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Soumahoro, Maboula & Karima Zerrou

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Mark Naison (MN): OK, Hello? Today we are honored to have a discussion about French language hip-hop with two people who know this genre as well as almost anybody in the world. We are at the Bronx Museum of the Arts on April 24—I almost said 1960—2009, and we will be talking with Karima Zerrou, who is an internationally known artist, representative, promoter, youth festival organizer, who has been very involved with hip hop ever since, you know, she was a teenager. And also Professor Maboula Soumahoro, who is a professor at Barnard College, who also grew up with hip-hop in Paris, and is—has done critical writing about the way hip hop was constructed as a cause of the recent Paris riots. And with us today is the director of African immigration research for the Bronx African American History Project, Dr. Jane Edward. Our videographers are Charlie Johnson and Karla Rodriguez, and I am Dr. Mark Naison.

So, what I'd like to do is start off with you, Karima, to ask how you became involved with hip-hop and how—what the Paris hip-hop scene was like when you were growing up.

Karima Zerrou (KZ): So around 1995, I—one of my good friends was dating a French rapper, so I ended up going to the studio a lot. They were named—very old school group—called Toolust [?]. And so I was at the studio with them a lot, and you know, just as a tourist or whatever and I would always enjoy going and hearing them rapping. They would ask for our input or advice or whatever. And later on at a party, I met a French rapper called Monsieur R, whose album I brought here. He's from Belgium, but originally from

Zaire, and he—we got along very well and I liked what he was doing so I started managing him.

MN: Now how old were you when you first managed an artist?

KZ: Seventeen.

MN: Seventeen you began managing?

KZ: [Laughs.] So seventeen years old I started managing Monsieur R and we—I actually did a very good job with him because I think he had a very good album and I do with him a French news station, hip-hop and R&B station in France which [crosstalk] was created, and I was able to get his track on rotation. So that gave him a lot exposure. Not only that, I also met with one of the biggest groups at the time, IAM, and Akhenaton, which was the leader of the group—

MN: Were the majority of these French rappers originally from Africa?

KZ: Mostly, yes. African, West African, North African—that was usually between in those two. And the few exception was Leno [?]
—Portuguese, and white—

Maboula Soumahoro (MS): —from the Caribbean, too—

KZ: —and Caribbean. So those three. But majorly, yes. African and Arabs, I would say. And I met Akhenaton. You know, I knew he was staying at that hotel at the time. So I went to see him, and I said, “This is Mr. R’s album. If you like it, please help us promote it because we’re independent and we’re not signed on a major label”—like he was, [inaudible] Virgin at the time. So he loved it, and everything. They were on tour for their

own album promotion, so he decided to—every time people asked him if he had something he liked at the time, he said, “Yes, Mr. R. I love the new album.” So people would start playing it, and I would get so many requests. And it started going from there. Well other French rappers started to find out who was behind him, I started to get all the requests from all the French rappers from pretty much everybody—X-Men, D’argie [?], Lunatic, La Brigade—I don’t know, I can’t even remember because there were so many. X-Men, they were from my neighborhood.

MN: Now what neighborhood were you living in?

KZ: Paris 20th District. So a lot of the French rappers—[crosstalk]—

MN: Explain to those of us who wouldn’t know what that would mean.

KZ: So the 20th District is on the east side of Paris. It’s not the suburbs, but it’s the closest to suburb when you’re from Paris because it’s very average and very cosmopolitan. And I was at the top of Bagnolet, so it was like the door by the subway—[crosstalk]

MS: Exactly. Because if you have Paris, then there’s a circle, you know, around, surrounding Paris. And then outside the circle is what would be called the suburb. And you have doors. What is called, you know, “doors,” entrance to Paris. [Crosstalk]

MN: Like gates?

MS: [Crosstalk] yes, that’s the name. Not physical gates. [MN Laughs.]

KZ: But you would say, “Porte de Bagnolet,” “Porte de Montreuil.” It’s like a figure of speech, right?

MS: Yes, yes. And so you have subway stations. You would tell people, you know, “This is Porte de Bagnolet.” This is a physical, you know, space.

KZ: And the suburbs in France is not the suburb here. The suburb in France is considered as not the good place to be in except of course some rich, nice suburb.

So I started getting a lot of request and Mr. R was signed on this independent label, Night and Day. And Night and Day, artistic director asked me to come on board and help him promote the other artists. So I started working out all those calculations, Hip Hop Vibe, Envision [?]
—not this one yet—all the other independent—CMP, and many others following. So it was really doing well in the hip-hop at the time. Everybody wanted it. Everybody was trying to get even a new department in their division. It was really like the—and I remember going to IAM’s house, one of the major French rappers was Solaar at the time, and I went to his house in Marseille, and I remember it looked like a castle. And I said, “Oh, ok. So hip hop does bring money.” [Laughter.] “Maybe I should push harder.” And so I started working promotion and then I—you know—it was ok because I was making some money out of it, but it wasn’t like enough steady for me to say to my family, “Ok, I got to stop school and I can do this job.” I had to find another option. So after working with one of the biggest ghetto group called Expression Direkt, he was from the 78th District in the suburb and it was very, very ghetto—

MN: Now describe a Paris ghetto for us who only know Milwaukee ghettos, New York, New Jersey—

KZ: Well, I mean, it’s projects—like the one I’ve seen in Harlem—

MN: How high are the projects? How tall? So they'll be like sixteen stories high—

[crosstalk]

KZ: Even higher sometimes—

MN: And will there be graffiti?

KZ and MS: Yes.

KZ: Graffitis—

MS: I'm thinking about Booba from Lunatic, one of the rappers who said, "Rap music is for the people who live on the sixteenth floor with an elevator broke down."

KZ: And smell of pee. [Laughs.]

MN: Really? He says that in French.

[Crosstalk]

MN: How would that say in French?

KZ and MS: [Speaking in French]

MN: Wow. So that's just like here.

KZ: Yes. Definitely. And I would say here it's even better because at least in each ghetto you have your own little life going, but in French ghettos it feels like when things are closed, there is nothing.

MS: There is nothing.

KZ: There is nothing—

MS: Because it's outside the main city, it's outside the transportation system.

KZ: And trains stop running at midnight, so—

MN: So you can't go anywhere—

MS: Yes, exactly.

KZ: Either you go to your stop in Paris or you have a car and you come back or you got to wait 'till morning. So that's why a lot of them break into cars and try to get home with somebody else's car. [Laughter.]

So, I—but anyway, so I met this person who was working a lot with French West Indies Music, Ericisia [?], the frère [brother] de Claudisia [?], so Ericisia [?] had a whole label of world music. Mostly French West Indies, African, Latina. And he wanted to develop this hip-hop division. And he heard of me from Expression Direkt and the fact that they heard of this group talking well about a woman—because that wasn't the case for Expression Direkt at the time—he was impressed and he wanted to meet me, and we met, and he gave me a chance to create a hip-hop division with him. So we started with his compilation Planet Hop—1 and 2—I didn't bring number one—but we did Planet Hop 1 and 2 which usually gathered all the famous French rapper at the time—in partnership with Sky Rock which is like the French HOT 97, except that it's nationally—

MN: It's a national stadium—station, right.

KZ: And so I did that with them. And then he wanted for me to organize hip-hop—American hip-hop—so we thought that a lot of major labels had compilations with the big ones. You know, like the Jay Zs and the Tupacs, and the KRS ONE, but they didn't have like independent artists, so I figured I would gather both and bring them some independent crossing major and the designer had an idea of doing it based on the subway station of New York—

MN: Wow!

KZ: So that's how we did it that way. And he, well he focused Brooklyn I guess. [Laughter.] He liked Brooklyn better. But so we did that, and that's how I started really working more and more and being really in a really steady position with a contract, with a nice job at nineteen and you know, so—working with Americans and working on French hip-hop. That was my record label job. But outside of that, I would throw parties, showcases, and the radio station would invite me sometimes for me to give them new things or to talk about artists that I worked with, like La Génération or ADO FM and so I worked for a while, and did shows, and things like that. So when I moved to New York, I became—ADO FM asked me to be the correspondent from here, which I did for a few years. And then I became Sky Rock—the HOT 97 in French—had a show airing from Brooklyn every Thursday night here with DJ Spank, and I was the booker and PR for the show. I did that for a year, but it stopped after Sarkozy went in power in France. I mean, during the election everything stopped because hip-hop shows were talking too much politics. They didn't like it. It was too critical. And so we stopped the show. And now I'm working on a lot of different things, so we'll go—

MN: We'll go more into that. Ok, Maboula, how did you get involved with hip-hop and how did you combine with that becoming a professor?

MS: [Laughter.] My story is very different. I was not involved professionally in hip-hop. I just grew up with the music because I grew up in the projects. Right out—it's not the deep suburb, because you have a different—people usually make distinctions between the suburb that is close to Paris and then the real suburb—the one where you have, you know, transportation problems. People make a distinction between the metro, which is the subway, and the RER, which would be the equivalent to the, you know, Metro North or Long Island Railroad. And so the RER would be what takes you to the real suburb. What would, you know, the places in which you have trouble coming back to at night because trains and, you know, buses, stop at a certain time. So I grew up right outside Paris in the 13th—so it's in the, you know, south east of Paris, near Porte D'Italie, so that's another—[Laughter, Crosstalk]—And so it is called—the district is the zip code, because we use zip code, is 94. So Val de Marne. And there are a lot of rappers who come from the Val de Marne.

KZ: And so naturally rappers love to revindicate—is that right?

MS: Yes, yes. To claim their zip code.

MN: Street cred for zip codes.

MS: Yes. People who say here, “BX, BK”—

KZ: I'm 94, I'm 95—

MS: So people will say 94—

MN: Like in Berlin they talk about Kreuzberg 36, the number—

MS: Ok, exactly.

MN: So it's that. You're 94. I'm representing for 94.

MS: So I'm representing—

MN: You're representing for 94. [Laughter.] Do you have a shirt with 94 on it?

MS: I actually have one. In my neighborhood, there was a graffiti artist who would make shirts and they have one which is 94270, this guy, and this is for—

KZ: That's really funny because last year we were doing a French urban show. I had Psychopath [?] performing—remember I had sent you the invitation—in New York—and he was like, “Quatre-vingt-treize! Quatre-vingt-treize!” Which is, “93! 93!” And this African woman said, “Can you tell me what is 93?” [Laughter.]

