

The Emotional and Political Narrative of Irregular Migration in French Rap

“We will go wherever the pavement takes us; our story, we will write it ourselves.”

“We will go wherever the pavement takes us; our story, we will write it ourselves.” The Algerian rapper Soolking uses these sentences while recounting his own migration journey. In academic literature, migration is often approached as a rational “decision-making process,” analyzed through push and pull factors. However, in Soolking’s songs, migration appears not as a calculated choice but as an existential necessity. In his narrative, migration is not a dream. Because in order to dream, one must first survive. In his song [Dalida](#), he describes the world he left behind with the following [lines](#):

So I left my village, dreaming of a life just a little less miserable

Yes, I left my village so I would no longer hear them tell me:

No one will ever help you anyway, you’re already dead

You’ll spend your life in shit, and your nightmares will replace your dreams

The world depicted in these verses is one where help never arrives, poverty becomes permanent, and the future is canceled. For this reason, migration is not a brave step taken toward the future. It is the final decision made in the face of the certain death that comes with staying behind. It is precisely at this point that harraga culture gains its meaning: identities, passports, and the possibility of return are burned, because there is already nothing left worth protecting.

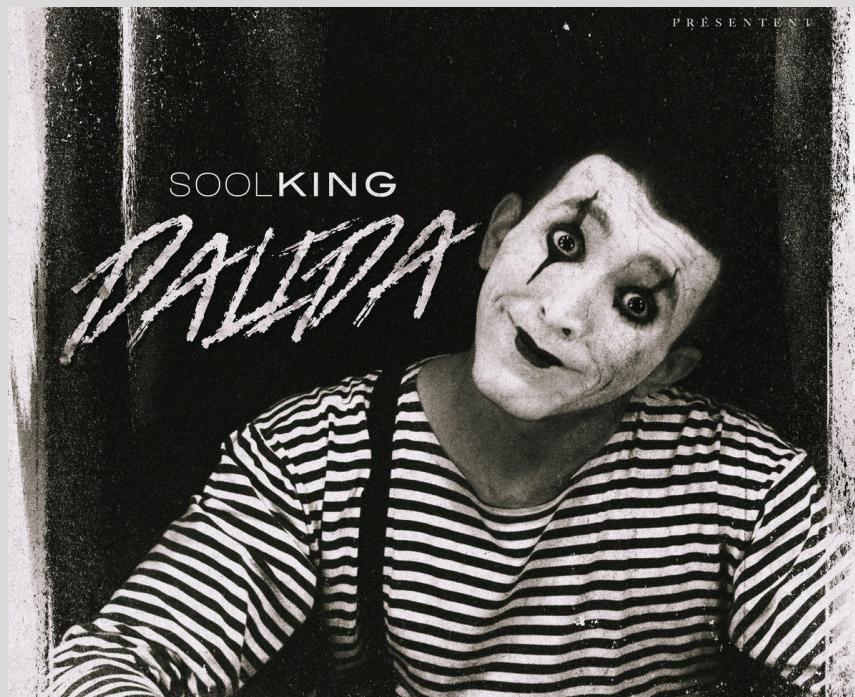


Figure 1. Album cover of Soolking's Dalida (2018).

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The Suspension of Emotions: The First Threshold of Migration

At the beginning of the migration process, especially at the moment of departure, a strong emotional intensity stands out in Soolking's narratives. Mothers' prayers, farewells, and the lover left behind are explicitly articulated during this phase. This moment appears as a threshold in which emotions can still be expressed and where the rupture has not yet been completed. Before the journey begins, there are emotions because numbness is not yet a necessity.

However, this emotionality is temporary. As the journey progresses and the question of survival becomes central, emotions retreat. In order for a body that constantly risks its life to remain standing, feelings are suppressed, even suspended. For this reason, in Soolking's songs, emotional expression is not a constant state but one that belongs only to the initial phase of migration. This rupture is crucial for understanding how emotions turn into a luxury within the experience of irregular migration, and why they fall silent in later stages.

The Sea as a Witness



Figure 2. Album cover of Soolking, *Sans Visa* (2022).

Source: © 2022 Affranchis Music / Hyper Focal.

His another song called [“Ya Ibahri”](#) (“Oh Sea”) transforms irregular migration from an individual story into the voice of the structural despair produced by border regimes. [In this song](#), the migrant is excluded not only from the control of human smugglers, but also entirely from the world of states, visas, and legal statuses. The metaphor of the “ticket” powerfully exposes the exclusionary logic of modern border regimes. For the migrant who cannot obtain a visa, whose passport is not recognized, or whose freedom of movement is legally obstructed, the only valid document of passage is the mother’s prayer. A body unrecognized by the state derives its legitimacy not from bureaucratic paperwork, but from spiritual and emotional bonds. Yet unlike borders, the sea accepts no negotiation and makes no distinctions. For this reason, the song does not sanctify hope; rather, it renders visible how border policies force people onto lethal routes.

*Young people are dying
while trying to escape*

*It’s over, once you choose
the seas*

*Mother, pray—your prayers are my
ticket.*

The Mourning of Those Left Behind

The narrative of migration becomes not only the story of those who depart, but also of those who are left behind. [“El Harraga”](#) by Cheb Khaled, one of the most important figures of rai music, centers on the mourning of a father who has lost his child to the sea. This grief moves beyond personal pain and takes on a political language. The phrase [“the future is blocked”](#) clearly reveals that irregular migration is not a matter of adventure or courage, but a necessity imposed by structural inequalities and sealed borders. Here, the sea symbolizes not freedom, but a world in which the land—the home country—can no longer offer life. The mourning of the father figure becomes a silent yet powerful political critique: what is lost is not only a child, but a society that has lost its future.

