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Orchestrating Hip-hop Culture Online: Within and Beyond the Middle East

Anders Ackfeldt

Keywords

art, identity, Arab Spring, rap music, music

Middle Eastern and Islamic themes have long been salient features in the history of hip-hop culture (Daulatzai 2012). Since the early days of hip-hop Muslim artists have used hip-hop to deliver what have been perceived as Islamic messages. Well-known hip-hop acts have for example sampled the voice of Malcolm X, quoting Five Percent lessons in lyrics or, a particularly vivid example, the featuring of belly dancers, Muslims in prayer and Quranic verses on display in the music video for Eric B and Rakims seminal "Paid in full" (1987). Audio-wise, Middle Eastern beats have been used as the foundation for several mainstream hip-hop songs. One example is Timbaland's use of the Egyptian song "Khosara," as the foundation for Jay-Z's monster hit "Big Pimpin'" (2000).

While hip-hop artists around the globe have identified themselves with the aesthetics of American hip-hop culture, American (at times Muslim) artists have converged visually, textually and acoustically with the rest of the Muslim world.

In many ways the transnational aspects of hip-hop is embedded in the creation myth, which was formalized by, for example Jeff Chang in his influential *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (2005). According to Chang, African-American and Latino b-girls and b-boys came together for street and park parties in the Bronx, New York to the break beats of Dj Cool Herc's legendary Jamaican style sound system (the Herculords). At least a decade before the rise of the Internet, movies like *Style Wars* (1983), *Wild Style* (1983) and *Beat Street* (1984) inspired

youth around the world to start their own graffiti crews and to write their first bars. Around the same time, Lionel Richie performance of “All Night Long” backed by break-dancers at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics finale had a massive impact on the spread of break dance around the globe. The American television program “Yo! MTV Raps” (1988–1995) was another crucial element, which cemented hip-hop as global movement.

The rise of the World Wide Web wired together artists and the estimated 150 million plus hip-hop consumers in the world, forever changing the global landscape of the culture (Motley & Henderson 2008). As a result, the record companies lost at least some of their power over the ways in which hip-hop music was distributed and promoted. The hip-hop group Public Enemy not only provided the blue print for political hip-hop, they were one of the first groups to realize the potential of the new means of communicating with their fans; releasing their music in digital formats online, starting blogs and inviting fans to participate in the creative process of making their music.

Today hip-hop fans can meet, share ideas and music from most corners of the world. Beats and colabs are up for sale online, young and aspiring MCs can, if they have money, buy a beat from a famous producer or a verse from a famous, more established MC in order to boost their own career. True, hip-hop was globalized before the Internet became an integral part of public life but the Internet has certainly changed the ways in which hip-hop culture is produced, marketed and experienced.

This current issue of *CyberOrient* brings together academics active at Scandinavian universities focusing on hip-hop from different aspects and fields. From different perspectives the authors seek to make sense of the impact, functions and dynamics of Middle Eastern and/or Islamic representations in hip-hop music online, both within and beyond the Middle East.

Andrea Dankić’s (Stockholm University) contribution “Hanounch style resistance. Becoming hip-hop authentic by balancing skills and painful lived experiences” is a carefully preformed ethnographic study of dialogically constructed authenticity between a Swedish independent hip-hop and

reggae artist and her music followers. The article looks at how this construction in turn influences the music-making process, art production and artist's identity. The article analyzes the importance of Middle Eastern cultural identity, found in the music and the album imagery as a part of the construction of authenticity.

The article "Muslimhiphop.com: Constructing Muslim Hip Hop Identities on the Internet" by Inka Rantakallio (University of Turku) is the first in-depth investigation of the website muslimhiphop.com. The site is often mentioned when it comes to discussions on the relationship between Islam and hip-hop culture. Muslimhiphop.com features Muslim artists from multicultural backgrounds from Australia to Sweden and from the US to Iraq. The article discusses how Muslim identity and Muslim hip-hop are constructed discursively and how artists on the website navigate and balances their religious beliefs in Islam with their artist careers.

Mark Levine (University of California, Irvine & Lund University) provides a comment to this special issue that reviews the history of hip-hop across the Middle East. He attempts to provide a theoretical grounding for the role of artistic production in the revolutions using the work of the Frankfurt School theoreticians Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin on the production, circulation and consumption of culture.

Finally my own contribution to this issue addresses Islamic themes and semiotics in video clips published online. Grounded in a doctoral project that explores the complex relationship between Islam and the global hip-hop culture, it is my belief that Islamic themed hip-hop video clips provide an excellent illustration of the dynamic and changing nature of Islamic traditions. On top of this, I argue that they provide a window into positions of alternative ethics rooted in Islamic traditions shared by young Muslims in urban environments in the US and Europe as well as the Middle East.

This issue also includes two book reviews. Kalle Bergren (Uppsala University) reviews Monica Millers "Religion and Hip Hop" (2013, Routledge) and Johan Cato (Lund University) reviews "Turkish Metal – Music, Meaning, and Morality in a Muslim Society" (2012, Ashgate) by Pierre Hecker.

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Muslimhiphop.com: Constructing Muslim Hip Hop Identities on the Internet

Inka Rantakallio

Abstract

Although music is not clearly permissible (halal) nor prohibited (haram) in Islam, many young Muslims today make hip hop music and also portray Muslim identities in their lyrics. The article discusses a case study of how Muslim identity and Muslim hip hop are constructed discursively on an American web site entitled Muslimhiphop.com. The site features Muslim artists from multicultural backgrounds from several different countries. The theoretical framework of social constructivism along with discourse analysis guide the study: identity is seen as contextually and socially constructed.

According to the web site's official stance, if the lyrics and the artists follow the principles of Islam, then the music is permissible. Islamic hip hop is argued to be a positive alternative to mainstream hip hop, to strengthen a positive Muslim identity especially among Muslim youth by teaching Islam and to enhance a positive social change for example by fighting stereotypes. However, it becomes evident that many Muslim artists struggle to integrate Islam with artistic creativity as well as commercial success with religious beliefs. Muslims who make and listen to Islamic hip hop have to continuously defend the music to Muslims who shun it as forbidden and to non-Muslims who feel estranged by its religiousness. Muslim identity is constantly negotiated, multidimensional and situational.

Keywords

rap music, Islam, music, Internet, identity

Introduction

This article is a case study that discusses how Muslims represent and construct social and religious identities within the global hip hop and Muslim community in an online context, focusing on a single web site entitled Muslimhiphop.com. Muslim hip hop, a mixture of Islam and an American-born contemporary musical style (see for example Chang 2005; Rose 1994), is

a term that can be used to refer to any rap music made by Muslims, or rap music with clear references to Islam and being a Muslim. In this article Muslim hip hop refers to so-called conscious Muslims who clearly bring forward their religion in their music;¹ this is also how the term is used on the Muslimhiphop.com web site. As web sites build representations of Islam and of religious beliefs that Muslims have,² they are also involved in the social construction of religious identities, what it means to identify as a Muslim. The Muslimhiphop.com web site contains discursive representations of what Muslim hip hop should be and could be; by creating cultural norms regarding the relationship of music and Islam, it also constructs Muslim identities. Some examples of this will be provided later in this article. Previous studies have acknowledged that Muslim hip hop can unite Muslims transnationally in a new way and that Muslims are using hip hop for example as a way to challenge and deconstruct discourses and stereotypic notions of Islam and build positive identities.³ Throughout the history of hip hop, this musical style has been able to unite individuals and groups across national and ethnic borders.⁴ Besides hip hop's potential positive influences on Muslim identities, the debate on whether Islam and hip hop are compatible or whether music is *haram* (forbidden) according to Islam plays a large role in the construction of Muslim hip hop identities and requires Muslims to justify and negotiate the combination of hip hop music and religion. Popular views about Islam as incompatible with "Western" culture (which hip hop is also often seen to be a part of) also influence Muslims who wish to make or listen to hip hop music. The idea of "Western culture" is notably problematic and cannot be clearly defined because it is essentially a discursively constructed and imagined entity, and something that is in constant fluctuation. In this article, referrals to Western culture are made primarily from the point of view of the material, that is the Muslimhiphop.com web site and the way the idea is represented there. In the material, "Western" culture was commonly seen as problematic from the point of view of Islamic morals.⁵

The main material for this article is the content of Muslimhiphop.com (later also MHH), a website dedicated to promoting Islam and its values with hip

hop music as well as some other music genres. Chosen parts of its content will be analyzed using discourse analysis and based on the hip hop artist interviews, hip hop artist profiles and other relevant sections on the website, the following questions will be explored: how and for what purposes does Muslimhiphop.com construct and represent Muslim identities? How do 'Muslim hip hop' and 'Islamic' music become defined and how do they relate to (and interact with) Muslim identities? How do Muslims negotiate their religious identity with being a hip hop artist? In what ways do Islamic principles and the exigencies of commercial success affect a Muslim rapper? This article focuses primarily on the descriptions and argumentation used on the website concerning hip hop music, Islam and being a Muslim, in other words how Muslim identities are constructed and represented online and in the context of hip hop music.

The following chapter describes the research material, after which the theoretical framework and the method are presented and discussed in relation to the material. Some aspects of Islam's relationship with music will be discussed before the analysis of the research material. Finally, conclusions as well as some questions for further study are discussed.

The material

The principal material for this article is a website, www.muslimhiphop.com, which was originally created by Michael (Mike) Shapiro in the United States. The material was gathered in 2010 – 2011. In total, the material gathered from the site consists of: 20 interviews, of which four were audio interviews featuring for example the MHH founder; 64 artist presentations; and general (official) website sections that is criteria for artists, history and mission of MHH, links, and a section called 'Music in Islam,' which explains the stance of the web site concerning the relationship of music and Islam. In light of the fact that the focus is on hip hop music I excluded artists of other genres from the analysis even though they were featured on the web site.⁶ There were 64 artists classified as being part of the hip hop genre. Out of these 64 artists or groups, 26 were born in the United States,

four in the United Kingdom, two in Canada, one in the Netherlands, one in Belgium, one in Pakistan, one in Kurdistan, one in Iraq, one in South Korea, one in Australia and one in Haiti. One pair of hip hop artists working together came from Mozambique and Nigeria, and another pair was made up of an American-born and a Belgian-born Muslim. For 22 hip hop artists listed on the site, the country of origin was unspecified, but based on their profiles, some were clearly living in the United States and at least a few in the United Kingdom. At least 16 out of the 64 had immigrated at some point or were descendants of immigrant parents.

Theoretical framework and method

The method or approach for analyzing the material is discourse analysis. As Fairclough (2003) maintains, text and discourse are not synonymous: the former is a spoken or written product of discourse whereas the latter includes the text and the actual social occurrence and process(es) of producing the text.⁷ The approach here is essentially that of social constructivism where it is assumed that reality is constructed in social interaction.⁸ When I have applied discourse analysis to the material, the research questions were answered by analyzing the function of language use on the MHH web site. This means (1) looking at socially-situated identities ('who') in socially-situated activity ('what') and how they are negotiated in interaction; and (2) analyzing, in terms of the structure of the text, what kind of (grammatical) patterns of meaning construction and organization can be detected, that are differences in language use and argumentation in the texts.⁹ This entails looking at ways of classifying meaning, such as synonyms, antonyms, collocation, metaphors and nominalization.¹⁰ I have focused mainly on the analysis of pronouns, nouns, adverbs and adjectives. While nouns are used to name and categorize things, adjectives are mainly used to define or modify them (as attribute or predicate); thus they contain important information about how and for what purpose meanings are represented and constructed, included and excluded. Adverbs are likewise typically meaning modifiers.¹¹ De Fina (2006) notes that identities that people perform in discourse are "based on ideologies and beliefs about (...) social groups and categories and

about the implications of belonging to them,” while also stating that categorization is an important process in the negotiation and construction of identities because it reflects how people attach features to experiences and make them relevant for their identities.¹² On the MHH web site this can be seen for example in the artist interviews where the rappers describe what kind of hip hop is respectful of Islam and interesting to Muslims.

The theoretical framework, which is used here to discuss and analyze Islam and hip hop music in the context of the Internet, is identity representation and construction of religious group identities. Identities can be described as subjective positions, attachments or representations that one takes and which discursive practices create.¹³ Identity and belonging are processes that one constantly shapes and negotiates with decisions, actions and surroundings.¹⁴ During the analysis, the constantly ongoing construction and organizing of meanings by Muslims and how certain socially constructed features are emphasized more than others is explored. However, this does not entail only meaning inclusion; identification also always signifies division, exclusion and difference making between individuals and groups, and sometimes identities are not chosen but imposed as part of social or structural power play.¹⁵ This kind of differentiation through meaning exclusion is clearly seen on the MHH web site, as for example the mission and the criteria for artists later in this article demonstrate. By using this kind of discursive practice, the site characterizes Muslim hip hop as enhancing a Muslim identity and Islamic values and traditions. According to Fairclough (2003), what one commits to in textual interaction is part of who one is and how the world and others are represented; because one’s sense of self is always related to interaction with other people, identities are social and relational also in text.¹⁶

When discussing Muslim identities, Bayat and Herrera (2010) note that especially after 9/11 and the increased islamophobia¹⁷ which ensued, many youth in Muslim minorities have been labeled as Muslims first and foremost, with any other identity they associate with coming second – such as American for example. In addition some young Muslims have asserted a

clearer identification to Islam as well as a stronger Muslim group identity.¹⁸ The 9/11 events and global Islamic terrorism forced Muslims to answer questions like what is Islam, what does being a Muslim mean, and is Islam an inherently violent religion.¹⁹ Hip hop, among other means of self-expression, became part of this identity negotiation work and also a tool for fighting stereotypes. Also the founder of Muslimhiphop.com, Michael Shapiro, explains in one of his interviews featured on the MHH web site about how he was inspired to fight against stereotypes after reading accusations of featuring pro-terrorism rap on his site.²⁰

Islam, music and hip hop

The Qur'an is ambiguous about the permissibility of music, yet it does not explicitly deny music. In some hadiths (collection of Prophet Muhammad's acts and sayings) the prophet can be interpreted to allow certain music but mostly the hadiths are vague like the Qur'an; this is also due to variance in the interpretation of the meaning of Arabic terms. Many famous Muslim scholars have opposed music during the centuries; for example Ibn Abi'l-Dunya claims it to be a distraction from pious life. Ibn Taymiyya explained the prohibition of music to be due to its capability to incite pleasure and excitement and thus lead away from any rational thinking, stating also that the Qur'an would explicitly state it if music was central to Islam; yet he also allowed chanting of poems and singing at weddings as this was allowed by the Prophet.²¹ The Sufis are an example of a group within Islam that has continued their musical tradition as part of spiritual practice and music has remained a central aspect of their religiousness through centuries despite the debate about music's permissibility. Ibn Taymiyya, along with Ibn al-Djawzi considered this heretical.²²

