

When Caribbean Rap is Conjugated in the Feminine

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¹ This is a translation of the original work, written in French: Patricia Victorin. "Quand le Rap Antillais se Conjugue au Féminin." *The Conversation*, 3 November 2024, <https://theconversation.com/quand-le-rap-antillais-se-conjuge-au-feminin-239753>. It was co-authored with Mathilde Lucken, author of the book *Mémoires de femmes*, published in 2023.

Despite numerous obstacles, female Caribbean rappers, currently largely overlooked and little-known, are working to establish themselves in the French-language rap scene, exploring and appropriating the richness of Creole music and language.

The Francophone Caribbean still exists in a state of diglossia: the French and Creole languages each hold a distinct function and status. And if the Creole language has established its place within literature and music, Caribbean rap, especially that produced by women, continues to occupy an extremely marginal position.

Due to its history and geography, the Caribbean is a veritable melting pot of people, language, music and literature, a hotspot of ‘creolisation’, defined by Édouard Glissant as an ‘unpredictable métissage’ (n.p.).²

As women conquer the international rap scene (Segas), female Caribbean artists have begun to experiment with different linguistic combinations in their lyrics: some opt for French or Creole, but others interweave the two or choose Spanish or American English.

For these artists, this is a means of democratising language, while at the same time preserving their Caribbean identity. Symbolically, this resounds with the distinctive nature of rap music, which oscillates between the potentially cryptic and the publicly accessible, the language of protest and of praise.

Far from the literary ‘doudouism’ (Simasotchi-Bronès) that was denounced by Suzanne Césaire as she decreed the ‘death of doudou literature. And to hell with hibiscus, frangipani, and bougainvillea’ (50), Caribbean rappers are following a path of emancipation, with striking lyrical flow and the occasional reintroduction of the saccharine and so-called ‘siwo’, or *syrup*.

² This French-language loanword denotes a form of interracial amalgamation, and is a more neutral variant of the English-language *miscegenation*.

Reversing masculinity and the dominant discourse

Rap is, by its very definition, a sexist genre: to appropriate it as a woman is to reverse the codes of masculinity and the discourses of domination. In the case of Caribbean rap, women can also reclaim certain norms of zouk-love: a form of love song typified by its slow rhythm.

Following feminist thinking, music from female Caribbean rappers offers a counter-discourse. In this regard, mainland France is perceived polysemically as both a place to be conquered by these women who no longer wish to be invisible, and as a power-possessing Babylon; *Babylon* is also the term used by Caribbean youth to refer to the police and the state more generally. All female Caribbean rappers express the desire for recognition, the wish to emerge from the shadows; this is typified by the Martinique-born Méryl, nominated in the category of ‘Female Breakthrough Artist’ at the 2024 ‘Victoires de la Musique’³ awards, who worked as a ghostwriter before writing and singing under her own name.

She addresses several social issues in her songs, among them food poverty and slavery, alongside taboo topics including incest and paedophilia, as in the single ‘ma Petite’⁴ with Rachelle Allison. In the face of deafening silence, they invite children to speak out (‘palé ich mwen’).⁵ The singers’ inclusion of children in the music video at times suggests protective sisterhood, at others a maternal instinct.

In her single ‘Yo fâché’,⁶ rapper La Tchad establishes herself through punchlines and lyrical flow; she evokes a ‘fanm matado’ (female matador)⁷ with her distinctive pink hair and hyperfeminine appearance, the young girl astride her shoulders a metaphor for a female-oriented

³ Literally *Victory of Music*; an annual awards ceremony supported by the French Ministry of Culture.

⁴ Meaning *my little one* in both French and Antillean Creole.

⁵ Literally *speaking my child* in Antillean Creole.

⁶ Meaning *They are angry* in Antillean Creole.

⁷ More generically, this term can also be translated as *fighting woman*. See Thomas.

future.

In ‘Diss men’, La Tchad melds English and Antillean Creole as she settles a score with male domination, gesturing to Guadeloupean women’s refusal to be treated like sex objects. From the hyperfeminine to the erasure of the female/male binary, the above artists embody female-fronted rap in all its diversity.

From the Bimbo to the ‘fanm doubout’⁸

Most of the time, in rap music videos, female bodies are filmed as though they are objects. This is one of the characteristics of the ‘male gaze’, a concept theorised by the filmmaker Laura Mulvey in 1975. In rap music videos, women tend to be confined to a passive role. To oppose the *male gaze*, feminists have developed the notion of a *female gaze*, a ‘perspective that adopts the viewpoint of a female in order to impress their experience’, according to the film critic Iris Brey (as quoted in roadtocinema.paris, n.p.).

The music videos of female rappers are somewhat paradoxical in this regard. Some adopt the symbolism associated with the ‘male gaze’: the female rapper proverbially takes the place of the male, mimicking male dominance. Others, as Célia Sauvage, who holds a doctorate in film studies, acknowledges, are ‘deflections of the hypersexualised image of women, this time not in the service of misogyny but in the service of female empowerment, which redefines the politics of the gaze at (primarily Black) bodies and dominant beauty standards, opposing this to the objectification of the ‘male gaze’” (as quoted in Simon, n.p.).

