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"He Yells at Me Three Times: Stay in Your Car!": Rap Culture, Black Identity and Reception of the Message of Police Brutality in Quebec City

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An earlier version of this paper has been presented online at the annual Conference of Canadian Sociological Association, during the Congress of Humanities and Social Sciences in Toronto in June 2025. It explores how rap music in Quebec, particularly through the work of the rap artist Webster and his collective Limoilou Starz (LS), serves as a tool for meaning-making, political expression, and resistance against racial profiling and police brutality experienced by Black youth in Quebec City. The study focuses on the song "SPVQ" (*Service de police de la Ville de Québec*) as a case study to analyze the encoding and reception of anti-racist messages within rap culture. Webster draws from a global tradition of socio-political rap—like that of African-American rappers KRS-One, LL Cool J, and Tupac—while anchoring his critique in the local realities of Limoilou, a marginalized, racially diverse district of Quebec City. Through a narrative, figurative, semantic, and ideological analysis of the song, the paper reveals how Webster articulates themes of police brutality, structural discrimination, economic marginalization, and resistance. The rapper's message is both a form of testimony and a civic intervention. His broader activism is analyzed through ethnographic techniques—including participant observation and interviews during workshops, media appearances, and online campaigns. It translates these messages into tangible social practices. To explain the persistence of these injustices, the paper situates the issue within Quebec's interculturalism framework, which ostensibly promotes dialogue and integration but often masks or even reinforces structural racism. This model maintains a symbolic majority/minority duality and conditions inclusion on conformity to a dominant White Francophone identity, thus rendering racialized youth as perpetual outsiders.

Keywords: hip-hop culture, Black identity, Black youth, rap culture, police brutality, Quebec

Introduction

Although rap music is recognized as having originated in the United States and is historically considered American, it has spread internationally, including to both continental Africa and the African diaspora. Its forms and influence are in continental Africans and particularly with African immigrants in Canada, including the francophone Province of Quebec. The study on which this paper reports is on the Quebec group Limoilou Starz, which is comprised of some 11 hip-hop rappers in Quebec City, and was initiated by "Webster", a second-generation African immigrant, born in Quebec, with a father from Senegal and a mother from Quebec

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City. Webster's songs cover issues faced by Black immigrants in Quebec, or "SeneQueb" (Senegalese-Quebecer) like him, from police brutality to issues from marginalization. Rap culture becomes a discursive frame to address violence, brutality and racism. Influenced by US models of political rap, anti-racist, social justice oriented and black identity promoter Webster articulates a new discourse that addresses discrimination and marginalization and works for a more just and representative of these current tensions and the fight for a just Quebec.

My paper focuses on one song from Webster as illustrative of his politics. The song is titled "SPVQ" (translated in English: Police Service of Quebec City). Released by the Afro-Quebecer rapper Webster, it addresses police brutality and discrimination against Blacks in Quebec.

The founder of the collective Limoilou Starz, Webster, lives in the Old-Limoilou, a poor district of Quebec City with his other friends. A specific trope of his message in this song is that the police of Quebec City discriminates young Blacks of the hip-hop world, first because of their grouping as a community, which supposedly suggests they are a gang, and second because of their external appearance and clothing style (the way they dress and walk) and for some, the Black color of their skin. The objective in this paper is mainly meaning-making: to try to explain how a universe of sense is constructed from a specific message, and how its reception can be articulated in social practices. The study on which the paper reports was conducted in Quebec City from August 2011 to December 2012, with content analysis of songs and ethnographic data collection of the 11 rappers who constitute the Limoilou Starz.

After a brief presentation of Limoilou district and statistics on immigration and youth in the City of Quebec in the first part of my paper, I will show, through content analysis of the song "SPVQ" and fieldwork investigation how the messages sent by Webster are encoded and reflect distinct realities mainly showing the strong confrontation between young rappers and police institution in general in the social movement in Quebec City; and how young people looking Black and doing rap music are discriminated and even brutalized by some police officers; and finally that the marginalized Black community of rappers also reacts to police brutality with the use of subtle and soft powers such as their art to resist and actively promote justice. In the last part of the paper, I will use the concept of interculturalism as illustrated by Gerard Bouchard (2015) to explain how police brutality against Black rappers serves as ideological practices rooted in Quebec's dichotomic, historical and sociopolitical context of belonging and exclusion.