Many theologians also expressed less harsh views. Ibn Radjab allowed music if the content was chaste. Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali concluded that, based on the analogous and legal arguments, music is allowed but only on certain occasions such as to evoke love of God and bring joy, depending on the circumstances. He considered some instruments (wind and string instru-

ments) as prohibited, and also some music performed by women if its purpose is seductive, listening to music without a specific purpose other than listening as well music that leads to or is associated with the consumption of wine. The text, or poetry in the song, should not be condemned if the content is morally permissible, and if music leads towards God then it is recommended and listening is *halal*, permissible. Like Ibn Taymiyyah, al-Ghazali's argumentation rests on the Qur'an and the hadiths, but he also elaborated on the potential beneficial effects of music. Ibn Abd Rabbihi also argued for the benefits of music, focusing less on whether music is allowed or not. He also links music to poetry which is allowed.²³ Some Muslim theologians, including al-Ghazali and Abu Nas al-Sarj, state that poetry and songs may be more attractive than the Qur'an due to more extensive expressivity in terms of melody and rhythm; however, this has also been interpreted to mean that music competes with the Qur'an.²⁴

Two of Islam's American offshoots, Nation of Islam (NOI) and the Five Percenters, have strongly influenced hip hop during its entire history. Hip hop music made by artists who belong to one of these groups has sometimes been termed Muslim hip hop. Hip hop music made by Muslims who do not necessarily include Islam in their lyrics has also been categorized as Muslim hip hop. These two forms of Muslim hip hop are separated here from Islamic hip hop or 'conscious' Muslims that is hip hop made by orthodox Muslims, who explicitly include Islam in their lyrics.²⁵ During the analysis I have also formulated another way of differentiating between the terms; I frequently use Muslim hip hop when referring to the artists ("Muslim" describing the authors and performers) and Islamic hip hop when referring to the lyrical content. These distinctions are important for at least two reasons: to clarify the focus of this article, and to highlight the plurality of meanings of the terms that are used to discuss hip hop music's affiliations with Islam. Orthodox Muslims may consider the Five Percenters and the Nation of Islam heretical and non-Islamic due to their flexible theological interpretations, absence of structure and often free-minded individualism regarding sex, drugs and other moral related issues.²⁶

Regarding the lay Muslim views on music, there are many who do not accept music making or listening but clearly there are also those who do, and Muslim hip hop is one example of that. Orthodox Muslims often focus their critique on the many clearly *haram* (forbidden) elements of hip hop made by other hip hop artists, also members of Five Percenters and Nation of Islam, such as blatant sexuality, drug abuse, violence and crime, but also denounce rap's materialism and misogyny as undesirable and immoral.²⁷ According to Khabeer (2007), Muslim rappers often stress that they want to convey an Islamic message especially to the youth, and base their choice of music genre on the fact that the youth in particular listen to popular music such as hip hop; the youth use popular culture as a tool to make sense of who they want to be, but Muslims are rarely represented in it.²⁸ Muslim rappers may feel controversial about rapping or even consider it to be against their religion and identification as a Muslim, yet they continue doing it. Some say that only Allah can be the judge of rap's permissibility.²⁹ The issue of making music is thus not clear-cut, and Muslims cannot be divided simply into those who see music as permitted and those who do not, or even by those who enjoy music and those who do not. Both Solomon (2006) and Shannahan and Hussain (2011) note that some rappers also convey ideas of a shared Muslim identity and show global solidarity while de-emphasizing theological and ethnic differences.³⁰ Shannahan and Hussain argue that in the case of Islamic rap, it is not only powerful in uniting Muslims across different denominations but also different ethnicities by raising solidarity against poor socio-political conditions, in their study in Tunisia and in Arab countries in general.³¹ Similar discourses were visible on the Muslimhiphop.com web site, but, as the discussion above and the analysis below demonstrate, the compatibility of hip hop and Islam as means of self-expression is not self-evident.

What is Muslimhiphop.com?

Web sites typically have an "about us" section, and Muslimhiphop.com is no exception; the link to this part of the site is titled "What is MHH." It includes four sections that explain the site's purpose: 'criteria for artists,'

‘history of MHH,’ ‘mission of MHH,’ and a section called ‘Music in Islam.’ The stance of the web site concerning the relationship between Islam and music is quite detailed; instead of simply stating that music and Islam are considered compatible, this argument is supported with several lists that discursively render music beneficial and even necessary for Muslims (see further analysis below). To demonstrate what these lists look like, I have quoted two of these sections below.

A section entitled ‘Our mission’ contains the following list:

Promote the message of Muslim artists.

Set the standard and code of conduct for those who partake in Muslim hip hop.

Show Muslims there is a creative outlet for them to express themselves in a *halal* (permissible) way.

Counter the impression given by the media that Muslims are defined by terrorism which Islam condemns.

Prove that Islam and art, music and comedy can have a strong and appropriate relationship.

Speak out against the injustices committed against and by Muslims.

Share Islam with the world through the universal language of music.

Reach out to non-practicing Muslims who would otherwise never here [*sic*] about Islam.

(What is MHH 2011)

The mission of the web site connects several activities with Muslim artistry: *halal* self-expression, condemning terrorism and fighting stereotypes, communicating Islam to others. Several abstract nouns, such as ‘message’ and ‘standard,’ point towards larger understandings about the social value of Muslim-made music and its relation to society, politics and moral issues

(see especially the expression ‘code of conduct’). This is visible also in the last point of the list; the adverbs ‘otherwise’ and ‘never’ are discursive ways of enhancing an underlying viewpoint and of convincing the reader. It appears that two potential scenarios are presented: either the secularized Muslims listen to Muslim hip hop and in this way find Islam, or they do not listen to Muslim hip hop and remain in a state of ignorance. A similar idea is visible, but more implicitly, in the preceding point (about sharing Islam). The mission supports and legitimizes Muslim hip hop and the web site’s existence and their role as teaching about Islam and enhancing a Muslim identification.

The web site has a strict list of criteria for those Muslim artists who wish to be included on the site.

Official Criteria for MuslimHipHop.com Artists

- (1) Islamic Content: Lyrics significantly about Islamic topics are what separates Muslim Hip Hop from all other forms. Therefore, MHH does not promote artists that simply happen to be Muslim. Additionally, the message must not employ the use of profanity or senseless violence nor promote sects/division.
- (2) Professionalism: Professional-quality recordings, not dinky beats made with fruity loops.³²
- (3) Talent: We are showcasing mainstream-quality artists, not OK artists.
- (4) Approach: A “Muslim Artist” isn’t necessarily a career or occupation. First and foremost, it is a role a Muslim takes on to promote an Islamic message through music, only if they first fulfill their financial, familial and other Islamic obligations.
- (5) Public Conduct: Muslim artists promoted by MuslimHipHop.com must behave in agreement with Islamic principles. Any un-Islamic

behavior online or at performances is unacceptable and will result in immediate removal from this website.

(What is MHH 2010).³³

In criterion one, Muslim hip hop is defined as 'Islamic' lyrical content but it is also distinguished from other types of music. The meaning of 'Islamic' is not directly explained here. However, it is possible to detect meanings that are excluded from Islamic music and being a Muslim: the use of foul language or references to violence, putting a music career ahead of more important values that is family and economic stability, socially reprehensible behavior, advancing division (among Muslims). In fact, every criterion on the list contains some kind of negation. The actual meanings that seem to be referred to are implicit: promoting peace, family values and the unity of Muslims. Also, when looking at the collocation of the adjective 'Islamic' in the list, it can be assumed that the content and topics in Muslim hip hop are related to the message, obligations and principles of Islam. The list above creates an assumption that all artists featured on the web site fulfill these criteria and make *halal* music; this may affect the site visitors' views on the artists.

Even though being an artist is assumed here to be secondary to religious duties, the music must be of the same quality as those who are professional musicians. What constitutes 'professional' or 'mainstream' quality of music is not specified in the list. In the hip hop context, strong beats, a flow in rhyming and insightful lyrical content are often considered important.³⁴ It seems that these elements are described through meaning exclusion in criteria one, two and three, although 'mainstream' vaguely refers to talent. Michael Shapiro, the web site creator and a Muslim convert, also discusses this issue in one of his interviews.

The abundant use of nominalized verbs and adjectives ('professionalism,' 'approach' and 'removal') generalizes but also replaces activities with constructed entities that are tightly connected to each other due to the list format: identifying both as a Muslim and as an artist is possible, but Islam

precedes other identifications and this norm must be visible in the music. Several adverbs (e.g. 'first,' 'first and foremost') intensify this idea. Music seems to become a tool for the expression of 'Islamic' ideas more than an art enjoyed in and of itself; a Muslim must follow Islamic principles before their artistic dreams.

After the criteria, there is more text on the web site underneath a heading 'Further Explanation.'³⁶ This piece of text clarifies many of the ideas mentioned in the 'Mission' and in the 'Criteria,' while also referring to larger social issues and problems among Muslims as being the incentive for the creation of the artist criteria and a code of conduct. The view of what Muslim hip hop should be is justified also with a list of reprehensible elements in hip hop lyrics such as violence, profanity and racism, which are assumed to be the reasons why some Muslims consider music as forbidden. The text also mentions non-Muslim artists in order to distinguish Muslim-made or Islamic hip hop from other hip hop, while creating an assumption that currently, Islamic hip hop is not yet equal to other hip hop in terms of quality. The second paragraph draws a picture of Muslim hip hop in a way reminiscent of many nationalist discourses where a common identity is constructed on 'traditions' and 'values,' as here also these same assumed entities are mentioned. This construction seems to imply that there is only one "correct" religious interpretation about Muslim music and its content. However, the opportunity to give feedback about the site and to negotiate this interpretation and the criteria of 'Islamic' music and artist conduct is also offered to the visitors of the web site at the end.

The explanation contains a statement according to which the code is not a discrimination against those who do not abide by it and that the web site is not trying to 'dictate' what Muslim hip hop should be; yet, if discrimination is understood to mean exclusion, this is exactly what the web site claims to do in its criteria. It is also stressed that the web site tries to enhance the quality and public status of Islamic music by encouraging Muslims artists; the text creates an assumption that the quality of Muslim music would remain stagnant without the web site and thus legitimizes the site's existence.

Additionally, Muslim artists are required to communicate justice and morality in their music, a norm that is constructed with the nouns 'righteousness' and 'truth.' However, attaining commercial success is also valued (see expressions "raise the bar," "make a name" and "promote").

The 'What is MHH'-section of the web site creates a framework for a discourse about Muslim hip hop and Muslim music. Muslim hip hop becomes defined as respectful of Islamic values by containing only *halal* lyrics and as a way to express Muslim identities. Summarizing, the criteria characterize Muslim hip hop as enhancing a Muslim identification and Islamic values and traditions and because the web site promotes this kind of music, it, too, enhances these. The ideas that are mentioned above also support the subsection 'Music in Islam' on the web site which explains the web site's stance regarding the relationship of Islam and music.³⁷ Regarding the theologians' views discussed earlier, al-Ghazali's opinions would appear somewhat similar to those expressed on the web site; if the content of the music is clean and its purpose is to bring closer to Islam, then it is allowed.

The main discourses that are present throughout the web site, and which I will further elaborate on below, are already present in the mission and the criteria: the *halal-haram*-discourse regarding music's permissibility, the education discourse, the discourse encouraging social change and the commercialism discourse.

Education discourse

Many Muslim artists state that they hope to remind and educate Muslims about Islamic principles and values while offering a permissible form of music which Muslims and even non-Muslims can find enjoyable as well as morally and spiritually uplifting. Several artists featured on the web site specifically mention that by filling their lyrics with Islamic references, they are hoping to make dawah, that means educate Muslims and non-Muslims about Islam as well as support a Muslim identification.³⁸ On the web site,

Islam is often referred to as the message but also as ‘the truth.’ Douglas Pratt has listed various meanings for dawah which also include ‘propaganda’ and ‘missionary call.’³⁹ Muslims who are a minority in their home countries, for example in the United States, may also aspire to spread their religion or convert others in order to accommodate their own Muslim lifestyle.⁴⁰ Some artists on the MHH web site claim that their music has had an impact on people’s conversion to Islam. I have named these references as the education discourse. Muslim artists are discursively constructing arguments about their own music and Islamic hip hop in general as something that is educational, beneficial and permissible for Muslims and supports a Muslim identity.

Hip hop artists are sometimes portrayed as role models to the listeners of hip hop, and especially the youth because they use hip hop to teach and spread Islam. The below quotation from the interview of Blakstone, a group of Muslims with second generation immigrant backgrounds,⁴¹ indicates some of the reasons why hip hop music in particular is used to educate about Islam:

MUSLIMHIPHOP.COM: What inspired you to do Muslim/Islamic Hip Hop?

BLAKSTONE: The state of Muslim youth here in the UK and in the West at large was our greatest inspiration. Hip-Hop is the dominant culture amongst ethnic minorities here in Britain and the Muslims are no exception to this. But often the lyrical content is so contradictory to Islam that it causes friction amongst the youth who wish to express themselves and find an identity, and the wider Muslim community. The artists become the role models, the lyrics become the teaching ground for behaviour and personality. The result is a whole generation of youth that struggle to balance the values of the streets with the values that their belief aspires to. The change in behaviour is reflected in their view of the opposite sex, the treatment of their parents, essentially the criteria they use to define good and bad is not the

Halal and *Haram* but is instead dictated by their desires and the peer pressure they feel. This was the primary motivation for us, reclaiming back our youth and inspiring the future generation of this ummah through a style that they appreciate, love and understand.

(Stories 5 : Blakstone Interview 2010).

Hip hop is portrayed as understandable and appealing to the ‘ethnic’ youth in Britain, where the artist group lives. This is claimed to be due to its dominance in their cultural environment. As Muslims are assumed to be “no exception” when it comes to the power and appeal of hip hop, also Blakstone’s engagement with hip hop becomes justified as an effective means to an end, which appears to be the strengthening of Islam. Hip hop is referred to with the entity noun ‘culture,’ and not only as music, which gives it a more extensive and prominent status. Hip hop culture is constructed as a powerful tool for teaching, and anyone using it as having power to control especially the minds of young people; in this way, its effectiveness in spreading Islam becomes factual. The usage of the adjective ‘dominant’ constructs authority for the artists as well: because they use an effective tool for teaching Islam, the (Muslim) hip hop artists “become the role models” and thus exercise power.

However, mainstream hip hop lyrics are referred to as ‘often’ contradicting Islam and suppressing Muslim self-expression and identity building. The assumed contradiction is further stressed by juxtaposing “street values” (which can be assumed to refer to values usually conveyed in hip hop music) with the values of Islam (see also the terms *halal*, permissible, and *haram*, prohibited, later in the quote; this pertains to the *halal-haram*-discourse discussed below). In the fifth sentence, the active subject is ‘belief,’ an abstract concept, and not the youth. By using words like ‘struggle,’ ‘dictates’ and ‘pressure,’ the youth are characterized as being under several, contradictory demands. They are seen as being in search of an identity, which Islam and Islamic hip hop are implicitly assumed to provide. The description renders the youth passive (see “dictated by”). In this way, the need for Muslim hip hop to help

construct Muslim identities is created. Islamic hip hop is constructed as the permissible and positive alternative also through the characterization of the Muslim rappers: the artists are portrayed as teachers and (their) lyrics as authority for Muslim behavior and even for Muslim personality. The justification of the hip hop activity is topped with the artists' motivation to be "reclaiming back our youth" [*italics mine*]; with the possessive form, the youth are the malleable object of their educators.

