

# SMALL HEROES. RAP MUSIC AND SELECTIVE BELONGINGS OF YOUNG HAITIAN IMMIGRANTS IN MONTREAL

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## Introduction

While the role fulfilled by music in the construction of personal and ethnic identities has received significant attention in recent anthropological literature, the perspective of children and young people has been widely neglected. The culture of hip-hop<sup>1</sup> in particular, with its group dynamics, competitive elements as well as its spirit of resistance against the world of adults constitutes a reflective tool for children and young people. The identification with this youth culture serves as a significant means for the (re-)creation of “black” tradition and ethnicity. From the moment it became understood as a vehicle for the “voices from the margins” (Rose 1994) just over 10 years ago, the interest in hip-hop within academia has become more established, mainly in the United States and in Canada,<sup>2</sup> but also in Europe<sup>3</sup> and other parts of the world.<sup>4</sup>

My fieldwork focused on the Haitian community in Montreal, Canada, and how it recreated “Haiti.” I was particularly interested in the reconstruction of Haitian history and gender ideologies within the migrant community and in discovering how it relates to both home and host society.<sup>5</sup> From the beginning of the 1990s, much research has been carried out on the first generation of Haitian immigrants, mainly to the United States, and they provided one of the most significant case studies in the development of the concept of “transnationalism” (Glick Schiller et al. 1992, Basch et al. 1994). By means of physi-

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- 1 While the culture of hip-hop consists of rap music, breakdance, graffiti and dj-ing, rap music has shaped urban black youth cultures most significantly all over the globe. This article will concentrate on the analysis of rap songs.
  - 2 Kage 2002; Lipsitz 1999; Ross & Rose 1994.
  - 3 Klein & Friedrich 2003; Menrath 2001.
  - 4 Auzanneau 2001; Kimminich 2004; Weller 2003. These authors have been working on rap music in Gabon, Senegal, and Brazil, respectively.
  - 5 Data was collected during my Ph.D. fieldwork in Montreal (2002, 2003). I thank the University of Marburg, Germany for supplying me with a doctoral grant and the Centre d’Etudes Ethniques, CEETUM, at the University of Montreal, for their support during my stay in Montreal.

cal movement, personal networks and political ideologies, Haitians in Montreal live their lives as transmigrants, commuting between “home” and host society. In doing so, they forge and sustain multiple social relations that link Haiti with Haitian settlements – within Canada and in other parts of the world, i.e. Paris, Miami, New York City or Boston.

The city of Montreal has attracted 80 per cent of all new immigrants in the Province of Quebec in recent decades and immigrants make up between 20 to 25 per cent of the metropolitan area population today (Meintel 2000: 15). An estimated 50,000 to 70,000 Haitians have come to Montreal since the mid 1950s. They were fleeing political persecution, structural violence and *la mizè* – the increasing poverty in one of the poorest countries in the western hemisphere (Dejean 1990).

I was interested in the differing and sometimes conflicting perspectives within Haitian families in Montreal, i.e. in the differences in attitudes, interests and needs with regard to gender and generation. The following article aims at exploring how children in particular perceive and define their position between Haiti as their parents’ reference culture, and Canada as their host society, a society within which they are labelled as immigrants, in spite of having been born there. Writing about “Haitian children” in Montreal, I mainly refer to children belonging to the second, in some cases third generation of Haitian immigrants – that is the children and, in some cases the grandchildren of former immigrants.<sup>6</sup>

I will focus on the following questions: How do children perceive their position betwixt and between? How do they construct an ethnic identity? Is ethnic identity important to their concept of self? Which roles do home and host society play in the process of shaping children’s identities? Finally: what role does rap music play in the construction of self among young Haitian immigrants?

## **Haitian families and identities in Montreal**

The Haitian Community in Montreal falls into two broad categories, which run parallel to class and race differentiations rather typical for post-slavery societies.<sup>7</sup> There are working class and “undocumented labourers” on the one hand, and skilled middle-class professionals working as teachers, doctors or nurses, on the other. Generally speaking, the former group tends to live on the margins of society, with little opportunity for upward social mobility while the latter is better off financially and also tends to be more comfortable with its

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6 Most of them are officially Canadian citizens; few have not been “naturalized” and remain Haitian citizens. Cf. Mannitz in this volume, who is pinpointing the problem of labelling children and grandchildren of former immigrants as “second and third generations of immigrants.”

7 See also Basch et al 1994: 183–198; Waters 2001.

Haitian heritage.<sup>8</sup> Many Haitians refer to their children as “wealth,”<sup>9</sup> since children – particularly among Haitian immigrants – are supposed to fulfill the expectations and desires of their parents.<sup>10</sup> Family life tends to engender strong challenges for all, more so in families with poor working class background, where both parents are forced to work fulltime. On the whole, parents’ perception of life in Canada differs from children’s perception. Flore Zéphir describes the trauma, frustrations and disappointments many Haitians face upon arrival in Canada. For months and often years, most first-generation immigrants have to come to terms with low-paid jobs, prejudice and little opportunity for upward social mobility, as well as with linguistic and cultural barriers. On top of that they often fear to lose their children to what they consider to be a foreign cultural world – Canada that is. At the same time, their children, by means of rapid acculturation and acquisition of language skills acquire the role of “experts” whom they depend upon. This paradoxical inequality often produces frustration on the parents’ part, frustration that sometimes results in child abuse.<sup>11</sup>