MS: Well actually, yes. I pulled out the shirt, but I guess it was not clean for today. [Laughter.] I travel with it wherever I go. And yes, it was done by a graffiti artists from our neighborhood who is called [French name beginning with N]. So I just grew up, you know, having—knowing people who were rappers, or DJs, a lot of dancers too. I grew up with Radio Navare [?], which was one of the first radios organizing open mic sessions and inviting rappers from all Paris to come to their studio. And it was, I think it was, Wednesday night. And at that time I was maybe 13 or 14, so we grew up with that. And there was also, you know, vinyls produced that you could buy and you had tapes

circulating, so the information was just traveling. And then at some point also I became a dancer. So I was a hip-hop dancer.

MN: Oh you—really?

MS: Yes, I took dance classes with a woman who is called [French name ending with Jeudi].

KZ: Oh! That's funny.

MS: And she had a dance company, they were the first professionals. And it was hip hop dancing. And very, you know, b-boys, and b-girls.

MN: Do you have any pictures from back in the day?

MS: I must have pictures [crosstalk], but I'm not going to show you [Laughter.] But [Name of dance teacher], she had a very successful at the time, successful dance company, which was called Boogie Side. And at some point she gave dance classes in Paris. And this is—I went to take her dance classes and then I met people, and formed my own company, my professional company. And we would do our shows and that's how I met some of the rappers, especially Macobe [?] or people from 94; we actually met because we were part of the same festivals, like they would organize festivals, you know, with the rappers, and dancers, and that's how I met a few of them. So that's how I grew up. And then just the underground scene. Before any money was made of, you know, hip-hop music, you still could find places where people would have open mic stations and concerts and it was very ghetto, very underground. And some systems still because the two scenes were very close—

MN: The Caribbean—

MS: Yes, hip-hop and reggae were really, really close. Like on the compilation, for instance, you have Raggasonic, and Raggasonic is a reggae—used to be a reggae band, and they would do featurings with rappers, and the two scenes were just, you know, very close. So that's—

Dr. Jane Edward (JE): And when did you start dancing?

MS: Oh, I was 19—like '96. '96.

KZ: Same period.

MS: Yes.

KZ: We're the same age, pretty much.

MS: Yes, yes. I was born on the same year. So that's what I did. But then I was also already in college. And I always wanted to, you know, pursue my career in college, so I was just combining the two and then at some point I had to choose. And I also started traveling to the US. So—

KZ: France is different from here. It's hard sometimes to combine studies and work. Because our classes are more demanding.

MS: Yes, you have to attend, you have to—and so I was working, you know, part-time jobs. I was going to school, I was dancing, and then at some point, I went—I came to New York on a family exchange program, and that's when I started coming back and forth, going back and forth between New York and Paris.

Dr. Jane Edward (JE): When was the first time you came to New York?

MS: Oh, the first time in my life was in '91. Because I have family here, and then I would come, you know, during the summer every two years and then in '95 I came here for six months because I was in my first year—my second year—in college, and I was an English major. And I just wanted to practice my English. And then in '99, I came for a full academic year, and I went to the CUNY Graduate Center.

KZ: I came in '99 too.

MS: Yes. [Laughter.] Yes, I went to the CUNY, the graduate center. I spent one year, and since then—like I was already beginning my PhD, and that's what I've been doing back and forth. So I've tried to incorporate—you know, hip-hop is just part of my life, so then if you become a scholar, you just try to translate your experience of the culture into academic terms.

KZ: I did it backwards. I actually went back to school and I came here after working for years in hip-hop, I decided—

MN: Now one question is when you are producing French language hip-hop, does it have an international audience? In other words, is the French—will this be purchased in the French diaspora as well as in France, or is it not as international a distribution?

KZ: Well, I mean—when you say French diaspora, when you say French diaspora, you mean, well, I mean, Canada, Africa—

MN: Canada, Africa—

KZ: Belgium—yes, they would. Yes, they would. You actually have them even at the Virgin Megastore in Times Square, but it's imported, you know. It has no distribution here. But I would say like some have crossed over more than others, you know. Some have collaborated—like, for instance, in the case of Makobe [?], he has collaborated with many African Artists, so of course, you know, they will maybe play him a little more in Africa than others that are more street and more French-ghetto related, and they might not relate to as much.

MN: Wow. Ok, so are there different styles—like what you're saying, there's a French ghetto style that is really distinctive?

MS: Yes, because I think that there was an evolution, like in '96, there was a law that was passed France which is called, "the law of 40 percent" and that made it mandatory for—

KZ: Radio—

MS: Yes, radio, and TV—

KZ: — to play at least 40% of French music—

MS: French music. And that created a space for the rappers. Because before '96, the scene was mostly underground. You had like extraordinary rappers, such as MC Solaar who was the first one to sell 1 million units of one of his albums, but he was the only one. And then you had, you know, IAM—

KZ: He wasn't ghetto--

MS: Yes.

KZ: He was very poetic, you know.

MS: Yes. But he had—at first—he had, I would say—

KZ: One or two songs—

MS: No, but he had the street cred. Like he was on the Radio Navare [?]
—He was a rapper, he just had a different approach, and I'm sure that's what contributed to him being, you know, selected as the, you know, the crossover. But he had been rapping—he had that underground name. And then people would like him or not. So this '96 law made it possible. I mean, I think record labels had to fill in the gap for this space created for the 40% of music to be played on the—

MN: Oh! So, in other words, they would've been playing more American—

MS: Oh yes! It was a measure taken to counter the cultural imperialism of the U.S.

KZ: It was more even in music. I think our minister at the time, Jacques Tuboux [?], was even trying to change some of the words to French. Like sandwich, [crosstalk, laughter.]

MN: What would be “gat” then, you know? [Laughter.] So that's—I think I make a distinction between pre-'96 and after '96. So that's why I think it makes sense that when Karima speaks of her stories, she's able to say, “I was making a little money” or I was, you know, able to live on that because before that it was just—

KZ: There was only three who had made money before that was IAM, Solaar, and

[Simultaneously with MS] NTM.

MS: That's all for that. Yes, so—Yes.

MN: Now one of the issues that is very interesting is a lot of these rappers come from families which were Muslim. And how do they, you know, reconcile the language and imagery of hip hop with their—are they still connected to the religion? So how does that work?

KZ: Well, I have a funny story. For instance, [Name of French hip-hop artist], right? It's a prophetic example. He was in a hip hop band, Ideargie [?], in the beginning of his career, which I helped on the promotion of his album, and he's also on one of the first compilation we had in '96 here—that was his group, and here is here this year. And he's Haitian, but he grew up with Africans, and you know, I don't think he—well, from what he told me, he's not very aware of his Haitian background too much, he's trying more and more. And at the time, Ideargie [?] was, you know, expressing themselves, [inaudible] languages, and everything they were going through with the police, discrimination—whatever, whatever. And a few years ago, when I left France, he became Muslim. And there's a difference between those who were born Muslim, and those who become Muslim—they start to do a little extra, overboard, of what they're trying to do. And that's exactly what he did. He said, "I'm stopping hip-hop. This is not for rappers. This is not what I'm supposed to do, it doesn't go with the religion." Then he came back, he said, "Well, actually, I will rap, but I will be careful what I say—"

MS: "No more cursing—"

KZ: "No more cursing, and no instruments of this or that, just drums—" I mean something totally ridiculous. We were just like, "what?" Us born Muslim, it was just weird for us—

MS: He still made a beautiful album out of—

KZ: He did, he did. But it was a little, you know, like a little Lauryn Hill transition—

MN: Oh right, like Lauryn Hill [Crosstalk, laughter]—

KZ: Pretty much, like—Ok, but you're still good, but, you know. [MN Laughs.] And then, a few years ago, he came back. And this last year he put out this—and it's one of the best albums I've heard in the past few years. And there's no cursing, there's only words, but back to the real music and American, you know, type of production for hip-hop music, and it's great. And he's Muslim, he feels Muslim, but he doesn't—I think now he understands that you can be Muslim and not go crazy over music—it's nothing to do with the other. But he's respectful. Because he feels like he came with a message before and I think he doesn't want to sound stupid and come back with something else.

MS: And also so, and then, I'm sure that you can trace that to the, you know, African-American experience, and the mother of Malcolm X and this tradition and you know, Malcolm X can be seen as icon, and an idol, and so people will emulate that. But on the other hand, you have other rappers who just come from Muslim backgrounds, and they just negotiate that however it suits them. So some people will really rap about Islam and present themselves as Muslim rappers, and some people just happen to be Muslim, or just coming from a Muslim background, and do not make a big deal of it—

KZ: Yes, like Booba is Muslim, but he doesn't—he talks bad about certain women; he talks about—he curses, you know—but he still is very good in lyrics. But he still—it's

not, you know, as you would say, oh the proper Muslim thing to do but some don't take it that personal when they rap.

MS: And Booba was a part of a group called Lunatic, and the other half, the other rapper of this group was very Muslim—

KZ: He became—

MS: Yes, he became— but in his lyrics, like there was a balance between like the realness of Booba, for instance, and the spiritual, you know, spirituality, or spiritual-oriented lyrics of the other.

KZ: But I was more—

MS: He would always quote things like Islam, “I'm a Muslim,” “I'm a—”

KZ: That's true. And actually, a few years ago he shocked me because I was—I met him, he was a little young guy, a very pretty boy, type of thing. And a few years ago, I was in a plane, and I saw him, and he was all in white, with a long beard, and I was like, “OK?” [MN Laughs.] And I went to say “Hi” to him, and he didn't even give me the peck, he was like doing this. Almost like, “I don't want to hug you.” And I was surprised. So some take it to some extent, but not everybody.

MS: Because both were in the same band, and they were still able to negotiate the Muslim identity in different ways.

JE: [Inaudible] French only, or they use other languages like English or African languages?

MS: All types of languages. [Crosstalk] Yes—

KZ: French with some words—some words of all background—

MS: Yes—Arabic, you can find some word of, you can find some Caribbean Creole, English, yes—it's a lot of, lot of—I think that those foreign languages would pop up, unless you're dealing with people from the Caribbean who will just say, "I'm going to rap in French Creole," or you know, people such as Admerati [?] or other people like that. But otherwise, it just pops up. But it's yes, constantly—

MN: What about in the beats? Do people incorporate the music of their traditions in the beats?