Halal-haram discourse

Many artists on the web site appear to see the combination of Islam and hip hop as positive because together they are argued to become a *halal* (permissible), powerful and educative alternative to the mainstream hip hop, which is claimed to be very often *haram* (prohibited), for example full of references to violence, sex, drugs and profanity. The *halal-haram*-discourse or discourse on Islamic morals and values, what is allowed and what is not, is clearly connected with the education discourse discussed above; both are used to justify Muslim hip hop. Arguing for music's permissibility using the scholarly authority was fairly common throughout the web site, or more precisely, the scholarly division on the matter about Islamic music and Muslim hip hop; for example the section Music in Islam on the web site uses this argument.⁴² Links to other web sites are included as references to theological discussion on the matter. One of these web sites cites famous theologians such as al-Bukhari, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and Ibn Hazm.⁴³ It appears that the 'Music in Islam' section seems to be a disclaimer directed at those who claim that music making or some types of music are not permissible for Muslims to enjoy, by exhibiting that there is no clear prohibition against music in Islam. The interpretation on this site seems to assert that music is allowed as long as it does not contain clearly forbidden (*haram*) elements. As one artist puts his argument concerning music, "but for the most part some will agree if it reminds you of ALLAH than [sic] it is *halal*."⁴⁴ It is interesting that although some Muslim artists in their interviews evade criticism about their involvement with music by claiming that only Allah can judge them,⁴⁵ this argument is not used in the 'official' standpoints of the web site.

In one of the radio interviews, Michael Shapiro differentiates orthodox Muslims from the members of Five Percent and the Nation of Islam when he defines Muslim hip hop and what is allowed in it. In the transcription of the Radio Islam interview below, he is explaining about how the focus of his web site came about.

Interviewer: (...) Now, I know you started about two years ago and you said you actually shut down for about six months. What led you to shutting the site down for this short period of time?

Shapiro: Yeah, I mean back then I was a little less mature than I am now, I think uhm...

I: Okay.

S: I was twenty-three, and... You know, I just wanted to experiment, see what happens so I basically added any artist that was Muslim. I didn't really care too much about what he talked about or if he cursed or anything like that, and... But then, you know I, as time went on like, the site got really suc-popular and I was like the only one, you know, one of the only guys running things and like I couldn't handle it all and then you know... I don't know, I just lost my focus, like I was like "why the hell, what is this Muslim hip hop, it's just Muslims that happen to be Muslims that happen to rap, I mean that's all it is," so I just said "forget it," so uh... About six months went by, there was actually another web site that came up, uhm, in lieu of mine, and... But I really, you know, I really respected the fact that he tried to put it up but uh... It was totally not, I don't, I think it was totally wrong, the whole approach was wrong because he was having people on that were cursing, that were just like, Five Percent Muslims and Nation of Islam and all these just like, wack people in my opinion, that were totally spreading the wrong message. So, I said okay, I gotta have something up there that's gonna, you know, set a standard or criteria for

Muslims to, to know how to make Islamic music, in a way that doesn't violate the religion, you know? I felt that that was happening so...

(Stories 9 : Radio Islam Interviews MHH a 2nd Time 2011).

Shapiro's response begins with a narrative structure (see the repetition of the adverb 'then'). He explains going through a wearing period stressed with the repetition of the adverb 'only' during which he was in charge of maintaining the web site. With this, and by using the utterance 'you know' several times, Shapiro seems to beg for understanding for his loss of focus and support for his point of view about a standard for music. He makes excuses for his earlier web site and its less conscious musical orientation and blames his young age and circumstances. Shapiro also uses the first person singular along with many verbs of cognition (think, feel, know) throughout the extract, which highlights the subjectivity of his views. The MHH web site and Muslim hip hop in general are perhaps a very personal matter to Shapiro.

The extract further stresses the point of view that Islamic music is something other than just Muslims rapping. His condemnation of the other web site ("the approach was totally wrong") may also be a marketing strategy to enhance his own website and to attain support for his interpretation about Islam and music's relationship. The 'wrong message' of Muslim hip hop, which is here attributed to the Five Percenters and the Nation of Islam, seems to be contrasted with the "right" message that is mentioned for example in the criteria of the web site. According to Shapiro, 'Islamic' music does not violate Islam, which leads the listener of the radio interview to assume that the 'wrong' music (i.e. music made by the Five Percenters and Nation of Islam and which contains cursing) does. Shapiro accentuates his opinion about these groups and the other web site by repeating the adverbs 'just' and 'totally,' which seems excessive as already the value adjective 'wrong' and 'wack' are very powerful in expressing a subjective opinion, in this case condemning what is characterized as non-Islamic music. In this way, he also seems to be separating "good" Muslims from "bad" Muslims, and defines

what it means to be a Muslim and a religiously conscious rapper, what kind of Muslim hip hop is halal and what is not.

However, Islamic hip hop was not born out of nothingness; Muslim rappers have been acculturated into hip hop music, which previously did not have many religiously conscious artists. Part of its rebellious nature and history has always been the use of foul language and controversial topics, such as sexual encounters and drug use.⁴⁶ It would be impossible to become a hip hop artist without knowing what hip hop is and has been.

Social change discourse

There is a significant amount of discussion on socioeconomic and political issues (such as racism, power structures and secretarianism in Islam) on the web site related to Muslim hip hop and its content. These discussions pertain largely to a discourse which I have named the social change discourse; the discourse constructs a shared Muslim identity by creating a need for a positive change to the social and political issues that touch Muslims and Muslim communities. Muslim rappers are portrayed as being at the forefront of advocating this change as they rap about it. The main themes appear to be Muslim unity and fighting stereotypes about Muslims. Both Muslims and non-Muslims are seen as the cause of the current problems, but only Muslims, the in-group,⁴⁷ are addressed. Also some immigrants are clearly rapping for other immigrants. Michael Shapiro's argument as to why listening to Muslim hip hop is beneficial is that the Muslim rappers talk about experiences which Muslims are assumed to share: it releases Muslims from their sufferings ('cathartic') as 'outsiders' and 'outcast' and helps also other people with similar experiences to relate to one another.⁴⁸

The social and political issues are also claimed to be central in the music of Blind Alphabetz. The group members were born in Mozambique and Nigeria and have later immigrated to the UK.

MUSLIMHIPHOP.COM: What are some of the key issues you are tackling in your songs?

BLIND ALPHABETZ: Mohammed Yahya: we try to tackle the problems that mankind face on daily basis such as oppression by corrupt leaders, weak governing structures, poverty in so called third world countries, the rising of crime rate, the effects of a poor education system, the back lash of broken family trees, but at the same time I like to share what I think are the solutions to all this problems.

(Stories 19 : Blind Alphabetz Interview 2010).

According to one group member, not only does the group discuss the problems, they also offer solutions, which of course are needed for social change; this can make the group's music seem more interesting to many as the issues are global (see also the generalizing 'mankind'). It seems that many Muslims consider bringing up global problems important (instead of focusing only on local level issues), which may be a consequence of a multicultural background; for example, the artists in question have ties to more than one country. This may also be a result of Islam and the centrality of the ummah, the global Muslim community but probably also a result of networks of people that provide information about global level problems (many Muslims are immigrants, some fleeing from a conflict zone). The hypothesis about information networks would seem plausible due to the rappers' immigrant background and also the mentioning of "third world countries."

Also Muslims may stereotype Muslims, as seen above in Shapiro's interview where he discusses Five Percenters and Nation of Islam. Sister Haero, an Iraqi-born Muslim living in the United States and one of the few female rappers on the web site, explains what kind of stereotypes she has faced.

MUSLIMHIPHOP.COM: What is it like being a female Muslim artist? Do you get a lot of friction from Muslims?

SISTER HAERO: I love being a Muslimah artist, because so many people have stereotypes about Muslim women (we don't have fun,

we're not allowed to state our opinions or showcase our talents, etc.), and I feel like I'm helping to break those stereotypes every time I step to the mic.

(Stories 7: Sister Haero Interview 2010).

The question contains an assumption that she is reprehended by Muslims in particular due to her gender; the assumptions she lists, however, could also come from non-Muslims. The female rapper states that she has indeed had to deal with stereotypes that relate to her religion and gender. By stressing that people frequently stereotype Muslim women with the intensifying adverb 'so' and the adjective 'many,' she legitimizes her own music making as necessary in order to 'break' these stereotypes. She boldly claims to be changing this state of things with her performing, emphasized with "every time." The stereotype she mentions lastly in the brackets ('our talents') sounds informative but is in fact evaluative as it portrays Muslim women as having talent; this assumption further enhances the image of also Sister Haero's music as good because she has previously in that sentence included herself in the category of (talented) Muslim women with the pronoun 'we.' In this way, she asserts a double identification as a Muslim woman and a hip hop artist.

Commercialism and Islam: Negotiating Muslim identities and hip hop

Besides being Muslims, many of the artists have grown up with hip hop and thus see it as a natural part of their social and musical environment. Some also argue hip hop music to be a modern way of self-expression, and thus even necessary in order to evolve and improve and to avoid backwardness. Several artists on the web site claim that it can remind them and other Muslims about God, which is religiously plausible (see the education discourse discussed above). Many Muslim artists on the web site are African-American, and thus I argue that what Suad Abdul Khabeer has noted holds true here as well: many African-American Muslim rappers, and quite

likely other Muslim rappers, too, seem to believe that Islam's function is not to eliminate cultural heritage such as hip hop music but rather to bring out the positive features of both.⁴⁹ In this way, Muslims negotiate religion with hip hop music and artistic creativity. Muslims who have grown up around hip hop culture do not necessarily wish to sacrifice the music for the sake of their religion. This demonstrates that religion is actively negotiated with the social and cultural environments and other possible identifications. In the case of Muslims who make hip hop music and thus engage with hip hop culture, combining both elements, hip hop and Islam, seems to be the only valid option if they wish to create and maintain a positive religious identity.

Suad Abdul Khabeer has noted that many conscious Muslim artists find it contradictory to their religious values to be striving towards mainstream success when the most commercially successful rap is filled with *haram* topics.⁵⁰ Combining religious lyrical content with a good quality sound seems to be something that some or perhaps most Muslim artists struggle with in order to find an audience as large as possible.

Appraisal of the artists' religiousness, moral and talent in their profiles is very typical throughout the MHH web site, and it seems to be a marketing strategy. On the other hand, it is emphasized that being a Muslim artist is not essentially about creating a career. Michael Shapiro specifies in one interview that becoming mainstream is not the aim content wise, but on a quality level, admitting that some Muslims have made a full-time occupation out of music as he talks about records sales; yet, when Shapiro wants to create an image of Muslim artists as religious and following Islamic principles later in the same interview, he reduces their career ambitions by calling music a "hobby" while emphasizing their family and other Islamic duties as primary.⁵¹ By perfecting skills, a hobby can turn into a career, however, Shapiro's reasoning seems problematic as in the case of most people it is impossible to reach such a level of expertise and professionalism unless they persistently work hard at it (which would require a full-time commitment).

Shapiro seems to deny this reality in order to support his alleged identification with Islam's values and tries to build an image of the Muslim hip hop genre as respecting Islam. By stating that the artists should be or are at a professional or mainstream level, he creates an image of Muslims as equally talented, skillful and appealing as non-Muslims artists, which encourages people to support, listen to and buy Muslim hip hop music. In this way, the different aspects of Muslim hip hop and Muslim identities are negotiated and constructed situationally, which can easily cause incongruity between statements. Mostly, however, becoming a well-known, mainstream artist is portrayed as something worth striving towards based on the way artists are described at the web site and based on Shapiro's interviews.

Many of the artist profiles contain appraisal of the artists' career and achievements. "Namedropping," that means mentioning famous influences or collaborators, was very common throughout the profiles, and most of these artists that were named were commercially very successful and also 'un-Islamic' in the sense that has been described at the MHH web site. However, contact with non-Muslim hip hop artists can bring Muslims and non-Muslim hip hop aficionados closer together, and in this way, mainstream success may become a reality at least for some Muslim rappers. Some Muslims may not even want to distinguish themselves from Five Percenters and the Nation of Islam or it simply does not matter to them, even if they do consider these two as out-groups. It is also possible that other rap artists are seen negatively in some contexts (e.g. smoking marijuana at their concerts, one well-known example being Wu-Tang Clan) whereas they are seen positively as successful rap artists.

Conclusions

Islamic hip hop appears to be a result of a negotiation: it is used as a way to express a Muslim identity and identification as a hip hop artist. However, this kind of dual identification is not simple as some Muslims seem to consider that Islam must reign over musical artistry, or that music must

be rejected entirely. The demands of some Muslims, who see hip hop music as affecting Muslim identity negatively, can cause conflicts to artists who themselves consider hip hop music to support their identification as Muslims. It cannot be assumed that engaging in religious hip hop always results in positive self-identification and stronger sense of belonging to a religious group, nor is it a given that the critical voices in the religious community entail the end of Muslim hip hop. In the case of Muslimhiphop.com, the ethnic plurality of the artists on the site creates an image of hip hop as uniting Muslims across borders, but the criteria that the artists have to fill in order to featured there separates the “right” Muslim hip hop and rappers from the “wrong” ones. The division that may result from Muslims making Islamic hip hop appears to be two-fold. Firstly, it can divide Muslims based on their opinions concerning music’s permissibility into those who allow it in some cases, and into those who consider all music forbidden. Secondly, some Muslim hip hop artists are building a distance to non-Muslim hip hop (sometimes including the Nation of Islam and Five Percenters) due to its perceived un-Islamic nature as filled with profanity, sex, drugs and violence. However, artists are not homogeneous or consistent in their relation with music and religion and therefore, the meanings of Islam and hip hop and the reasoning behind their potential separation or combination varies. For example, a Muslim may consider listening to mainstream music or Muslim music generally speaking *haram*, yet he or she may listen to it anyway in some cases.

Islamic hip hop was portrayed on the web site as being positive and having beneficial effects on Muslim identities, such as instilling pride about being a Muslim. These were often the main selling points for Islamic music. However, Islamic hip hop was also heavily contrasted with mainstream hip hop, and the *halal-haram*-discourse was frequently employed in that. Most artists state that they are giving Muslims a *halal* alternative to the existing un-Islamic, *haram* hip hop, which often features morally problematic content. By constructing a general condemning attitude, they build a common identity for Muslims as opposing this type of musical content. *Halal* music serves

as a reminder of Allah, and as such, it also builds and reminds of a shared religious identity. Muslim hip hop was also claimed to represent Islam and Muslims correctly, as opposed to the mainstream media for example, and to fight stereotypes in this way. Yet, although the web site and many artists claim to oppose stereotyping, the juxtaposing of ‘western’ and Islamic and “mainstream” hip hop and Islamic hip hop was a recurrent theme there. Changing stereotypes about Muslims along with bringing Muslim unity were some of the social and political themes on the web site that were discussed using a discourse of social change; the discourse constructs a shared Muslim identity by creating a need for a positive change to the current social and political situation of Muslims and Muslim communities.

The power of music in educating has been noted by many throughout history; thus it appears logical that the Qur’an has been taught through recitation, and now Muslims claim to have turned to rap and other types of music for the purpose of dawah, as spreading Islam was frequently called on the MHH web site. However, it seems that making music, at least for some Muslim artists, is purely instrumental; it was referred to as a ‘tool’ and a ‘hobby.’ This might also be one reason why music is not always “mainstream” quality; however, there are many Muslim artists striving towards mainstream success. The exigencies of commercial success as well as peer pressure experienced by Muslim artists on behalf of the music industry and other Muslims are both important themes for further study.