Context: Quebec, Limoilou Youth, Rap Culture

As of 2021 census, Quebec City has a population of 563,921 inhabitants[1]. One of its poorest neighborhood, Limoilou, is twined with the rich district La Cité, and they count together 107,835 inhabitants. The twined district includes three territories: the Upper Town, Lower Town, and Limoilou. It is divided into nine districts: the richest: Vieux-Quebec-Cap-Blanc-Colline Parlementaire and Montcalm; the middle-class: Saint-Sacrement, Saint-Jean-Baptiste, and the new Saint-Roch; and the poorest: Saint-Sauveur, Vieux-Limoilou, Lairet, and Maizerets. The City of Quebec recruitment targets for immigrant families varying between their youngness (25 to 44 years old); their dense demography and their strong skill help reinforce the economics of the region. Concentration of younger immigrants has increased between 2001 and 2006 which is particularly in the districts of Sainte-Foy-Sillery and La Cité-Limoilou. In 2009, 71% of the new immigrants settled in the two

[1] See https://worldpopulationreview.com/canadian-cities/quebec-city.

districts and constituted respectively 8.2% and 7.2% in Sainte-Foy in 2006. Immigrant youth from visible minority were aged from 15 to 29 years and had an unemployment rate of 17.8% in 2007. The category "Blacks" has the higher unemployment rate (+ 20%). Their immigration status of visible minority influences their accessibility to the labor market. Is this part of the reasons why young rappers like Webster claim their marginalization and oppression by some institutions?

To understand this, I examine in particular the messages they produce in their songs. In fact, Webster of Limoilou Starz, deals specifically with problems related to racism, unemployment, street life, politics, in his songs, confirming what Tony Mitchell already asserted about Francophone Quebecer themes of rap songs, that social-conscious themes, now of secondary importance in U.S. rap, find stronger echoes in Francophone Quebec and the rest of Canada (Mitchell, 2001, p. 31).

Production of the Message of Police Brutality

Tricia Rose explains in her book *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994) that hip-hop artists have developed rap messages of denunciation and resistance to police in response to brutality[2] that they were facing, and also to deconstruct the ideological and institutional power of White Americans, whose goals were to suppress and dominate the African-Americans. For example, messages of police brutality made by the singer KRS-One in his song "Who Protects Us from You?" are primarily intended to denounce the police violence against Africans-Americans, as evidenced by lyrics extracts: "Killing Blacks and calling it the law" (Rose, 1994, p. 107). The recurring themes in the song are: the murder of Blacks, the lack of respect for Blacks, and lack of employment among Blacks ("Can I have a job please?" as quoted by Rose in the same book). She reminds us also about the song of LL Cool J entitled "Illegal Search", which refers to the profiling of the Black gangsters by police. The texts of this song, also very committed, denounce police brutality, but especially the racial profiling against the Black men. To Rose, "his lyrics address the expectation that the rapper will be stopped in the basis of race and gender … and the humiliation such treatment causes". Another example of messages on violence in hip-hop is illustrated by Johannes Schmidt or Jeremy Prestholdt when they speak of the African American singer 2Pac, whose "Gangsta Rap" music, was generally associated with "negatively and stereotypical image of male [and] inner-city youths who glorify violence and sexism" (Schmidt, 2003, p. 4). For Prestholdt, Tupac Shakur was a typical example of "the global barometer of youth in the world" (2009, p. 197) because of historical narrative resonating with youth violence.

Therefore, the song of Webster entitled "SPVQ" will be analyzed as a SPC—Socio-Political Conscious song producing a strong local sense of political engagement, issued from a global message in hip-hop: the message of resistance to police violence.