Haitian children in Montreal are highly diversified as a group and include those born and raised in Canada as well those who were born in Haiti but came to Canada at an early age. Like the first generation of Haitian immigrants, they are stratified in terms of social class, which in turn affects their ethnic identifications. By and large, children from a middle-class background tend to claim a certain degree of Haitianess, which is expressed by declaring pride in one’s Haitian roots. Those children show a preference for a Haitian lifestyle and participate in Haitian social activities at home or within their ethnic community. Be it their culinary preferences, their choice of music or their religious affiliations – Haiti serves as a source of ethnic identification.<sup>12</sup>

There are also weaker forms of Haitianess, which Zéphir (2001: 99) calls the “undercover phenomenon.” It means hiding one’s Haitian roots by passing as an African Canadian. These children speak inner-city Black English, many of the girls wear short skirts, the boys wear baggy pants and gold chains. Alex Stepick (1998: 60) calls this response “cultural suicide”, which he claims to be the result of the continuous confrontation of Haitian children and youth with negative stereotypes about their own group. They are accused of being prone to gang violence and drug abuse, of being dirty and smelly, and, most severely, HIV positive.<sup>13</sup>

8 Zéphir 2001: 146.

9 “Timoun yo ce canet banc malere,” translated as “the child is the bank account of the poor,” is a common Haitian proverb.

10 Stepick 1998: 22; Zéphir 2001: 50.

11 Stepick 1998: 23; Zéphir 2001: 125–145.

12 Potvin 1999.

13 In the 1980s and 1990s the North American media spread the message that the HIV/Aids-transmitting risk groups consisted of the “Four Hs” – Heroin addicts, Haemophiliacs, Homosexuals, and Haitians (Richman 1992: 192; Stepick 1998: 35).

These two different strategies of identification serve as my frame of analysis. While the rap songs I am dealing with have been produced by Haitian university students with middle-class backgrounds, the children I worked with in order to understand the perception of these songs live in a poor working class area of Montreal. I will try to show how through hip-hop, group solidarity and community consciousness is (re-)produced and differences between these two groups of young Haitian immigrants are levelled out.

### **Moune morne: The people from the mountains**

In the following case study I will present one of the most popular hip-hop groups in Quebec, called “Muzion – moune morne.” Their first album, “mentalité moune morne – ils n’ont pas compris,” appeared in 1999, the second, “J’Révolutionne,” in 2003. The group is composed of four rappers of Haitian descent – two female and two male. Since the mid 1990s, Muzion, who rap in French, English and Haitian Créole, have gained a lot of respect and “street cred”<sup>14</sup> among children and youth of Haitian origin in Montreal. All members of the group have a middle-class background. J Kyl, for instance, one of the female members, was studying law at one of Montreal’s universities and interrupted her studies in order to concentrate on her musical career. She and the three other members view hip-hop as an educative tool. They work in close contact with their local community, St. Michel, and invite children and youth to participate in their projects. Thus, through their music, they get in touch with the local population.

The following excerpt from the song “rien à perdre” demonstrates some of their ideas.

#### **Rien à perdre – Nothing to lose**<sup>15</sup>

Not one day without a song  
 How many tell me: ‘you would have made a good lawyer, what went wrong?’  
 But I have an artistic soul, a spirit too mystic, nearly autistic for the lyrics  
 unconstrained, I chose rap to live my rebellion  
 Displaying my poems, making them run under an amazing beat  
 Hip-Hop does for me everything that the rest won’t do  
 Gives me 3 times 16 bars of noise, which beats at the head of those,  
 who otherwise wouldn’t listen to me  
 I keep the kids off of the street, they’re running to my music  
 I make them hear my voice so loud, in public  
 Represent the oppressed, you say that’s bullshit?  
 But how many raise their arms when I take the mic’ for rhyming.

14 “Street cred” (abrev.) = “street credibility,” one of the main concepts of Hip-Hop-Culture.

15 Excerpt from “rien à perdre,” from the album “mentalité moune morne,” 1999 (my translation). See appendix for all original song versions.

During the two summers of my fieldwork in Montreal, Muzion's songs were played all day long on the local ethnic music stations. Children and young people also sang their songs at festivals, parties and other private events. Nearly every Haitian child I talked to knew Muzion – their story, their music and their messages. In using the three languages of their environment, Muzion's songs describe life under Montreal's plurilingual urban conditions. They constantly employ code-switching and language borrowing and maintain symbolic references of identification.