One should question whether the themes that come up in the artist profiles and written interviews are what the artists themselves wish to bring up or whether they are Michael Shapiro’s selective views on what Muslim artists should concentrate on. The basis for this questioning is that Shapiro has the power to pick and choose the artists of the website, and he evokes many of the same themes in the radio interviews that are mentioned in the artist profiles and interviews. The website contains discursive representations of Muslim identities and Muslim hip hop and as such, it is necessarily partial, situational and subjective. One must be careful not to overgeneralize the

opinions and constructions on the site to represent all Muslim hip hop artists. Further studies should discuss the discursiveness of Muslim identities as well as different notions of what may be termed “Muslim hip hop” or “Islamic hip hop.”

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Notes

¹ Khabeer (2007) uses the term Islamic hip hop for this kind of music.

² Bunt 2009:1. Although it is tempting to suggest that the whole range of Islam is present online, it is important to note that Muslim immigrants and their offspring in Europe and America have much better access to the Internet than Muslims in other parts of the world, and most of these users are American Muslims. However, Muslim immigrants may also be more active in searching for a sense of belonging and a community such as the (virtual) ummah (the global Muslim community) due to their status as a religious minority amidst religiously and ethnically diverse societies. (Cooke and Lawrence 2005:23; Karim 2002:37, 51, 53; Zaman 2008:467, 470).

³ Khabeer 2007; Shannahan and Hussain 2011; Solomon 2006.

⁴ See for example Chang 2005; Rose 1994.

⁵ See also Khabeer 2007. Regarding the stereotyping of Islam in “the West”, see Quinn 2008; see also Said 1981. One example from the MHH web site is the American rapper Tyson: http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/1._Tyson_Interview, accessed September 21, 2010.

⁶ Despite the hip hop focus, the website features also Muslim artists from related music genres (pop, reggae, spoken word) as well as nasheed music (Islamic vocal

music very reminiscent of Qur'an reciting, sometimes accompanied by percussions). The total number of artists in early 2011 was 100. Most of them were male. The total number can change as artists may be removed from or added to the site.

⁷ Fairclough 2000:3–4.

⁸ Fairclough 2003:8.

⁹ Gee 1999:13, 80–81, 99.

¹⁰ Fairclough 2003.

¹¹ The grammatical definitions of nouns and adjectives here were formulated with the help of Oxford Dictionaries Online: <http://oxforddictionaries.com/>, accessed May 1, 2011. In the analysis, I have relied on Joanne Scheibman's (2002) classifications and ideas about the functions of these grammatical items on several occasions. However, like many sociolinguists, she utilizes R. M. V. Dixon's work (see for example Dixon 1991).

¹² De Fina 2006:354.

¹³ Hall 1996:6.

¹⁴ Bauman 2004.

¹⁵ See Bauman 2004:11, 38; Hall 1996:3.

¹⁶ Fairclough 2003:166.

¹⁷ Islamophobia can be defined as a discourse that creates prejudice and hostility towards Islam and Muslims (see Bayat and Herrera 2010: 21).

¹⁸ Bayat and Herrera 2010:20–21.

¹⁹ Roy 2004:23–25, 29–30, 33.

²⁰ http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/4._Radio_Islam_Interviews_MHH, accessed February 24, 2011.

²¹ Shiloah 1995:31-35; Shehadi 1995:95-102.

²² Shiloah 1995:35, 40-43; Shehadi 1995:102-110. Trimmingham (1971:242) also mentions Ibn Taymiyya as one of the jurists condemning the practice of music and dance.

²³ Shiloah 1995:35; 43-44; Shehadi 1995:106, 118-130, 132-138.

²⁴ Shehadi 1995:125-126.

²⁵ See for example Alim 2006; see Khabeer 2007. The term 'orthodox' here refers to those Muslims who follow Islam as a religion and acknowledge its basic tenets, that means Five Percenters are not orthodox in this sense. (see Miyakawa 2005).

²⁶ See Miyakawa 2005; Shannahan and Hussain 2011, 39.

²⁷ Aidi 2004; Khabeer 2007.

²⁸ Khabeer 2007:128-130, 134.

²⁹ Shannahan and Hussain 2011:53-54.

³⁰ Solomon 2006; Shannahan and Hussain 2011.

³¹ Shannahan and Hussain 2011:47-48.

³² 'Fruity loops' refers to a music production software; see FL Studio Online Reference Manual 2013.

³³ When I visited the site May 31, 2013, criterion number four had been removed.

³⁴ See Rose 1994; see Krims 2000.

³⁵ Stories 9 : Radio Islam Interviews MHH a 2nd Time 2011.

³⁶ What is MHH 2010.

³⁷ What is MHH : Music in Islam 2010.

³⁸ See for example the group 3ILM (Hip-Hop 3ILM 2013). In the interview of the group Mecca2Medina, who are from the UK, dawah is defined as “delivering the message of Islam” (Stories 2 : Mecca2Medina Interview 2013).

³⁹ Pratt 2005:194.

⁴⁰ See Armajani 2004:58–60; see also Bayoumi (2010) who writes on Muslim living in Brooklyn. Armajani (2004) translates dawah as “the process of converting people to Islam.”

⁴¹ See the group’s artist profile, Hip-Hop Blakstone 2010.

⁴² See What is MHH 2010. On the MHH web site, no scholars are mentioned by name. Most links to other web sites were expired or otherwise not working when I attempted to access them on August 5, 2013.

⁴³ “Are Singing and Music *Haram*?” 2013.

⁴⁴ See Hip-Hop DJ Cee Life 2010. I browsed through all the links currently available on the muslimhiphop.com web site’s Music in Islam section and this along with the link to Yusuf Islam’s commentary (formerly known as an artist by the name Cat Stevens) were the only ones working.

⁴⁵ See also Shannahan and Hussain 2011:49, 55.

⁴⁶ See for example Krims 2000; Chang 2005. Also, if one considers the web site criteria, it only mentions the public conduct of artists, and thus what the artists listen to privately is at least officially not a hindrance for being featured on the site.

⁴⁷ In-group refers to the group (or groups) which they consider to belong to, in a complimentary way. The opposite of in-groups are out-groups which are not identified with. (See e.g. Liebkind 2009.)

⁴⁸ Stories 6 : KDHR Interviews 2011.

⁴⁹ Khabeer 2007:131.

⁵⁰ Khabeer 2007.

⁵¹ Stories 9 : Radio Islam Interviews MHH a 2nd Time 2011.

Hanounch style resistance. Becoming hip-hop authentic by balancing skills and painful lived experiences

Andrea Dankic

Abstract

The aim of this article is to examine the dialogically constructed authenticity between an independent hip-hop and reggae artist and her audience and how this construction in turn influences the music-making process, art production and artist identity. It is argued that authenticity is constructed by the artist deconstructing the expected connections between on the one hand particular cultural belongings, lived experiences and ethnic origins, and on the other hand a certain appearance, style, set of values and behaviour. The representation of the Middle East found in the music and the album imagery is analysed as a part of the authenticity construction. The ethnographic study which the article is based on utilises qualitative interviews with the artist and her audience as well as observation in addition to analyses of multimedia content to provide a perspective into the dialogically constructed authenticity.

Keywords

Sweden, rap music, gender, Palestine, identity, music

Introduction

“Keeping it real” has become an essential goal for most artists in the music industry today (Barker and Taylor 2007:xi). Media and the internet are spheres where music is shared, consumed and created in the 21st century (Johansson 2009:141) and thus where authenticity production and consumption take place. This article is based on an ethnographic study conducted on the musician Hanounch, an independent reggae and hip-hop artist from Sweden, and her musical followers.¹ The research was conducted over the course of five months during the second half of 2010 and the first

half of 2011. Hanouneh's politically infused music is often linked to the Middle East and she has made several songs about the Gaza Strip, where she lived for a period of time. This article seeks to deepen existing understandings of how authenticity can be constructed in the relationship between an independent artist and her audience, musical followers, and what this results in.²

Becoming and being Hanouneh

Hanouneh means caring, considerate, thoughtful and pleasant in Arabic. Hanna, who learned Arabic during the periods when she lived in the Middle East and continued to study the language at university upon her return to Sweden, told the author that the word is often used in the context of a mother's care, to indicate tenderness and affection. Henry Diab, a lecturer in Arabic at Lund University in Sweden, agreed with this description of the word. Diab agrees that is a very positive word and explained that it comes from the Arabic word *hanun* (masculine) and *hanuna* (feminine) and claims the spelling of *hanouneh* to be the way he would transcribe the word from Arabic into Latin letters (personal communication, April 27, 2011).

Musical followers Big H and Alexander, who both work with music, associate the Arabic word *hanouneh* with musical ability. Big H is a blogger and radio show host in Saudi Arabia who promotes what he defines as "good music that doesn't disrespect your mind" (Big H, personal communication, February 14, 2011). When the author was discussing Hanouneh's name with Big H he described it as "a great name... Mixed in a way between Arabic & Western... I like it. Hanouneh means 'soft' in Arabic, in a way she's silently killing on the mic, softly killing it, like the Fugees 'killing me softly' lol." Alexander, a DJ and radio show host as well, did not know that Hanouneh was an actual word before the interview with the author. Alexander told the author that he found the name fitting to Hanouneh since he believes that she is taking care of her musical talent which he believes musicians should do.

Hanna claims that if she had chosen an adjective based on qualities she possesses she would not have chosen hanouneh since being “soft, tender, affectionate” is not how she views herself. Yet she told the author that she did appreciate the fact that the name is difficult to place but that it still indicates an association with the Middle East. This is an example of when self-identity, the way a person views her- or himself, is in conflict with ascribed identity, the way other people think of and view a person (Hagström 2006: 18–19). Hanna claims not to identify herself with the meaning of her Arabic nickname but rather the fact that it speaks of the Middle East, of which her statement that Hanouneh is “a natural Arabic nickname for Hanna” is yet another example. I would state the importance of this Middle Eastern cultural identity to be an example of the authenticity production between Hanna and her musical followers. Thus the word hanouneh contains in this context both the ascribed identity given by the musical followers – being considerate with one’s musical skills and talent – and a part of Hanna’s self-identity – the Arabic link.

Double-naming into being me

Nicknames can also function as ways of integrating in a certain setting or community (Holland 2006:101). Hanna told the author on several occasions that the Palestinian family she lived with in Jerusalem gave her the nickname Hanouneh among the rest of the family members. By being called Hanouneh she was constantly reminded of her connection to the family she lived with. The fact that the name Hanouneh was given to her by the family can be viewed as a symbolic act – a new beginning in a new geographical place as a part of a new community represented by the Palestinian family (Hagström 2006:84).

After years of having Hanouneh as her nickname within the Arabic context and community, Hanna decided to pursue her music career and therefore had to choose an artist name. The person whom she acknowledges as having chosen her artist name is DJ Lethal Skillz. She got in contact with him through MySpace in 2005 resulting in her becoming a part of the 961 Un-

derground, an international hip-hop crew with roots in Lebanon of which Skillz is a member. Hanna described the naming ritual to the author as Lethal Skillz saying: “Ah, well, we need to call you something so why not call you Hanouneh?” and in that moment her Palestinian family-affiliated nickname became her artist name as well.

The double-naming of Hanouneh in the two contexts of the Palestinian family and hip-hop culture in the Middle East works as a confirmation of officially becoming a part of several new communities (Hagström 2006:84–85) which becomes a part of the construction of authenticity by granting her the possibility of representing these communities through membership. The fact that the name was given to her by other people in the Middle East is another part of the authenticity production. This is not a name she made up on her own in any way, which is the case for many artists, and I believe this is an important aspect since it adds to the impression of being more real and authentic. One example of this is when Hanna describes Hanouneh to the author as “moderately her own”:

The name chose me which is good since I’ve never thought of myself as an artist... It would have been weird to call myself by my first name and Hanna Cinthio feels very associated with the family, so it’s really nice to have a name which is moderately my own... I’m very happy it turned out this way because it would have been really tough being forced to pick an artist name.

(Interview with Hanna, Jan 28, 2011)

Claiming the name to have chosen her highlights the relationship between the name-giver and the agency of the name which is based on the above-mentioned symbolic act. By being “moderately her own.” Hanouneh becomes, with an inherent element of an artist persona, a part of her self-identity. Hanna described this artist persona as something almost forced upon her. She mentioned several times in the interviews that she never dreamed about performing on stage, and compares herself with the many people who do that throughout their upbringing as well as later in life. The

expressed resistance to dreams of performing on stage as well as the ambivalent relationship to the idea of an artist persona are parts of the authenticity production by being references to the idea of the artist role as something that chose her – not the other way around.

Representation of painful lived experiences

Hanna remembered the early beginning of MySpace in 2005 as a time when there were not that many profiles making it easy to surf around the social media site which is how she discovered DJ Lethal Skillz from Beirut. She added him as a MySpace friend and they started collaborating through the internet by him sending her a lot of beats³ to write lyrics and record vocals for. This is when the internet collaborations started for Hanna. She received beats from producers to which she recorded vocals. She said that she initially did not know how to go about the home recordings on her own computer but that she taught herself by trial and error.

With time DJ Lethal Skillz introduced her to his hip-hop crew 961 Underground which consists of eight other members who are geographically located in Lebanon, other parts of the Middle East and Europe. Hanna told the author that it all began in late 2006 when she was given the beat to the song that was later named “Lost at midnight.” At the time there was no song title and DJ Lethal Skillz did not tell her what the song was about. The only instruction she received was to interpret the beat on her own and write lyrics from there.

It felt as if everything clicked between us when I [Hanna] a couple of days later sent him [DJ Lethal Skillz] my recorded lyrics: he told me that the beat came about in the midst of Israel’s heaviest bombing of Beirut, that the war made him feel despondent and desperate, and that I had completely captured his feelings in my lyrics (...) In 2007, Skillz entered the song to a Polish competition, but it reached them too late and could therefore not be accepted in the competition,

but one of the members of the jury who listened to the song was so fascinated by it that he invited the crew to perform at Vena Festival in Lodz, Poland, that year. The guy told us that he was willing to pay living and travel expenses for all the members of the crew despite the fact that we had to travel from Lebanon, Cyprus and Sweden. At first we didn't think it was for real, but in October we ended up meeting at Warszawa airport for the first time and had a couple of days festival and performance ahead of us. I became an official member of the crew the following year when I went to Lebanon.

(Hanna, personal communication, Jan 13, 2012)

In her description of how she became a part of 961 Underground there is also a story about how Hanna passes something similar to a test as a songwriter and a musician by “hearing” war and pain in the beat Lethal Skillz made in the midst of war in Beirut years after her own experiences of Israeli attacks on Gaza City. She wrote the words that Lethal Skillz felt when he made the beat, which is the beginning of the musical bond between them. Sara Ahmed, professor in Race and Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London, argues for emotions to move between, “get stuck” on and shape the surfaces of both individual and collective bodies (2004). Ahmed suggests that “while the experience of pain may be solitary, it is never private. A truly private pain would be one ended by a suicide without a note.” (Ahmed 2004:29). I interpret this as pain being something that is always shared with other people. Ahmed discusses a sociality of pain based on an ethics that starts with your pain but most importantly “acts about that which I cannot know, rather than act insofar as I know” (2004:31). Hanna’s ability to “hear” war and pain in the musical piece by Skillz speaks to Ahmed’s sociality of pain in the sense that Hanna did not know exactly what the pain was about but she felt it conveyed in the music. She acted on that which she did not know, with the difference that she once did know having lived through similar experiences during her time in Gaza. I would describe this as applying a recollection of previously experienced pain in a new situation.

