

Producing Hip-Hop Culture and Identity

How a Youth Recording Studio Supports Well-Being

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Abstract *Montreal, Canada, is a vibrant multicultural and multilingual city, within which, unfortunately, racialized youth grapple with discrimination and marginalization, shaped by a confluence of institutional, cultural, and political forces. However, the dynamic realm of hip-hop culture provides a transformative avenue for emerging artists, offering alternative spaces of belonging. In this chapter, we build on previous scholarship on hip hop as a site of social and cultural redefinition for marginalized identities. Our study explores how music creation and community-building at a recording studio can foster youth well-being. Located in a free after-school youth center, the studio supports well-being through the development of community, critical perspectives, self-expression, and performative hip-hop identities. We argue that this positive hip-hop identity is anti-essentialist and that it challenges reductive and exclusionary models of Quebec identity and belonging. Our methods are ethnographic, including participant observation and interviews with nine youths aged 18 to 21.*

In August 2022, the Réseau express métropolitain (REM), an electric train network under development in Montreal, posted to their TikTok account a freestyle created by rapper Maky Lavender commissioned to promote the new transit option. The video was widely criticized and then deleted due to criticisms that Lavender, a Black bilingual MC, rapped only in English. The Quebec government agency in charge of the REM had hired Lavender to perform as part of a publicity campaign a year prior and recorded this freestyle at that time. The agency explained that

they removed the post because “the video did not meet their publication criteria on sharing information regarding the electric train” (Leavitt 2022), despite them having the English language video for a year. While the REM sought out Lavender for his coolness and credibility among youth, they gave him no instructions, abandoned him and the project as soon as there were concerns raised, and asked him to stay quiet: “It was so easy for them to pull the plug. It was so easy for them to be like, ‘yeah we’ll just take it off—don’t talk to the press’” (Kassam and Caruso-Moro 2022). This event speaks to anti-English language politics in the province as well as attitudes towards rappers, and particularly Black men, as expendable.

These politics and attitudes shape the lived context of the youth in our study, who all attend NBS Studio (NoBadSound Studio), a free-access community recording studio. The studio is housed in Chalet Kent, a not-for-profit community center for youths aged 11 to 18, located in a very culturally diverse neighborhood of Montreal. Chalet Kent describes itself as being “dedicated to inspire and empower youth through various projects and programs and allow for young people to build meaningful relations, engage in critical thinking, and (re)imagine more sustainable futures” (Chalet Kent, n.d.). Many of the youth who make music at NBS are deeply invested in hip-hop culture. The quality of NBS Studio’s facilities and equipment, combined with the director’s musical and interpersonal skills and profound commitment to empowering youth, have made this free-access studio a focal point for emerging artists in the Montreal hip-hop community. Here, youth create and record music and can develop positive identities grounded in hip-hop culture.

In this chapter, we first set the stage for our ethnographic inquiry by describing the political and cultural context in Quebec, including its hip-hop history, as well as some literature on hip hop, youth and well-being, and the hip-hop alter-ego. We then describe our study of nine young people who attend NBS Studio and explore how music making there can support well-being through the development of community, critical perspectives, self-expression, and performative youth identities. Youth can counter and challenge negative discourses about racialized and immigrant adolescents in Quebec by exploring and celebrating these other-

wise marginalized identities in the spaces, both physical and digital, of the studio and international hip-hop culture.

The Politics of Belonging in Quebec

Identities in Quebec

Members of our research team have previously described the dominant model of belonging in the province in terms of “Québécoisité,” in which

two intersecting continua, sight, and sound... are the most important elements: having or not Whiteness is the first fact to be noted about any newly encountered individual in Quebec. The other, unseen but clearly heard, element that goes to make up Québécoisité in our theoretical framework is language: specifically, speakers in Quebec being perceived as having or not having the ‘right’ kind of French. (Sarkar, Low, and Winer 2007: 357)

These elements are legacies of Quebec’s history. After the Treaty of Paris in 1763, French elite settlers left New France and English-speaking settler elites took control of the economy being built upon indigenous territories, eventually forming the nation-state of Canada (Bouchard 2012:14–15). French settlers lived mainly along the St. Lawrence River and continued to be part of the colonial project, testified by French toponyms across North America (Bouchard and Lévesque 2014). At the same time, they were marginalized based on economic, social, and political factors; however, their social status was in no way comparable to that of indigenous peoples facing the first stages of genocide (Austin 2010: 19) and Black peoples oppressed by chattel slavery, segregation, and other manifestations of antiblackness (Howard 2020: 128). In the 1960s, during the Quiet Revolution, a cultural upheaval which saw the rise of secularism and heightened social and economic development, the population of what is called “old stock” Quebecers, who are White, francophone, and (sometimes only culturally) Catholic, became the eco-

conomic, political as well as cultural dominant group. This dominance has been maintained in part by exclusive discourses, policies, and practices which can serve to separate “us” from “them.” For instance, some political parties and media instrumentalize fears of the disappearance of the “old stock” francophone population in light of immigration and population growth, mobilizing language and identity politics for political gain.