In order to understand the relevance of hip-hop for children, one needs to consider its function in group dynamics and communication. Alison James hints to the importance of group dynamics for children, who learn to negotiate the conflicting cultural demands between individuality and conformity within their peer-groups. She furthermore declares "talk" to be the primary medium of social exchange among children. Children's habits of talking and playing with words describe the inherent codes, which relate to specific categories of thoughts (James 1995: 59–60). Thus, it is not surprising that rap music in particular can serve as a source of empowerment and inspiration, given that it works with specific codes, linguistic varieties, mixings and neologisms.<sup>16</sup>

Both aspects, peer-group dimensions and their communicative skills, help children to advance from childhood to adolescence, from a more private way of life within the family to a more social way of life in the wider community. In many societies institutions such as the family, school, churches or youth associations help children through this phase of transition. However, as a result of the specific conditions mentioned above, in many Haitian families these institutions hardly exist, much less function. Instead, it is hip-hop's group dimensions that provide spaces for ritualizing the transition from childhood to adolescence. In all my interviews with children in Montreal, specific hip-hop-groups, i.e. their "crews" and "posses" served as a local source of identity and group affiliation within the "hoods."<sup>17</sup> As such they also function as a substitute for the missing or inadequate family support system. Hip-hop also serves children's competitive needs. They can compare their agility and skill, their strength and endurance.<sup>18</sup> In rap-music, breakdance and graffiti "battles," they aim at judging each other's creativity, originality and innovative potentials.<sup>19</sup>

As mentioned, the four members of Muzion have a strong attachment to their community and feel responsible for Haitian children in the streets. In one of my interviews with J Kyl, she explained to me that the term "moune morne" or "mornier" referred to the maroons, the slaves who had fled the sugar plantations two centuries ago and continued their lives as rebels in the mountains of Haiti. While in Haiti the term is employed to describe poor peasants

16 On the use of local vernaculars within rap music, see also Auzanneau 2001.

17 From "neighbourhood," also used in French and Haitian Créole.

18 Regarding children's desire for competitive occasions, see also Hardmann 1993: 73–76.

19 Rose 1994: 41–61.

living in the rural areas, in Montreal, many Haitian parents use it to let their children know that they consider their manners uncivilized and wild. Muzion, however, use the term in a positive way, J Kyl explained and confessed proudly: “Yes, I am mornier, yes, I will fight for my freedom, yes, I live like a peasant, because I am not materialistic.”<sup>20</sup>

In this statement, two main aspects of children’s and young people’s identity constructions are pin-pointed: they define themselves as opposed to their parent’s world, which they experience as intimidating and hostile, and they refer to Haitian history and to heroes of the Haitian revolution – the latter serving as role models.

Thus, “family conflicts” on the one hand and “black power” on the other are experienced as major issues in the social lives of Haitian children and serve as focal points of reference with regard to identity construction. In the following I will analyze some of Muzion’s songs, focusing on these two major themes. During my interviews with the children, the lyrics of Muzion’s songs served as a point of entry to discuss their perspectives and attitudes concerning these issues.

The seven children I mainly talked to were between 10 and 14 years of age and lived in St. Michel, a multi-ethnic working-class quarter of Montreal.<sup>21</sup> The following descriptions and citations result from two meetings organized by Muzion, who knew the children through their own project activities.<sup>22</sup> We met in a public park, where we sat on the ground, listening to Muzion’s songs on a small CD-player. We listened to a couple of songs, the children singing the lyrics or humming the melodies. Then I interrupted the music and we discussed the songs’ messages.<sup>23</sup>

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20 This and all following children’s statements have been translated from French/Haitian Créole into English.

21 Except from the members of Muzion, all names mentioned in the text are pseudonyms.

22 The members of Muzion were interviewed separately and did not take part in the meetings with the children.

23 While all the following songs have been translated from a mix of French/Haitian Créole/English into English, I would like to point out that translations of rap-songs tend to remain partly inadequate. Rappers often produce abstract stories with catchy phrases, storing fragments of associative allusions. Rap language contains images, ideas and icons, which encompass re-contextualizations that emerge from dialogues between rap musicians and those who listen to their music.

## Family conflicts

### L'éducation – Education<sup>24</sup>

An alcoholic father, a choleric son with a devil's look  
 All alone, without accomplices, getting furious, hitting too easily.  
 A mother, selling her body, a girl, stretching her body easily  
 In the bed of a pig, the first night, he takes her out  
 An abusive father disrespecting his wife, his son disrespecting his mother  
 Ephemeral authority and his mates applauding.  
 The family, first source of all our actions,  
 The most beautiful thing or the most ugly,  
 depending on whether or not there's love involved in our education.

### Tel père, tel vice – Such father, such shame<sup>25</sup>

A naïve life of 10 years  
 Depressive mother, absent father, dictator style, cutting looks  
 What's wrong, son? Say you're afraid! He's bringing fear to the whole house  
 He's getting even more brutal by the time he has to pay the rent, the bills  
 What a mess, nobody is laughing anymore, when the door-bell rings.  
 The mother sets up the table, the child running to bed  
 Lying under the covers, cramping, this jerk of a father  
 Might come to play with him, his hands in his pants...  
 Refrain: After all you've done wrong, you want me to forgive you?  
 You say you love me? How dare you forget the past!  
 I don't believe you when you say you're sorry.

Muzion touch upon the issue of family and intergenerational conflicts in many of their songs. “L'éducation,” among other songs, accuse parents of inadequate communication vis-à-vis their children. Muzion develop an image of autistic, violent and isolated fathers, who long for other worlds and other women, and an image of mothers, who lose their identity in their day-to-day worries about their jobs and their children's lives. Lack of respect and self-control on both sides, the songs tell us, teaches children violent worldviews and sexualized modes of behaviour.