Hip-hop scholar Imani Perry (2004:6) argues that artists within hip-hop culture should be understood within the context of a community. Through the name Hanounch, the Palestinian family she lived with for years, membership in the Lebanese-oriented hip-hop crew, and her own experiences of war and destruction in a specific geographical place her music often focuses on, Hanna became a part of a particular community through which she was understood.

This situated community in a Middle Eastern context is the reason why most of the musical followers were either not quite sure of Hanounch's ethnic background or simply assumed that she has roots in the Middle East. In reality her ethnic background is Swedish and Sweden is the country where she was born and lived most of her life apart from a period in her late teenage years when she moved to the Middle East. Yet on her Hanna Hanounch Cinthio Facebook profile (Cinthio 2011) it says that she is from East Jerusalem, which Hanna explains as being an expression of her longing for the place. She mentions several times to the author that the years she spent there shaped her as an individual. Perry (2004:21) argues that the origin of an artist is important in hip-hop, but "more so as a symbolic affiliation rather than as a clear and specific historical truth" which is the case here.

The fact that Hanna has Western citizenship matters more. There is an evident awareness of the associations linked with this citizenship: Luxurious first-class treatments are made possible in the context of war and conflict enabling the one with the Western/Swedish passport to be taken to safety. This is expressed in the song "Mad respect to the 961" where Hanounch sings:

Got brothers n sisters all over the world / but while I ride first class
they stuck in third/ Political crisis, another attack / One step forward
and two steps back/ I try to relate to my boys and my girls / Truth is
we be living in separate worlds/ I'm a different species / a privileged
class / I know that my passport is saving my ass

(Cinthio 2008)

Feelings of discomfort and anger with her own “privileged class” position and experiences compared to the members of her family in the Middle East resulted in a double-edged sword when she was given the choice to leave the conflict area while they were not, as Hanna told the author. For Hanna these feelings of “privileged guilt” turned into feelings of responsibility to speak on behalf of people who are not able to speak for themselves. As told to author:

I chose to be in that situation. I experienced it and lived in the middle of it, but it was my own choice. My sisters and cousins down there have never had a free choice to actually leave it as I have. I have seen up-close how some people very dear to me have suffered tremendously because of it, and this has pushed me to become involved in matters that concern structural oppression both within families but also societies, the situation in Palestine, both internally and politically, the occupation, Israel (...) These experiences cause a feeling of obligation. There is a huge privilege to view this from the outside and actually choose to leave it. I'm not subjected to the honour-norms if I don't want to, I'm not subjected to the occupation and stuck in fucking misery like the family down there... I have the possibility of being here and then I have to speak about it. No matter if the lyrics are about girls and their situation or Palestine, no matter the level I'm convinced that the drive comes from there. Even if it's an enormous privilege it is also a difficult feeling to be the one who can get out of there, that doesn't feel good. It's weird how the world works that just because I have my passport and I happen to be born here enables such an enormous freedom of choice regarding what I want to do with my life (...). This has turned into a responsibility that has come naturally. If my sister Nadja can't rise up and say what she feels then I have to say it instead of her in a song.

(Interview with Hanna, Jan 28, 2011)

In the case of Palestine, there are two sides to this privilege. Hanna has the freedom to leave and seek refuge whenever she wants, but also to go to

Palestine whenever she chooses. Musical follower Aisha, who has both Palestinian and Swedish citizenship, told the author that her Swedish/Western passport does not help her when traveling to Palestine because she claims that the Israeli authorities on the border to Palestine would not let her enter because of her Palestinian citizenship, despite the fact that she has never been there. Aisha told the author that she wishes to change places with Hanna in order to be granted the opportunity to travel to Palestine which she refers to as her home country. Aisha's wish to switch places with Hanna demonstrates the power relations imbedded in this "privileged guilt."

The guilt is also based on living with someone else's pain, as vividly articulated by Ahmed (2004) through her own experiences of growing up with a mother diagnosed with a serious illness:

It is my mother who has pain. She has to live with it. Yet, the experience of living with my mother was an experiencing of living with her pain, as pain was such a significant part of her life. I would look at her and see pain. I was the witness towards whom her pleas would be addressed, although her pleas would not simply be a call for action (sometimes there would be nothing for me to do). Her pleas would sometimes just be for me to bear witness, to recognise her pain. Through such witnessing, I would grant her pain the status of an event, a happening in the world, rather than just the "something" she felt, the "something" that would come and go with her coming and going. Through witnessing, I would give her pain a life outside the fragile borders of her vulnerable and much loved body. But her pain, despite being the event that drew us together (...) was still shrouded with mystery. I lived with what was, for me, the unliveable.

(Ahmed 2004:29–30)

This description of living with someone else's pain, I would argue, contains elements of how Hanna might feel with regards to the pain of the Palestinian family she has lived with, but also the Palestinian people as a whole who are often associated with political struggle. By recognizing the witnessed

pain through her music, Hanounch is granting their pain the status of a real experience. Witnessing in the sense of telling the story of ones surroundings and experiences is another important aspect of hip-hop which can be applied to Hanounch (Perry 2004:88). Hanna feels obliged to tell the suffering stories of the Palestinian people. These stories are about various kinds of oppression: honour-based norms, war and occupation forces. This is also connected to a specific kind of representation found in hip-hop culture: “to scream for the unheard and otherwise speak the unspeakable” (Chang 2005:328). Representing others by speaking for them results in a production of authenticity by linking Hanounch to this view of authentic suffering and struggle. Gary Alan Fine (2004:275) states in his study on self-taught artists within the art world that “the claimed authenticity of objects rubs off on the purchaser, particularly in a society that values diversity and an expansive tolerance as expressed through commodified markers of taste.” I believe this to be comparable with Hanounch’s construction of authenticity in the context of speaking for others. The claimed authenticity associated with the specific emotions and experiences of the specific physical place “rubs” in the same way “off” on Hanounch.

A “Love and War” kind of fighter

During the interviews the author conducted with the musical followers after the release of Hanounch’s album in February 2011, we discussed the imagery used on the album cover and the official Hanounch website. Musical follower Mr B used the pink gun-shaped bag on the album cover when talking about the message behind Hanounch’s music:

The bag itself says “I’m a rebel!” (chuckle) “I’m gonna fight this war” (...) She fights a war for freedom, freedom of speech, against oppression. The message is that people are valuable, that they should have the guts to express themselves, say something!

(Interview with Mr B, Feb 17, 2011)

Fig. 1. The album cover of Hanouneh's debut album "Love and War".

© Jenny Bäcklin.



Aisha continues along the line of Hanouneh being a rebel but takes it further and uses the word terrorist when telling the author:

Terrorist, but in a good way... A terrorist doesn't really look like this, and I don't know how one looks like, but propaganda, media, everything is based on the idea of terrorists looking like this, you know what I mean, so I think that she's probably trying to show that "I'm a terrorist, but I'm not the one you think I am"...

(Interview with Aisha, Feb 15, 2011)

Musical follower Bob mentions the imagery's association with Islam through the connotations of terrorism:

...the bag looks like a gun or something like that and I think that's a way of reflecting about what Islam is today because she looks like a Muslim woman, and her scarf and her bag is like a weapon. It's the image that a lot of people have of the Islamic reality today, they are all terrorists putting bombs everywhere...

(Interview with Bob, Feb 21, 2011)

The link between Islam and terrorism as described by Bob is a common one in the post-9/11 era – a term alluding to a world where terrorism and the war against it play an important role. Historian Richard English mentions the possibility of interpreting the terms “terrorism” and “terrorist” in a pejoratively and obscure way in this era (English 2009:1). Despite its common usage the loaded term “terrorism” lacks a clear definition and “has been used in so many ways, to refer to so many different (though often partially overlapping) kinds of act, that it has become rather blurred in its usage” (English 2009:2). English continues by suggesting that the literal meaning of the word “terrorism” – derived from the Latin “terrere” meaning to frighten, terrify and scare away – inaccurately proposes to be linked to the meaning of the word “terror” (2009:5–7).

According to English, this ambiguous meaning of the word terrorism makes it possible for Bob and Aisha to compare Hanounch's imagery to one of a terrorist. Aisha alludes to this ambiguity when stating that she “[doesn't] know what one looks like, but propaganda, media, everything is based on the idea of terrorists looking like this” when referring to Hanounch carrying the gun-shaped purse and wearing a Palestinian scarf (keffiyeh/kufiya in Arabic) covering her face except for her eyes. The link to the Middle East becomes evident through the scarf in two ways. The first is the political meaning attached to the scarf itself since it has been a symbol for the Palestinian people since the 1930s making it pro-Palestinian, even if it during the last couple of decades has become a fashion statement among hipsters and left-wing youth across the world (Kim 2007). The second is the possibility of interpreting it in a militant way because of the way it is worn. Hanounch

is using it to mask herself allowing only the eyes to be visible. The latter interpretation is what Aisha referred to in her reading of Hanounch resembling a terrorist.

Bob pointed out a third possible interpretation of the way the scarf is worn – as a hijab – when addressing her gender and potential religious affiliation in the statement that “she looks like a Muslim woman” and claiming the imagery to be about what Islam is today. Both musical followers Noah and Alexander pointed out to the author the possibility of interpreting Hanounch’s scarf as a hijab, but also as a ‘fighter,’ a revolutionary. The focus on women, Islam and revolutionary ambitions was in the limelight at the time of the release of “Love and War,” which came out in the midst of the Arab Spring (Booth, Chrisafis, Finn, Marsh, Rice and Sherwood 2011). The discourse of women in the Middle Eastern countries being depicted as having an important role in these revolutions is found in the musical followers’ statements as well as the Hanounch imagery connoting a female activist (or terrorist) on her debut album released in the midst of the demonstrations and protests in the Middle East. The important role of the protesters was supported by Time magazine appointing The Protester as the person of 2011 (Stengel 2011).

The protester metaphor resonates in the debut album title “Love and War” which Hanna stated as being representative of its content: a mix of the private represented by stories of relationships and the political being represented by “angry social criticism” (Svereggae 2011). This emphasis on emotions runs through the imagery of Hanounch as well as her music as previously discussed with regards to anger and pain. Hanounch described her music to the author as emotion-driven focusing on pain, anger and self-therapy with regards to personal relationships. Gender theorist Ann Werner suggests in her doctoral dissertation about teenage girls’ uses of music and their constructions of gender that songs about social problems are viewed as more real and authentic compared to songs about lust, money and joy in spite of the fact that there is nothing claiming the longing for money to be less of a first-hand experience than agony (Werner 2009:189). A certain

type of authenticity based on writing about personal experience and feelings has served as a defining quality for rock music for several decades, argues gender theorist Hillevi Ganetz (2008:62-63). She continues by stating that this kind of authenticity has found its antithesis in pop music defined by inauthenticity based on production and image, which is the focus in her study about a Swedish reality talent show, Fame Factory (Ganetz 2008:63). The show aired on TV3 on Swedish Television for four seasons from 2002 to 2005 and was portrayed as a school for future artists with their own staff of teachers and a principal (Ganetz 2008:28). Håkan Hellström, a Swedish pop singer, has expressed strong negative opinions about Fame Factory referring to it as “a disease” he hopes will “die out” because of its extreme commercial approach (Ganetz 2008:63-64). This strong opposition to commercial success is common among artists who want to keep themselves as far away from the label “sell-out” as possible (e.g. Huss 2009).

Necessary skills

In her study of how a band creates hip-hop music and culture, Dankić (2008) examines their version of hip-hop music to include various knowledge and skills such as singing, rapping/emceeing, free-styling, beat-boxing, sms-battling and song/music writing. Skills played an important role for Hanounch as well. They are the medium used in her production and consumption of authenticity.

Most of the informants have described Hanounch’s voice as strong and powerful. Musical follower Matsimilian used following adjectives when telling the author about Hanounch’s voice: “beautiful, cute, pure but yet very strong.” Several of them also claimed not to be able to pinpoint exactly what they like about her voice. Noah described to the author that there is something in her vocal pitch which Matsimilian agrees with and gets even more specific about: “Her voice is pure... she has an infallible sense of pitch.” The word strong is often used when describing Hanounch and especially her voice, just like in Matsimilian’s description. This goes along the line of the participants in Werner’s study on music usage who viewed a powerful

voice as a positive quality and part of authenticity production in rock music unlike the high-pitched voice many women are associated with (Werner 2009:190). Hanouneh is depicted as a strong woman with a strong voice proclaiming strong messages.

The musical followers who were either currently still into hip-hop or who grew up with it have all associated Hanouneh to hip-hop in a positive manner. Musical follower Mr B claimed to the author that he could “hear hip-hop in her voice.” This positive link with the “important” hip-hop is a part of the authenticity production of Hanouneh (Werner 2009:187). Hanna used her voice as an instrument which has traditionally been considered to be the only instrument women have been viewed as having a special talent for (Ganetz 2009:131). To musical follower Alexander it was very simple. He expressed to the author that the power in Hanna’s voice is based on training.

The simplicity of the lyrics is another of Hanouneh’s skills. Singing strong messages with a powerful voice seems to be proclaimed best when done in a way which is easy to understand. Hanna explained to the author that she uses her own lyrics to express a strong opposition to the hip-hop tradition of building lyrics based on overly complicated wordplay. While she finds such lyrics impressive from a skills perspective, she explained that they rarely move her. She went on to assert that this complicated lyrical style was a front fuelled by a fear of using simple words and sentences. Instead, Hanna wanted to be able to express the way it feels as opposed to seeking protection in irony or cleverness. She claims that lyrics based on simple words can in fact be stronger by being unprotected. I interpret this unprotected to mean honesty. When speaking to the author, musical follower Alexander stressed the importance of using a style of language that everyone can understand especially when one is part of a modern political movement like Hanouneh is. He believes that Hanouneh does it the way it should be done.

Several of the musical followers pointed out the importance of Hanouneh’s collaborations with certain producers and artists. The choice of these

collaborators and other people she chose to work with seemed to be noticed by the followers as something Hanna did well, making it another one of her skills. Musical follower Big H called her smart for knowing who to “build with” when speaking with the author, and mentioned her collaboration with DJ Lethal Skillz as an example since he introduced her to the Middle Eastern hip-hop scene. Hanna was in Jamaica at the time for the author’s interview with Alexander which was mentioned to him to which he replied: “Great! That’s important connections. When you’re doing reggae music you need Jamaican connections (chuckle). Yeah, it’s crazy because no one’s producing in Jamaica anymore but you still need connections from there. Why I don’t know.”

Alexander and another musical follower, Caleb, both mentioned the producer Doobie Sounds and Mr Sloap as a reason how they found Hanouneh’s music, alluding to the importance of knowledge about producers in reggae music. This is also noticed on the album cover of “Love and War” where the songs are presented along with their producer. Hanna mentioned to the author that her musical framework has often been based on her musical collaborations – through Lethal Skillz she ended up doing hip-hop music and through the band she was in alongside her brother it was reggae.