Content Analysis of Song "SPVQ"

The analysis of a song distributed by the videoclip support is not really easy to do. When I decided to analyze the song "SPVQ" via YouTube, a website of video hosting, I have deliberately chosen to concentrate on the analysis of the linguistic message rather than the iconic message, because of the efficiency of the textual treatment of linguistic message. Thus, I have proceeded through the method of content analysis, which has this advantage that it "provides a detailed description of language and texts as social practices as well as their

[2] Police brutality is understood as the use of unnecessary or excessive force by police during interactions with the public, particularly the abuse of power and authority through force that is not justified, as referred by Rhonda B. Hill (2017).

rhetorical organization", as stated by Blais and Martineau (2007, p. 7). In fact, it aims to bring out the meaning of the text rather than its formal and aesthetic aspects as also said by Kientz (1971) and Piret, Nizet, and Bourgeois (1996). For these authors, content analysis is a semantic method of studying a text, by using two analytical tools: the structures, which help for the description of the realities of a material, and the narrative of quest, to capture the dynamic developed between the actors (pp. 55 and 77). But regarding the first part of my analysis, the description of the material, I have rather preferred a "handmade" analytical type as also suggested by Blais and Martineau, because it allows fast processing of data and facilitates denser decoding.

Reception of the Message

The communication process is a circulation circuit with different times from production to reproduction, modeled on the production of goods loop of Karl Marx in the famous and never aging book *The Capital*. But according to Stuart Hall in his essay "Encoding/Decoding" (1980), the process is behavioral and incomplete if it does not appear at the end of the chain at one last important moment: the social uses or practices. It means exactly that the message has to be decoded and its impact measured in the social practices. Those who can understand it in dominant and negotiated senses, will reproduce expected practices like the producers who originally coded the sense, and those who oppose themselves to the originated sense do not articulate it in their practices.

The Results of the Handmade Grid of Analysis

The text of the song is divided into three paragraphs. The first paragraph has 170 words, the second paragraph has 119 words, and the last paragraph has 159 words. The grid analysis shows four levels of reading of the text, identified by four axes: the narrative axis, the figurative axis, the semantics axis, and the ideological axis.

In the narrative axis, a story is narrated by its author in forms of short sentences with basic structure (subject + verb + object). There is no rime, as usually seen in rap songs. In the first paragraph, Webster is the subject. He speaks directly to an individual auditor (identified in text by the word "Son" directly in English). He tells him about his interception by two police officers one night of December. In the figurative axis: A lot of parameters are given about the time and temperature (9 oclock:15 at night; it is winter time and cold; it is -10°c). Parameters of real spaces also exist: for example: the street, outside. As for the vocabulary and syntaxis, we note a strong construction of sentences with complex structures: "Could I inquire about your patterns of …? Just to say can I ask you the reason why, for example"; or also " He nods with difficulty" just to say he agrees.

A sustainable number of action verbs (to exist, to keep, to start, to park, to take, to put) and less of state verbs (to be in "it should be" for example) are clearly demonstrating that there is action in this text, not passivity. The ideological axis tells us about the themes and the values. The themes are principally: police interception and aggressiveness (i.e.: he yells at me: "Stay inside your car!"). The order is repeated three times. The requested values are: the courtesy and consilience ("it is always better to be polite"), and attention (Webster checks in his rear view mirror). His feelings are the astonishment for him and curiosity for police ("they look at me as if they want to take my picture!" he says), but he also uses metaphoric and ironic figures of speech to emphasize this state (metaphoric speech: two faces of banana who look at me as if they would take my pictures, to certainly talk about the whiteness of the skin color of the two police officers).

In the second paragraph or part of the song, Webster verbally confronts or "attacks", to use his own terms, the police officer because he replied that Webster is intercepted because he wears a hood over his head. His

assertion on the reasons why he has been intercepted clearly shows that the police officer discriminated him because of his skin color and his hip-hop style. Webster also accuses the big bosses of the police to acknowledge that operation of racial profiling. So profiling and discrimination are the major themes here. Feelings are anger and displeasure, and values are pugnacity and combativeness.

