The opposition between the "girls' song" and the rest of the tracks on this eleven-track compilation, with only one number performed by a woman, illustrates the interaction between generation, age and gender at a stage in life when the sexual segregation of leisure activities increases sharply (Moulin 2005: 27). Also, as Jade's middle school was located in a low-income housing neighbourhood of a new town in the greater Paris area, an implicit geographic and ethno-racial dimension comes into play here: the *Rapattitude* compilation, which sold roughly 100,000 copies, was not such a hit to the extent that it made an impression on all French teenagers at the time. Its reception was informed by a process of assignation of rap and rap listening to the "banlieue" (Hammou 2012: 74; 141), and this transpires in the life narratives of my interviewees. Their taste for rap is closely linked to the affirmation of a group of age peers, brought together by a shared time and space of socialization, which may or may not include a gendered dimension (as in the case of Jade) or an ethno-racial one (Celeste). This experience is sometimes presented as visceral and impossible to put into words:

"It was a lightning bolt. It does something to you, because you tell yourself: 'This is us'. There was a sense of urgency about saying something from the gut... We didn't put it into words, of course, when we were fourteen or fifteen, but we felt something big was happening, that looked like us, and that wouldn't go away." (Cathy, amateur)

- 26 In addition to this generational dimension—rap as the "youth music" of the 1990s—most of the interviewees expressed a taste for a practice that they associated with rebellion, hinted at by Cathy's mention of an "urgency about saying something". Many

connected this urge to rise up as a response to racism and territorial discrimination, which they experienced first-hand (for Marina, Sandrine, Delphine, Victoria, Claire) or with friends (for Sofia and Asma):

“Delphine: I was a Jimmy Jay fan, I dug what MC Solaar was doing musically, but I didn’t find the words transcendent. I found more appealing messages in NTM, who were very vocal from the outset. It was so provocative to me, if only the fact that they were called ‘Nique Ta Mère’ [Fuck Your Mother]... Given what we were living through in that society, it was a statement in itself: ‘Okay, so we’re against this society, we’re saying it loud and clear, fuck you’. I found that huge in itself. [...]”

Karim: When you say ‘what we were living through in that society’, at the time, there were things that pissed you off, that hurt you? What kind of things?

Delphine: It was mostly about the banlieue, actually, there was already a lot of stigma being put on the banlieue. I was protected to a large extent in the village [in the greater Paris area] where I lived [until the age of 12], and I had a kind of social shock when I came to [a big city in the same area] [...] For instance, there was a neighbour I would run into on a regular basis, and every time he would see my sister or me, he went ‘Hey darkie!’. On TV too, on the news, I was starting to realize that the banlieues were often singled out, and as I walked around in the banlieues I also saw that there was much more poverty than elsewhere.” (Delphine, pro)

- 27 All but three of the seventeen women I met belong to racialized minorities, but even among the remaining three, a direct experience of discrimination, leading them to reconsider their belonging to the majority ethnic group (Delon 2019b) may have been significant:

“When I started middle school, my parents put me in a Catholic private school. Prayers on Monday and all that. I think they were too harsh, too at odds with my mentality, too... out of step. And you spend the whole day there, mind you, so you’re fed up of everything, I would punch everyone. It was a private school but I didn’t have a dime, super racist, I was called a dirty Portuguese even though I came from public primary school. And that’s when it hit me that the world’s not right. That’s when they made me feel... well, what the Blacks in the projects where I lived felt when they told me about that stuff.” (Marina, amateur)

- 28 The centrality of the theme of rebellion in the narratives of these women illustrates how rap operated for them as a means and a resource of a form of politicization, understood in its broader sense as a process that “emphasizes the existence of a feeling of injustice, and therefore of a denaturalization of the situation, a confrontational worldview and a de-singularization of the cause” (Hamidi 2006; Clech 2016: 160). The practice of rap in the 1990s appears to have been an “emancipatory practice” (Sonnette 2013: 152) in that it carved a legitimate space for the denaturalization of discriminations, and allowed if not demanded the confrontational expression of feelings of injustice.¹⁰