The pink twist

Social anthropologist and gender scholar Fanny Ambjörnsson (2011:11) depicts the history of the colour pink’s association with femininity in a Western setting as approximately sixty years old. Ambjörnsson views the colour pink as “a contemporary key symbol creating feelings, commitment and devotion while simultaneously marking, maintaining and challenging various borders in society” (2011:11). Pink speaks of structures based on cultural ideas about masculinity and femininity (Ambjörnsson 2011:11) which is also a part of Hanna’s use of the colour. Hanna described how she used the common associations of pink as girly and cute in the Hanouneh imagery:

Hanna: I can understand one might think that it's aggressive in some way "eeh, using a mask" but the fact that it's pink works as a contrast to that... Despite it all there is humour in it (chuckle). I have never meant for these pictures to look tough... For me this is a way of playing with this aggressive expression, that everything actually is pink... It's a twist somehow.

The author: Why did you choose the colour pink?

Hanna: Because I think that it's a great colour (chuckle) and because it's a colour that's often linked with the opposite of everything that that picture signals and stands for...

The author: This kind of girlie...

Hanna: Yeah, exactly, this girlie, feminine and cute thing. I thought that it would be nice to mix it somehow... And then I found this gorgeous purse in Amsterdam and thought "I have to have this!" (chuckle)...

(Interview with Hanna, Jan 28, 2011)

The cute femininity described by Hanna is used to make the symbolism of war and political activism less serious, which supports the argument shared by some gender theorists that masculinity is viewed as serious, hard and authentic, while the kind of femininity Hanna is playing with is seen as this conception of masculinity's inauthentic opposite (e.g. Ganetz, Gavanas, Huss and Werner 2009). Hanna's claim that her intention was never for the imagery to come across as tough imparts a deliberately humorous aspect, which prevents the imagery from being viewed as a legitimate threat (Werner 2009:160) while allowing for possibilities of reading it differently. Despite the fact that Hanna claimed her music to be emotionally driven and fuelled by anger, the question remains whether she would feel okay with the imagery of Hanounch being depicted as angry without any possibility of reading it differently. Queer feminist activists are an example of when pink is used as an "anger tool" for making resistance against the society they

are critical of (Ambjörnsson 2011:175). They, along with the rest of the feminist movement, use a specific shade of pink – the darker vivid cerise pink used in the Hanounch imagery. (Ambjörnsson 2011:173).

Hanna expressed to the author that she saw a contradiction in the fact that the women who live up to the Western ideal of what a woman should look like are the ones encouraging girls and women to be strong, to “be themselves” and that they are fine just the way they are. The author believes that self-irony and humour as evidenced using statements such as “I am whatever you think I am” a strategy for Hanna to cope with this contradiction she identifies. In line with the work of philosopher and feminist theoretician Rosi Braidotti, the choice of the cute and girly femininity in the imagery can be viewed from the perspective of the concept of “woman” as a set of options which Hanna chooses from and plays with in order to create new meanings and femininities (as cited in Sundén 2002:22–23). Braidotti states self-distance and humour as a means of imagining new gender identities by applying traditional gender definitions (as cited in Sundén 2002:22–23). The author would argue this to be what Hanna is doing through the imagery of Hanounch containing masculinity (black, leather jacket, terrorist and rebel associations, war) and femininity (pink, heavy eye make-up, love) resulting in a gender twist. During the interview with the author, Aisha depicted this twist in Hanounch’s imagery by stating that she has the looks of a woman and behaviour of a man which to Aisha is defined by being straightforward and very strong. The strong link between rebelliousness and masculinity can be complex for girls and women to negotiate since by the virtue of their gender they are associated with the very opposite of being rebels (Werner 2009:190). The paradox of Hanounch’s imagery highlights this.

Another mix of traditional gender definitions can be found in the study on female DJs in the electronic music scene by social anthropologist Anna Gavanas (2009). Gavanas describes the importance for women within the DJ community to be tomboys (more aggressive and confident) rather than “girly-girls” since masculinity in a certain dose provides credibility while too much feminine behaviour and looks results in no credibility (Gavanas

2009:104). This inferiority associated with femininity is thoroughly examined in feminist scholarship while the various resistance strategies against women's inferiority and with them also feminine identity are still unexplored making them somewhat invisible (Ambjörnsson 2011:183). Ambjörnsson states that as a part of the queer feminist movement, femmes acknowledge femininity as something worthy of their time and attention using it as a resistance strategy towards the society which undervalues it (2011). This focus on emphasising the importance of femininity in a positive light can be found in the Hanounch imagery. By the strong symbolism of being a clear feminine marker in contemporary Western society, the colour pink gives feminine authority to the gender twist represented by the Palestinian scarf, the heavy make-up and the gun-shaped purse. Thus the feminine symbolism highlights the toughness associated with the masculine and takes on the function of the overall filter through which the resistance is carried out.

Musical follower Alexander told the author that he laughed the first time he saw the images of Hanounch wearing the scarf and the gun-shaped purse because it represents the way he thinks of her. He refers to this representation as girlie style resistance which he explains in the following way:

Alexander: If you're forced to carry a weapon, what would it look like when a girl would do it? A pink gun-shaped hand bag (chuckle). No comment needed, says it all... And it's also this Palestinian stuff, I guess she's Palestian-based or her parents are from there, I'm not sure, and it's like, yeah so what you expect... what do the people think when they hear "Palestine," they expect guns and this Palestinian scarf (...) and she's playing with it in a way a man would never do...

(...)

The author: You think it's radical to use pink in this way?

Alexander: Yes, totally! And I'm totally sure that she knows this...

The author: But in what way is it radical? I'm not sure if I understand...

Alexander: Ok, my point-of-view... There's a shift in the Arabic world, I guess we can see it on TV at the moment and this has a lot to do with women taking part in it, without women in Egypt, Tunisia or Libya there wouldn't be any revolution at all. I think that these, especially the young women, that it's the first time they have a part in a thing like this and this is I guess for some people there still taboo... They let it happen, I think so, I'm not sure, I have some friends from Iran and Egypt and they told me about it... There are a lot religious leaders there who have a lot of problem with this and this is also like our blue and pink stuff is based in the heads of the people living there... And there are a lot of other things like wearing a scarf... But I'm not sure, I'm not an expert, I just go with what I see and Hanounch is with her connections to this part of the world a sign for this new independence of women... With this strong base you can do women-like stuff and you can play with it and she's doing it really good!

(Interview with Alexander, Feb 21, 2011)

The link to Palestine and the Arab Spring is evident in Alexander's discussion of the symbolism in the imagery. In light of her gender and her use of symbols like the scarf and purse Hanounch is described as being a part of the revolutions which were taking place in the Middle East at the time of the interview with Alexander. This combination of symbolism based on traditional gender, religious, and political markers ascribed to a female body are important parts of the production and consumption of authenticity associated with Hanounch. Through the humour, self-irony and usage of the colour pink, Hanounch is at the very least suggestion that this is what a "real" female activist and revolutionary fighter might look like, while at the same time she claims that such a thing does not exist. Thus the result becomes a reference to the inauthentic which is the closest thing possible to an imagined authenticity: women and revolutionaries are too complex to be portrayed as symbolisms in an imagery. Through this imagery she leaves several versions for its reader to interpret. The imagery could be read as

representations of traditional female symbolism associated with the success of how convincing the gender performance is (Ganetz 2009). Through the gender performance her gender twist is based on, Hanouneh performs a quiet provocation producing authenticity by questioning the clear borders and divisions between femininity and masculinity but also what it means to be a “real” and a “fake” revolutionary. Criticism, provocation and humour inform the only possible way of dealing with authenticity in this situation.

Discussion and conclusion

This article depicts the importance of Hanouneh’s Middle Eastern cultural identity as a part of the construction of authenticity. This cultural identity is signified by the name Hanouneh which contains both the ascribed identity, focusing on personal qualities, given by the musical followers and the Arabic link which is a part of Hanna’s self-identity. The Middle Eastern cultural identity is also found in the double-naming of Hanouneh in two communities in the Middle East granting her the possibility of representing them through her membership. This is one of the factors that enable Hanouneh to speak for and represent these specific communities through which she also should be understood.

The article discusses the interplay of ethnic backgrounds and citizenships resulting in the privilege associated with some of them and the oppression associated with others exemplified with the case of Aisha’s double-citizenship. Hanna’s feelings of “privileged guilt” along with her ability to “hear pain” are argued to be parts of the construction of authenticity. Music is suggested to be Hanna’s way of dealing with the felt agony of living with the pain of the Palestinian family and also, on a wider scale, that of the Palestinian people in general.

Resistance strategies found in the imagery and the music such as the protester metaphor, the humour, self-irony and criticism of representations of women and “revolutionaries” are, by their deconstructing nature, suggested as being part of the authenticity construction. Hanna’s description of her

music as emotion-driven is supported by the driving forces of anger, struggle, humour and radicalness which has been highlighted and discussed in this article. Hanna Hanounch is depicted as constructing authenticity by deconstructing the expected connections between a particular background or origin and a certain appearance, style, use of language, values and behaviour (Bäckman 2009:218). When discussing her own view of authenticity in a hip-hop context with the author, Hanna provided two possible options for constructing it: “Either you are skilled and talented in what you do making your background and past experiences of less importance, or you have experiences of war and get credibility based on that resulting in your music not having to be as good.” This study shows how Hanounch aims to strike a balance between these two options.

Global and transnational perspectives play their part in the authenticity construction. The name Hanounch, the Hanounch imagery and her music are examples of such perspectives. Through this, the artist Hanounch and her music become a part of a storytelling about the multiculturalism wind spreading through Western Europe and the rest of the world. The collaborations as well as the musical creation process often take place in an online context in the case of Hanounch, which I would claim to be a reality for most contemporary musicians. Their musical networks are found online where communication is enabled with likeminded individuals world-wide who might eventually meet up (offline), which proved to be the case with Hanounch and the 961 Underground. This oscillation between the online and offline was depicted as a part of the Arab Spring where “the oldest of techniques” was combined with “the newest of technologies” (Stengel, 2011) making it a common way of being a protester in the year 2011.

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Notes

¹ Hanouneh's audience is referred to as musical followers because of their interest and support shown for the music and the artist. See Dankić 2012 for the complete study and especially pp. 70–87 for a further discussion on the topic of musical followers.

² The musical followers which are interviewed throughout this article have selected their own pseudonyms to protect their identities. Their freedom to select their own names explains why they are at times very different from one another.

³ The common term for a hip-hop instrumental.

“I Am Malcolm X” – Islamic Themes in Hip-hop Video Clips Online

Anders Ackfeldt

Abstract

The Internet provides a space for new interpretations and conversations concerning religious practices to take place without the direct interference of religious authorities. The intention of this article is to highlight one vivid aspect of this development, Islamic themed hip-hop video clips distributed online. The visual aesthetics, the selection of pictures (or no pictures), themes and storylines supplementing the musical message can be used to mobilize and promote different traditions of interpretation of Islam. They can also convey interesting insights in the negotiations and compromises of Muslim identities in the consumer culture logic of the modern society. Lastly, they can provide a route to analyze the articulations of alternative interpretations of Islam often, but not always, rooted in a deep social-justice activism that connects marginalized communities within and beyond the Middle East.

Keywords

USA, Islam, video, music, identity, rap music

Whenever and wherever it has been necessary, great Negro warriors have arisen from the ranks of Islam, (...) inspired by the teachings of the new faith, which merges all distinctions in one great brotherhood.

Edward Wilmot Blyden, “Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race,” 1888.

Introduction – Video clips online as a source for research

The present text are a part of an ongoing investigation into the hip-hop culture and Islam that began during my time as a student in Islamology and has since developed into a Ph.D. project at Lund University, Sweden. Over the years my research topic has given me the opportunity to conduct interviews with hip-hop artists and other actors involved in this music culture.

The interviews have taken me to a wide range of places such as Istanbul, Beirut, New York, Manama and Malmö. In addition to this, I am an enthusiastic consumer of hip-hop culture. I continuously listen to hip-hop music, read magazines, listen to radio shows, attend concerts and watch music videos and the increasing amount of well-produced hip-hop documentaries. Furthermore, I have spent way too much time online visiting hip-hop forums, websites, and browsing twitter feeds.

Religious themes have been present in the hip-hop culture since it's beginning over thirty years ago in New York. Artists have invoked religious language in lyrics, as well as religious symbols on, for example, album covers, on clothing, on jewelry and in their music videos clips. As noted by Monica Miller in her well researched book *Religion and Hip hop* (2012) there has been a lot of scholarly effort put into describing religious manifestations within the hip-hop culture but less attention has been directed towards investigating what are the uses these manifestations.

This article seeks to contribute to the growing body of scholarly work on the complex relationship between Islam and the hip-hop culture and point to some potential areas for future research. Several well informed studies have been carried out on the topic but they have almost solely focused on Islamic themes in lyrics (see, for example, Aidi 2002, 2003, 2004; Khabeer 2007; Solomon 2006; Swedenburg 1996).

By analyzing Islamic themes in hip-hop music video clips, published and presented online, I will argue that these expressions are not appropriated by coincidence or as merely cultural borrowing. They are used as a means of commenting on political events and actualities of concern for the Muslim world. They also work to effectively mobilize different Islamic traditions around issues of relevance to the broader Muslim world.

In many ways video clips presented, distributed and in some cases created in a collaborative effort online, are the definitive computer-mediated form of communication. They can contain sounds, graphics, pictures and moving video footage. With cameras readily available in almost every mobile phone

as well as the opportunity to edit video material on existing computers or mobile phones even, the possibilities to not only capture real time events but also to enhance a message by for example crosscut video footage and/or music. Yet they have, as noted by Vit Sisler, largely been neglected in the study of Islam.

Both video games and video clips have been neglected and marginalized by the academy, albeit to varying degrees. Given their pervasiveness, especially among Middle Eastern youth, we are in crucial need today of critical understanding of the different ways these media articulate Islam and communicate it to consumers.

(Sisler 2009:231)

Video clips are distributed over the Internet typically via video sites like Vimeo, YouTube or Worldstarhip.com – YouTube being by far the most popular one at the moment. The most popular clips have hundreds of millions of views and often include hip-hop artists. At their best the video clips online offer satire similar to the comics found in newspapers while commenting on ongoing world events. At their worst however it is a cat with a hat playing the piano.

Islamic themed hip-hop video clips can roughly be divided into three categories. The first category are professionally directed music clips, or in other words the traditional music video. The second category are clips generated by fans or semi-professionals, sometimes only containing pictures and maybe lyrics. The third category are clips generated through a communal effort created either solely by fans or by artists who invite fans to contribute their own private video material. Over the years I have spent way too much time online browsing clips. In this article I will only have the opportunity to introduce you to a few clips in order to illustrate my positions.

It is my belief that Islamic themed hip-hop video clips provide an excellent illustration of the dynamic and changing nature of Islamic traditions. In addition to this, I will argue that they provide a window to alternative

worldviews rooted in Islamic traditions shared by young Muslims in urban environments in the US, Europe as well as the Middle East.