In my discussions with the children they confirmed this general picture and described severe conflicts within their families, between their parents as well as between parents and children. The children claimed most of the tension and quarrels in Montreal's Haitian families resulted from their parent's frustration on the one hand and their own desire for more freedom and less control on the other. Particularly their fathers suffered from the unexpected changes that result out of unemployment, low social and economic status and the loss of authority. Tom, a boy of thirteen years said: “It's true what they say. Normally it's important, the respect; sure one has to respect the other. But

24 Excerpt from “l'Education,” from the Album “mentalité moune morne,” 1999 (my translation).

25 Excerpt from “Tel père, tel vice,” from the Album “mentalité moune morne,” 1999 (my translation).

at the same time it's not only me, who is obliged, it's also my parents, they also have to have respect. And that's what they say, Muzion."

In his explanation Tom refers to the fact that Haitian children in Montreal profit from a more permissive educational system in Canada but at the same time suffer because their parents nevertheless try to raise their children according to Haitian traditions of strict generational hierarchies.

The issue of sexual abuse was another difficult topic which came up. Again, Muzion's lyrics helped me to imagine the violent conditions many Haitian children face and my young interviewees to discuss their fears and suspicions. When I read the lyrics of "Tel père, tel vice" to them, Emile, a 10-year-old boy, started talking about his elder brother. He left his family a couple of years ago to join one of the local street gangs that roam the streets of Montreal-Nord and St. Michel making a living from drug dealing and carjacking. Sometimes when they meet, Emile and his brother talk about the situation at home and about the brother's desire to re-start an ordinary life and continue school. Emile said the situation at home got even worse after his brother had left, because his father felt ashamed of his son's gang activities and, according to Emile, at times even hid or denied his elder son's existence: "It's the severest punishment for my father, that my brother went away and lives his life. But it's true: sometimes my father is like a dictator; that scares me. I understand my brother, but I miss him a lot."

Emile uses the song to talk about his feelings, such as his fear of violence and his solitude. When discussing the lyrics, most of the children agreed with Emile's negative perception about their everyday lives at home and started talking about their experiences. They all longed for a less conflict laden "home," i.e. a place of security and refuge. Most of them, girls as well as boys, felt closer to their mothers than to their fathers, since the former showed a lot more interest in their children's lives. Vanessa, aged 12, complained that the only issue her father would talk about was Haiti. Even though her father has lived in Canada for more than 20 years, she said, he was obsessed by the idea of eventually returning there. And she added: "Sometimes that scares me, because I do not know anything about Haiti and I know that there's much criminality over there." Vanessa felt threatened by the idea of having to "return" to a country she does not know. A couple of other children also mentioned their parents had never started a real life in Canada, but remained fully attached to their homeland instead. These different ties – the parents being attached to their home country, their children feeling more at home in their host society – are a common phenomenon within immigrant families in general.<sup>26</sup> The children's narrations made this gap running through Haitian immigrant families very apparent.

Both songs discussed here carry different images and judgements concerning mothers and fathers. When I touched this issue, it quickly became clear that gender plays an important role in the perception of family conflicts. Myr-

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26 Rumbaut & Portes 2001: 6.

lène, aged 14, explained, that only Haitian fathers acted in such a violent manner, while Haitian mothers generally felt much more attached to their children. She told us that she was happy to know that her mum would never take her to Haiti, but would always stay in Canada with her children. Vanessa agreed, saying her mother would never leave Canada either because she wanted her children to get a good education. She witnessed many violent conflicts in her family as well, but knew her mother would either try to calm down her father or would leave him one day to live on her own with her children, as many Haitian women in Montreal have already done.

Other girls mentioned that since their parents lived according to Haitian traditions and values, they treated girls and boys differently. While their brothers were allowed to stay out even at night, girls would be much more controlled. Eve, aged 13, mentioned that she felt her mother did not trust her and had started to observe her even on her way to school to find out whether she had a boyfriend. Referring to the songs, one of the girls said: "For me, with Muzion, I know that they're Haitians, like me, they are blacks, and they live through the same things as we do. Sometimes, in their songs, things become clearer. Sometimes, it's strange to see that it's just around the corner. And I talk about it with my friends; it's great to see a Haitian girl talking like that, which is not our parents' ideal!"

Muzion serve as a representation of young and modern Haitians, who do not – and do not want to – live up to their parent's expectations. The two female members of Muzion in particular present an image of Haitian girls inconsistent with Haitian traditions and ideals. Their habit of wearing baggy pants and dreadlocks like their male peers as well as their unbridled performances on stage cause huge concerns among Haitian parents in Montreal. For Haitian children, however, they serve as role models and their attitudes and behaviour are perceived as integral parts of the lives and identities of young Haitians in Montreal.

In summary, by means of discussing two of Muzion's songs dealing with family conflicts, four major issues were elucidated as being central to the social lives and identities of Haitian children in Montreal. First, the lack of respect both between parents and between parents and children. Second, the issue of sexual abuse and violence in general. Third, marked differences in attitudes and perspectives between different generations, effecting different ties with regard to home and host society, parents and particularly fathers feeling attached to their home country, children feeling more at home in Canada. Fourth, the parent's reproduction of Haitian gender ideologies and hence, the different treatment of girls and boys.