For example, in the Fall 2022 provincial political campaign, the incumbent (and now re-elected) premier François Legault indicated that accepting more than 50,000 immigrants a year would be “a bit suicidal” until “we have stopped the decline of French.” A week later the then immigration and labor minister Jean Boulet said, “80 percent of immigrants go to Montreal, don’t work, don’t speak French or don’t adhere to the values of Quebec society” (Nerestant 2022).¹ Language and identity politics also shape recent pieces of legislation restricting the wearing of religious symbols in the public sector, including for teachers, with negative consequences for Muslim women and others (Low et al. 2021), and restricting access to English language services in the public sector (including health care, the courts, and college education) and business. Fighting discrimination is complicated by the fact that the premier does not recognize systemic racism in the province (Banerjee 2020).

This brief socio-historical description highlights aspects of the sometimes-hostile climate facing racialized and indigenous peoples in Quebec, as well as those who immigrate to the province, including many members of the Quebec hip-hop scene (particularly those based in Montreal, the largest city).

1 While the premier criticized these remarks and said that Boulet, the minister in question, would be removed from this position if his party were re-elected, Boulet had been in the position for almost a year and was re-elected in his riding.

Hip-Hop Histories in Quebec

Hip-hop culture started to appear in Quebec towards the end of the 1970s (Lamort 2017: 11). The history of hip hop in Quebec is marked by the appearance and development of networks on the fringes of conventional circuits. As performance scholar Annette Saddik reminds us, hip hop must be understood in relation to a continuity of Afro-American forms of performative expression in constant renewal (2003: 120), including Caribbean, Latin, and African traditions. Hip hop was introduced to Quebec through cultural exchanges between the Caribbean and Afro-American diasporas of Montreal and New York, and this, from the beginning of the emergence of the hip-hop movement in the late 1970s (Low, Sarkar, and Winer 2009: 66). During the 1990s, hip hop started becoming more popular in Quebec's francophone music scene while remaining very close to, and sometimes imitating, what was popular in France (Fortin, Lasse, and Roy 2007; Desfossés 2020). At the end of the decade, a paradigm shift started to occur when rap artists in Quebec stopped imitating the French rap artist accent, and began to use their own local slang, expressions, and prosody in their songs (Sakar and Winer 2006: 176; Lesacher 2012). These developments paved the way to more fluidity, freedom, and variety in language use after the turn of the millennium.

Since the 2010s, hip hop has been on the rise and undergoing new transformations in Quebec. While some speak of “post-rap” (Pagliarulo-Beauchemin 2016), the term “Rap Québécois” or “Rap Keb” is beginning to be used to designate the hip-hop scene in Quebec (Arbour-Masse 2017). The controversy over *Franglais*—French infused with words borrowed from English—in Quebec hip hop (Savard Moran 2019; White 2019) has brought attention to hip-hop culture in the mainstream media landscape.² However, not all artists benefit from the same recognition; as

2 In an interview by Renaud, Laniel-Tremblay explains, “this controversy addressing the state of French in Quebec was rather a way of circumventing terms which may be even more controversial, but which are nevertheless necessary to name in this context—for example the influence of the racialized

scholar Néméh-Nombré has argued, the hip-hop artists receiving the most media attention are French-speaking White men (2018: 39–44). Racialized artists also get less support from institutions (media, festivals, funding) and may sometimes be subject to police surveillance (Arbour-Masse 2018). We should also keep in mind that hip hop holds high cultural prestige, a rare domain in which young, racialized people's identities are valued, positioning them as trendsetters (Fortin 2006; Kitwana 2005). Yet, throughout hip-hop history in Quebec, accounts of hypervisibility and erasure illustrate the difficulties of addressing the presence of racialized people in the public space (Ferah 2019; Néméh-Nombré 2018: 39–44).