The first part of this article analyzes how hip-hop artist in the Middle East has used themes of African-American Islam during the democratic uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. Central for this is the usage of references to Malcolm X. The second part of the text discusses hip-hop video clips released online following publication of the anti-Islamic video trailer “Innocence of Muslims.” The final part of the text sums it up and points to some possible future areas for research.

A framework for this article and a foundation for my understanding of Islamic themed hip-hop is a non-essentialistic definition of Islam, and the assumption that every aspect of Islam is an ongoing process over time and space under constant change and historical mutation. Islam is not a static monolithic construction rather it should be viewed as dynamic traditions shaped, in particular times and geographical spaces, in a close relation to the surrounding societies (see for example Asad 1986; Curtis 2002; Schaebler & Stenberg 2004). It is also my intention to follow in the footsteps of Curtis and move away from what he calls textbook Islam.

Textbook Islam revolves around the Five Pillars of Islamic practice, a brief introduction of the Qur’an and Muhammad, an explanation of Shari’a as “Islamic Law,” and the historical split between Sunni and Shi’a – With perhaps a sprinkle of Sufism or Jihadism thrown in for good measure.

(Curtis 2009:78)

A very important and often overseen aspect in the study of Islam is the fact that actors who do not identify themselves as Muslims participate in the process of shaping what is perceived as Islam. (Cato 2012:13) They could for example be pundits, politicians or academics that write and talk about Islam in the public debate. However they could also be Islamic movements like Nation of Gods and Earths that clearly identify with Islamic semiotics,

symbols and concepts but do not consider themselves to be Muslims. It should also be noted that when I speak about the “Muslim world” it should not be seen as a geographical area but rather as a global cognitive universe of ideas.

Themes of African-American Islam in Arab Hip-hop

As noted by many culture commentators, general pundits and scholars alike, hip-hop artists and their music played a role during the democratic uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa in 2011, though it has been debated to what degree (see for example Gonzalez-Quijano 2013 & Swedenburg 2012). For example one of the more visible songs in connection to the uprisings and one of the first to get worldwide recognition was “Rais lebled” (2010) [Leader of the Country] by the Tunisian rapper El Général. It was accompanied by a powerful video clip when it was posted online in November of 2010. The soundscape of the song mimics the dark and gritty sound of New York hip-hop from the early 1990s. Also the video clip, filmed with a blue filter, brings groups like Mobb Deep with videos like “Survival of the Fittest” (1995) and “Shook Ones Pt. 2” (1995) to mind.

The video starts with a clip of now-former President Ben Ali visiting a classroom asking one of the kids sitting in his bench “Why are you worried? Would you tell me something? Don’t be afraid!” The young boy doesn’t dare answer the question. Instead El Général is seen, alone, with his microphone in what looks like an abandoned building. He speaks out and addresses the president. *Mr. President, here, today, I speak with you in my name and the name of all people who live in misery...* (El Général 2010).

Later versions of the video posted after the arrest of El Général also contained an introduction text that told the story of the arrest of El Général and encouraged the spreading of the video:

On the 6th of January 2011 rapper El Général (real name: Hameda Ben Aoun) was arrested in Tunisia by the police for questioning.

Until today no news about him, while dozens of people already died in the streets. He is the voice of Tunisian people, we are their megaphone. Post this video now!

(El Général 2010)

Mark Levine has described “Rais lebled” and the accompanying music video clips as a “perfect reflection of a generation about to explode” (Levine 2011). Even if it is hard to measure the impact of the song on other hip-hop acts from the Middle East it is fair to say that the clips tremendous global impact sparked an interest for hip-hop music in the wake of the uprisings.

Even though the video clip and the song “Rais lebled” does not contain any direct Islamic themes some of the other more widely spread songs, contained themes of African-American Islamic liberation and resistance. For example the song “Prisoner” by Arabian Knightz Ft. Shadia Mansour (2011) heavily sampled the Saviours’ Day address delivered by Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan at the Great Western Forum in Los Angeles on February 17, 2002. The words quoted in the song are as follows:

I’m writing you from my prison. What prison? A prison not of bars, but a prison constructed for me out of my passion for truth and justice. [...] and that propaganda has put me in a prison. So I wrote him like Joseph spoke to Pharaoh, out of prison. I know this pharaoh doesn’t only have troubling dreams; he has troubling realities.

(Arabian Knightz Ft. Shadia Mansour 2011)

This section in Minister Farrakhan’s speech is a reference to a letter he wrote to President George W. Bush in December of 2001, after the attacks on the Twin Towers, raising his concerns over the American foreign policy and the war on terror in particular. Minister Farrakhan alludes to the story of Joseph and the Pharaohs dreams that can be found both in the Bible (Gen 41) and the Quran (Sura 12, Yusuf). He compares President Bush to the Pharaoh and casts himself as the dream interpreter, the truth teller who foretold to

Joseph seven years of richness and seven years of famine. In the video clip it is clear that the Pharaoh in this context is now former President Mubarak, who “doesn’t only have troubling dreams; he has troubling realities...” The video clip was released February 4, 2011 and contains strong and violent scenes from the demonstrations as the focal point for the protests in Tahrir Square, Egypt. Pro-democracy protestors are seen clashing with military, police and pro-Mubarak supporters.

References made to the Black Freedom Struggle and the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S., and to Malcolm X in particular, were common during the democratic uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. The cable networks showed pictures of demonstrators holding up signs with the text “We Shall Over Come.” One of the more memorable tweets from the uprisings was from the now imprisoned Nabeel Rajab, the head of the Bahrain Center of Human Rights. He linked to Pete Seeger via Twitter singing “We Shall Overcome” followed by the hashtags #Bahrain #Egypt #Kuwait #Saudi #UAE #Lebanon #Morocco #Tunisia #Oman #Qatar. Protest signs were also seen referencing Malcolm X, some with quotes and some with only his photo.

Malcolm X has maintained a unique position as a powerful symbol for the hip-hop generation and as Alridge points out:

Since the early years of Hip Hop, SPC [socially and politically conscious] hip hoppers have continued to espouse many of the ideas and ideology of the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) and Black Freedom Struggle (BFS).

(Alridge 2005:226)

In 1985 Rapper KRS-One and DJ Scott La Rock formed Boogie Down Productions, one of the formative bands of conscious political hip-hop. Their Album *By All Means Necessary* (1988) is seen by many as a blueprint for political hip-hop. The title of the album alludes to the famous speech held by Malcolm X in 1965. Also the cover art on the album KRS-One

is seen mimicking a famous photo of Malcolm X from Ebony Magazine (September 1964); wearing a leather jacket, sunglasses, a baseball cap and holding a Micro-Uzi submachine gun. KRS-One peaks out of a window in the same way as Malcolm X did on the photo. KRS-One is not adhering to any Islamic teachings. In fact he has in recent years devoted some of his time to launch his own religion, "The Temple of Hip Hop."

The legendary American hip-hop group Public Enemy has probably done more to promote the image of Malcolm X than any other group. For example Malcolm X's image is prominent in the video for the song "Fight the Power" (1989), first released on the soundtrack for the film "Do the Right Thing" (1989) directed by Spike Lee. The group performs surrounded by the Nation of Islam affiliated security organization S1W (Security of the First World) in front of a giant Malcolm X photo with cheering crowds holding pictures of other African American leaders and persons symbolizing the African American struggle like Harriet Tubman, Marcus Garvey, Martin Luther King and Jessie Jackson. Malcolm X's words have been sampled in countless hip-hop songs. The black baseball cap with an "X" on and t-shirts with photos of Malcolm X were and are still sold to hip-hop fans all over the world.

The legacy of Malcolm X within hip-hop culture goes beyond national borders, religious beliefs or political goals. Muslim as well as non-Muslims in the US and abroad, utilized his words and pictures. Malcolm X's unique and complex story has and will most likely continue to find new ways to inspire hip-hop artist in their artistic expressions.

One illustration of this is the Egyptian hip-hop trio Arabian Knightz. In April of 2011, in the midst of the Arab uprisings they together with the American MC General Steele recorded the song "I am Malcolm X" (2011). The lyrics of the song link the Arab uprisings to the Black Freedom Struggle in USA. At the beginning of the first verse General Steele raps:

Malik was a king that had a dream like Martin Luther /
Built an Islamic truth for constitution revolution /

our generation needs a new one /

the mother of the civilization needs Civil Rights Movement

(Arabian Knightz Ft. General Steele 2011)

Malik refers to the name El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, the name Malcolm X took after his conversion to mainstream Islam, after that he left Nation of Islam, in 1964. The quote clearly calls for a new Civil Rights Movement, in Egypt (the mother of the civilization) built on an “Islamic truth.”

The title of the song is a reference to the ending scenes of the Malcolm X movie by Spike Lee. The film ends with a scene of a black teacher in an American classroom. Behind her on the blackboard, are the words “MALCOLM X DAY.” She tells the class that it is Malcolm X’s birthday. “Malcolm X is you, all of you, and you are Malcolm X,” she says. Some of the students in the classroom rise up and one after another holler, “I am Malcolm X!” The scene cuts to a classroom somewhere on the African continent where students also stands up and shout, “I am Malcolm X!” The movie climaxes with the, at the time, recently released anti-apartheid activist Nelson Mandela, reciting one of Malcolm X’s speeches. The message, both of the song and the scene from the movie is clear: Malcolm X’s struggle was not confined to only American soil, it is a global struggle, one which concerns all oppressed people in the world.

The video clip accompanying the song underlines this message and illustrates it with powerfully video footage showing, for example, the crossing of Edmund Pettus Bridge when Alabama state troopers attacked civil-rights demonstrators outside the town of Selma in 1965 and more recent footage of demonstrators being brutally attacked by police at Tahrir Square in Cairo.

#MuhammadShowedMe – The Hip-hop community reacts to the “Innocence of Muslims”-trailer

The usage of Islamic references is a reoccurring theme within hip-hop music throughout its history. Artists from all corners of the world and from a

wide variety of Islamic traditions of interpretations are represented within the culture. Sometimes, but not always, these references contain political undertones in order to give voice to issues of political relevance and of concern for the Muslim world for example questions concerning environmental issues anti-racism, and anti-globalization.

Video clips online are probably the latest channel for this form of political mass-communication. A recent example of this is the events following the online publication of the anti-Islamic video trailer “Innocence of Muslims” across the Muslim world. This incident clearly shows the impact a video clip going viral can have, as people have reacted to them both online and offline. While protests spread the American hip-hop artist Lupe Fiasco promoted the hashtag #MuhammadShowedMe on twitter and called for Muslims to counter the claims made in the trailer about Muhammad by tweeting what the Prophet Muhammad meant to them. The hashtag swiftly went viral, receiving almost 15 thousand mentions in just two days encouraging Muslims from different Islamic traditions to rally around on cause.

Lupe has gained attention both outside and within the Muslim world as a respected artist with an assertive Muslim identity. He has earned critical recognition both in the underground and in the mainstream hip-hop scenes. In 2008 he was awarded a Grammy and 12 nominations. On top of this he has also been nominated for a number of other music awards. Lately he has been a vocal critic of the public policies of the Obama administration.

Interestingly enough, it did not take long for artists across the Muslim world to respond with hip-hop songs and video clips. In December of 2012 rappers Deen and Sphinx released their track “Muslim” (produced by 21 The Producer & mixed by Mister Rocks) branded online as a direct response to the “Anti-Islam film ‘Innocence of Muslims.’” Sphinx is one of the members of Egyptian hip-hop based group Arabian Knightz (earlier mention in this text). Deen was born in California to parents of Pakistani and Afghan origin and he currently splits his time between Dubai and California.

In an interview with Saudi based hip-hop radio show host Hassane Ahmad Dennaoui aka. Big Hass on the hip-hop program “Lasish Hip-hop” [Why hip-hop?] Deen explains that at first he didn’t want to address the clip but when he discovered that the director of the trailer was from his home town, Cerritos, CA he felt obligated to react. As he explains in the interview:

Hold on, wait a second man, you ain’t going to be living in my city and then on top of that attacking my people. You know, and get away with something like that! I didn’t respond violently. No. Because that’s not what Islam teaches us, what we did, we came out with something positive. We educated... We put out a message that you know, is educational not only for non-Muslim and that director. But is educational for Muslims as well because we are not spouse to be out there reacting violently, you know, and attack this person and that. No! You know the Prophet (Peace be upon him). You know, he used to walk down the street and get, you know, hit with rocks or fruit or what ever it was. Did you ever see him react violently? No! That’s our best example. That’s what we need to follow.

(Big Hass interview with Deen 2012)

As the quote clearly states the song was intended as a form of dawah, an invitation to what is perceived as true Islam direct to non-Muslims and Muslims alike.

During the interview Deen also explains that it was a conscious decision to put the song on YouTube and have the lyrics in English in order to reach as many peoples as possible. It is clear that Deen sees the song as a form of religious edutainment and that the usage of an Islamic message is not used by coincidence.

Deen and Sphinx were not alone to post music clips with Islamic themes as responses to the trailer. For example one clip with the title “The official #Muhammad Response Spoken Word Muslim Version” was posted on Youtube and several other video sites, by an unnamed artist during Septem-

ber 2012. Even do the Spoken Word genre is not strictly hip-hop it draws it inspiration from the same artist that laid the groundwork for the emergence of hip-hop, for example the Last Poets and the late Gil Scott-Heron. Also, the art form utilizes much of the same aesthetics as hip-hop.

Professionally edited with a strict minimalist image, the video quickly reached a big audience. At the time of writing it has had more than one million views on YouTube alone. The website and organization behind the video clip “Talk Islam” is an Australian organization that according to the website talkislam.com.au started “with a group of young Muslim brothers from Sydney inspired to spread the dawah on the streets.” The group is very active on online and maintains, along with the website, both a Facebook page (see Facebook Inc. 2011) and a Twitter account (see Twitter Inc. 2012). They have released several video clips all in the same fashion with a coherent graphical design that seems to target a young urban Muslim audience with a message about clean living and personal success marketed in a hip, street-smart manner under the slogan “It’s time for Islam to do the talking. One Message, One God.”

My last example of a video response to the trailer “Innocence of Muslims” was actually not intended as a response when it first was posted on Youtube in August 2012. When it was first posted online, it had the title “APD-TA by Masaniai Muhammad Ali feat Hassan Diop.” However it was later re-released by fans under the title “Innocence of Muslims Movie: Hip Hop Response ‘APDTA’ by Muslim female producer.” It was published on several video clips cites as well as on Youtube but at the time of writing the renamed clip has been removed from YouTube.

The song is produced by Masaniai Muhammad Ali, a California based producer, and features the rapper Hass (Hassan Diop). Masaniai Muhammad Ali is also co-owner of Nation19, a Muslim style street wear line and a magazine, along with her sister Queen Muhammad Ali. The video is professionally produced and edited. It features rapper Hass and Masaniai Muhammad Ali standing in the desert with a road sign stating “Crenshaw BLVD 4800 S.” Crenshaw Boulevard and the Crenshaw district is frequently mentioned

in American hip-hop lyrics by for example by hip-hop icons as Nas and Dr. Dre. The district is also well known within hip-hop lore for having accommodated many famous rappers over the years, for example Ice Cube, Skee-Lo and Ice-T. The video also features clips of whirling dervishes performing dhikr, and pilgrims performing tawaf in Mecca. The intention is clearly to visually connect Crenshaw to the larger Muslim world. Graphics in the video states, "We need Unity." The lyrics highlight the presence of Muslims in the so-called "west." The hook states:

Look to the east bow my head to the Kaaba, I start it how we finish
brutha bismillah. For those who are now home may Allah's peace be
upon them, we pray their deeds were pleasing in the sight of Allah.
Look to the west and see the ummah get larger, We start it how we
finish in the name of Allah.