**Black power****J'Révolutionne**<sup>27</sup>

You see one million rowing slaves. That's us!  
 One million children, men and women. Us!  
 Without chains, without the lash of the whip. That's what makes us move:  
     the fury in our souls, that's us!  
 Humanity which crosses ebony and ivory, that's us!  
 A whole army of oppressed, who yell 'war'  
 Who are tired of being the ridiculous mass! White or black  
     We take back our power  
 But who zombified me, confiscated my spirit... Tame?  
 Only when this written dream can live, I will stay here without hope...  
     I don't have any tears left when I cry  
     We don't mind the scandal  
     I dream the revolution Boukman<sup>28</sup> style  
 Wherever I go, I will settle down among ourselves  
 Hit the volume, beat the tam-tams in the mountains.  
 We're running applauding these guys  
 Dead! (For to serve us as cover)  
 Free! (all saints like Louverture)<sup>29</sup>  
 We will die this time all the same  
     Between ghettos and aristocracy  
 As long as there's no flag. And too many fatherlands!  
 We will be nothing but Negroes against Nazis oppressors  
 As long as we're condemned for our sex, our race, our class,  
 For the god, to whom we pray and whom we worship  
 As long as my texts harass and annoy the coward  
 Who doesn't understand what we say and the brothers say  
     Everywhere, in all the countries, decay,  
     They die under the betrayal, the beatings  
 Where're you from? I am there! We want war – And that's all!!!

Black pride, rebellion and violent images about the legacy of slavery are common tropes in hip-hop culture in general and constitute the most important topic in Muzion's songs. Like many other hip-hop groups, they embrace the idea of blackness in ways that parallel the rise of black consciousness in the 1970s in the United States. They popularize an afrocentric movement through lyrics that link the daily problems of racism, economic oppression and black marginality in contemporary American society.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, they connect

27 Excerpt from the song "J'révolutionne," from the Album "J'révolutionne," 2003 (my translation). J'révolutionne, a neologism, could be translated with: I dream the revolution.

28 Boukman was a vodou priest, who inspired the Haitian slaves to rebel against their white masters during the Haitian revolution, a rebellion, which resulted in the declaration of the state of Haiti in 1804, the first independent black nation in the world.

29 Toussaint Louverture was a soldier during the Haitian revolution, who managed to unite the black masses and to mobilize them against their white enemies.

30 Rose 1994: 21–34.

contemporary racial discrimination with the historical experience of slavery, drawing upon both as a source for black rebellion and resistance. Muzion work with explicitly aggressive contents, a common phenomenon in hip-hop-culture.<sup>31</sup> In the song discussed here, they do not just mix French, English and Haitian Créole, but also interweave cultural elements originating in the African American movement in the Americas, from Haiti, and from their distinct youth culture.

As for the reconstruction of a particularly Haitian identity in the diaspora, specifically Haitian symbols are drawn upon – e.g. “Boukman” and “Louverture,” two Haitian heroes from the Haitian revolution. Their fury and rage are not being addressed primarily to evoke worldwide solidarity among coloured people, but to bring to light historically rooted issues of a particular Haitian relevance and, thus to evoke Haitian ethnicity on a transnational level.

I started my discussion with the children by questioning the relevance of the “old” Haitian heroes for the life of a Haitian girl or boy in Montreal today. I asked them whether they knew about these Haitian heroes and whether they had talked about them at home. Tom, aged 13, explained that his parents had told him some things about Haitian history and the slave rebellion, but that he particularly liked the sound and the general atmosphere of the songs: “When I listen to Muzion, I am glad to be Haitian. Their pride and all that, that’s good. Haiti, this is not the same thing for my parents, for Muzion, it’s much cooler.” He laughed, then raised his arms and shouted “Men Moun Yo!” [“I am here!”].

I also raised the issue of the aggressive tone of the song, asking “What kind of war are they talking about?” Altogether they started giggling and Sammy, a boy of 14, got up, raised his arms and started performing the last part of the song with lucid hip-hop-style movements. Then he sat down again and the children started discussing the importance of those famous rebels and their use of violence for their everyday life. After several minutes of chaotic shouting about, some order returned and Sammy started talking about his experiences at school: “We, at school, the blacks, we are rebels too, you see? Sometimes it’s like this, we get together, but we’re not a street-gang. Anyhow, we’re against the others, we have to fight all the time!”

Sammy relates to one of the common tropes of Caribbean culture, the rebellious maroon. Referring to “maroon resistance” is calling for class-based solidarity as well as for enduring resistance against the dominating American way of life. Sammy continues explaining that at school he would always be Haitian, although he’s proud to be a Canadian citizen: “Haiti, it is like your mother. You might have your problems with her, you might even fight with

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31 For instance, Rose (1994) analyses the way rap and rap-related violence are discussed in popular media, showing how this specific discourse is part of a more general discourse on black people. See also Gilroy (1991: 110), where he deconstructs the media’s ideological perspective on black crime.

her, but you will never leave her, you will be with her all your life, it's biology, you can't escape it."

Sammy's equation between one's Haitian descent and the relationship to one's mother shows that despite ambivalent feelings, ethnic ties are perceived to be like maternal ties, biological and inescapable and thus need to be accepted as such. Moreover, he explained that the main reason why the children at school constantly reminded him of his Haitian descent was the negative image Haitians have in Montreal.