- 29 Noémie, Sofia and Léa also cited the importance of a sense of revolt in their rap practice, but their retrospective accounts have self-depreciating undertones that evidence their current distance from that form of politicization:

“I grew up and I realized I had fewer things to say, too. When I was 15-16, I had so much to say, damn... I would churn out lyrics like *every single day* [she says this in English]. I think it was youth. Today, I’m like: it’s just that I was young, I had things to say, I was living with my mom and dad, they wouldn’t let me style my hair how I liked it, I couldn’t go there, I was angry about everything, I was learning that the world is ugly... [laughs]” (Léa, semi-pro)

- 30 Like Léa, they associate this rebellion with the age of adolescence (this is also the case of Émilie and Marina, who described themselves at that age respectively as “always

angry” and “hypersensitive”). Two interpretations can be advanced according to the status one grants to this retrospective assessment of adolescence by adult women. If we take it literally, we embrace the commonplace view of adolescence as a time of “crisis”, of rebellion and uncertainty. Yet the experience of adolescence can also be historicized (Thiercé 2001), and embedded within age power relations characterized by an adult domination (Bonnardel 2015). This may in turn inform the interpretation of all the other power relations at work.

A Gender Repositioning in Fast-Changing Sexual Hierarchies

- 31 Rappers’ careers, to the extent that I was able to objectivize them using biographical interviewees, depend on three career turning points. These turning points came particularly early for the women I met, especially compared to the careers of the “ordinary musicians” studied by Marc Perrenoud (2007). Also, they came at specific junctures in their life cycles. The first career turn consists in the learning and “exercise of taste” (*ibid.*: 18) for the musical genre. This happens on average around the age of 11.5—between the end of primary school and the start of middle school. For men, it happens on average over a year later—halfway through middle school. The second career turn is the transition from listening to practice (*ibid.*: 22). This happens around the age of 15.5 for girls and 16 for boys—at the beginning of high school. The third career turn is about “playing” (*ibid.*: 93), and consists in a process of publicization of the practice (through local musical scenes, recordings...) and in some cases of professionalization. For the women I met, this happened on average at the age of 17.5, compared to almost 20 for the men.
- 32 At each of these career turns, the standard deviation from the average age is higher for women (ca. 2.5) than for men (1.6). This greater dispersion of the age at which women become interested in rap, transition from listening to practice, and finally from private to public practice suggests that the process is more unpredictable for women than for men—this could be related to the specific obstacles they have to face as women and the unequal means at their disposal to overcome them.
- 33 The transition from childhood to adulthood is characterized by calls for quick social mobility between age classes and processes of age distinction (Zotian 2015: 25). For the female rappers here, this mobility happens even more quickly as the transition from listening to public practice happens on average earlier in childhood, and faster.
- 34 For instance, while Asma’s musical investment in rap had significant implications in terms of class and race (as the daughter of politicized parents with higher education degrees and working intellectual jobs, asserting solidarity with the racialized working-class people she rubbed shoulders with at her primary and middle schools in a big city near Paris), age relations remained crucial to her trajectory:
- “There was also Salt-N-Pepa, ‘Let’s talk about sex’. The first all-girl US band I heard about. Obviously at the time I had no idea about sex, about what having sex was, that wasn’t my deal at all, but I learned my own Frenglish version of the lyrics by heart. [...] I performed it in the playground, last year of primary school. You come into the playground, and you go: ‘let’s [gibberish] baby [gibberish] you and me!’. That was quite something. I didn’t see it like that at the time, right, I wasn’t

thinking: 'Hey, I'm going to impress them...' [But] it was a big deal..." (Asma, semi-pro)

35 Age hierarchies inform the taste for rap and investment in the practice of rap at multiple levels, redefining the form of the other social relations that exist at these stages of the life cycle. The tension between the legacies of parental models and shifts away from these models can be read in this light, as in Léa's trajectory; age relations also play a notable role in the logics of integration within peer groups and distinction from them, as in the aforementioned example of Asma, or of Cathy, who was "pushed" into "this movement that looked like us, that brought something strong to the table" by Malek, a friend from the neighbourhood, when they were around 14; likewise, positionings in sibblingships, for instance for Jade, relate to them. In each case, gender power relations play a prominent part in these transformations.