Migration as a Space of Resistance and Systemic Critique

Migration is also portrayed in French rap music as a site of political resistance and historical reckoning, rather than merely as an economic necessity or a personal survival tactic. France is depicted not as a “promised land,” but as a nation indebted to the regions it once exploited, particularly in postcolonial narratives. From this perspective, migration is understood as the inevitable outcome of historical continuity, rather than an act of benevolence granted by the host society or a condition of guesthood.

The song ["Lettre à la République"](#) by French rapper Kery James, who is of Haitian descent, is one of the best illustrations of this discourse. The song directly connects France's colonial past to the current presence of migrants, even as it sharply challenges the Republic's rhetoric of equality and secularism:



Figure 3. From the music video [Lettre à la République](#) by Kery James (2012), directed by Leïla Sy and Mathieu Foucher.

Source: Full Dawa Prod., 2012.

“Colonizers, torturers of Algerians,
That colonial past is yours.
It is you who chose to bind your history to ours,
Now you must take responsibility for it.
The smell of blood follows you, even if you cover yourselves in perfume.
We, Arabs and Blacks,
We are not here by chance.”

These lines portray the presence of migrants in France not as a coincidence, but as a historically inevitable outcome. In the line [“Nous les Arabes et les Noirs, on n’est pas là par hasard,”](#) Kery James frames migration to Europe as a direct continuation of colonial violence rather than the result of individual choice. Migration is thus represented as a consequence of France’s colonial past, with migrants’ presence understood as a historical cost rather than a “burden,” since France is depicted as an active agent that initiated migration processes and economically benefited from them.

This language of resistance is carried onto a more universal and existential plane in Keny Arkana's "[La Rage](#)." Having grown up in France as the child of an Argentine family, Arkana interprets anger not only as a response to injustices directed at migrants, but as a consequence of the founding violence of the modern world itself. The line "Anger, because it is man who created every wall" explicitly emphasizes that borders and walls are not natural phenomena, but political mechanisms constructed by human hands. It suggests that the individual who surrounds themselves with concrete is not afraid of nature, but of the Other and of the disorder they themselves have produced. The question "[Could he be afraid of nature?](#)" reverses the dominant framing of the migration as a "threat": the true threat is not migration, but the artificial systems built to suppress it. In this sense, Arkana's anger is not merely a repressed emotion; it is a reaction to the rupture in humanity's relationship both with nature and with its own kind. The expression of deep disharmony situates border regimes that criminalize migration within a broader ethical collapse. Finally, the question of where the dove—the symbol of peace—has disappeared to makes visible which human values modern politics has sacrificed in the name of security and control.

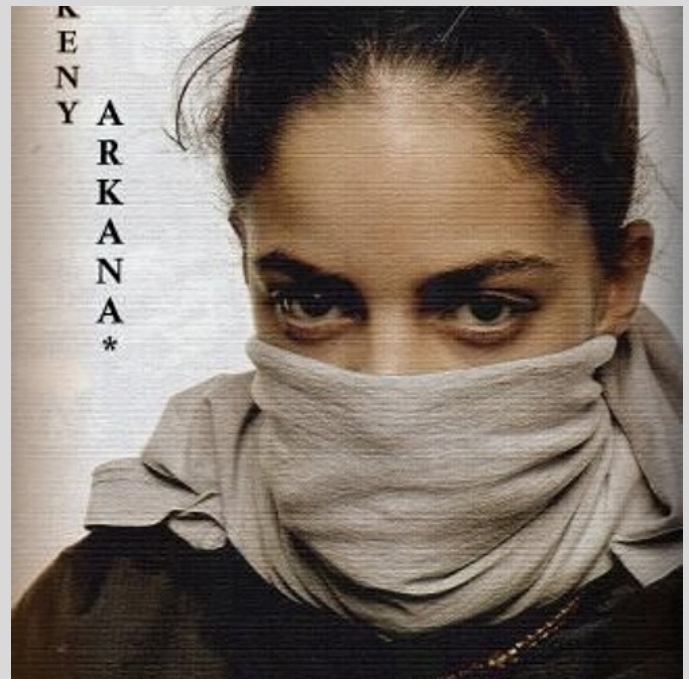


Figure 4. Keny Arkana with her face partially covered.

Source: Saber y Poder, WordPress.com.

"Anger, because it is man who created every wall. Barricading himself with concrete—could he be afraid of nature?"

Anger, because he has forgotten that he is part of it.

A deep disharmony... but from which world has the dove disappeared?"

Rap Music as a Site of Counter-Memory

When taken together, these narratives suggest that French rap should be understood not merely as a genre associated with irregular migration, but as an affective archive of histories that states refuse to write, acknowledge, or actively suppress. While official discourses tend to reduce migration to numbers, legal categories, and perceived security threats, rap articulates migration through embodied experiences—through fear, anger, loss, and vulnerability. In this sense, rap functions as a form of counter-memory that resists the binary framing of migration as either "successful integration" or "failed assimilation," instead

exposing the violence of border regimes, the unspoken grief surrounding migration, and the emotions pushed to the margins of public discourse.

Soolking's silence in the face of the survival imperative, Cheb Khaled's mourning in relation to his sea, Kery James's historical resolution, and Keny Arkana's universal anger all occupy the same political space but use different affects. These songs, taken together, underline migrants not only in motion but also in affect, in memory, and in resistance. Music, in fact, is not only a site of storytelling but of witnessing, uncovering, and resisting. Modern migration borders impose their particular kind of silence, which rap turns into an archive of migrant voices—preserving the very thing that is supposed to be effaced and which is intended to be remembered.



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