In Sista Sonny’s music video ‘Rien’,⁹ women dance and twerk, but are not subjected to the male gaze: they occupy the centre of the screen. Buttocks play a central role as an object of desire, but also act as emblems of female protest against domination. Ultimately, certain corporeal metonymies (‘pussy’ and ‘buttocks’) become the heralds of female desire

⁸ An Antillean Creole term denoting a woman of questionable morals.

⁹ Meaning *Nothing* in both French and Antillean Creole.

and pleasure (Schwentzel).

In the music video for Maureen's song 'Tic', which accompanied the Mugler Spring/Summer 2021 runway show, women achieve emancipation through dance. Far from objectifying the women, the artist argues that it is a means of 'liberation, of being yourself, of feeling good' (Maureen, as quoted in Gassion). Women control and reclaim their image, commanders of their sexuality, at the centre of attention. They become self-aware and self-reliant; we may speak of emancipation and female empowerment in this reinvention of the 'fanm matado' and 'fanm doubout' tropes (Thomas).

The intersection of linguistic influence and confluence

The very use of Creole, side-by-side with French and other languages, emphasises the emancipatory aspect of a musical genre which seeks its place in the French and Francophone, but also American, rap scene, through a form of reinvention of aesthetic and linguistic norms.

Caribbean rap from female artists succeeds in 'establishing a space in which the disparate may come together, where culture shocks, disharmony, disorder and interference become sites of creation', to repurpose Glissant's formulations (as quoted in Joignot n.p.) in the context of creolisation in music.

In this confluence of influences which melds zouk with reggaeton, R'n'B, hip-hop, and Jamaican denbow, we may also detect an alliance of the Caribbean's north and south. The influence of the prototypically Caribbean bouyon soca, a fusion of Dominican bouyan music and soca music from Trinidad and Tobago, should also not be forgotten. Then there is shatta, a genre originating in Martinique's Volga-Plage district in Fort-de-France. The rapper Cindy Stawz, who hails from Guadeloupe, blends rap with gospel and soul in a seamless whole that transgresses generic and linguistic boundaries.

Édouard Glissant's 'Transforming continuously without getting lost' (Joignot, n.p.)

For the aforementioned rappers, there is also the issue of reclaiming the

well-known zouk-love style – its rhythmic slowness, its commonplaces, its saccharine romantic lyrics – and simultaneously putting an end to doudouism and the illusion of the submissive female.

In this regard, due to its very popularity, the sub-genre serves as an ideal means through which to reflect upon the renewed inclusion of romantic language in rap songs. In the single ‘Fwisoné’,¹⁰ by T-Stone ft. La Rose, the duo blends the aesthetics of zouk-love and of rap, incorporating romanticised lyrics and expressions of desire. The duet is reminiscent of Jocelyn Beroard and Philippe Lavil’s ‘Kolé séré’,¹¹ which intertwines the French and Creole languages.

The singer Méryl pays tribute to Jocelyn Beroard, a female figurehead from the band Kassav’, in a remix influenced by 1980s American rap, titled ‘Siwo’.¹² At issue is restoring the prestige of zouk – ‘the king without a crown’ (Désirée n.p.) – and updating through transformation the music which served as a lullaby soundtrack to, if not the childhoods of today’s female rappers, at least those of their parents’ generation.

In the music video for ‘ZABOKA x FANM STAB RMX’, featuring Shannon x Dj Tutuss, the rapper Maurane Voyer proclaims the colour pink to be the female signature. Once a colour associated with little girls or submissive women, it is revived to become a symbol of feminist empowerment.

Female-fronted Caribbean rap, or Babel reinvented

Creole is both a language of emancipation and of crossing, which has established itself even within serious and high-brow literature. Caribbean rap reconnects the language with the so-called ‘night speech’ once performed by the oral storyteller, who, having assembled their

¹⁰ Meaning *Chill* in Antillean Creole.

¹¹ Deriving from the French verbs *coller* and *serrer*, this Antillean Creole title roughly translates to *stick* (i.e. adhere) and *hug*.

¹² Meaning *syrup* in Antillean Creole.

audience, would pay little heed to the perceived proper use of language, and would instead entice listeners with their linguistic virtuosity, their flow. The Creole used in rap music is a language freed from constraints, a ‘mosaic’ language that welcomes other languages and fuses them together. In ‘Dembow Martinica’,¹³ Méryl’s linguistic mosaic results in an amalgam of Martinican Creole, French, English, and South American Spanish: a Babel, revisited.

Altogether, these female artists excel at promoting Creole as a colloquial language, lingua franca, and mother tongue (Llewellyn). More vibrant than ever, the language demonstrates its capacity for renewal as it is updated in the context of rap music, reconfiguring itself from mother tongue to the new language of sisterly solidarity, much as with French dialects in the face of Latin, a language associated with knowledge and power.