KZ: Definitely. When I started hearing things here like Jay Z, "Big Pimpin'" and all the song like that, I said, "wow, the French people have been—French guys—have been doing this for years." Like all the things you hear with Arabic sound here, or Indian sound—French guys have been doing it forever. It's just not international like American hip-hop, so—

MN: Now when people are starting their rap careers do they do like ciphers where kids will stand around in the street corner and practice their rhymes? Is that something you'll see in—what's your number? 94?

MS: 94.

MN: Do you see, you know, people in the corner, rhyiming in the 94?

KZ: I don't think it was—I think it was different in France. It didn't happen on the street randomly. It happened in spaces. You have, you know, a space that is called the M.J.C, the Maison des Jeunes et de la Culture, so it's community houses, and it's sponsored by the city hall. Like the community city hall or the—I don't know, the office managing of the particular district. And there were all the spaces that were made available to young people. And this is where people would go and, you know, to do sports, and sometimes to start rhyiming and things like that. So these were the spaces. It was not—

MN: It not—it was more in these community centers—

KZ: Yes, I think it is definitely true. And I just think the reason for that, I mean, according to me, because I had some French rappers coming here. Passi for instance, came, [some static on tape] and stayed at my house for a week and is very famous, too. And he was one of the—and the French NWA in the early '90s, and then now he's more like a crossover type of a thing. And he stayed on the Grand Concourse right here. And I remember, we left Times Square, and we came to my house, and then the subway he was surprised how French—American guys would rhyme out loud like that. And I think the reason French guys didn't do that is because in France, the mentality is so different, that I think if you do that in your neighborhood, you might get some haters of people thinking that you're trying to show off. And if you do that in the train, it's just—the white French, stuck up people, they just won't—

MS: And also when hip-hop started in France, it was a subculture. It was not the mainstream culture even of the projects—

MN: Oh!

MS: Right now hip-hop is like mainstream and it's like the suburb is supposed to be hip-hop. But when you talk about before '96 and, you know, from the early 1980s on, it was a subculture of the suburb culture. So it's not as if everybody was hip-hop—

KZ: Right, you had also funk—

MS: Yes—

KZ: [crosstalk], African and—

MS: Exactly. So it was—it's pretty new. Hip-hop came and it was like—not all kids from the suburbs or everybody was just a hip-hop head right away. It was still a minority. And right now, it's like, you know, on TV, on the radio, and mainstream is hip-hop, but it wasn't—

MN: So you were at the beginning, both of you came in at the beginning when it began to go really mainstream.

MS: Yes, when it was exciting to go because it was this underground scene and, you know, for the—you know, it was kind an elite—like the people who were in the know, the people who got information, the news about the parties, the concerts—

KZ: And even—it opened doors for minorities or women like me because I remember every labels were looking to hire minorities who knew about hip-hop because they wanted to develop their division. And that's how I guess I was able to get this job, because they needed people who knew the language and understand what they were

saying and knew how to deal with them. And when I did Mr. R, it was in the beginning of independent rappers and he did 50, 60 thousand copies at the time that it was starting to be first, you know, consequent sales for French hip hop.

MN: No, but it's very interesting that, you know, you were two women who were involved in this in very much a male dominated genre. And you both—so was it hard?

KZ: I think it's easier as a dancer than it was in a business.

MS: But as a dancer I didn't—like my, the group I used to dance with, we were mainly women anyway. So we created our space, you know—

KZ: Yes, but men respected you as a dancer. I remember, like I'd see men and women dancing at Place Caré[?]

MS: Yes, yes, but it depends, it depends, because you have different styles. And were the—like maybe the second generation of the second wave, so we were a reaction—we were dancing in reaction to the first dancers. So we were not the old school and the, you know, the original b-boys and, you know, tumbling and things like that. We were straight, you know, dancing standing; we wouldn't go like break dance—

MN: You didn't do spins.

MS: No. And this was like, this is not—you don't do it because you cannot do it, you don't do it—when we thought the spinning was just overdone and boring. We just thought that—we thought that we were the vanguards, so you know. But then, yes, you could get respect as a dancer if you were a break-dancer. If you were doing anything else,

that was—that was another story. But I think that my experience also was into, you know, going to the, you know, concerts, and things like that. And this was really, you know, male dominated, but sometimes they would just overlook you, or you had to be with guys for, you know, for protection, but nothing really happened. It's not—I never felt because I was woman that I was just disrespected. You are just made invisible. People act like they haven't seen you. And you know—when you are going to those places, you have to dress a certain way. You have to behave a certain way. Because you know that you cannot be too, you know, girly. Because otherwise it becomes difficult. But if you get like this bigger attitude, you know, it's fine, and you can go wherever.

KZ: Well personally, I had a lot of problems. But I, you know, I'm very stubborn, so [MN Laughs] I—well being first being a North African, one, dealing with all the black artists. That was already for my North African community, a problem.

MN: So you had from your community a problem dealing with a predominately—

KZ: Yes, because if I was at a party or after show and a Moroccan or Algerian would see me, they were like, “How come you're out? You're family don't mind?” You know, they would say things like that. And I would say, “No. What about your sister, does she mind? You know, maybe you should check what she's doing in the suburbs right now, because I know what I'm doing here.” But, or, because I was one of the women who was around, you get a lot of, how do you say—advances?

MS: Attention by the guys—

KZ: Like, yes, they want to go out on you—

MS: Hit on you—

KZ: [Crosstalk.] And because you don't go for it, then they create a reputation of you sleeping around. So I had that. Apparently I was sleeping around with American artists because I wasn't sleeping around with French [Laughter], so I had to be sleeping around with somebody. So I had that. And I had—But it fades out because of, for instance, oh, where my name—I don't know if it's in this album or not—but I remember my contact and my name were on this album so I would get phone calls and curse, and things like that.

MN: People would call you and curse you out?

KZ: Bitch and all of those types of names, you know, [inaudible.] So I had those situations—

JE: And these people are French? Or they are from African origin or—?

KZ: Those who called me? Oh no, definitely no. They were either Africans or Moroccans—I mean, all African together. I'm sure. Because for them to take the time to look at my name, and wanted to call, and wanted to curse. Yes.

[Inaudible comment.]

KZ: Yes. I don't know. I mean, that's my feeling. And but it fade out. I remember one time when I first—I did this compilation and I started giving the flyer to some of the guys. And this one wanted to be smart and told me, “Oh, so now you're giving flyers out.” And I said, “No, that's my compilation.” And he said, “Oh. So some people do

work?” and I said, “Yes.” So I had to build my reputation so that people took—and then it fade out. You know, people stop talking. But in the beginning it was tough. And actually an American artist told me—Wyclef Jean—at the time, because I was touring with the Fugees, and he told me—I told him the situation, and he said to me, “You know, it’s going to happen. What you—you know what you’re doing—you’re family and your best friends know. That’s what’s important. If they speak about you—good or bad—they still speak about you. That means there’s a reason, so keep doing what you’re doing.” And that’s what I do.

MS: I guess my experience was just a different—it’s just that we understood that as long as you didn’t appear as a woman and as an attractive woman, then people would—you’re one of the boys.

KZ: I can’t hide my face! [Laughs]

MS: No, I know, but it’s not I’m just saying [laughter] I didn’t hide my face either, but it was just—you could go to any party and they were like ghetto parties and you—

KZ: I would dress like my sweater, jeans, sneakers—

MS: No, no—I’m not—all I’m trying to say is that we would go to places that could be considered, that could have been considered, dangerous, and you didn’t even know how the party would end up because, you know, fight would broke out, the police would raid the place, and things like that. But we just knew that we couldn’t wear heals, we just, at that place, I’m just saying—

MN: Right. You couldn’t wear like, dress like a hip-hop dancer with short-shorts—

KZ: Oh no—

MS: No, no—

MN: Like what they call the “video vixens”?

KZ: Never.

MS: Yes. All I’m saying is that we knew, we understood, that we had to change and adapt our behaviors and our clothes. That’s what I’m saying. Because otherwise, then, you would get—sometimes people would not even know—you know, if you wear the hood—you know, the people don’t know that you’re, you are a girl.

MN: Could a woman break in as a DJ or a rapper in this world?

MS and KZ: Yes.

MN: And they did?

KZ: Well we have a few.

MS: Yes, we have a few. We have a few. And I’m thinking- one of the—one of my favorite artists, and I’m sure that she wouldn’t even like me to introduce her as a woman because she wants to be a rapper—

KZ: Stay? [?]

MS: No, not even Ste, Ste has evolved. Casey. Casey. is just, to me, she is just the best female rapper of all times, but she doesn’t want to be categorized as a woman. She says, “I’m a rapper.” She looks even—she looks like a man. She doesn’t want to act like a

woman, and she has a very particular take on her femininity and her womanhood. But she's so—she's just—

MN: And how do you spell her name?

MS: C-A-S-E-Y.

KZ: But she never crossed over.

MS: No, but she's so good. I mean, I'm just saying she's great—and she's been great all the time. She doesn't want to crossover, but she's just the best, to me, the best rapper of—

KZ: We—I think we had three—that well majored in sales at the time, right? That was Ste, Lady Laistee, which did OK, and Diam's. Diam's she's doing even better than the guys.

MN: And how do you spell her name?

KZ: D-I-A-M, apostrophe, S. She was very underground, and now she's very pop, hip-hop. But you know, she's the one who opened doors for a lot of rappers because of what she did. She's from Malta. So she's light skinned. She's white actually.

MN: Malta. You mean the country—M-A-L—

MS: T-A. Yes.

MN: Do you—this whole issue that came up in the riots were people blamed hip-hop for it. When hip-hop started to become popular, was there a whole discourse about hip-hop and criminality?

MS: Yes.

MN: So talk a little bit about that. Was that—when did that start, that people began to think that?