Previous research from our team members on the hip-hop scene in Quebec has analyzed how some in the community challenge dominant language and identity politics through richly diverse membership and practices, including multilingual code-switching or “translanguaging” in their lyrics (Low and Sarkar 2014; Sarkar 2009). We have examined the ways this “parler hip hop” challenges Quebec official monolingual language policies and Québécoisité as a model of belonging. We argue that the Montreal hip-hop community creates its own language and identity standards from the bottom-up, a kind of resistance vernacular that reflects the ways language is lived in very diverse neighborhoods. A rich literature exists on the hip-hop community in Quebec (White 2019; Lesacher 2014) with a focus on youth (Atséna Abogo 2019; Leblanc et al 2016; Laabidi 2012). Less has been researched on the spaces (in as well as out of school) that nurture and support the Montreal hip-hop community and its particular linguistic and cultural practices; this chapter extends our recent study that seeks to fill this gap (Laniel-Tremblay and Low 2022). In the literature from outside Quebec on nonformal hip-hop

communities [on the evolution of the spoken language] which brings new vocabulary and speech practices in the public space” (Renaud 2021, translation by Laniel-Tremblay). The case of Franglais in hip hop highlights how languages are often instrumentalized in Quebec to talk indirectly about races and identities.

programs, Dimitriadis' (2009) multi-year study of a hip-hop-based program in a youth center in the United States explored its impact on youth identities and community building. More recently Levy et al. (2021: 221–222) conducted a study in a community center with children aged 8 to 11 participating in a hip-hop and spoken word therapy program. The results highlighted gains in self-confidence, the ability to express difficult topics, and improvement of a sense of a community.

While hip hop includes four well known elements (Mcing, Djing, break dancing, and graffiti), to which some add knowledge as the fifth (Alim 2009: 2; Laabidi 2006: 168), NBS Studio focuses on music production and personal growth, including knowledge of self.

Hip Hop and Youth Well-Being

In contexts with a glaring lack of mental health resources, hip-hop music-making and listening can be important outlets and supports (Harper and Jackson 2018: 114; Heath and Arroyo 2014: 31–38; Chang 2005). The central art forms of hip-hop culture—rap lyric writing, deejaying, dancing, and beatmaking—have been gaining traction in wellness-focused settings for their abilities to engage young people in the process of actively working through life challenges (Elligan 2000) as culturally sustaining forms of expression, self-knowledge, and community-building (Paris and Alim 2017). For these reasons, scholars have developed a literature connecting hip hop and mental health. This corpus opens the door to rethinking and adapting therapeutic practices (Hadley and Yancy 2012). For instance, hip hop therapy relies on “the deliberate integration of elements of hip-hop culture into a therapeutic context to achieve a cathartic state that contributes to psychosocial development” (Alvarez 2012: 122). Similarly, scholar Raphael Travis says that “hip-hop empowerment strategies suggest that deliberate and purposeful engagement in musical experiences (and other empowering aspects of hip-hop culture) help the evocation, modulation, or termination of emotions, and subsequently promote health development through the cascading and reinforcing aspects of development” (2016: 128–131).

Key to hip hop's therapeutic value is rap lyric writing. The exercise of putting feelings, emotions, thoughts, and aspirations to paper is a core principle of rap and can be extremely positive and beneficial for the development of the participants (Levy, Cook, and Emdin 2018: 2–6). As Low (2011: 118) reminds us, the centrality of language and poetry, speech and words, in hip hop is embodied in the acronym rap (rhythm and poetry). Exploring the emotional impact of writing lyrics, social behavioral scientists Lepore and Smyth (2002) demonstrate how writing can reduce health risks by promoting socio-cognitive and socio-emotional development. Nevertheless, post-colonial literature scholar Sara Grewal reminds us not to overlook orality, since “the dynamism, physicality, and embodiment, and contingency and ephemerality of rap as a performed, oral/aural genre are, I argue, essential to the ‘street’ aspects of its epistemology” (2020: 80).

Beat making also offers a highly engaging intervention approach because “near-instant gratification in the form of aural and visual feedback ... means rapport can be rapidly developed in a fun and interactive way (Travis et al.: 749). Music production offers another appealing mode of self-expression (ibid.: 744), facilitated by recent efforts to democratize and decolonize production software (Nast 2001), improvements of open-source production software, and the general accessibility of quality production equipment.

The complexity of rap and hip hop's view of the construction of knowledge and its dissemination aims to highlight the plurality of experiences regarding self-expression within hip-hop culture, which talks back to different narratives on the evolution of hip-hop epistemology (Desfossés 2020; Marsh and Campbell 2020; Lamort 2017; Campbell 2014: 271). It is then not surprising to have seen the presence of hip-hop culture in school settings over the past decades (Crooke, Comte, and Almeida 2020: 19), as well as community center programs (Dimitriadis 2009). Dimitriadis explored how through hip hop, “contemporary youth are increasingly fashioning notions of self and community outside of school in ways educators have largely ignored” (2009: xi). These notions of self and community are often accompanied by political awareness, acting as a kind of counter to school: “rap, as I will show, proliferates in

such sites, serving as a kind of alternative curriculum through which often intensely disaffected young people have produced and maintained notions of community, history, and self” (ibid.: 34). Similarly, Ladson-Billings (2015) points to the relevance of hip-hop-based programs for educating racialized youth because they offer the possibility of experiences outside, and sometimes challenge, Eurocentric music.