36 Émilie's constant "anger", for instance, related to the negotiation of a contradictory gender position in two social settings, family and the peer group:

"I really was daddy's girl, and I really liked all the guys' sports. Football, a little bit of rugby... A little bit of boxing... The thing is that my father always wanted to have a little boy. One day he told me. His name is Émile, and he wanted a little Émile Junior, and I came out as a girl, plus I was hiding in the womb until the ninth month so he thought I was a boy. [...] I never associated my father with those guys out there that snubbed me. He was always proud of me, there was always this beautiful thing in his eyes, he never laid a hand on me, whereas outside guys were like: 'OK, enough, I'm going to slap you', that kind of thing, so I would get into a lot of fights with guys because my thing was, 'you're not the boss of me.' So there you go, I was pissed off all the time, actually. For a long time it was like that." (Émilie, semi-pro)

37 After this stage, which extended roughly from childhood to adolescence, during which her gender positioning was primarily constructed in reference to her father's legacy and gaze, advancing in age redefined Émilie's position and aspirations in sexual relations. During the transition between adolescence and adulthood, as for the majority of the women interviewed here, her amateur rap practice intensified, and became increasingly public and professionalized:

"When I was younger, I wore baggy pants, you'd hardly ever see me with a skirt on. And you were definitely not going to see me wearing heels. And then when you have a life, when you start to... learn what it is to love, to experience your sexuality, your body changes, your mindset changes, and you change, and you feel like showing what is making you happy both outside and inside. [...] I used to dig wide baggy pants so much, and even if you wore that, there'd be comments. So, you know, don't come in with a dress and little heels, because that means you're looking to charm people around you, it means you want to be intruder... You more or less start to be afraid of what you are, of who you want to be, you're afraid of hearsay, you're afraid of pressure, you want to be respected in your job, you want to show that you can be like them..." (Émilie, semi-pro)

38 For Émilie, like for the vast majority of the women I met, her rap career led to a gender repositioning. Indeed, regardless of whether their entry into that career connects with gender issues, female rappers have to confront gender assignments "as they go along" (Daune-Richard & Devreux 1992: 22), as they get older. Yet, as the case of Émilie illustrates, this gender repositioning does not play out in a "social space" where gender norms are stable: it is not only sexism and the experience of minority in mostly male groups that lead to such a repositioning, but also the transformation of available social positions and their associated costs, depending on whether one is assigned male or female and on how one negotiates with the heterosexual norm from childhood to

adulthood. Regarding this, the vast majority of the women I met used “gender reflexivity” (Gasquet 2015) to deal with this quick, often imposed mobility, which sometimes results in a degraded social status. For Marina, for instance, the end of mixed-gender musical sociability during adolescence was informed by a combination of gender and class conflicts, and led to her exclusion from the group of friends with whom she rapped:

“I started rap around the age of 13, at the Maison de la musique [a local community centre], with [W. and X., two boys from the neighbourhood who were two years younger than her]. We developed a friendship and we were inseparable for at least a year. [...] And then things changed. [...] You have the first flirts, it’s like they all want to take you out, and when you don’t want to, they’re like: ‘yeah, she’s a huge bitch...’. Total nonsense. [...] The thing is, we were always in our little world, with W. and X., we were in la-la-land. But the others weren’t necessarily! [...] Y. had great dance moves, so I hit it off with him. Same thing with Z., but he had this kind of bully mentality, the mentality... well, this additional pain they must have had inside of them. [...] So one day, Z. came to my place to extort me. He rang the intercom, and he just went: ‘Okay so now you’re going to give me your records’. So I started fighting him, even in his dreams he wasn’t going to get a single microgram of my records. And then, since he ran away from my place... there were rumours, and after that it was over. [...] I was uprooted, actually. When you look at it. Because if not for that fight, if not for Z., I would have gone on hanging out with them, reputation didn’t play into it, I didn’t care about that. But being cut off from them overnight, I had dreams about that for at least two years, about patching things up with W. or X. It hurt a lot.” (Marina, amateur)