KZ: Well I have one, the Ministère A.M.E.R., when they sing the song, “Sacrifice de Poulet,” Which is “Sacrifice of the Police.” “Poulet,” is more like—it’s not police—

MS: It’s a pig, it’s saying pig—

MN: It’s sort of a derogatory term—

KZ: Yes, Poulet is a term—

MS: Yes, like the Black Panthers will use the [crosstalk]—

KZ: Yes. “Sacrifice of Pig.”

MN: Sacrifice of—

KZ: They wanted to ban the song. But actually they did, I think.

MS: Yes, they had a fine—not for the song, they were attacking the song, but they didn’t censor the song. They fined them because of an interview in which they said some—I don’t know what they said—some things that were deemed too radical, and they were

fined because of that, but not of the song, when we knew that they were targets. So they did that, and that was in '96, '95. And so, I mean—

KZ: It was first started by them.

MS: Yes. And even NTM, they had some, I think they read some comments on stage during one show and they were, they were—I don't know, tried and found guilty, and fined for that. So even before 2005, there had been, you know, problems. Monsieur R was taking to court, Sniper, another band, was taken to court—

KZ: Le Caution—pas Le Caution—La Rumeur—

MS: La Rumeur was taken to court. I think one of the members of La Rumeur has just been found not guilty after three—it lasted close to ten years, the trial. And now it's the third and final trial that he had to undergo and he was just cleared of everything. But the story was just ridiculous it lasted for so long. So there's been this tradition.

MN: Now the issues with language are issues of criticism of police or more issues of cursing?

KZ: No cursing is allowed.

MS: Yes, but cursing the police is not.

MN: Oh. [Laughter.] So you can curse women, curse—

MS: Yes.

KZ: You can curse even American coming to European land on TV, curse on TV and they won't be—there's no censored song.

MN: So the censorship is only for criticism of the police—

KZ: Of the police, or the state—

MN: Or the government.

MS: The government.

KZ: But it's never said upfront. They don't say, "Well this song is going to be banned because they did [inaudible.]" They're just looking for trouble.

MS: It's like libel. They lied. They said something that—

MN: Oh, libel—

MS: Libel, ok, Libel. [Laughs.]

MN: So you can get censored for libel, attacks on the police, or attacks on the government.

MS: Yes.

KZ: And plus, when La Rumeur attacked the government, they attacked the Ministry of Interior, and he became the president, so—

MN: Oh, Sarkozy—

MS: Yes, Sarkozy.

KZ: Apparently his son, I work with his son, Sarkozy's son. And he's an aspiring producer in hip-hop so—it's very interesting.

MN: That is very strange.

KZ: It's very interesting. I actually—on channel one and five, TF1, they had made a whole documentary about it. Like oh my god! Do you realize this same—his father is banning a lot of rappers, and here he is, working with them now.

MS: But everybody [inaudible], everybody knew. Like they did the show not too long ago, but everybody knew that his—Sarkozy's son was one of the aspiring producers. But I think that this question of just censorship. It really happened, it really took place, when hip-hop became, you know, started to cross over, and started to reach more people. Because if you listen, if you listen to French lyrics from the, I don't know, early nineties, it was very—very—you could find very radical rappers. But it didn't matter because it didn't—nobody heard it. As long as they got, you know, on the radio, on TV, then it became a [inaudible.]

MN: It would be like Rebel Diaz here, who's a—you know, they're underground rappers. And they say all these radical things. But they're never on television or radio.

MS: And so they never get censored, and so the example of Ministère A.M.E.R. for instance—when they did this song called “Sacrifice de Poulet.” They were fined because “Sacrifice de Poulet” appeared on the soundtrack of the movie *La Haine*, “Hate”, by Mathieu Kassovitz, which was a big, you know, blockbuster, which was awarded many prizes, and so the movie was done along with the soundtrack. And the soundtrack was

one of the best compilations of French Rap. So this became a problem. But before “Sacrifice de Poulet,” they had done, you know, lots of other things that were even worse in terms of radicalism than “Sacrifice du Poulet,” they were never censored for that.

MN: Now one thing that I thought of in listening to your discussions is in the United States, enormous numbers of people from the projects, from the ghettos are in prison. Including a lot of the rappers. Is this happening in France, that a lot of people are going to prison?

KZ and MS: Yes.

MN: Really?

KZ: All the time. In and Out. [Laughs.]

MN: So like people you grew up with were going to prison?

MS: Oh because you have a lot of, you know, trafficking of all sorts, and you know, drug dealing, and you know—robberies—

KZ: They would go for prison for, you know, serious things, like—well, serious, I mean, per se—weed stuff, or robberies, or things like that, or Booba, who didn’t pay his Taxi and run—and things like that. But a lot of them would get arrested for things like not wanting to talk to the police when they asked them question, or wanted to give their papers, and then they fight, and then they keep them longer, and—you know, it goes, over and over for other things. But sometime—it was so common for them to be arrested that French rappers, when I was waiting for them on radio stations, would find that

excuse to me. “Oh, I’m late because the police stopped me.” [MN Laughs.] “I’m late because the police hold me.” And I couldn’t even feel like they’re lying because it happened so many times, like, “Ok, well let me know when it’s done.” [Laughs]

MN: So this is—so a lot of the things that are happening here are also happening there.

MS: Yes, because I think we have a problem with the, you know, the judicial system, and the prison system, and the—and it’s always the—you know, the prison system or judicial systems are always targeting the most underprivileged minorities, so if we’re dealing with, you know, that particular population, that they would be affected, and that is reflected in the lyrics, and you know, the prison as a space, appears constantly in the—

MN: So prisons are a theme in this music?

MS: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

KZ: Oh yes. They even give shouts to jail names—

MN: Oh so you have like your 94—like here you’ll give a shout out to Green Haven, Greenvale, Attica—

MS: Reikers—

KZ: Yes, yes. They would say, [Name various French Prisons, including La Santé]. I mean they would give—

MN: So you’re having shout outs to the prisons were people from their neighborhood are—

KZ: Yes. They even say sometimes—I remember Mr. R was part of a group called “Ménage-à-Trois”—yeah, but they were seven, don’t worry [laughter]—and one of them was locked up, and he was telling them, “we’re waiting for you, when you come out, we’re there—” Dah dah dah—that was part of the theme also in the songs.

MS: Yes, it always appears. You can get actually a very accurate geography of the French Prisons, because you can get all the names—they are mapping the prison of France. [Crosstalk]

MN: This is so much just like here. Because there is one song with the—“The Rich Get Richer,” with Chubb Rock and Group Home, where—I play it for my class, and they mention ten different prisons—

MS: Yes, yes—

MN: You know, and that’s the same—

MS: Yes, because even “Sacrifice de Poulet,” the song that we mentioned, is about a riot. A riot going on. And then they say that, at the end of the song, they would say, “And this is the same thing—the same thing is happening throughout all of France.” And then they list all the prisons. They list also you have the names. Bois D’Arcy, Fleury, La Santé, Frenes, everything. That’s in the song.

MN: Now so the—when—the police stop people and ask you for papers? When the police—and if you’re being stopped—

KZ: They want to see if you’re legal or they want to find an excuse to pat you up

[END TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE, BEGIN TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO]¹

KZ: to see what you have on you. They do that for guys more than girls—

MS: It depends, because, again, as I said, because I had this double life as a, you know girl [laughter] passing for a guy, of, you know, being out late at night with a group of guys—

KZ: Oh yes, yes, no—when you're with a group of guys, they have no choice. One day I was with a group of guys, they would include you. But by yourself, I don't think they would if you're not with the guys. I mean—

MS: I had like a very bad experience—I mean, a few—but I remember there was one big concert that was organized maybe in the late '90s, and it was a rap showcase—[Name of Showcase in French], I don't know if you remember—

KZ: Yes.

MS: So it was by the radio, underground radio, Génération. And they had had this, you know, open mic show, you know, weekly. They had been inviting this emerging rap collective that was called Time Bomb. And Time Bomb was getting very popular, and at some point, I don't know, somebody organized a showcase in the equivalent of a Virgin Megastore.

¹ Note the overlap from the end of tape one, side one, to the beginning of tape one, side two.

KZ: It was over packed.

MS: Yes. And people, because it was an underground station, and people thought that nobody listened to that. I don't—I don't know how it was planned, but they had this stupid idea to—I don't know—not clear the store, and just to have the showcase in the middle of the store. And what happened is that it was over packed, and it went out of control, and the store was looted and things like that. And as I was on my way to the place and I didn't know back then that it was—that it had been looted because I didn't know, I was on my way—there was a lot of police everywhere and we were three girls and they searched us, and they were looking for the CDs that we might have stolen from the store. When by then, we didn't know that it had happened. And so many times I have been, I have been checked by the police with boys but also alone it doesn't—it never mattered.

JE: The police that checked you, were they female or were they male?

MS: Yes, that was one of the issues that we had because they started trying to feel us, you know, to—and there was not a woman. And then we complained about that, and they said that—and we said, “Why are you doing this, you're not supposed to do this, and you're not supposed to do that--?” and they were like, “oh, who do you think you are?” and “Do you know your rights?” When you [crosstalk] racism, you always come up with this racism excuse, when we had been racially profiled, I mean—there were people in front of us, people behind us, and they picked us, and we were three black girls.

KZ: And the police was not diverse—starting a little now to be—but it was only white police. [Crosstalk]

MS: It was worse—

KZ: The only black person? The French West Indies guy. And you wonder if they were happy to black.

MS: Yes, but even those—they were—it's just like women police officers—it was harder for you—

KZ: They were even harder on you, even harder—

MS: If you see a black police officer, that was hard. Because we felt that they had to boast to their colleagues that there would be no connection. [Crosstalk] Women and minorities as police officers, it was worse.