The music and lyrics produced by Muzion help him to view Haiti as well as his family in a more positive light. Sammy assumed that many black people would be better off today if they were as courageous as the Haitian slaves during the revolution. Indeed, most of the other children I talked to were impressed by the radical stance the slaves took and shared a vision of a better life achieved through united resistance and black power.

Particularly the three girls complained that their Quebecois identity was not accepted among many of their white friends. Myrlène explained that she had never really felt Haitian because she grew up mainly with white friends and hardly knew other Haitians. But the day other children made fun of her on account of her skin-colour, she started reflecting upon her Haitian roots. The music, she told me, helped her to find something "Haitian" which was different from her parents' Haiti, something more positive and meaningful. Again, this statement implies ambivalence between a negative "Haiti" associated with one's parents and a more positive "Haiti" associated with connotations and meanings, that may serve as a source of identification for oneself. The latter need to be discovered and music is an important means of such discovery.

In order to deepen the analysis of these ambivalent attitudes and feelings, I would like to introduce one more Muzion song – "La Vi Ti Nèg" – meaning: "the life of a small nigger." It depicts miserable living conditions, violence and broken families as part of Haitians' life in the diaspora, but it also pleads for a positive memory of and solidarity with the homeland. Since its release in 1999 this song has become Muzion's most popular hit, which may be the result of both its captivating rhythm and its simple message:

**La Vi Ti Nèg – Life of a small nigger<sup>32</sup>**

It's one love / like the pearl of the Antilles my clan is shining  
As did the folks / who destroyed power in 1804<sup>33</sup>

Black & proud to be I see those people capable  
To realize that everything is only camouflage  
but you don't have to worry because we're united  
You can lean on me even when the load is heavy  
A handshake for me before the countdown starts

Where are we from?

1 Recognize your power. Black, your fury,  
think well about where you are and where you want to start from

2 Never lower your head. It's your planet. Do what you have to do from A to Z.

3 Recognize where you're coming from and give a lot of support  
To the crews who for you don't fear the dead.  
At the end of your power, you need your allies

To eradicate the bad and go before the wind. That's what you have to do!

Cry, cry, I've already cried

Now, nobody will make fun of me

You pretend not to know me

But I recognized you from Delmas<sup>34</sup>

Where we drank coconut milk

Where you ate a mango

Now you don't know where you are

I saw you crying. What has happened to you?

I don't recognize your accent

Everywhere you go you do crazy stuff / You have made yourself enemies

Now you speak French / You studied good, forgot your créole

You want to make your family believe that everything is fine

And that you're able to make lots of money

Your mouth lies / You're a liar

In Haiti, you ate well

Now you live in a room with cockroaches

Jescome<sup>35</sup> who just arrived / You don't have money to go to the market

Every day you eat flour with milk

Move on, move on / Do you think I'm just kidding?

Move on, move on / Get up and come to see what's happening

Move on, move on / Do you think I'm just kidding? Haitian!

I look for a job, / The white guy says I stole his money

I look for a house, You say I'm dirty / That's why I go home

At school, the teacher said I am stupid / My whole family is broken

Refrain: Life's not easy / That's why we unite

32 Excerpt from "La Vi Ti Nèg" (French and Haitian Créole), from the Album "mentalité moune morne", 1999 (my translation).

33 The year 1804 is the year of Haitian independence.

34 A rich residential area of Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

35 Haitian expression for someone, who only recently arrived in Canada.

Like “J’*r*évolutionne,” this song addresses the issues of family life and black pride, pinpointing the transnational dimension of Haitian ethnicity in Montreal. But in contrast to many other of Muzion’s songs, “La Vi Ti Nèg” raises the issue of ethnic consciousness and pride specifically with respect to Haitian community life in Montreal. In bringing up class-related issues, i.e. language, food, and lifestyle, Muzion call for the recognition of Haitian origins and for class-transcending solidarity within the Haitian community. The common attitude among many migrants, that they should fulfill the ideal of the successful immigrant and thus deny migration-related losses and failures in order to meet the expectations of others, is rejected. Instead, Muzion depict the typical immigrant who struggles to make ends meet while being torn between the immigrant community in Canada, Haiti and the family-members left behind there and the host society as such. In this song, they deal especially with the ambivalent feelings towards Haiti, which most Haitians are forced to leave for economic and political reasons, but which still plays an important part in many of their lives.

Most of the seven interviewed children shared this ambivalent feeling towards their parent’s home country. This is also due to the fact that their parents themselves (re-)produce contradictory and inconsistent images of Haiti. On the one hand, Haiti is depicted as a dramatically poor and violent country where people are regularly massacred and tortured. On the other hand, Haiti is depicted as the first black independent nation in the Western Hemisphere that has the potential to serve as a model for all black nations in the world. It seems the first generation of Haitian immigrants has passed this somewhat paradoxical depiction of Haiti on to their children. Among the latter an even greater variety of depictions and meanings of Blackness and Haitianess exists since they feel more attached to their host country than their parents and are thus more influenced by ideas developed within the black Canadian community than they are. In the discussion about the meaning of the song “La Vi Ti Nèg” Vanessa explained:

For me, with Haiti, it gets on my nerves too what they say all the time about criminality and all that. But in the songs, what is important is that we are here today, we have to learn that Haiti worked in the past. And today, we can also work, we have to unite, that’s what will give us power. Our parents, they are always stressed, they always work and all that. But we, young people, we can do things in a different way. They, Muzion, they do it. Everybody knows them, they are proud to be Haitians and they make a lot of money.