In the last paragraph, Webster says that he does the bad finger to the young officers following repression, and to their irresponsible chiefs because they just want to justify the budget of the repression actions. This is actually showing his anger and pugnacity when we know the sense of the bad finger. Same themes appear here: police violence and their discrimination against Blacks and hip-hop (they stigmatize Blacks and rap culture, he sings), and also economic reasons of police repression (their chiefs want to justify their budgets). Values are: state responsibility, but most irresponsibility. Feelings are: anger, wrath.

Articulation in Social Practices: Fieldwork Investigation

In order to complete the process of reception of the message of police brutality and racial discrimination, and to understand how Webster's rap messages applied in social practices, I investigated their meanings in some social practices. My fieldwork investigation took 18 months in Quebec City and included ethnographic techniques such as participant observation and formal and informal interviews during workshops, media appearances, and online campaigns. In total, I interviewed 11 rappers and 20 additional participants (family members, friends, neighbors and various stakeholders of the media and hip-hop industry).

I met Webster in January 2012, along with almost all the members of his group Limoilou Starz at the Brulerie café in Limoilou on 3rd Avenue: Seif the Congolese, Loki the "SeneQueb" (Senegalese-Quebecer), Showme the Quebecer, Shoddy the Congolese-Colombian, Nino and Parano aka the Sozi (they are real twins), GLD the Congolese. They told me, in a very warm atmosphere, about their respective paths since primary and secondary school, where they first met. For Webster, their rap is inspired by the Wu-Tang school (hardcore and "dirty" rap), while for the Sozi brothers, it's more about entertainment (they learned to play with words to create good lyrics). Shoddy and GLD explained that they aim to deliver messages—for example, in their song "Sortir de la rue" ("Getting out of the Street"), which talks about the hard life of a young person who works and wants to succeed without ending up behind bars; or "Lilou Life" which, in the contrary, is about the happy lifestyle of the young rappers in the Southside of Limoilou (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Webster, GLD and Parrano singing during the shooting of the videoclip Lilou Life in Limoilou, Quebec City @AtsenaAbogo.

Fieldwork made it possible to identify a number of Webster's social practices aiming at denouncing and fighting police discrimination. I have retained three principal practices that Webster engages in.

Active Online Presence

For example, Webster maintains an active online presence, sharing news articles and commentary on racial profiling. To start my study of their practices, at the beginning of November 2010, I sent each rapper a Facebook friend request after first getting their consent. I then browsed their Facebook pages daily, especially Webster's, which is a real information hub on police activities and misconduct. For instance, on January 16, 2011, he posted a Cyberpresse article titled "Profiling? Come on!", about three Black men in Quebec who were stopped by police, and another article about a Black man in Montreal—who turns out to be a police officer himself—filing a complaint against a colleague for racial discrimination.

Webster continued using social media all winter to raise awareness about police misconduct, and he consistently showed up whenever someone in his network reported unjust police treatment. But he also praises police officers when they come up with good results, proving he is not biased. For instance, on January 18, 2012 he posted a thank-you message to the policewoman who rightly pulled him over at a red light, praising her professionalism. On January 19, 2012, he also shared an article from *Le Devoir* titled "SPVM unveils its anti-profiling policy" and urged the Quebec City police to follow suit.

Workshops on Human Rights, Justice, and Rapping

To understand what and how Webster communicated to its listeners, I observed and participated in Webster's Human Rights and Justice workshops for youth and police officers (see Figure 2). In parallel, I also participated in events like Black History Month where he delivered a speech and often was scheduled to sing one or two of his songs. For example, on February 8, 2012, he spoke at the *Musée de la Civilisation de Québec* as part of Black History Month, again delivering his message about police brutality and Black slavery in Quebec. I also attended rap workshops where he teaches about the art of rapping in high schools and helps address school dropouts for young adolescent students of Limoilou and Saint-Sauveur.

Figure 2. Webster engaging with his audience at a Human Rights Workshop on police brutality and racial discrimination in St Rock, Quebec City @AtsenaAbogo.