- 39 The increasing weight of asymmetrical norms of heterosexual exchanges leads in particular to redefinitions of relationships to seduction. The gendered practices and norms that young girls who rap associate with “seductive femininity” are often first rejected, particularly in working-class circles (Skeggs 1997). This stance changes as girls become older. Léa for instance, tells of how, when she was around 13-14:

“Girls who walked around wearing mini-skirts and all that stuff, I’d give them dirty looks. So ‘Tasse-pé’ [the title of one of her early tracks, which translates roughly as ‘slut’], that stood for the anti-me. To me, girls were sluts... except for my friends! And then I began feeling like wearing low-cut tops, blah blah... And I stopped rapping that song!” (Léa, semi-pro)

- 40 At the same time, lasting in mostly male peer groups requires strategies that have for instance been described by Marie Buscatto (2010) in other musical worlds that consist in “turning off the seduction”. Age mobility reconfigures the hierarchized space of gender positions and in doing so creates particularly complex dilemmas—if not double binds—that lead some girls to give up or to be evicted from their rap careers.
- 41 The combined impact of age and gender relations goes some way towards explaining the paradox that women who stopped rapping early bring up sexism less than their peers who pursued long careers. For those who decide to stop rapping or to stick to amateur practices, interviews relate attempts at “resexing” (Flament 1986) their artistic project as women: Léa turned to singing; Nadia, Cathy and Amina became support personnel in the field of artistic practice. For those who stay, the transformation of the hierarchized space of gender positions leads them to “call into question inegalitarian gender norms” (Aterianus-Owanga 2016: 66) in their relationship to rap and to challenge sexism (Guillard & Sonnette 2020: 51), in cases where these were not already central concerns at the time when they moved from listening to amateur practice. A matrix of politicization and of the cultivation of an agonistic ethos

(Clech 2016), rap offers resources to tackle the question of sexism by drawing on the denaturalization of the social order and the conflictualization of injustice that female rappers associate with their taste for the genre.

Becoming a Businesswoman? Sex, Class and Race in the Face of Artistic Expression

- 42 To assess the objective dimension of these careers, I have classically (Hugrée 2016) opted for an examination of intergenerational professional mobility, attempting whenever possible to distinguish positions compared to the mother and to the father. Indeed, given the androcentrism of social mobility tables, Chaudron (1984) pointed out the importance of considering social trajectories in relation to the mother's position; Octobre *et al.* (2010) have found this to be relevant in their research on cultural transmission.
- 43 Rap as an activity, such as it is understood here based on the careers of women engaged in the social world of French rap, consists in moving from a hobby to a more intensive practice, a "serious leisure" (Stebbins 1992) that may yield symbolic as well as material rewards, and even in some cases, job opportunities. In that sense rappers fall under the "professional music and singing artists"¹¹ category of the French Institute for Statistical Studies Insee, a category that is itself a sub-category of "executives and upper intellectual professions"¹², an overarching category that stands at the top of the socio-professional hierarchy. Beyond this nomenclature, the practice of rap departs from the ordinary economic condition of the contemporary working classes, characterized by low-level, physically or psychologically draining wage work at a set pace and with set hours (Siblot *et al.* 2015: 299), as well as from leisure activities involving "informal and unplanned uses of free time" (*ibid.*: 303). On the contrary, practising rap as an amateur and "learning the trade" (Perrenoud 2007: 96) of rapping requires a form of self-control in the management of time when it comes to leisure (with the need to rehearse, to fulfil commitments made for performances or studio recordings, etc.) and offers great freedom and the lack of a direct, explicit subordinate relationship when it comes to work.
- 44 Eleven of the seventeenth women under study here appear to have surpassed their mother's professional status, whereas only one was downgraded. Six of the same seventeen surpassed their father's professional status; seven others are characterized by stability, but if we consider gender hierarchies, achieving the same socio-professional status as her father can be considered as upward mobility for a woman.¹³
- 45 Yet, none of the rappers or former rappers I met made a lasting living from rap. They may have reached the category of the "executives and upper intellectual professions" as rappers, but only for a few years. Several, on the other hand, successfully pursued professional careers in the areas of cultural and social work where rap was an important if not decisive factor, alongside their education resources¹⁴. I met the seventeen rappers under study over the course of a long period, during the 2000s. I was able to reconnect with all but one to learn about their familial and professional situation in the 2010s, generally at least ten years after the end of their rapping career. In 2016, six worked in social or community work (in socio-cultural work, as director of a cultural or sports association, home economics consultant, etc.). Four were part of the