Playing with Identity through the Hip-Hop Alter-Ego

One aspect of hip-hop identities is the persona or alter-ego (Bradley 2018). In our research on youth well-being at NBS Studio, we became interested in the role the persona could play in fostering well-being.

The persona is not unique to hip hop. Popular music theorist Mickey Hess describes how as with “David Bowie performing as Ziggy Stardust or Garth Brooks performing as Chris Gaines, certain hip-hop acts perform a second artist persona. This phenomenon can take shape, through costumes, playfully evasive lyrics, and samples, as resistance to the material conditions of the musician” (2006: 298). According to music journalist Brent Bradley, these choices enable artistic freedom:

The ability to recreate ourselves through the simplicity of adopting another persona allows us to explore areas of our personality that might not jive with what our peers would normally expect from us, so it makes sense why so many artists adopt alter-egos at various points in their careers. An alter-ego can work as a reset button on the expectations an artist carries, as well as serving as a fresh canvas for artistic freedom. (2018)

Creating a character offers the possibility of producing a distance from oneself allowing experimentation, imaginativeness, and vulnerability to interact from new angles. The alter-ego can become a tool by which the artist can explore their desires and create alternate realities. It can also involve choosing which facets of their identity to put forward, amplify, and share, and which not (Hess 2006: 298). This practice has been very

widespread since the beginning of the movement for both MCs and producers and allows artists to explore different registers and themes (Williams and Stroud 2013: 19).

One of the most common strategies to shape an alter-ego is the “ego trip,” which describes a “posture of the rapper praising his own qualities and performances” (Journet 2012). The ego trip is an example of hip-hop “braggadocio” (Williams and Stroud 2013: 19), a type of boastful behavior that glorifies the speaker and positions them as the best (Exantus 2022: 117; Fofana 2012). The ego trip can be traced back to rap battle culture and “comes from the fact that rap, nowadays, has become very competitive. Between clashes, battles, concerts, and other concepts, the rapper then finds himself obliged to promote himself” (Culturap 2021). In short, the ego trip is a technique of self-expression combining exaggeration and boasting, but also the possibility of dreaming; as such it opens the door to reinventing oneself. In this way, the ego trip can be a powerful technique to boost self-esteem and confidence and shows how artistic freedom can be transformative.

Studying NBS, Hip Hop, and Youth Well-Being

During Winter 2019, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted in French, English, or both, with nine participants from the NBS Studio aged 18 to 21. The sample was composed of six men and three women with origins from Chile, the Dominican Republic, France, Haiti, Lebanon, Madagascar, the Philippines, Senegal, and Vietnam. Five of them were born outside Canada, and all participants had moved at one point in their lives. They also all grew up in multilingual households, using a combination of their parents’ native language and French and/or English. On NBS’s website, the studio ethos is described as “an inclusive, safe space for young artists to grow their musical abilities and expand their knowledge of studio recording. We take a hands-on, practical approach to teaching youth about music production, recording, mixing, performance and writing songs” (NBS 2022). The youth center is mainly frequented by young people from the surrounding neighborhoods, but

NBS study participants also lived in each of the four major suburban regions outside the island of Montreal; that some are travelling up to ninety minutes by public transport to get to the studio is an indicator of NBS's popularity. The dedication of Jai Nitai Lotus, the studio coordinator and mentor, and of the youth mentors is worth highlighting when describing why the studio is so appreciated.

Our interviews with these youth indicated that going to the studio supports their well-being, alongside developing music creation and production skills. Support for well-being is grounded in four elements: community, criticality, self-expression, and performative identities.

1) Finding Community

To start, here is a participant describing an example of some alienation experienced in Quebec, but also in her family's country of origin:

I cannot define a place where I can call home, because I feel different no matter where I go. Like when I'm here it's like you're not a Canadian Québécois because you're not pale. When I go to [country of family origin in Africa], well it's like I'm too pale to be from the place, and then I get dressed differently, I speak differently so that there is not really a place where I feel I belong." (Danielle, Laniel-Tremblay's translation)

This is an expression of not feeling at home in any national context, while the comments about skin color and language are a reminder of the ways race and language shape belonging and discrimination.