## **Conclusion**

By means of the songs – using them as a primary source of information and as a means for discussing their messages with children – I could identify the major issues that affect immigrant Haitian children in Montreal in their endeavour to localize themselves socially and culturally in an environment character-

ized by ambivalent ties and demands. The songs and the children's reflections upon them give insight into their perceptions of their own social reality between home and host society.

Through listening to music and experiencing music as a way of life, immigrant children are better able to find their own social selves in the world they live in. They may construct selective belongings in order to position themselves socially vis-à-vis their host society, their immigrant community and their parent's country of origin. They use hip-hop as a reflective tool for dealing with the relevant issues affecting their lives, such as family life or black power.

With regard to their family lives the image of Haiti that children develop is a rather stereotypical and negative one. It serves as a symbolic icon encompassing the parents' generation's conflicts in establishing themselves in Canada, conflicts also effected by their desire to maintain Haitian traditions and values and to return to Haiti one day. Children consider their parents' ideologies and traditions as out-dated and as incompatible with life in Montreal. Their parents' desire to return to Haiti evokes fears in them of being deported one day to a "home" country they have never been to.

We also learn about divisions along gender lines when focusing on problems within the family. The images of mothers and fathers depicted in the songs differed considerably and highlighted major conflicts. In the discussions girls and boys related differences of attitudes and behaviour in terms of gender – i.e. different relationships to their mothers and fathers – thus portraying social and cultural diversity as linked to gender as well.

With regard to "black power" Haiti serves as an imaginary homeland. Contrary to its depiction when related to family issues, it appears as an image one can draw upon for the production of black pride. By means of the songs, Haitian children are encouraged to learn about the Haitian revolution and the heroic deeds of their ancestors, who fought for Haiti's independence and made it the first black nation in the world. The conflicts they experience within their families as well as vis-à-vis the Canadian host society trigger the "invention" of Haiti as an imaginary land characterized by black unity and black power.

By relating to Haitian history through music, children may develop a feeling of belonging to the Haitian community. At the same time they remain part of their Canadian environment. The accounts of the children revealed that a transnational Haitian identity exists side-by-side with a genuine feeling of belonging to the Canadian society. These attachments do not go without conflict but nevertheless bear positive connotations in their inter-relatedness.

Haitian children are aware that their lives are shaped by "culture," "culture" being in their view something that needs to be situated somewhere between their parents' "heritage" and their own cultural creations, ascriptions and belongings.

The class-transcending qualities of hip-hop may serve as a social link between youth from a well-to-do middle-class and children from a poor working class background. Particularly for children, who spend a lot of their time on

the streets, hip-hop can serve to reconstruct black history and culture, and to fulfill to some degree their desire to belong somewhere. Sometimes it is only through hip-hop that Haitian children and youth get to know about the history of slavery and about Haitian history in general. Especially the heroic aspects of the Haitian revolution can help to create a positive identification as blacks and as descendants of rebels and revolutionaries.<sup>36</sup> Through the ideals and ideologies attached to hip-hop, social values such as respect, trust, and credibility may be conveyed to children – values many children do not acquire through their parents.

The analysis of children's perception and interpretation of their music helps to elucidate the social dynamics within their peer-groups as well as between themselves and their parents and the larger society. I agree with those who claim that societies need to be understood from different angles and that the insights children can provide make our understanding of the social dynamics within societies more complete.<sup>37</sup> Like "gender," "generation" can serve as an analytical tool that opens up new perspectives on social phenomena and can therefore contribute to the development of new theories in the social sciences and anthropology in particular.

## Appendix

### Rien à perdre

Pas un jour sans ligne  
 Combien m'disent: 'T'aurais fait une bonne avocate yo qu'est-ce t'as bloqué??  
 Mais j'ai l'âme artistique, un esprit trop mystique presque autistique aux lyriques  
 désinvoltés et j'ai choisi le rap pour vivre de ma rivotte  
 Apposer ma poésie, la faire couler sur un beat frappa  
 Le hip hop fait pour moi c'que tout le reste ne fera pas  
 Me laisse 3 fois 16 bars de fracas qui frappe à la tête de celui  
 qui autrement ne m'écouteras pas  
 Garder les jeunes hors de la rue stocké sur ma musique  
 Faire entendre ma voix très haute là, sur la place publique  
 Représenter la masse opprimée, tu dis qu'ce bullshit ?  
 Mais combien lèvent leurs bras quand j'prends le micro pour rimer?

### L'éducation

Un père alcoolique, un fils colérique au regard diabolique  
 Solo pas d'acolyte s'énervé et frappe trop vite  
 Une mère qui vend son corps, une fille qui étend son corps facilement  
 Dans l'lit d'un porc la première nuit qu'il la sort dehors

36 On hip-hop's relevance in creating ethnic consciousness and historical reflection, see also Weller 2003. In German cities, a growing number of youth projects use hip-hop as an educative tool in order to attract young people from the streets and use the language and style of hip-hop to gain the youth's attention.