world of entrepreneurship, as CEO in the field of communication, business finder or sales rep. Another two worked in the worlds of art, as freelance artists outside of rap. One of the women worked in a legal profession. Only three had blue-collar or employee work as their main source of income, combined with an artistic or creative vocation pursued as freelancers, serving as an occasional extra cashflow. Eleven of these women, then aged 30 to 45, had children. In most cases, the birth of their first child coincided with a temporary, years-long (two cases) or permanent (two cases) career interruption for professional rappers¹⁵, a situation almost never experienced by the male rappers I met, which confirms the gender imbalance characterizing parenthood in artistic professions (Ravet 2003; Buscatto 2009; Provansal 2018). How can this ambivalent social mobility be assessed?

- 46 In terms of subjective careers, all the women I met stressed that rap, at least for a period of time, led them experience a professional practice that gave them the opportunity to voice a public, independent expression, without direct hierarchical supervision. This is a singular position, including among professional musical practices, in which women are often perceived primarily as performers of lyrics or music written by men (Prévost-Thomas & Ravet 2007). The norm of undifferentiation between the roles of author and performer that prevailed in 1990s French rap (Pecqueux 2007: 26) changed things in that respect, as in the experience of Victoria, who was a singer in a band before she rapped:

“I was closer to groovy funk music initially. When we started listening to rap, I said: ‘Wait, this is what I want to be doing. Enough of singing...’ [...] It didn’t suit me. In hip-hop, all of a sudden, whether someone is doing the music or not, you’re completely independent. There’s no talk of this person’s lyrics or that person’s music. You’re the one who gets to decide. Because you have your own rhythm, and you’re not... I’m not saying it’s universal, though, it was how our group worked that made it that way” (Victoria, pro)

- 47 Such independence was rarely experienced by the parents of the rappers under study (out of seventeen women, one was the daughter of a senior executive, and another of a singer), who mostly were in subordinate positions as workers (mason, welder, mechanic, skilled labourer, etc.), employees (delivery driver, dishwasher, cook, cleaning staff...), low-level public servants (childcare workers, nursing assistant, nurses, schoolteachers, police officer, prefecture employees, etc.) or mid-level private sector managers (computer engineer, accountant, manager in the event planning sector, site manager)¹⁶. Depending on the professional career pursued after rap, this experience can be presented as an important step within a trajectory of professional and personal self-fulfilment, or as a happy time remembered with some bitterness in a less fulfilling present, particularly for the three women who had to devote themselves to multiple activities, among which an employee position takes up much of their time.

Conclusion

- 48 What role has engagement in rap played in the social mobilities of the women studied in this paper? Despite the complexity of navigating moves within a constantly changing social space, the trajectories of these rappers from childhood to adulthood tends to evidence an upward social mobility, particularly compared to their parents’ generation. None of these women express a sense of downgrading in the course of their trajectory or in reference to their parents. This is all the more noteworthy as comparison between

the women who entered a professional rap career and those who only experienced an amateur career indicates that former did not, on average, fare better than the latter in terms of both objective and subjective social mobility. This means that the relative exposure accumulated within the rap world by women who had a semi-professional or professional career does not translate into more significant social mobility compared to those who did not attract similar exposure and only practised as amateurs. Those in lasting artistic careers sometimes have to contend with at least as much obstacles to social mobility than those who give up on these careers, a fact that tends to be obscured by the most linear analyses of occupational careers (Bennett 2011).