For youth involved in the study, their deep engagement with hip-hop culture is key to finding a place where they feel comfortable. The studio becomes an incubator for community connection. One participant explained, "Hip hop helped me get into a community, that's for sure. I started meeting more rappers and more people who share the same vision as me. I thought I was the only one, but in fact there are many who share the same vision as me about music" (Laniel-Tremblay's translation). Because hip-hop culture needs to be understood within the con-

text of the Global Hip-Hop Nation³—and for many of the youth here, rap from France is a more important influence than rap from the US—connecting to hip hop allows the participants to recontextualize their identities, making links with communities outside Québec or abroad. For instance, the studio took part in the PHI_portal, a cross-border participatory installation at the multimedia center and gallery Phi Center in Montreal where artists were “invited to listening sessions with young artists from other cities, such as Milwaukee and Mexico City” (Lipset 2021). To a certain extent, the Global Hip-Hop Nation which materialized at NBS Studio represents an alternative to Quebec identity’s narrative: first, by offering a place where their identities are not othered, and second by building bridges between members of the community and promoting their identities with a view to creating solidarities.

2) A Critical Voice and Self-Reflection

The participants all have different life trajectories, however, hip hop offers them a framework through which they can express and channel emotions and feelings. Ibrahimia explains that “[Music] opened my mind, it allowed me to mentally move forward in life thinking like, yeah, you’re not a kid anymore, and like when I was writing stuff and everything, I read it again and then I said to myself, like you know in real life, maybe you act this way, but you shouldn’t.”

This passage demonstrates how music and writing can become tools that enable people to reflect on their behaviors and promote personal thought processes. Ibrahimia is also a Cégep⁴ psychology student which gives him a different perspective on the relationship between music and the psyche. Along with Adjapong and Levy (2021: 6–10) and Travis et al. (2019), he concludes that “music is also a therapy.” Another example re-

3 Alim (2009: 3) defines this concept as “a multilingual, multiethnic ‘nation’ with an international reach, a fluid capacity to cross borders, and a reluctance to adhere to the geopolitical givens of the present.”

4 A college with pre-university and technical programs.

lated to the education field involves Jackson, who confides having improved his vocabulary and his writing thanks to his practice of rap:

Now that I'm forcing myself not to... curse in my words, curse in my lyrics. It's a lot, it's a lot harder and it challenges my brain to be like okay, well hey, ok, you need to find another word that replaces that. Or you have to find another word that replaces that. That actually helps me with my vocabulary. So when I'm doing an English essay at school, I write super naturally and I write like sophisticated words.

By devoting themselves more to writing through hip hop, participants became more receptive to the power and impact of words, resulting in cognitive and political insights matched by a desire to surpass oneself.

Nick summarizes the powerful influence of hip hop when saying, "Hip hop taught me a lot of things about philosophy, how to deal with the world. You know, even if the music is not deep, the process behind it is, like the time spent in the studio, how to like help each other all the time."

Engaging with hip-hop culture provokes reflections on how social structures reproducing racial, economic, and social discrimination are affecting them:

We are not little idiots. We don't make music just to promote bad stuff you know. We talk about it because, me of course, well I don't talk for myself because you know I have a good life, thank god...They [hip-hop artists] will talk, "Yeah I have dealt this I dealt that," after that you [the audience] it's up to you to make sure, by listening, to tell yourself, "ah shit these people they lived, they lived a nightmare and why not try to improve the situation of future generations." (Ibrahima)

Ibrahima reveals how through hip hop he makes connections with his life experiences and those discussed in artists' pieces. This process of self-reflection counters common concerns about the negative influence of hip hop's complex politics of representation, including violence, sexism, and consumerism, by depicting how people show discernment when analyz-

ing rap. Precisely, this participant explains, why writing can be one of the last spaces of freedom and can raise awareness (Harper and Jackson 2018; Chang 2015). Ibrahima further explains how hip hop can give a voice to excluded people or communities such as “people who have a life that is a hassle, for example in *HLM* [*Habitation à loyer modéré*, meaning subsidized housing] in France, or in the ghettos of Harlem in the States, these people in their music claim their lives.” Building on that, Nick declares that “society could learn about... open-mindedness because in hip hop there is a lot, a lot of open-mindedness. That, we accept everything, it’s music and also, it’s a lot of mutual aid between artists and everything. Society can learn to accept new, new people especially on the racial level.”

Carlos Munoz, producer, and cofounder of a Montreal production label, points out that “guys who do rap are often like messengers of what is happening in the street” (Arbour-Masse 2018). Similarly, D’Amico describes rap as a kind of social documentary: “Rap provided practitioners with the possibility to describe, document and even critique urban realities; the surveillance, over-policing, and punishment of Black bodies; and the structures and strategies of domination that shaped their quotidian realities” (2019: 11).