MZ: And it didn't happen just for young persons. I remember my Dad in the morning going to work and he—this homeless ask him for a cigarette, so my Dad was like, OK. And then he said, "Oh hurry up!" You know, he attacked him like that, "Oh hurry up!" My dad was like, "Excuse me?" So my Dad put it back and the guy put his hand up—my Dad is a black belt Judo, so he put him on the floor right away, he didn't wait to see what he was going to do. The police comes, I don't know how come they came so fast, they usually don't. The police came and arrested my Dad instead of, you know, the French homeless, arrested my Dad, and took him to the post office. And lucky my dad was working as a bartender near this big post office in the 14th district on the west of Paris, and he was really friends with a lot of cops because he was giving them alcohol [MN

laughs] not just because he—and he called one of them, and he came to the station, he read the papers. And he said, “You’re writing on here that my client was aggressive?” My client—I mean my friend was aggressive? That he tried to take your gun when you arrested him? I know Mr. Zerrou very well for a few years. I go to his bar, and this is not the person that I know. So make sure that”—it was a woman cop—he said, “Make sure what you wrote is accurate, because I will not give up and I will look for those details.” She said, “Well maybe, I’m, you know, maybe I took it the wrong way, maybe we can drop things—” You know—it just doesn’t happen to young people—

MS: But if you don’t have any backup, then what happens? If you don’t have—

MN: Yes. If you don’t have somebody to, yes—

MS: —vouch for you, then it’s—you need to know somebody, otherwise it’s—it often goes bad—

KZ: Yes.

MS: And people, I mean, this can be lived as a form a harassment—

KZ: And when I came to this country, it took me a long time to be able to be nice to cops here. Because at night, they’re nicer, they don’t just come to you for nothing. So it took me a long time. One day a guy told me to come, I pull out my ID. And he said, “Why are you pulling out your ID?” And I said, “Because you told me to come.” And he said, “No, I just thought you were cute.” And I said, “Sorry, I’m traumatized.” [Laughs.]

MN: So the police are worse there than here?

MS: No, it depends. I think you have good and bad everywhere, but it's just that in France, it happens. People are trying to dismiss those facts and those occurrences as saying, "Oh, no, it's not true." But it happens. I've—it can go out of control. I've seen, you know, police officer—for instance, when you get on the train or on the bus in France, you have people whose job is to check the validity of your metro card. That's their job. It's not the driver or the police that does that. There's a special squad. They are not police, they are not—I don't know what powers they have, but they have the power to fine you. So it can be—you can be sitting on the bus, and then the bus driver will stop at a particular station, and this squad will come up on board and say, you know, they'll take out your metro card and they will check the validity. And so if you don't have a valid metro card, then they can fine you. And that's what they're supposed to do. But if you don't have any, you know, documents on you, they can call the police. And like they would call the police and they can take you to the police station just because of the metro card.

KZ: They feel if you don't have your ID you could be illegal in the country and you need to go home. They bring—they brought a lot of people back home that way.

MS: And so sometimes just because of the metro card, like the situation can get out hand when and you end up like at the police station for nothing. I remember that in my neighborhood one day we were on the bus with several people from the neighborhood. I had the metro card, and my sister had a metro card as well, and then there were a bunch of guys who didn't have anything. And when those—this particular squad came on board, they tried to check the validity of the metro card, and it was like ten or fifteen people who

didn't have anything. And they didn't have any documents or anything. And what they did is call the nearest police station, saying, "we are going to de-route the bus, and we are going to drive those people straight to the police station." Missing ten stops, they are going another way just to get the people to the police station. So they drove us there—I was there because I knew some people—and when we arrived to the police station and people were complaining in the bus because it had been de-routed, but it happens, so the police was waiting for us. They opened the door, and they asked the squad, "so who's who? Who has a metro card, who doesn't have?" And they pointed to all the blacks and Arabs. That's what they did. That's what they did. And people think about the suburbs as if it was only of, you know, North and Sub-Saharan Africans, but you have white people. Minorities in France are a tiny minority to many white and people tend to forget that. So you also have poor white people in the suburbs. And among the group I was part of, there were white people, but they were left out. Because they were not visibly identified—

KZ: Profiled.

MS: Profiled, and so the squad just said, "Oh, this one, that one, this one, that one." And it was all blacks and Arabs. So what I'm saying is that it's just an example, but it happens, and there are lots of other stories that can happen and here, I guess it's the same thing too.

MN: Now given that there are poor whites living in the suburbs, do you have someone in French hip hop who would be the equivalent of an Eminem? Somebody who—

MS: Yes! You have like NTM—

KZ: NTM is one French West Indies Guy and one Portuguese.

MS: IAM—like he had—the guy from IAM—he was Italian originally—

KZ: He became Muslim—

MS: He made his whole album about his Italian origin—and or I mean at least one song about his Italian origin and yes. You have the guy from Assassin—

KZ: You have Diam's, Who's Malt, like we told you—

MS: Assassin—Rockin' Squat is white, and his father was a very famous actor, so you have—

KZ: But do you we have an Eminem? No, we don't, right?

MS: [Crosstalk] Some just happen to be white and they're just rappers—

KZ: We have a big slammer—Encore Malade [?]-who's white and a really big slam—

MN: But poetry?

KZ: Yes.

MN: Now is hip-hop been claimed as an important part of national culture in France?

MS: National? [Laughs]

MN: You know, like does—or is it still, you know, contested, or seen as something that is—

KZ: Well it has—I don't know. Well for instance, when I was in Paris two weeks ago, because [inaudible] doesn't have much money, I spoke to my friend who works for all the big station on TNT satellite channel which is MCM and Virgin 17. And I told him, I said, he said, "Well right now, we're going to see for next year because we're mad slow." And I said, "What do you mean you're slow?" And he said, "We're trying to get away from urban music." So, I'm like, "Do you want to get away from urban music in 2009? How is that going to happen?" So it's still—[crosstalk]

MS: I think it cannot be right now. Like for instance, I think that's exactly why the tensions are, you know, unfolding right now. Hip-hop cannot become national because it's over represented by people coming from outside of France. And because those people are not recognized as French—would always mention the origin of Senegalese, origin Algerian origin, and they're not seen, or they're not constructed as French, so therefore their production, their artistic production, is not part of France. And that's exactly what creates the tension at the moment. It's not—it's still not—we might get there—

KZ: We're trying—

MS: But at the moment, it's still like this, you know, foreign music. Or of foreign origin music.

KZ: They try to please people by—like they gave at the last French Grammy awards the "Best Revelation of the Year" to Seyfu who's a Senegalese rapper—very hardcore—they gave him that, but—

MS: But it was the people's the choice—

KZ: It was the people's choice—

MS: It was not the—

KZ: But they could have cheated. [MN Laughs.] [Crosstalk] They knew the pick a month before. Kery James and Seyfu told me they knew. But the thing is, Keri James didn't go, because he boycotted because he said, "You still don't have a hip hop section for the Grammy awards?"

MS: And they don't even let them perform. Like they would be there for the awards ceremony—

MN: But they don't let them perform.

MS: Few perform. And because it was the people's choice. Like you have the regular awards, and then you have the award that is voted by the audience. Not the institution.

KZ: And then Virgin 17 was doing the hip-hop awards each year. And they couldn't do it anymore right now, they put it on hold. And I told the record company when I was in Paris, I said, "Are they serious?" And they told me, "Wait, wait. An Eminem or a Daim's come back [meaning a white] come back, they'll go back to it again."

MN: Wow. So do you think that this is connected to Sarkozy and the reaction to the 2005 riots?

MS: I don't think it's like Sarkozy, is just, like he's the president. He's the president.

KZ: It was even before that.

MN: He was reflecting something already happening—

KZ: Yes.

MS: Yes, exactly. Like they voted for him massively, and it was just the contrast between the two men candidates at this presidential election was so stark that I think that by voting for Sarkozy, like France really made a decision, and a conscious decision to go in a very particular, a very particular direction. And Sarkozy had been the one handling riots of 2005. So I'm not saying that it fueled personally, but it was just—

MN: Right, but there was a reaction against immigrants in France in—

KZ: Reaction came years ago when Le Pen, one of the most radical—

MS: Extremist, extremist right, like nationally—

KZ: Got 14% of the vote, when nobody even knew he could even get a few percent. Then people started freaking out—

MS: That was 2002.

KZ: Like, Wow.

MS: Because the way the presidential system work is that you have the election and you have, you know, a huge number of candidates. And then you have a first round, and the second round opposed the two candidates that gather the most votes. And so what happened in 2002, is that it was Chirac—former president Chirac—against Jean-Marie Le Pen, which means that Jean-Marie Le Pen beat any of the other candidates. And he is from—his party is called the National Front, and it's like—he was like—[Crosstalk]

KZ: Oh they're horrible—

MN: Like Nazis.

MS: Yes, [Crosstalk.]

MS: Yes, the guy's a revisionist and—so he come from a very extremist, you know, right, tradition. And he was the second runner for the presidential election in 2002. And then in 2007, we get Nicholas Sarkozy, who, in my opinion, took—used a lot of the rhetoric that was associated—that had been until then associated—with the National Front and claiming that he had defeated the National Front and that France could no longer afford this kind of thinking because it was too much. He actually used the same rhetoric and then was elected on that platform, and bragged about having defeated the National Front when he had become—I think he has become the National Front.

KZ: And he has a Hungary background. He's not even totally French himself, you know.

MS: But it doesn't matter.

MN: Now talk a little bit about the 2005 riots and how, you know, what that was like and then how hip-hop entered.

[MS and KZ discuss]

MN: OK, tell me when you're ready. Do you want to take a quick break? OK, five minute break.

[Break in tape]

MN: Ok, again: so the anti-immigrant sentiment was building with the Le Pen campaign in 2002. How did the riots in 2005 intensify this and how did hip-hop come into this as a point of discussion in the riots?

MS: It was took it the easy way. They said, “If people are rioting, it’s because of those rappers.” That’s how—that’s the shortcut that they took.

KZ: It’s because of the lyrics, what they say in the lyrics, but that wasn’t the case. That was more like—you know it’s funny, because I go to Paris off and on, and—but there was a time that I didn’t go for months. And one of my best girl friends, who I grew up with, moved to Istanbul, where her family was originally from. And she came to Paris, she looked at me, she said—it was weird—she said, “Do you feel what I’m feeling right now in Paris? Do you see something weird?” and I said, “Yes, but can’t express it. All I know is that it’s about to explode.” I felt something.

MN: You felt something in the streets?

KZ: Yes, I felt something like a tension, a—something negative. She said, “Do you feel—?” But we couldn’t put a name to it. She was like—we grew up in that neighborhood—“Do you feel what I’m feeling?” And I said, “Yes, but—it’s weird.” And I said, “I don’t know, but I’m not feeling good about this.” She said, “Yes, me neither.” We left, and then another girl friend of mine who used to handle the store LTD [?], she lives here now—and she said, “Karima, I just came back from Paris—oh my god, it’s so weird.” And I said, “Ok.” And then when I heard about the riots, I said, “Oh yeah, I’m not surprised.” Because I just felt myself when I was just going to visit—

MS: I didn't feel it this way because I'm always assuming that it can explode at any time and it should explode everyday. [Laughter.] But that's just my take on it.