- 49 The analysis of precocious artistic careers like those of these female rappers highlights objective and subjective transformations of the social space over the course of life cycles, and the ways in which the combinations of a variety of power relations redefine the space of possibles. When considered in light of their life narratives, the careers of these 1990s French rappers do not fit the stereotype of rebellious women who turned to rap to subvert its macho status quo. While some of them did commit to a rap career in a challenge of sorts to the men around them, or to stand out from other women, as many of them do not consider their gender position as a notable factor in their taste for rap. Depending on the moment and the individual, the practice of rap has different implications on mobility across multiple social boundaries, which may sometimes consist in subverting assignation to devalued forms of femininity, but also accessing an independent expression-based activity, forging a space of protective sociability and public expression on social, spatial and/or ethno-racial discriminations, negotiating independence from parents but also peers during adolescence, etc. Overall, pursuing a rap career appears as a means of collective affirmation (of an imagined community with shifting outlines, but in which the generational and anti-racist dimensions are important) and of politicization of injustice¹⁷.
- 50 Still, the question of gender hierarchies often emerges in the course of these women's careers, at the intersection between the transformation of the gendered positions available to individuals assigned as women during the transition from adolescence to adulthood and the experience of inequalities in their artistic trajectories or more broadly in their family and work. For those in lasting rap careers, the politicization associated with the practice of rap serves as a resource to denaturalize the gendered order, and to challenge it on a conflictual mode in the rap world and beyond. This dynamic explains why the more these women last in their rap careers, the greater the significance of gender issues in the thematization of their musical engagement.

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NOTES

1. See the introduction to this dossier.
2. Increasingly numerous studies have however been looking into the effects of aging on artistic careers (Cardon 2011; Buscatto 2019).
3. The persons I interviewed, most of whom were born in the 1970s, belong to the same generation as those interviewed by Pauline Clech (2016). The population under study here is however doubly complementary: first, it is an exclusively female population, whereas the "local hip-hop elites" studied by Clech were for the vast majority male; second, I selected this population chiefly on the basis of presence on the recording market and involvement in the national music industry, whereas the practices of "the hip-hop elites in the Red banlieue" were primarily connected to the local socio-cultural and political institutions of Communist Party municipalities in France.
4. Many rappers adopt a first name as a stage name, either their own (Saliha, Youssoupha...), a variation on it (Lino, Sté Strausz...) or a borrowed one (Casey, Booba...).
5. These six rappers combined make up over a third of all women who had a long career in French rap in the 1990s, a total of around fifteen women.
6. Spending time in the social world of French rap without being able to pursue a long artistic career, which is generally synonymous with professionalization in the stronger sense, meaning having a full time paid gig, is being a part of the broad area of "semi-professionalism" that characterizes popular music, in which artists make "sustained investments in commercial networks" but come up against "uncertainty as to whether their professional value will be lasting" (Jouvenet 2007) and about the economic rewards they may accrue.
7. Although I will not expand on this aspect in this paper, the question of the geographical dimension of these careers has been taken into account. The initial study pertained only to the Paris and Marseille areas; in a second step, the scope was expanded to include a broader variety of local scenes (Guillard 2016) where the women I interviewed began rapping, in the urban areas of Paris (10), but also Marseille, Lyon and Lille (7).
8. So far, this remains a fiction. Between 1990 and 2004, only 5% of rap works were by a woman or a group that included a woman; the French rap discography compiled by the website Genius between 2004 and 2017 (<https://genius.com/albums/Rap-francais/Discographie-du-rap-francais>) does not indicate a notable increase in that proportion over the past fifteen years. (There are, however, gender biases on that website). See Karim HAMMOU, "Le Genius n'a pas de sexe", carnet de recherche *Sur un son rap*, 25 January 2019. Online: <https://surunsonrap.hypotheses.org/3869>.

9. Due to the low number of professional female rappers in 1990s France, to ensure anonymity, I refrained from mentioning specific data regarding the interviewees' socio-professional backgrounds, ethno-racial properties, etc. alongside their pseudonyms. These subjects are occasionally addressed in the interviews or synthetically in reference to all interviewees. I merely characterize the interviewees on the basis of their level of professionalization: "pro", "semi-pro" or "amateur".