As reports of racial profiling from the Montreal Police Service continue to make headlines (Schué 2019), there are social and political pressures facing racialized youth. In this sense, Ibrahima’s words are particularly interesting. He continues by specifying how hip hop can be a catalyst for reflections of a political and social nature on the issues of systemic racism. His next example illustrates how the works of hip-hop artists made him realize that these stories should not be analyzed individually, but rather as multiple manifestations of deep social issues targeting racialized people:

Lil Uzi Vert won’t be able to talk to all the young people of future generations and tell them ‘no, don’t do this, don’t do that,’ because you know, he’s a normal person, he won’t be able to go through every neighborhood and everything, so it’s up to society to listen to this music, to accept it as it is...whether it was Donald Trump, whether it was Barack Obama, it doesn’t matter, we have a problem in the

country [the USA] with the ghettos. Why not try to improve that and just make sure that these people live better, opening more jobs for young people.

The great popularity of hip hop allows artists to reach a very large audience, which represents an outlet for instilling awareness. Other themes appear in the discussion such as observations concerning gender stereotypes when Nick brings up the fact that “a problem in hip hop is that there is like, how to say that, a strong masculinity. It’s really very masculine; it dictates how men have to act. Like the image of [a] thug, of [a] womanizer that creates toxic masculinity as such, and that needs to be changed.”

These examples demonstrate how hip-hop culture can instigate political awareness by establishing connections between the audience and artists recounting similar experiences or by exposing youth to social issues. In sum, it encompasses the process of turning inward through a process of questioning and reflecting on different situations or problems, and outward by turning these into inspiration for creating.

3) Having a Public Diary: Expressing Feelings

Some participants describe themselves as introverts, drawing a parallel between writing lyrics and keeping a personal journal. This points to how hip hop encompasses a plurality of modes and variations of expression. In the following section, we will draw attention to the benefits of expressing feelings through hip hop and how this can translate into openness to others and gains in maturity. To start, Mark describes the value of having an outlet that matches his personality:

Hip hop taught me about how to express myself. I’m like the type of dude I don’t really like to talk as much. And it’s like I have a way to express my feelings I’m pretty bad at expressing myself in words so if I make a song and people will understand how I feel, that’s cool. That’s why I like it a lot, and it kept me out of trouble; taught me how to communicate with people, it made me grow as

a person, made me more mature. It's like having a diary, a public diary and it's like talking about how you feel and songs just like let it go.

This last quote testifies to the educational and therapeutic contribution of hip hop as a medium for gaining confidence, which supports Ibrahima's words regarding how rap helped him express himself. Clearly, the malleability of hip hop allows people to adapt it to their wants and interests. In addition, Mark emphasizes the importance of putting his emotions and thoughts in writing like a diary, and how it was beneficial for him to gain maturity. In his opinion, the public reception of his texts is a barometer to gauge if he has been able to formulate his message well. It is also relevant to note that hip hop and music have taken him away from problems, which challenges prejudices against hip hop that consider it to be inherently negative (Harper and Jackson 2018: 115). By devoting himself to hip hop, Mark tells us how this passion has become a way to channel his thoughts and emotions. Looking back, Mark acknowledges that hip hop had a direct impact on his personal development by allowing him to mature and helping him avoid problematic situations and contexts. These remarks underline the value of openness to others through words, and of connecting with yourself in a form of self-care (Travis et al. 2019: 748).

For other participants, the beat making and other musical aspects (rather than lyrics) are the central components through which they developed a connection that fostered their self-expression. Way and McKerrill (2017: 3) report that music can be semantically more ambiguous than an image or text; this seemed to open new modes of expression for some of our participants. For instance, Lamia expresses how creating beats for a song allows her to explore different emotions she cannot evoke with lyrics:

These are things that I would just say when I make music. It's not something that I'm going to say, like, I'm not going to open up about that, it's more like, that's why I said it was like my escape, precisely with the words I feel that I don't express myself well. But

when it's done with the music, it comes, it flows, it comes more easily. So, like, that's why I manage to be more vulnerable when it's related to music.

This statement testifies once again to the multidisciplinary richness that hip hop offers and more specifically to the relevance of music which can be a medium for different possibilities, including accessing a range of other emotions. Mark agrees with this by adding how the emotions felt while listening to the music can be as, or even stronger than, the message of the lyrics: "I think the feeling is more important than what you're saying because some people don't know how to explain things so they know they don't need to express how do you feel but like not by words but just like by doing."

For introverts, hip-hop culture provides several elements which allow everyone to go at their own pace while respecting their limits and preferences. As Chantal summarizes: "In what I write, uh, it's more like philosophy, metaphors... it's a bit of everything, like what I see, what happens to me in life, situations that my friends experience." In short, writing or music creation represent avenues to make connections and give meaning to what the individual is experiencing by reformulating their thoughts using the multiple components of hip hop: lyrics, music, and knowledge. The multimodality at the heart of hip hop is ultimately a factor that makes it possible to highlight the different skills and preferences of young people, which is a great lesson in valuing and recognizing the plurality of skills and modes of expression. However, the benefits derived from writing lyrics and composing music are not exclusive to hip hop; it is the connection participants have with this culture that allows them to access tools to develop their self-expression, and other musical cultures could offer similar opportunities.