Translation Commentary

The above article originally appeared in the French-language edition of *The Conversation*, a website founded in Australia in 2010 that specialises in publishing articles blending reportage and academic research, a form which has been termed ‘exploratory journalism’ (Riedlinger). The piece was subsequently republished by a variety of outlets, among them France’s *Yonne Lautre* and *OnePlanète*, and the Canadian webzine *Tolerance* – testament both to the article’s timeliness and its international appeal.

Stylistically, the article’s origins are subtly apparent in several ways. For instance, the article’s initial, italicised paragraph – which originally appeared in emboldened font – could be classified either as an abstract (likely by those in academic circles) or as a lead paragraph (vis-à-vis journalistic conventions). Perhaps even more notable typographically is the consistent use of microparagraphing, with some of the article’s paragraphs as short as a single sentence. The overall result

¹³ Loosely meaning *dembow*, *Martinique-style*.

is almost telegraphic. In an era in which short-form social media content predominates, this helps to maintain momentum, alongside visually splitting the copy to better underscore key points of interest. Overall, there is little of the explication and argumentation that would be expected of traditional academic writing: instead there is a more directly, aptly conversational, presentation of facts. Occasionally, this may cause the article to appear somewhat disjointed, as with the final sentence of the antepenultimate paragraph which refers to the rapper Cindy Stawz. Only tangentially related to the paragraph's preceding sentences, it figures as something akin to a conversational non-sequitur. The article's comparatively informal tone is also encapsulated by the use of non-standard, sentence-initial conjunctions ('And if the Creole language has established its place within literature and music') and free-flowing, paratactic constructions ('Women control and reclaim their image, commanders of their sexuality, at the centre of attention').

Each of these elements I have sought to maintain in the article's English-language translation. Nonetheless, by the very nature of translation, some aspects of the original article have been altered, for one or often a combination of reasons: geographical, grammatical, political, social, or simply stylistic. For instance, the reference to 'l'Hexagon' in the original article, a colloquial term alluding to the physical shape of the French nation, has been rendered as 'mainland France' in my English language translation – more prosaic, perhaps, but also transparent and universally neutral. Indeed, the amendments I have made frequently align with what are commonly known as 'translation universals' (Pillière); following Baker, these can be classified as 'features which typically occur in translated text[s]' and are 'a product of constraints which are inherent in the translation process' (243, 246), comprising a) explicitation; b) simplification; c) normalisation, also known as conservatism; and d) levelling out. While the potentially essentialising notion of 'universals' has proved problematic for some, and is far from uncontroversial (for a good overview, see Mauranen and Kujamäki), I have found that the typology effectively captures the diversity of linguistic strategies I employed in translating Victorin and Lucken's

article from French to English. At times, the simplification was undesired yet unavoidable, as with the phrase ‘la femme soumise se pi(g)mente’. The French original riffs upon the orthographical overlap between the term *piment* (pepper) and *pigmente* (colour) – wordplay obscured by its English-language translation. Elsewhere, I have attempted to atone for this loss of linguistic playfulness in translating *rejoue*, a verb with several synonymous meanings, as ‘resounds’, an acknowledgement of the article’s focus upon the music industry. Intriguingly, despite the article’s focus upon greater gender-based representation and inclusivity, the generic masculine is still employed in its penultimate paragraph (see, e.g., ‘son flow’); this I have translated using the gender-neutral pronoun *their* in an instance of normalisation. Relatedly, I have chosen to capitalise my translation of the adjective *noir* where it relates to discussions of ethnicity, believing this to best reflect the article’s ethos of inclusivity, whilst also following guidelines adhered to by prominent Anglophone publications (e.g. Froke et al.). This is a graphological consideration not pertinent to a Francophone context, given that even proper adjectives in the French language are lowercase. A further difference between the English and French languages is the latter’s standard usage of gendered nouns, as captured by the inclusion of the term *maîtresses* in the original article. A direct English translation – as *mistresses* – proved problematic, given the word’s sexual connotations, whilst I felt the (generic) masculine equivalent, *masters*, too at odds with the article’s focus upon female empowerment in a traditionally male-dominated industry, and the consequent usurpation of dominant discourses. For this reason, I selected instead the gender-neutral noun *commanders*, believing its military undertones an additional boon as complement to later discussions of the so-called ‘fanm doubout’, or fighting woman. Lastly, the conversion of the colloquialism ‘le frigo vide’ to ‘food poverty’ typifies the strategy of levelling out; literally meaning *the empty fridge*, the expression is something of a set phrase, akin to (British) English acknowledgements of ‘the cost-of-living crisis’ or, more informally, ‘cozzie livs’.

Throughout the article, where the titles of songs or excerpts of their lyrics are in a language other than English, the original has been retained. This linguistic form tallies with the content of the article,

following its reflection upon the political significance of particular language choices in various contexts. Additionally, often these titles and lyrics possess distinct cultural resonances that would be flattened in direct translation; additional context in this regard has been provided through footnotes, a more formalised instance of explication. Finally, and perhaps more prosaically, retaining the tracks' original titles renders them more easily searchable – should the reader be interested, in the future, in listening to these exemplary instances of Caribbean rap, conjugated in the feminine.

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