10. This dimension is only absent from interviews with Faty and Amina, both of whom had short careers. Amina however endorses the idea of a collective generational expression through hip-hop culture, even pointing to it as the reason why she gave up on her own rap career to support hip-hop artists: "We're in a literary country, so we like words, and there were artists whose words were starting to fill the streets. [...] I was telling myself: 'This is going to blow up, no way it doesn't. Urban culture, hip-hop culture, those were struggles, but there was also joy. It was a nice balance. [...] So I ended up telling myself: 'There's all this talent... that's where the future is. And there needs to be people behind them, so let's go!'"

11. Artistes professionnels de la musique et du chant (*NdT*).

12. Cadres et professions intellectuelles supérieures (*NdT*).

13. Among the male rappers I met, five surpassed their father's social status whereas two were downgraded. Ten surpassed their mother's social status and two were downgraded, with an additional seven whose position was similar to their mother's.

14. Half of the women I met hold an undergraduate or higher degree, a proportion that is similar to that observed among women of the same generation in the French population at large (Insee 2019: <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/4797586?sommaire=4928952>). The trajectories of these women are more often characterized by the combination of educational cultural capital and of the "illegitimate cultural capital" (Clech 2016) associated with hip-hop than by a replacement of the former with the latter.

15. The women I met generally stopped their amateur and semi-professional rap careers before the birth of their first child.

16. The social backgrounds and class roots of the 1990s rappers (both male and female) I interviewed are fairly similar to those of the rap artists studied by Fabien Brugière a decade later: "Contrary to common representations of rappers as underprivileged youths from the projects [...] the group investigated here is relatively heterogeneous in terms of social origins" (Brugière 2018: 137), with a mix of working-class and lower-middle-class individuals. They do contrast, however, with the social backgrounds of popular music artists regardless of genre, a third of whom are from privileged classes (Coulangeon 2004: 109).

17. Rap's ability to operate as a matrix of generational politicization may have eroded in the 2000s as it developed and was institutionalized in the cultural industries, and as public discourses on the genre were diversified (Hammou 2012: Chapter 8 and epilogue).

ABSTRACTS

What were the aspirations of women who began a rapping career in 1990s France? Were they looking to make it in a male-dominated world? To leave behind a dominated social position and enjoy an artist's life? To assert the public existence of postcolonial minorities? Based primarily on life narratives, this article analyses the social mobility of female French rappers in the 1990s. It shows the importance of considering both subjective and objective career experiences, as well

as the manifold power relations informing trajectories within a social space whose hierarchies are multidimensional. An often unseen dimension in the analysis of artistic careers, the transformations of social hierarchies from childhood to adulthood, and by extension age relations, are crucial here. At odds with the commonplace assumption that women get into male-dominated rap artist careers to subvert the gender order, this study shows that for a majority of these women, rap works as a generational matrix of politicization in which the experience of territorial and ethno-racial discriminations is key. As they grow older, however, this politicization contributes to denaturalizing new social hierarchies, starting with gender hierarchies. The impact of power relations is notable in both subjective and objective career experiences. Subjectively, the taste for rap and the transition to its practice are part of a politicization of inequalities which is perceived as a "generational" experience, which can be transferred from one type of inequality to the next over the course of a career or retrospectively played down as "teenage revolt". Objectively, age relations redefine gender relations by exacerbating the double bind to which female rappers are confronted throughout their careers, during which the main turning points occur from childhood to adulthood. Still, for most of these women, the practice of rap contributes to an upward social mobility, particularly in comparison to their parents, most of whom are working-class and/or members of racialized minorities, and who have often performed subordinate jobs with demanding working hours.