4) Gaining Confidence through Performance: Creating a Hip-Hop Persona

Given the importance of performance in hip hop, our participants described the time and dedication needed to develop and master the art

and subtleties of emceeing. Participants expressed a desire not to have their style categorized for them, nor to have the usual stereotypes of young people doing rap applied to them. They don't want to be put in a box, or at least they want to create the box. However, we noticed an interesting tension: while many of the youth talked about the possibilities lyric writing and beat making offered for self-expression, they also described the importance of creating an artistic persona as part of the process of liberating themselves from some social expectations. For beginners in hip hop, the alter-ego technique can be appealing because it allows them to shape their MC character by subscribing to different codes of hip hop. It creates a space where it is possible to dream and give free rein to their imagination; metaphorically speaking, it opens doors and offers different opportunities.

Just as the Global Hip Hop Nation offers spaces of reference outside the limits of the Quebec nation, the alter-ego offers possibilities of taking on new identities. We argue that the concept of the alter-ego is anti-essentialist—identities are fluid, can be taken on and off, and are used for specific purposes in relation to particular audiences—and can be used to find an identity that fits. This rap practice offers a mental space to experiment with how identities play out in different circumstances. As with filters or effects on Instagram or TikTok that enable a person to change their appearance or voice, etc., the filter metaphor can apply to the alter-ego in hip hop, as artists use it to alter themselves or to reveal aspects of their identity and personality.

Almost all our participants have created a MC persona. The following excerpt from the interview with Jackson bears many similarities to Bradley's (2018) previous observations about the artistic and reinventive possibilities of the alter-ego:

Édouard: So, when you rap, would you say that you are a different person?

Jackson: Definitely... I just, I just feel like it represents me more. It's the one that doesn't, that doesn't like, who speaks about meaningful things. But JAY-jay, I feel like that's the person that I really wanna be. And then when I rap, I feel like I am that person...

Édouard: So, do you think that one day... you and JAY-jay will eventually merge?

Jackson: Actually, I hope that will happen very soon, right?... I feel like JAY-jay is just like waiting for me at a certain spot, and he's like, "aight, dude, I'm just waiting for you when you're ready to like stop, start, sorry, start speaking, speaking meaningful things." Yeah, JAY-jay, my persona, is very confident and doesn't have any problems speaking. But me as like... I'm confident when I speak to people, but sometimes I stumble on my words. And JAY-jay is totally different from that. So, so, so we're two opposites.

Édouard: It's a way for you to find confidence?

Jackson: Yeah. And ever since like, I came up with JAY-jay I became more confident, like, on my stuff... Yeah, so. It really helped me out.

For Jackson, his alter-ego "JAY-jay" is by his own admission an avatar of the individual he aspires to become. The alter-ego provides him confidence, particularly with regard to his slight speech impairment. For the participants, it seems that the possibility of creating a new or better version of themselves is what particularly appeals to them: fiction and the imaginary can become reality when they personify their alter-ego. In short, the possibility of embodying a persona or a renewed and improved version of oneself seems to allow young people to approach their daily life with more confidence and symbolizes a type of renewal.

As with Ibrahim, Mark explores the ways his alter-ego can open up new possibilities of expression for himself. He offers a new take, however, on the artistic persona, describing how his conveys emotions and moods: "I created something more like it's incognitones [sic] it is just a shadow and like my main goal is to... I'm not a person, I'm just a mood...I think feeling is more important than what you're saying because some people don't know how to explain those things."

This perspective takes a very different approach to communication, focused on creating an atmosphere rather than narrative storytelling. Rather than build a new persona, his art helps him to partly disappear into his shadow, which means he is "incognito." This posture makes sense given that this same person had explained that he had difficulty find-

ing the words to express his feelings. He also sees his creative process in terms of “movement,” describing his style of writing as “abstract poetic movement” and how he is inspired by roaming in the neighborhood.

Mark’s roaming alter-ego also seems to be an outlet for reconciling and channeling his multiple musical influences and allows him to evolve in different scenes and communities: “The way I move is kind of like I love a type of music where I’m in each different scene and I’m producing for like all these different types of scenes. Just like there’s no difference, the only different thing is different people will have different taste of music. So like I love every type of music and so I have something to relate about every part of like a community.”

Mark seems to value the simple things in life by privileging the feelings, senses, and desire to escape the more difficult aspects. He declares, “I mostly really talk about, the thing I see all the time, nature. I don’t have to talk about drug dealing or the slum. It’s not things I want to promote.” This deliberate avoidance helps him move beyond the negative elements he may encounter:

Édouard: Do you feel like by avoiding these topics it helps you?