I furthermore followed Webster to Ottawa on March 8, 2011 for a Francophone Month concert organized by the *Alliance Française*, where he performed a series of lesser-known songs and ended with "SPVQ" (see Figure 3). He gave a long monologue about police abuses in Quebec City, especially against Blacks, which

made some attendees uncomfortable enough to leave. Webster reiterated that he wasn't there to oppose the police, but to speak out on behalf of young people from Limoilou like himself, who are often judged because of their appearance (as Blacks) and poverty (coming from a working-class neighborhood).

Figure 3. Webster and Karim Ouellet engaging with their audience during a show at Capitol theatre in Quebec City @AtsenaAbogo.

I also followed Webster to the Dusrochers Centre, where he ran a writing workshop for young juvenile offenders (mostly aged 15), discussing the risks of dropping out of school and street delinquency—like ending up in prison, being rejected by family, or living in poverty. Finally, I later interviewed him, and he confirmed that he offers training workshops to Quebec City police officers as well about racial profiling.

Appearance on Media (TV Documentaries and Radio Shows)

In November 2011, Webster was the focus of a Radio-Canada investigation (*Enquête*) on street gangs in Quebec City (aired on November 24, 2011). Afterward, he was invited to *Maurais Live* on Choi-Radio X, where he was confronted by the head of the Quebec police union, who accused him—citing his lyrics and activism—of inciting youth rebellion and being a threat to society. Webster defended himself, saying his actions were about raising awareness, and that his aggressive lyrics were just a writing style—not a reflection of real-life violence. Despite ongoing criticism, including from Quebec police union representatives who accused him of inciting rebellion, Webster insists that his activism is peaceful and aimed at awareness, not violence.

Online activism, rapping workshops, training workshops on human rights and justice, and other speeches, allowed Webster to strategize on four principal themes: equal treatment for everyone; police officers to show their badge and explain the reasons for stopping someone; compiling police misconducts in order to file ethical complaints; and recruiting police officers from immigrant communities for better representation.

His work exemplifies how hip-hop can be a medium of political resistance and civic engagement. His message resonates because it reflects mainly lived experiences or realities emerging from his activism: tensions between youth (especially Black rappers) and police institutions; conflicts between Black and White youth in Quebec City, contrasting the province's multicultural image; racial profiling and police discrimination against hip-hop artists; and the use of music as a powerful civic tool to challenge injustice.

As of Webster, man cannot justify discrimination, racial profiling, or police brutality, as they are fundamentally unjust and harmful practices. His work can help to critically analyze how such practices persist in Quebec within the framework of interculturalism, including a discussion of their ideological underpinnings.

Recent Statistics on Police Encounters

The analysis of recent data showing trends in police encounters across Quebec, sheds the light on the frequency and nature of these incidents and their ramifications with race. For example, an article from *The Globe and Mail* newspaper highlights significant historical incidents of police brutality in Quebec that particularly impacted the Black community, highlights the systemic issues surrounding these events and their long-term emotional toll. Journalist Frédérik-Xavier Plante (2024) presented a study by Statistics Canada on Quebec police stops with a breakdown by race. The results showed that 4,567 stops were done by Quebec City police between January 1, 2023 and July 13, 2024. White people were under-represented in police stops, making up 83.1 percent of stops, compared with 90.6 percent of the Quebec City population. Also, Black people represented 7.8 percent of the stops, almost double their share in the Quebec City population, which was 4.1 percent. Arab people represented 3.1 percent of the stops, while they accounted for only 1.8 percent of the city's population.

Although Quebec Human Rights Commission has recommended that Police Departments across the province (30 of them) publish their reports disaggregated by race, man can see that in the latest reports (since 2020), nothing has been done. But 12 of them have implemented the collection of racial data, without publishing them.

In the last part of this paper, I would like to explain why those discriminations and racial profiling practices are so persistent in Quebec and what could potentially be their ideological ground.