À quoi aspiraient les femmes qui se sont engagées dans la carrière de rappeuses en France dans les années 1990 ? S'agissait-il de s'imposer dans un milieu dominé par les hommes ? De quitter une condition sociale subordonnée pour profiter de la « vie d'artiste » ? D'affirmer publiquement l'existence de minorités postcoloniales ? En s'appuyant principalement sur des récits de vie, cet article analyse la mobilité sociale vécue par les rappeuses françaises des années 1990. Il montre l'importance d'articuler non seulement versants subjectif et objectif de la carrière, mais aussi les multiples rapports de pouvoir qui configurent les mobilités au sein d'un espace social aux hiérarchies multidimensionnelles. Dimension souvent inaperçue de l'analyse des carrières artistiques, les transformations des hiérarchies sociales de l'enfance à l'âge adulte, et donc les rapports sociaux d'âge, apparaissent ici cruciaux. Contre le lieu commun qui voudrait que les femmes s'engagent dans la carrière faiblement féminisée d'artiste de rap pour y subvertir l'ordre du genre, l'enquête montre que le rap fonctionne, pour une majorité des rappeuses rencontrées, comme une matrice générationnelle de politisation dans laquelle l'expérience des discriminations territoriales et ethnoraciales est déterminante. Au fil de l'avancée en âge, cette politisation contribue cependant à dénaturer de nouvelles hiérarchies sociales – au premier rang desquelles les hiérarchies de genre. L'articulation des rapports sociaux de pouvoir est notable aussi bien sur le versant subjectif que sur le versant objectif des carrières étudiées. Sur le versant subjectif, le goût pour le rap et le passage à sa pratique participent à une politisation des inégalités, vécue comme une expérience « générationnelle » et susceptible d'être transférée d'une logique inégalitaire à une autre au fil de la carrière ou réduite rétrospectivement à une « révolte adolescente ». Sur le versant objectif, les rapports sociaux d'âge redéfinissent les rapports sociaux de sexe, en exacerbent les injonctions contradictoires subies par les rappeuses au fil d'une carrière artistique dont les principaux tournants se jouent dans le passage de l'enfance à l'âge adulte. Néanmoins, pour la plupart des femmes rencontrées, la pratique du rap participe à une mobilité sociale ascendante, notamment en regard de leurs parents, appartenant en majorité aux classes populaires et/ou aux minorités racisées et ayant exercé des métiers souvent subordonnés aux rythmes de travail contraints.

¿Cuáles eran las aspiraciones de las mujeres que iniciaron una carrera como rapera en la Francia de los años 90? ¿Buscaban imponerse en un medio dominado por los hombres? ¿Dejar atrás una condición social subordinada para disfrutar de la "vida de artista"? ¿Afirmar públicamente la existencia de minorías poscoloniales? Basándose principalmente en relatos de vida, este artículo

analiza la movilidad social experimentada por las raperas francesas en los años 90. Muestra la importancia de articular no sólo el lado subjetivo y el lado objetivo de una carrera, sino también las múltiples relaciones de poder que configuran la movilidad dentro de un espacio social con jerarquías multidimensionales. Una dimensión que suele pasar desapercibida en el análisis de las carreras artísticas –las transformaciones de las jerarquías sociales de la infancia a la edad adulta y, por tanto, las relaciones sociales etarias– aquí resultan cruciales. Contrariamente al lugar común que pretende que las mujeres emprenden la carrera débilmente feminizada de artistas de rap para subvertir el orden del género, la investigación muestra que para la mayoría de las raperas entrevistadas el rap funciona como una matriz generacional de politización, en la que la experiencia de las discriminaciones territoriales y étnico-raciales es determinante. Sin embargo, a medida que van haciéndose mayores, esta politización contribuye a desnaturalizar nuevas jerarquías sociales, en primer lugar, las jerarquías de género. La articulación de las relaciones sociales de poder es notable tanto en el lado subjetivo como en el lado objetivo de las carreras estudiadas. En el lado subjetivo, el gusto por el rap y el paso a su práctica contribuyen a una politización de las desigualdades, vivida como una experiencia “generacional” susceptible de ser transferida de una lógica desigualitaria a otra a lo largo de una carrera, o reducida retrospectivamente a una “rebeldía adolescente”. Por el lado objetivo, las relaciones sociales de edad redefinen las relaciones sociales de sexo, exacerbando los mandatos contradictorios que sufren las raperas a lo largo de una carrera artística cuyos principales puntos de inflexión se juegan en la transición de la infancia a la edad adulta. No obstante, para la mayoría de las mujeres que entrevistamos, el rap forma parte de una movilidad social ascendente, sobre todo en comparación con sus padres, que en su mayoría pertenecen a las clases populares y/o a minorías racializadas y han ejercido oficios a menudo subordinados a ritmos de trabajo bajo presión.

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