Mark: Yeah, because it helps you. I understand where you are trying to get. It helps you understand. I think the more you talk about something the more it gets real. It’s like looking in the mirror and you’re telling yourself “All you gonna do is bad,” you gonna do bad. Then if you tell yourself “You gonna do good,” you gonna do good. It’s all mentality. It’s how I see it.

In Mark’s case, making music was one of the ways he helped himself out of the difficult contexts in which he grew up, specifying, “I had to break a path” trying not to repeat the same patterns present in his family. In the end, he mobilized different aspects offered by hip hop to develop a channel of his own to express his thoughts and feelings.

Up to now, participants have been discussing how confidence is a fundamental element of performance, and of hip hop in general. Presenting artwork and performing take courage and having some help can be welcome especially for beginner MCs. In this respect, the MC

alter-ego can also enable another rap convention, the ego trip. Considering that participants are young adults exploring their identities and are quite new MCs, the ego trip is an appealing option because it can contribute to building a rapper's credibility in terms of following rap's codes while allowing to dare and experiment within its relatively defined structures. The ego trip is a great tool to boost one's confidence. Ibrahima says, "I do a lot of ego trips. That's to say, I value myself a lot as the person I am. That's to say, I talk a lot about myself, how I have confidence in myself and everything." Another participant, Moussa, gives us a very detailed description of his vision of the ego trip, in which he balances between exaggeration and authenticity:

After all, there are certain codes that are linked to music in general, for example, the ego trip basically, it's something that is very much linked to rap... if it comes from art it's going to come out in art... it's not going to come out in my life every day. I'm not going to start hitting people because I heard such rapper or I said in my lyrics that so. Or in my lyrics, I appear, I can sometimes appear a little violent, but it's, it's ego trip, it's exaggerated. I'm not going to suddenly start hitting people, it's, it's stupid. But after, in rap, I try to rap what I am, I try to rap, to stay relatively true even if I can, I can mess around. Sometimes I mess around, I can go in all directions.

Moussa describes the need to use discernment and not take everything that is said at face value. He also shares how he tries to maintain a balance between exaggerated "messaging around" and trying to stay "relatively true" to himself.

The alter-ego is one element in hip-hop's toolbox for exploring and experimenting with identity. In discussing their time at NBS Studio, participants have expressed being grateful for finding a community that supports their identities and allows them to connect with peers. They also mentioned that hip hop's introspective work fosters personal growth and political awareness. The analysis shows that creating raps allows youth to connect with their feelings. For some, writing lyrics

is their gateway and for others, music production is a better outlet. For all, engaging with hip-hop culture brings possibilities to connect with and express their emotions. Finally, crafting their hip-hop alter-egos is an artistic strategy that fosters confidence through the option to reinvent yourself through projection and approach the creative process and performance from a less intimidating standpoint. The participants hope to transpose this confidence booster to other areas of their lives.

We also argue that on top of these other uses and benefits, the alter-ego has an anti-essentialist dimension that contrasts with the categories or stereotypes too often affixed to racialized youth. The youth use their personas to experiment, re-invent, and “mess around” with their identities; these are spaces of change, movement, and play. By opening new possibilities for themselves, the youth embody an anti-essential model of identity that contrasts with fixed, reductive, and exclusionary models of Quebec identity and belonging.

Conclusion

NBS Studio offers a welcoming environment propitious to youths’ well-being and personal growth through engagement with hip-hop culture. This is in part due to hip hop’s affordances, but also to the commitment to youth empowerment and positive development by the studio director and mentors. NBS’ welcoming and supportive atmosphere and dynamic energy were reflected in the dedication and enthusiasm expressed by the participants during the interviews. They shared examples of how their passion helped them to become better people and create bonds within their community. They spoke about issues that matter to them, and how components of hip-hop culture such as rap, music production, and the alter-ego are helping them to achieve their goals, artistically and personally.

The youth’s work can be observed in a series of videos called “We Out Here Live,” presenting performances of the artists recording at NBS. As part of a week against racism, in collaboration with other community centers from the neighborhood, NBS produced a video in

the Spring of 2022 (NBS Studio 2022). Young artists were invited to express themselves about their experiences with racism. This video is vibrant and poignant and displays several of the elements of youth well-being described in this chapter, such as political awareness, expressing emotions, and building community. It stands in stark contrast with the Quebec's Premier's continued refusal to recognize systemic racism. "We Out Here Live" embodies the community revolving around NBS Studio, including its contributions to youth well-being and growth, and is a strong example of hip hop's commitment to social justice.

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