MN: We have that for a quote. "It can explode any time and it should explode everyday." [Laughter.]

MS: No, but so I was in Paris at the time and to me, they were—I took the riots very personally because I had spent time in the U.S. and it might be a paradox, but I have enjoyed—I've always enjoyed more freedom as a black person in the U.S. than in France.

KZ: You feel more comfortable.

MS: I always felt more comfortable. I always felt like I had more opportunities, I always felt that people were, you know, more open minded and that they were actually interested in black people—

KZ: You feel like sky's the limit, even if you're a minority—[Crosstalk] which is not the case in France.

MS: And that you can do things-- In France, I always had this feeling that I was limited, you know? And even when I was trying to come to the states and I was—at first I came to the Graduate Center and then I went to Columbia University—I remember some of my professors wouldn't even think that I could get into, you know, Columbia University, telling me, "You don't—you just don't work into Columbia University." And I was like, oh, no, this professor is [inaudible] me.

KZ: This French comic, this French Moroccan comic, made exactly that—in the sketch—exactly that scene, saying—so he tells him, he says, “Djemel, what do you want to be?” He said, “I want to be a doctor.” He said, [Laughs] “Hey! Guys! Come hear that! Come and hear that!” [Laughter.] And he’s imitating the French counselor in school. “Come hear that! He wants to be a doctor! Come and hear that!”

MN: That’s like straight out of the autobiography of Malcolm X. When Malcolm X was in eighth grade and he’s the best student in the class, and he says, “I want to be—” Mr. Ostrowski, says Malcolm, “Oh, no—be a carpenter.”

MS: Yes, yes. Exactly.

KZ: Pretty much that.

MS: Exactly, so when my personal—I’m not going to over, you know, make over-generalizations, I’m not saying that the U.S. is the best country, but I know that on a personal level, and I also know women, North Africans and Sub Saharan Africans who are dear friends of mine, who have made it to positions here that they would have never reached in France. That’s a fact. One of them is working for the U.N., another one became a legal, you know—how do you say—a legal assistant?

KZ: Paralegal.

MN: Paralegal.

MS: Paralegal, and, you know, things like that we never dreamt about it. I mean, I dreamt about things, I always knew what I wanted to do, but people were telling me, you know,

“Be an English as a Second Language teacher, that’s good enough.” So after you get your bachelor’s you get the exam and you can—I was like no, I want to teach in a University.

It was like, OK. [Crosstalk]

KZ: It is the same when I—

MS: But so I spent a lot of time in the U.S., and I was happy in New York. I was happy in New York. And then at some point I came back to France. And all these, you know, I have fond memories—It was like going backwards. Like I kept thinking, “The French, the French—they keep doing this, they say they would stop doing that—” And then the riots broke out. And when the riots broke out, I was teaching at a University in France. Not in Paris, but in Tours. And I just remember—and that’s what I wrote in the article—I just remember that morning when they said two kids died in Clichy-sous-Bois, which is the place where the boys were found dead—two boys were dead—

KZ: It was that they were running away from the police because they got scared—

MS: No, no, no—that’s what they said after. The first—[crosstalk]

KZ: The official story was like they hide themselves into that box and they got electrocuted, because that was like—

MS: But they said that they had committed a robbery. I remember the first time, I remember, I was listening to Génération in the morning and they said two kids died running away from the police after committing a robbery. That’s the first information that—and then you got contradicting information. And then it turned out that they never committed any robbery and that they were just coming back from a soccer game. But I

remember the like, turning on the radio—"Two kids died"—apparently they were running from the police because they had committed this crime. And so after, you know, the riots broke out and—I just felt very, you know, personally, you know, offended and hurt by the people, you know, the lashing out of the—the verbal lashing out of what French people allowed themselves to say publicly. And when I say publically I mean in the media, all sorts of media. And they were always equating these problems, or these populations with foreigners, or immigrants, or even when I come to the States, people ask me, "Do you know about the immigrants?" We are not immigrants. We're not—that's the key thing. We're people who were born, for the most part, and who were—and even if we were not born in France, we became, at some point, naturalized French citizens. So this is not a question of immigration. This is a question of a particular, a specific portion of the French population that is being marginalized. And it's not about, "Oh you know, they have different culture." Yes we have different cultures because we have different origin. But this is not—it's not a citizen-against-foreigner issue. And people kept saying, "Oh you know, if they were back in their country, you know, especially with the crazy governments that they have in those countries, the army would have, you know, just killed all of them, and now they're happy. They're happy in France, and they're just ungrateful and that's why they behave like this and like that." And it kept—and it had started with the veil, actually, with the Hijab stuff—it started with the veil and the banning of the Muslim veil at schools because they kept saying, "These Muslim girls, you know, they're not home. They're not in Algeria. They're not in Tunisia. This is France." And they could never accept the fact that these Muslims and veiled girls were French citizens who were Muslims. So it's easy for them to just—how to say—delocate,

like, place the people out of France—when we are talking about French people, and nothing else. As if the immigrants—especially the illegal immigrants—would burn up, you know, cars and things like that. The immigrants—they’re trying to hide from the police, and they’re trying not to be deported from France. They don’t have time to riot. They would never. It’s a luxury to riot.

KZ: And between those two riots, I mean, they were doing a lot of surveys. The [French Name] were doing a lot of surveys on how—they put their resume with a French name, they put their resume with an African or Muslim name, and how that person would be called for a job, and how that person wouldn’t be called for a job. Or how that person would get the appointment, and then the next person goes and it’s not available, and the person goes after that and it’s available because they have a different name—

MN: Right. So Karima and Maboula would automatically—[Crosstalk] [Laughter]

MS: To me—that’s dumb—[laughter], No, it’s true. Because it’s different from the French Caribbean who are black, for instance, but they have French sounding names. But my name is Maboula Soumahoro, so I know that when I get a call, I know that they are cool with black people. [Laughter] Because it’s not like—you can’t—me, I’m black.

MN: Like Teairra Mari.

MS: Yes, Teairra Mari. [Crosstalk.] You know, “Oh my God, he’s black.” But me, they know.

KZ: [Crosstalk.] employment office to my brother, because I’m Kabi [?], so my last name is not too Muslim or too Arabic because we’re not. We’re still Muslim, but my last name

would not sound—so it's Zerrou—because Zerrou is a little confusing, you don't know where it's coming from, they told my brother at the employment office, “We just want to be honest, just but the K. Zerrou. Don't put your first name fully. That would help.”

MN: Oh my God.

MS: To me, it's like [crosstalk]—

KZ: And then my brother, my brother had his resume and his boy Alex had the same resume, except that my brother had three or four internships in New York at the U.N. with me, right? And Alex got a phone call for an interview. My brother never even got a phone call. And they had the same diploma, same degree, with additional experience in New York, I mean—

MS: And what I meant by, you know, how I've always felt that France was backward is that—we're still at the level when we have to prove the existence of those discriminations. It's as if it's a myth. So people, you know—

KZ: They deny it—

MS: So the survey that you just mentioned, I still find it crazy that people have to carry out those surveys, like we have to prove discrimination happens. It's still a myth.

KZ: Yeah they want to film it for TV, for media, to start telling people—

MS: [Crosstalk] It takes a lot for people to be convinced. Because they will say anything, “Oh, maybe they didn't like you, maybe you didn't have the experience, maybe—” No. You have to work twice as hard. You have to do everything better. You have to be the

best at everything for people to give you a chance. And when I was telling—when I told you that I get most of my opportunities in the U.S., that’s just a fact. And then I was able to capitalize on my experience and my opportunities in the US to be accepted in France. But for France to give me one opportunity—now they’re all, “Oh!” You know, Columbia University, PhD and everything. But everything I did, I had to do it extra. Like going to the graduate center at CUNY was not enough. No, I had to be a visiting scholar at Columbia University. I had to get my PhD and the same year, become Metro de Conference [?], which is a rank of associate professors, and it’s actually a contest that you have to take. And then you have to become like, English as a Second Language teacher which is also a competitive exam that you have to take, and I had to get this within one year. Which nobody ever does. Nobody ever does. And I did, and it’s like—it’s the only way for me to get some credit. And after that, they say, “Oh my god, you’re so good, and so—” But if you’re average, and you’re a minority, then you have nothing. You have to be outstanding. And people don’t—shouldn’t have to be outstanding all the time. They don’t have to do that.

KZ: And actually, Kery James, the rapper, did a song after the riots about that. Saying that, “From the ghetto doesn’t mean you have to fall.” And he made a whole song about it. I have the video; if you want, I can send it to you.

MN: Yes.

KZ: And it has—

MN: It’s called Banliues—[Crosstalk]

KZ: People from the suburbs. [Crosstalk]

MN: Oh wow. And I, you know, the other thing is—

KZ: And I have the video with the subtitles in English—

MN: OK, because then I can put it on that song, the translation site, and maybe people translate it—

KZ: No, it is translated already—

MN: It's already translated?

KZ And you—like the two first sentence, for instance, is like, “We’re not condemned to fail/ This is the song of the fighters/ Ghetto and proud to be/ I’m writing this for the fighters/ Those who doesn’t always do what we expect from them/ Those who are not always saying what we want them to say/ Because life is a fight/ For those upstairs and those downstairs/ If you don’t except that, or you can’t hear that, then you’re a coward/”—I mean the whole lyrics of this is crazy. Everybody was so impressed with this song. I cried the first time I heard it.

MN: I know, it's bringing tears to my eyes.

MS: That's the last song of the compilation that—[crosstalk]—that's the last one that—
[crosstalk]—who did the mix—

MN: So, Charlie, maybe you should play it tonight. Do you want me to lend you this to play at the—there's a—it's—what do they call it?—spring weekend at Fordham, so I'm going to let Charlie play this at—

KZ: And in the whole video, you know what happens?

MS: Yes.