37 Caputo 1995; Hardmann 1973: 76; Haudrup Christensen 1994.

Un père abusif qui désrespecte sa femme, le fils désrespecte sa mère  
 Autorité éphémère et ses potes l'acclament  
 Une famille, la première source de toutes nos actions  
 La plus belle chose ou la plus l'aide dépendant d'l'amour dans l'éducation.

**Tel père, tel vice**

Une vie naïve de 10 ans  
 Mère dépressive, un père absent style dictateur au regard tranchant:  
 'Qu'est ce que t'as fils? Dis que t'as peur!' Il dicte la peur dans tout le foyer  
 Et devient d'autant plus bestial quand vient le temps de payer les bills, le loyer  
 Quelles conneries! Dès qu'on entend la sonnerie, plus personne ne rit.  
 La mère place le couvert et l'enfant court dans son lit.  
 Couché sous ses draps, il constipe à l'idée que ce con de type  
 Viendra jouer avec lui, la main dans son slip...  
 Refrain: After all you've done wrong, you want me to forgive you?  
 You say you love me? How dare you forget the past!  
 I don't believe you when you say you're sorry.

**J'Révolutionne**

Tu verras un million d'esclaves qui rament C'est nous!  
 Un million d'enfants, d'hommes et de femmes: Nous!  
 Sans chaîne, sans coup de fouet. C'qui nous fait bouger:  
 la rage dans nos âmes c'est nous  
 L'humanité croise l'ébène et l'ivoire c'est nous  
 Une seule armée d'oppressés qui crient «War!»  
 Y'en a marre d'être la masse dérisoire! Blancs ou noirs,  
 On reprend le pouvoir sur nous!  
 Mais qui m'a zombifiée, confisquée, mon esprit... Docile?  
 Sauf si ce rêve écrit vit, J'reste prise sans espoir ici...  
 Je n'ai plus de larme du tout quand j'braille.  
 On fout le scandale!  
 J'révolutionne, Boukman style  
 Où que je m'en aille, Chez nous je m'installe.  
 Mets le volume, cogne le chant des tam-tams dans les mornes.  
 On courre en acclamant ces hommes  
 Morts! (pour nous servir de couverture)  
 Libres! (tous saints comme Louverture)  
 Nous mourrons tous égaux c'fois-ci  
 Entre les ghettos et l'aristocratie.  
 Tant qu'il n'y aura d'un drapeau et trop de patries,  
 Nous ne serons que des négros contre des bourreaux nazis.  
 Tant qu'on sera jugé pour notre sexe, notre race, notre classe,  
 Pour le dieu qu'on prie et vénère  
 Tant que mes textes vexent et fâchent le lâche  
 Qui n'a pas compris ce qu'on dit et que des frères  
 Partout, de tous les pays, s'écroulent  
 Meurent sous le mépris, les coups.  
 Kote Moun Yo? Men Moun Yo! On veut la guerre -- Et puis c'est tout!!!

**La Vi Ti Nèg – Life of a small nigger**

C'est one love / comme la perle des Antilles mon clan brille  
En tant que les gens qui ont anéanti / le pouvoir d'autrui en 1804

Black & proud to be, j'vise les gens aptes  
À reconnaître qu'aujourd'hui c'est camouflé  
mais faut pas s'soucier car nous sommes associés  
yo tu peux t'accoter sur moi si la charge est lourde  
Un coup de main aux miens avant le compte à rebours  
On part de où?

1 reconnaît ta force. Black, ta rage,  
pense bien à où est-ce que tu l'amorces  
2 baisse jamais la tête. C'est ta planète. Fais ce que t'as à faire avec de A à Z  
3 reconnaît d'où tu sors, donne beaucoup d'support  
aux crews qui pour toi s'en foutent de la mort.  
À bout de tes forces, t'as besoin de tes alliés  
Effacer le mal et aller devant l'vent. Cé sa li yé!

Kriye kriye ou, mwen kriye deja  
Kounye-a pa gen moun kap manke mwen d'éga  
Pran poz ou pa konnen'm  
Mwen té konn wè ou bo zon Delma  
Koté ou té ap bwè bon dlo kokoyé  
Ou te ap manjé mango  
Kounye-en ou pa konn koté ou yé  
Mwen wè je ou nen dlo / Sa ki pran ou?  
Mwen pa sa rekonèt aksen ou  
Wap mache di bétiz, / ap fè lenmi ak prop san ou  
Tonbe pale franse / gro klas lekòl bliye kreyol  
Montre fanmi lakay wap bien Mennen / se kob la kap monte  
Bouch ou senti / Ou ap bay manti  
Ayiti, ou te konn manje  
Kounye-en ou rete nen yon ti piès kay plen ravèt  
Jescome ki fèk parèt / Pa gen kob fè makèt  
Chak jou manje farin ak lèt

Avanse, avanse! Ou konprann m'ap ranse?  
Avanse, avanse! Kanpe vini wè sa kap pase  
Avanse, avanse! Nou konprann m'ap ranse?  
Aisyen! M'al chèche travay, / blan en di se kob li m'ap volè  
M'al chèche kay, yo di mwen malprop  
Se pou mwen tounen lakay  
Lekòl, mèt la di mwen se kretin / Tout fanmi'm gaye

Refrain: Lavi na pa fasil / Sé pou sa nou rasanble.

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