Interculturalism Model as a Ground to Understand Racial Profiling and Police Brutality in Quebec

Quebecer famous philosopher Gerard Bouchard (2015) and co-chair of the Bouchard-Taylor Commission define interculturalism as an accepted idea of a cohesive nation that include "an official language, a legal framework, and territorial unity—and that must be combined with a symbolic element that helps foster identity, collective memory, and belonging" (p. 400). Interculturalism, he explains additionally, involves a dichotomy, a duality but also a balance between two categories: "Us" and "Them", and between principles, values, and expectations that are often in conflict. In this sense, it is a continuous attempt to articulate majority and minorities, continuity and diversity, identity and rights. It invites, at all levels of collective life, the invention of new ways of coexisting within and beyond differences. Bouchard furthermore clarifies (p. 445):

> In Quebec, a significant source of anxiety comes from the fact that the Francophone cultural majority is a fragile minority in the North American environment (representing less than two percent of the total population). Also, this anxiety is often supplemented by the presence of a demographically significant ethnocultural minority perceived as hostile to the traditions and values of the majority group and resistant to integration (which can happen when this minority fears for its own values and culture). This unease can also occur in countries where the foundational culture is experiencing a period of instability or undergoing some kind of crisis. Be that as it may, it follows that the duality thus risks being experienced as the intersection of two sets of anxieties since minority groups often, and for obvious reasons, fuel their own feelings of uncertainty about their future. Finally, there are nations in which duality is the result of a sustainable agreement forged in the history between two groups, one a majority, the other a minority.

Finally, it should be noted that the "majority/minority" dichotomy is not immutable. Due to the prolonged dynamic of interactions, it is not impossible that it may one day dissolve. One can then imagine two possibilities: either that its two major components eventually merge completely, or that one of them disappears. In either scenario, both the interculturalist model and the paradigm of duality would be transcended.

In the case of Quebec, however, this eventuality remains largely theoretical. Immigration, which tends to renew the duality, would have to decrease substantially, and cultural minorities (or the majority itself) would have to renounce their continuation.

With immigration, Quebec society faces a consequence and a paradox of the multicultural orientation within the paradigm of duality. This orientation advocates respect for diversity, but at the same time insists on the Us/Them divide and defuses the tension that fuels it, which contributes—at least indirectly—to perpetuating the duality.

Racial Profiling and Police Brutality as Ideological Tools

Policing in Quebec often reflects a broader societal anxiety about national cohesion and identity, especially in urban spaces where racialized populations are more visible. Racial profiling and police brutality can therefore be understood as ideological practices rooted in Quebec's historical and sociopolitical context. From the lens of interculturalism, these practices can be seen as efforts to "discipline" those who appear not to integrate or who are perceived as threats to social order. In this way, Blackness is constructed as deviant or incompatible with the normative image of Québécois identity. Therefore, surveillance and control become tools for managing the boundaries of belonging.

Conclusions

Although I didn't encounter serious physical brutality on Black rappers during my fieldwork in Quebec, I can say that Webster's activism reveals the gap between Quebec's proclaimed intercultural ideals and the lived experiences of racialized communities, particularly the Black youth community of Limoilou. The song "SPVQ" and the broader work of Limoilou Starz articulate a local reality of marginalization rooted in racial profiling, state neglect, and cultural exclusion. Webster's rap messages therefore exemplify how hip-hop can function not only as a medium of cultural expression but also as a critical civic tool for contesting injustice.

Despite its rhetoric of harmony and diversity, Quebec's interculturalism model inadvertently sustains a racialized social order. By upholding a dichotomy between "Us" and "Them", it legitimizes the surveillance, control, and repression of those perceived as not fully belonging—especially young Black men in hip-hop communities. As such, police brutality can be a message appropriated by Webster in Quebec to explain racial discrimination and profiling, and to denounce not simply abuses of power, but ideological practices that help enforce boundaries of belonging and reinforce national identity under the guise of public order.

To move beyond this duality and towards genuine inclusion, Quebec must confront the systemic roots of racism and rethink interculturalism not as a framework of conditional acceptance, but as one of equal citizenship, shared power, and structural transformation.

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