KZ: People give each other's frame, prints in frame, and you have blacks, Arabic, whites from the Ghetto, who pass each other the frame, and you see the title of what they became. One is a teacher, one is a bank owner, one is a—and you see that they are successful—

MS: Success stories—

KZ: And he says, you know, being seen as potential terrorists and he's talking about everything. It's crazy.

MN: No, it's very emotional to hear this. It must be for you guys—this is so much like—except maybe even worse. Because I—this is what my friend from Germany said. And when I went to Spain, I was in a dinner party, and people, you know, this woman was making racist comments about children in the schools. So, you know, there's something going on in Europe that—

MS: Yes because it's settled—I think we discussed it in class—in Europe, it's settled.

It's not—Like, America was, the U.S., almost founded in race and racial categorization. In France, because I don't know that much about other countries—race is not accepted as a valid, you know, category of [crosstalk]—

MN: Right, no, I know—

MS: So people will think things happen to you because you're poor. Things happen to you because you're from the suburbs. Things happen to you because—because there was never any law banning any group of people—except for the Jews, during World War II—not saying, you're black, or you're North Africans or you're Asians, you're not—you're Asian and you can't do that—it was never written. So actually when you're fighting, you first have to establish—just like, you know, rape—you know, the rape victims who have to prove that they have been raped before we can even investigate the crime.

MN: Wow.

MS: So but what I was saying about racism is that we're still at the level when you have to prove that it exists. And people will tell you, "Oh, no, this is nonsense. This is—" Which is a very [inaudible] negation of your own experience. You will tell people—

KZ: Do you remember being young, being in the French train, and somebody, you pissed them off, you bump into them and you didn't apologize, and he look at you, and he's like, "Oh, go home."

MS: Yes, "Go home."

MN: Go Home.

KZ: The first thing they come to mind—

MS: "Why don't you people just go home? Where do you think you are?"

KZ: Africa is here! I'm black and I'm proud, and I'm—I have more years language, because French have colonized my ancestors. Not because, you know.

MS: Yes.

KZ: And that's very, very nice. And that's why hip-hop helped us actually express or hear what we already feeling or what's said all the time. So that's why I think we put so much into hip-hop, and that's why they hated it so much.

MS: Yes. And because [inaudible] you had the music of your parents, the traditional music, which, at some point, it was not cool because it was from your parents, and then you had the French music that you could not identify with. Not meaning that you can't—I love French Music as well as even though—

KZ: Of course—

MS: Jacques Brel and things like that—you have like great French lyricists that I like, but it's still not you, because it's not you—and then I think that hip-hop came and created this space for us to just tell stories and tell the experiences.

KZ: And like when Obama won—

MS: That's why hip-hop is so popular—

KZ: When Obama won, my client, TRACE TV, the CEO, Olivier, who's French West Indies, of course got requests from the French television to come—so suddenly they felt the guilt, you know [laughter]— they came to film him and they ask, they presented him as the only black French owner of a TV station—

MS: Cable TV, too—

KZ: Cable TV—he could never be in the digital satellite channel because he explained on TV, he said, “I was so surprised when I received the letter of denial,” because he said he, “I had everything in order, we had the public, we had, our system was put together to have—to be authorized on the TNT”— which was the digital station, and he couldn’t get it. He said, “I think we scare them because we represent urban music for the urban crowd and that’s the reason.” And he expressed during the interview that who finance him? Goldman Sachs from the U.S. Not a French bank, not a French company, Goldman Sachs from the U.S. And the reason is because he went to a great school with some French bankers who became his friend, and one of them was representing Goldman Sachs in France and spoke to his U.S. office, and he said, and the French guy from Goldman Sachs said, “In the U.S., we don’t care your color, we’re looking at what you—your project, the numbers, how much you can make out of it, [MN Laughs], and they sign you up. And that’s what they don’t do in France yet. And then they brought in Miss France—Sonia Mahor [?]² of the past year—who’s very light skinned, so pretty—she’s like a Halle Berry—And they told her, “Why you haven’t done more acting things since you became a Miss France?” She said, “Because every time they wanted me to play a suburb girl, a ghetto girl, or things like that.” It’s like so cliché, it’s enough. We need to change the mentality and they hope that Obama’s election might open—and then when I went to France, I told Olivier, “What are you doing right now?” and he said, “Oh, Sarkozy invited us for a meeting on diversity.” I said, “Ok.” So, we’re trying—

² Note that the Miss France of 2009 was Chloé Mortaud.

MS: [Crosstalk] I, too, have been working with the French American foundation for the conference that I've been organizing this past week. And they were actually—surprisingly, they were actually very interested by the topic and they gave me a lot of money—

KZ: No, they try, they try—

MS: —they gave me a lot of money because they're trying to understand because of the riots, because of potential future riots, they—I think that they are trying to understand because they have no choice and they want to keep the social unrest, you know, as low possible. But I don't even think that they have the capacity to under—I might be pessimistic, but they don't even realize how deep the issues are and they just want to use makeshift solutions just to make sure that things will not blow up again. But they don't want to go deep in to, you know, the solution. And people would say, you know, they would go to your friend and say, "Oh, you know, you on the TV channel" or "You heard the TV channel, you can do this." People would come to me and say, "You have a PhD, you're successful. You're traveling across the Atlantic, and you're doing this and that," but they point to the, you know, the one person, and this person is supposed to represent for the entire group—

KZ: They think an individual can do it all—

MS: —so I know what I've been doing, but I know how many people from my neighborhood and my building in particular, never will graduate from high school. And then it's easy to use me, "Oh, you're a ghetto girl, and you made it—" And this and that,

but what doesn't change for your family, for your relatives, for your friends, and people from the same, you know, the same parts you grew up in, it doesn't change anything. But then they will be quick to say, "Ok, we have educated, we have this educated black woman, and we'll use her for this or that," but it won't change anything. It won't change anything.

KZ: When French rappers come to see me here and I tell them—because they're travelling a lot, they're very open minded, they learn a lot, doing what they're doing—and I said, "How can you stay in France? Just tell me, because I don't understand it." They say, "Well, because that's where I'm from. And I'm never there. And that's what helps me stay there."

MN: Being never there helps me stay there.

KZ: They're traveling all the time, but that's where their residence, their market company, or family, the rent, and their paycheck comes to. So, they—you know. [inaudible] baffled. I said, "You're so not French." How can—he was in my last night, I said, "You hate it, why are there?" He said, "Because my money's there, but I'm not there." Now he moved to Miami last month. He was fed up.

JE: It's like the Canadians moving to America. So many people in Canada actually moved from there to here. And when they finished their studies—they can't take jobs in Canada. It is really tough. And when I was in my final years, I tried to apply for so many universities, but they always rejected. Rejected. Rejected. So I got it here.

KZ and MS: Yes, Yes.

MS: Yes. People—you can get jobs, but you will never get the jobs you want. But there are certain things that I like—I can never forget the fact that, you know what we have—we have different types of job contracts in France. And the one that everybody wants is called CDI, Contrat à durée indéterminée, which means that it's a life-long contract. If you sign that, they can never fire you—

KZ: I mean, they can, but they have to pay a lot— [Laughter]

MS: Yes. So everybody is trying to get their CDI. And so what you get, if you are on the job marked, you get the CDD—which is the limited—

KZ: Fixed-term. Fixed-term, Renewable Fixed-term—

MS: —contracts. And I can't help remembering that the only CDI that was ever offered to me in France was as a cleaning lady. When I was like in my early 20s and I was trying to get jobs for, you know, part-time jobs or during the breaks, just to make money because I needed it. I didn't want to get through the whole application processes for most of the positions that you would get for two weeks or two months. And they'd give us, oh yes, one interview, second interview—you won't even make that much, but they make it so difficult for you. So then I went to this place that I knew, and it was a cleaning company, and I said, "I want to work for you." And they were so happy with me because I would always show up on time and do my job well—because I was well raised—but at some point, the woman, my supervisor, she came to me, and she's like, "Oh, I have good news for you." [Laughter.] But if she said it as straightforward like this, because it was September, and you know, classes resume in September in France if you are in high

school and things like that. So I was pretty young. And she said, “Why aren’t you in school?” That’s how she started that. I will never forget. She said, “Why aren’t you in school?” I said, “I’m not in school because classes start in October.” (Because I was at the University.) And she was like, “In October? You mean—?” I said, “Yes, I’m a college student.” She said, “You’re a college student?” And I said, “Yes.” She said, “What do you study?” “Oh, I study English.” “What year?” I said, “Oh, I’m getting my Bachelor’s.” “What? But we have a position for you!” [Laughter] And I said—And she said, “Yes, you know, you work very well—” and this and that. And then I said, and she said, “So obviously you don’t want the position.” And I said, “Obviously I don’t want it.” [Laughter] And I think that’s the first time and the only time that I was ever given—

KZ: No but things—college wise, things have changed since our time. Like a lot of minorities around me are going to college for a while, but at the end they get nothing, so it’s kind of a waste of time sometimes. But funny you said that—Montpechu [?] in France, called La Guyonne [?]-when Obama won, they have no pity—like, they would go all out to expose even what French people do. That’s what I love about that show. And when Obama won, they said, “So, seems like black people are doing they thing right now. So let’s invite one very important black person [laughter]—let’s invite one famous black person from—Senegalese. Tell us your best position. You have a position in France?” “Yes! I’m the chief of the department of fish at the supermarket. The international supermarket of France.” You know, they were showing that, it’s still—yes. They’re showing that all the time.

But very interesting something about hip-hop and politics is this hip-hop rapper went a little crazy—Doc Gynéco [MS Laughs]—and he associated with himself with the President during the election. [MS Laughs.] He tried to release something now and nobody is even looking, listening—and even his old partners are not even looking at him.

MS: “I think our people from the ghetto the servers. They’re just complaining a lot, they’re lazy—and I used to be like them, but now—”

KZ: Yes. He turned his vest against his own people so and he supported the president. And he won. And there’s another one—Algerian singer, Faudel, who also supported the president. Since he did that, all my community was like, “OK, later. We’re not supporting you anymore.” So anyone who try to support the government in that way—it’s [crosstalk] to happen.

MS: Because that government—I mean, I was—again, I’ve said—I was just shocked. I was just shocked the way, you know, president Sarkozy campaigned for the—you know, the presidential elections. And the things they discussed—the, you know, the fear of the immigrant—it’s not new. We’ve seen that all over the world, all over history, but—no immigrants, and slaughtering, you know the Muslims, slaughtering sheeps in their bathrooms and, you know, oppressing their women, and you know—at some point—it’s very interesting to see when the authorities choose to pay attention to women’s [inaudible]. You know, things can happen all year round, and then at some point they will say, “Oh, Muslim and women!” You know, they will do that, but they will never question how women are being treated in other locations or in other, you know, groups—French groups. So they just did—I don’t know—very simply racist things and it was acceptable.

That's really what shocked me—that's really what shocked me during the presidential election and that's what shocked me during the riots. The things that people would say with no shame and not even trying to be politically correct. Say, "I will say whatever I have on my mind and these young people—they're just crazy, and they're savages, and their savagery is linked to the fact that they are of color and they are foreigners." Because the way they were constructing them, the way they were represented, always had to do—in fact, the negativity of these representation was always tied to the fact that they were not French. When they were.

KZ: That's why you have artists like him [?] or whatever who'd rather put forward the continent Africa then talking about France. That's what he did. He called his album, "My Africa." But he has a song on politic, he has even an interlude where they imitate former President Jacques Chirac, who he says, "Listen, I have—" (I remember that interlude because it's very funny)—he said, "I'm calling you because they're sending my people back to Mali, you have to help me!" He said, "I did you a favor last time already." He says, "I need another favor because they're sending them back to Mali right now." And he's talking to them, he's imitating his voice—so they—they try to take it to sometimes, as a—you know, if you cry about it all the time, it's not going to do well. So they try to joke about it sometimes, but they know the truth. And they get involved. I know a lot of rappers who get involved with a demonstration or who goes to Foyer [?]
—how do you call that?—those houses where people stay in the meantime while finding a place because they can't afford it—

JE: Shelter?

KZ: Yes, shelters, exactly. They go there because they want to take some of the shelters and send them home. So rappers go there, demonstrate with the people. Try to speak to the media—a lot of them are trying to help, but they're not very powerful and all that.

JE: And what about because [inaudible] in some African countries, now they have their emerging hip-hop—

MS: Yes—

JE: [Inaudible].

MS: I think they have their own scenes and because also of the, I don't know, immigration networks—some people who started in Ivory Coast, some people who started in North Africa or Senegal, then at some point in their life they will find themselves in—whether, you know, in France, or in Europe, or either in the U.S. and they will make new connections. They will make new connections. But I think that in the, I don't know, the—I think that through the, you know, French, on the French hip-hop scene, it remains really French—French produced. But then if you go in these more international networks

[END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO; BEGIN TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE.]³

³ Note the over lap from the end of tape one, side two to tape two, side one.

then you would find those African, you know, rappers, that would make connections with Jamaican artists, New York artists, or things like that. But the French, you know, the French rappers, they remain really French—

KZ: Except [crosstalk] a special concept—

MS: Yes. And then he would mix with African artists, but not necessarily rappers from Africa. Not rappers, it's like—

MN: Like Eusune D'or [?]

MS: Yes, Eusune D'or [?]

KZ: He has many famous ones in there. Like, he has Eusune D'or [?] He has—

MN: He's a singer?

KZ and MS: Yes.

MS: He has [inaudible name], [inaudible name], Salif Keita [?]

KZ: No, he has a lot of them. And when it comes to hip-hop, they usually sometime work with DJ Awadi from Senegal, who was able to work with both sides, but it's not a lot of them who crossover. Maybe D'Argie [?] because their manager was in Paris. Sometimes, you know, collaboration is all about location. So if the manager is in Paris, so she knows more of the French rappers so when they come to town, like when I was—I did D'Argie [?]'s promotion in the nineties, and I took them to Devant Du Monde, and I put them on stage with other French rappers. Because I was involved, so they ended up being mixed, but, otherwise, you know, if there is no business people involved, sometimes they might

just not meet. And Booba when he was in New York, and they were performing in New York—and Booba is our like French 50 cent, type of thing [MN Laughs]—Booba was here, and I wanted him to come and see them on stage, because I thought they would very happy to have a famous French rapper who sells millions to be there at their stage, and I told Booba, “You like?” And he said, “Well, it’s not really my type but I did it for you.” And I said, “Well don’t tell them that. Tell them you came for them. I want them to be happy.”

MN: Now Booba, you can sell millions of CDs—

KZ: He did.

MS: Yes.

KZ: And he was—he actually produced himself, so he made a lot of money. Because he was smart enough to keep his rights.

MS: I think it’s very interesting, Booba, because he comes from a collective, you know, a group of rappers and DJs and everything. They started in the early ‘90s and then he had—

KZ: And he has a white mother and a black father—

MS: Yes. And then he had this group called Lunatic, and then—he’s really good and he got all his street credibility and they were one of the first groups to not sign—to decide not to sign to any major label and to sell a lot. That’s what they did with—[crosstalk]—

MN: Lunatic—

MS: Yes, Lunatic. That's how they got airplay on radio stations. And they were one of the first very successful example of self-production and not selling out to the thing, so he's really capitalizing—

MN: Wow—

KZ: When the radio started to play him, they had no choice—

MS: They had to—

KZ: His street credibility was too strong—

MN: So he built up his own following without going through a major label.

MS: Yes, exactly. And I think that's one—[Crosstalk]

MN: Like 50 Cent was the same way, he made mixtapes—

KZ: People call him the French 50 cent.

MS: And now he's really capitalizing and just reaping the results of this past street credibility—because I personally don't think that his things are as good as they used to be—but he's playing on that, you know, on street cred, you know, capital that he built up and now he's selling a lot—

KZ: [Crosstalk] Except his new album didn't do well, but that happens when you do five to six very good ones, there's going to be one bad. But I'm sure he's going to come back strong again. He's very ghetto in the way he writes, but he's still very entertaining music wise, and he's still—

MS: And He's a good rapper. He's a good rapper.

KZ: He writes very well. And he's handsome.

Unknown Male: Who is the source of inspiration for French rappers? Who is the source?
What's the source?

MS: Well first—I think the first wave they listened to a lot of American rap. And there was a point where people would say it was as if they were just mimicking French—no, American rap music. But I think that—

KZ: They found their own after a while—

MS: Yes. After that, they found their voice. They found their own voice. And what used to be like—it used to be a good a thing that if one of your tracks had been produced by an American, you know, producers, but now, you know, some French rappers will even pride themselves, saying, “We don't even like the Americans. We have our own sound.”

KZ: Or you remember when they used to come to here to master their albums in New York, now they have [inaudible], everything is being done on [inaudible].

MS: And there's this way to say, we know, we don't even, I don't care for the Americans. I don't even look to the U.S. I don't even—so this part of, you know, the influence of—

KZ: Like Kery James, I offered him to come, and he told me, he will, he never came. But he knows it's the hip-hop Mecca, so he may have to come, but he says, “I was never

really fond—” I said, “I know, but Obama’s in power now, you can come, right?”

[Laughter.] And he said, “Yes.”

Unknown male voice: French rappers [inaudible] and they mature in the process.

MS and KZ: Yes.

Unknown male voice: And that gives us hope where other rappers can kind of learn and get exposed—

KZ: Oh yes, it’s the only market. France is the only market that is able to get hip-hop fast track. Yes, is the second [inaudible] market after the U.S.—

MN: To the U.S.? Wow. Now one other question, and we have to cut this off because we all have to go places. Do any of the rappers perform in front of live bands, or they all—?

MS: Of course.

KZ: Yes, big shows set out sometimes.

MN: Like do they have live music—no, like live musicians behind them or are they almost all DJs?

MS: Because you have—it’s so diverse. When you’re talking about rap music in France right now, you have people who still perform with like, you know, like, strictly hip-hop with DJs and dancers and [inaudible] and things like that. Some people will just have the rapper and the DJ. Some people will have live band. Some people—It all depends.

KZ: Or mix DJ and live band.

MS: Yes.

KZ: You know, it depends on the money—budget—and it depends on the stage— if you're on TV--

MS: And the artistic sensibility. Because it's just so diverse. You have different things. And you have trends—things that were done in the '90s were not done in the early 2000s and there are new things, new things.

KZ: And my friend Bella [?], he's the less famous out of them, and she said she didn't know him—

MS: Yes.

KZ: And the reason is because he came out recently, but he was there for years, but he came out recently. You know, he deals drugs. He's not—he's not signed to anyone, but he uses that money to produce himself. And what he did is, when I went to France on vacation, he sent out posters and flyers throughout all over the city. All over. That means you couldn't even do one block without seeing him. I don't know how he did that, at night, I guess, when the cops are not around, but he was able to do that. And that's really like, I guess that's the way of them to feel like they are doing something worthy. Even though they know they're not doing—whatever they're doing on the side is not maybe legal or right. This is something where he feels like at least it's going to be worthy of something. He meant something to be here. And that's what he tells me, he says, "All I want to do is do music and be known for it."

Unknown male voice: So the reason [inaudible] that you think the music [inaudible] behind the scenes?

KZ: Not all of them, but that's his case, for instance, because he knows anything else, it would be hard for him to find because he was already in jail before. So it's going to be difficult, so what else can he—it's already difficult to find a job when you have no record. So imagine with a record.

MN: So that's like three strikes against you, if you have a record, and you're from the minority in France.

KZ: Yes, of course. So I think—I understand how he's feeling and it's better for him to be in the studio. And I think he even stopped doing what he was doing—that was just in the beginning to be able to finance. But, you know, it's very street, it's very little. But I feel like it's still positive—like they're trying to do something else than what they used to do.

MN: Well look, I just, you know, we could go on forever. I want to say this is a historic discussion and I'm going to ask Charlie to make many copies and also I'm going to hire him to edit this because I think the two of you produce something that many, many people should hear. And I'm going to take it to Germany with me because I think, you know, the two of you should go to Berlin together and make this presentation. I don't know [inaudible], but it was a very powerful experience to hear this. And very moving, and thank you so much. We made history today.

MS: Thank you for organizing this.

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison and Dr. Jane Edward
Interviewees: Maboula Soumahoro and Karima Zerrou
Date: April 24, 2009

KZ: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW] *Note that some conversation takes places after the interview is over.