(Masaniai Muhammad Ali ft. Hassan Diop 2012)

I should note that this interest in Islam is by no means a new phenomenon among African-American artists. Hip-hop artists like Masaniai Muhammad Ali and Hass only extend an interest the has existed at least since 1940s and 1950s when several well know African-American jazz musicians converted to Islam (Curtis 2007:687). One of the more noteworthy artists to convert was Art Blakey also known as Abdullah Ibn Buhaina, famous together with the Muslim Jazz collective the Messengers.

Concluding Remarks – What's on the Rappers Reading Lists?

Computer-mediated forms of communication have played an imperative for the growth of Islamic themed hip-hop worldwide. What began with references to African-American Islamic movements such as the Nation of Islam and The Five Percenters in the particular context of the inner city settings in the U.S. is today a universal phenomenon. The interconnectivity and polycentric nature of the Internet and ultimately the social media tools of the World Wide Web enable individuals to easily frame and broadcast

views to individuals in all corners of the world with mutual interests and concerns. Perhaps more importantly it gives individuals the possibility to encounter similarities in ideas and concepts.

In his book *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (1993) Howard Rheingold introduces the concept of virtual communities to describe networks of social relations online. One of the underlying factors for the formation of a virtual community is what Rheingold calls as a *grassroot groupmind*; the exhilarating “sensation of personally participating” in a process with a common goal.

In order to explain why young people and young adults from different geographical areas, cultures and religions adopts and orchestrated the American hip-hop culture in their own local contexts it is useful to use Black popular culture and dance studies scholar Halifu Osumare’s concept of “Connective Marginalities.” In her book *The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip-Hop: Power Moves* she defines “Connective Marginalities” as:

the term I give a conceptual frame that encompasses various social and historical realms that forms the context for youth participating in hip-hop outside the United States. These spheres of social experience interconnect and overlap, partially facilitating the expulsion of hip-hop culture internationally.

(Osumare 2007:62)

These spheres or themes which, according to Osumare unites participants in the hip-hop culture worldwide are; youth, historical oppression, class and culture. These “Connective Marginalities” helps to cultivate a local activism with a global engagement. By incorporating Islamic themes in for example music video clips, artists visually connect to the cognitive universe of Islam. This in turn leads to concrete cooperation and artistic exchanges where artists translate their respective local battles into a more global struggle. A “sensation of personally participating” helps to bridge the gap between different Islamic traditions. They become what Hamid Dabashi names “border

crossing pilgrims” someone who manage to “translate the native and nativist boundaries of a particular cause [...] into the vernacular grammar of a far more global struggle.” (Dabashi 2008:186)

Through hip-hop music African-American Islamic themes of liberation and resistance were introduced to a young urban Muslim audience outside the US. When talking to young Muslims in the immigrant-dense housing areas in for example Sweden, one is more likely to encounter references to Islamic themed hip-hop than references to traditional Muslim scholars from the Middle East. We know less than we want to know about the influence of African-American traditions of Islam on other traditions of Islam in a global perspective. But what we know is that the hip-hop culture today is a prominent arena where ideas from African-American Islamic traditions, so called orthodox traditions of Islam and the African-American Civil Rights Movement, intersect with thoughts from post-colonial thinkers like Edward Said and Franz Fanon. The cultural impact and iconic status of Malcolm X within in the hip-hop culture is key in order to understand the worldview of many young Muslims around the globe. Malcolm X represents an alternative political Islam not rooted in the constructed divide between “the West” and the “the East” but rather as a collective symbol for a shared experience of marginalization, may it be in the so called “West” or the so called “East.” As Hamid Dabashi writes:

There is no other evolutionary figure who like Malcolm X so gracefully and courageously climbs over that dilapidated wall which mercenary Orientalists have constructed between the Western part of their own perturbed imagination and the rest of the world.

(Dabashi 2008:23)

Peter Mandeville (2010) and others have pointed to this and reexamined the ecology of political Islam in the light of “modern subaltern thought and activism” (2010:2). They have rooted it in discrepant geopolitical worldviews and alternative ethics both in the Pan-Africanism thought of Edward Blyden, who saw Islam as a far better medium for African-American

liberation than Christianity, and of other modern thinkers like South African anti-apartheid scholar-activist Farid Esack (1997) and Hamid Dabashi (2008), who in different ways have formulated ideas around Islamic liberation theologies.

The topic of Islamic themes in hip-hop in the Middle East and beyond is a complex issues that deserves no oversimplifications. Even do this article has focused on instances where Islamic themes in hip-hop are used in order to contest both established Islamic traditions of interpretations and perceived unjust powers structures there are plenty of examples of the opposite. These examples needs to be further investigated by scholars interested in the relationship between Islam and hip-hop. In order to find out more, scholars need to interview participants in the hip-hop culture and find out “what is on their reading list,” so to speak. We also need to know more about how the online activities of the global hip-hop generation translate into “everyday theologies;” this is a colossal research enterprise, which requires continuous investigation and theorizing.

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"I Wanna Be a Dark-Skinned Pork Roast" – and other stories about how 'dark' Danish rappers negotiate otherness in their marketing and music productions

Kristine Ringsager

Abstract

This article explores processes of experienced otherness as it is represented in stories told by Danish rappers with Middle Eastern background. Referring to stories about 'being stopped' the article illustrates how these rap artists, because of their visible otherness, are forced to navigate in a discursive landscape that affects their becoming of subjects as well as rap artists. The article discusses how otherness experienced in everyday encounters seems to generate habits of thought and expression, which also influence the rappers' choices regarding their music production and marketing. I propose and discuss three different ways of how this is done: (1) A strategy where rappers play along with stigmatising stories about the criminal and dangerous 'other' or 'stranger,' hereby constituting a brand as a dangerous 'perker;' (2) a strategy where rap artists remove the danger from the stranger, hereby enabling themselves to pass as inoffensive exotic foreigners; and (3) a strategy where rappers confront the stigmatising stereotypes, creating alternative and possibly instructive stories about 'dark' Danes.

Keywords

music, Denmark, identity, Middle East, rap music

Introduction: a story about a pork roast

For many Danes pork roast with crackling – or in Danish 'flæsketeg med sprød svær' – is the closest thing there is to a national dish. It is associated with a real Christmas dinner, served with red cabbage and white and brown potatoes, uniting the family around the table before dancing and singing around the tree on Christmas Eve as is the tradition in Denmark. In the course of the last two decades, where migration and integration have been recurring political and popular issues, the pork roast has gained a kind of political connotation as well. As the meat comes from a pig, devout Muslims do not eat pork roast. Hereby pork roast has become something exclusively – and exclusionarily – 'Danish,' substantiating a public narrative of 'Muslim identity as inconsistent with a Danish identity' and creating a symbolic and stereotypical polarity between 'us,' the Danes, and them, the 'others.'

When Faraz, a young upcoming rapper born in Iran but since his third year raised in Denmark, explained to me how he deliberately worked on branding himself as a “dark-skinned pork roast” (Interview with Faraz, October 20, 2010),¹ I became curious. I new that Faraz felt frustrated and annoyed about the otherness he experienced was put upon him because of his dark skin, hair and eyes. But why was he so strategically intentional in articulating and re-appropriating this otherness in his branding of himself as a rapper? What did he mean by referring to himself as a ‘dark-skinned pork roast?’

Based on ethnographic field research in the underground multi-ethnic rap milieu in Denmark,² this article aims to investigate and describe how Faraz and other Danish rap artists with Middle Eastern background – or ‘dark Danish rappers’³ – experience otherness, and how they re-appropriate and negotiate this otherness in their music and as part of their branding strategies.

In popular discourse, the other – or the stranger – often appears as a pre-given and natural figure. However, as Sara Ahmed suggests, nobody is simply just a stranger or an other. Drawing on Frantz Fanon and his phenomenology on ‘being’ the other (Fanon 1986), Ahmed describes the stranger as “*some-body* whom we have *already recognised* in the very moment in which they are ‘seen’ or ‘faced’ as a stranger” (Ahmed 2000:21). In this sense, otherness is to be understood as a spatial relation. The other is a relational figure constituted in bodily encounters – face-to-face or mediated through stereotypical images formed and incorporated in encounters, but performed in other times and other spaces. Hence, the experience of otherness can be described in terms of the bodily and social experience of restrictions, uncertainty and blockage (Ahmed 2007:161).

In many cases, the bodily experience of estrangement has to do with the stereotypical conception of others, as imagined to be a threat or a burden to the national community. After 9/11 and the Danish cartoon crisis⁴ public representation of Middle Eastern people in Denmark has increasingly been related to orientalist imaginations about Muslims as personified symbols of terror, enemies and ‘radical others’ (Koefoed and Simonsen 2010:63–64). This imaginary link, creating a political relation between migration, integra-

tion and national security questions (Gad 2011:76-77), has stressed an already existing tension between a 'cultural anxiety' (Grillo 2003) and an 'ethno-nationalism' (Gullestad 2006) in popular discourse in Denmark. Where cultural anxiety is characterised by the fear of loosing treasured national values such as language, territory, self-determination, identity etc. (Grillo 2003:158), ethno-nationalism is to be understood as a close-knit set of specific understandings about geography, history, culture, religion and perceptions about skin colour and descent. In this imaginary geographical space 'foreign appearance' (e.g. a foreign look or a foreign family name) work as markers of cultural difference and social distance (Gullestad 2006:302). Thus, in stressing the notion of 'us' and 'them,' the radical others, cultural anxiety and ethno-nationalism seem to be two sides of the same coin.

The projection of danger onto the figure of the stranger allows for the imagination of home as an inhabitable, inherently safe and valuable space. By assuming that those whom one does not know are the origin of danger, the 'we' of the community is established, enforced and legitimated. Thus, the strangers become figures posing danger by their very presence in the streets and in the purified space of community, constituting what Sara Ahmed calls 'stranger danger' (Ahmed 2000:32-37).

As Stuart Hall has argued 'difference' and otherness are of central importance in popular culture. By showing how stereotyping as a representational practice works in different ways, and that this practice is caught up in plays of power, he argues that the field of popular culture is a field, where a struggle over meaning takes place. It opens out into a "politics of representation" (Hall 1997:277).

Following such observations this article discusses how dark Danish rappers deliberately relate to and negotiate the stereotypical image of the dangerous stranger in the way they represent and brand themselves as rappers. It also addresses this play of power as a negotiating process that can be understood in terms of what Ahmed calls the phenomenology of 'being stopped' (Ahmed 2006, 2007). Based on stories about 'being stopped' and attempts of 'passing through' told by dark Danish rappers, I illuminate how these rappers seem to be capable of using different aspects of their visible otherness in order to make it big in the rap business. Generally, I propose that it

is possible to speak about three different passing strategies: (1) A strategy where the rappers play along with all stigmatising stories about the criminal and dangerous 'other,' hereby constituting the very concept of 'stranger danger'; (2) a strategy where rap artists remove the danger from the stranger, by deliberately downplaying sides of the otherness that could be regarded as 'non-Danish,' instead focusing on the exotic parts of being a dark Dane; and (3) a strategy where the rappers use the music and the position as artists to try to enlighten and facilitate dialogue, in order to deconstruct and rearticulate the narratives about the 'dangerous stranger.'

As strategies these of course have equivalents in all musical fields that negotiate the relationship between an underground and a mainstream, and the proposed categories lean on familiar brands like the gangsta-rapper, the party-emo-rapper and the social conscious 'preacher.' In this field, however, the passing strategies in play are closely connected to negotiation of otherness. The present article offers an understanding of the strategies as analytical categories, but in reality they of course overlap, interlink and connect to each other in different ways depending on the individual agent.

Experienced otherness in the rap business

As public articulations, framed to receive special attention, music and other arts are often key rallying points for identity groups and central to the representations of identity (Turino 2008:106). The origin of the aesthetic expression of hip hop and rap music among marginalised 'black' people in America's big cities and a persistent representation of the genre as the political mouthpiece of the ghetto, seem to have led the way for similar use of hip hop among groups feeling marginalized in other contexts, for instance young dark people in Denmark. In this sense hip hop appear as a counterculture, sometimes giving rise to explicit political resistance, sometimes just emphasising an opposition to the established, the neat, the political correct etc. – as does every counterculture (Krogh and Pedersen 2008:11). In other words, rap music has become a cultural trend that dark Danes position themselves in relation to, in order to distance themselves from the political discourse towards migrants in Denmark. The well-established dark Danish rapper, playwright and actor, Zaki, illustrates this imagined connection between rap and foreigners:

“We have to do certain things to be real foreigners, otherwise you are integrated, and then you are suddenly something totally different, then you are in some kind of vacuum, and ‘what the hell are you then?’ Then you have said goodbye to your base, but you haven’t really got any other country. Well, so you have to shave your head, wear street wear and listen to hip hop and rap. You can’t for instance play rock music and have long hair.” (Interview with Zaki, Jun 6, 2012)

Quite many young dark Danes do not just listen to rap and hip hop, they become producers and performers of rap music themselves. Among these rappers the production of rap music is an act of negotiating the otherness they experience as well as expressing frustrations over the common political discourse in Denmark. For a large part this is a musical community taking place on the Internet, primarily involving young male rappers uploading music and clips on YouTube and bonding on Facebook, where they like or dislike each others’ uploaded tracks, mix tapes, videos etc. However, even though some of them might get tens of thousands of views on YouTube and have a huge fan base on Facebook, and some might attend and win different talent shows and become well-known in their local neighbourhoods, most of them will never become established rappers in the Danish music business.

Among the research participants I have talked to, a widespread explanation for dark Danish rappers’ difficulties in getting access to the more established market and rap media is, that the artistic standards in the ‘pale’ and the ‘dark’ rap communities in Denmark are very different from each other. “There’s race segregation in rap as well,” as the rapper and university-educated social entrepreneur Ali puts it. Ali, who is born in Iran but raised in Denmark, elaborates his reflection:

“One of the reasons why they [dark Danish rappers] aren’t taken seriously, why they aren’t gaining access to the established Danish rap media, is because they are judged by other standards. [...] Danish rap media value rappers in terms of the rhymes, whereas the [dark Danish] rappers have other objectives such as flow and message, when they make the songs.” (Interview with Ali, December 12, 2010)

Thus, many dark Danish rap artists find that their music is not recognised as ‘good’ in a pale Danish context and that they for that reason is marginalised from the established music industry in Denmark. Of course such experiences must be contextualised with other considerations such as quality, ‘playlist-ability,’ general adjustment to the market etc. However, in relation to the rappers’ attempts at gaining acknowledgement and respect as rap artists, certain factors relating to the concept of otherness are brought up by my research participants.

For this reason it seems relevant to illuminate, how dark Danish rap artists experience that they are ‘being stopped,’ and which strategies they put in play in trying to ‘pass through’ and get access and acknowledgement to the established music industry.

Stories of being stopped – and of stopping oneself

“Yesterday, me and the boys were thrown out of a cafe, because we were ‘gang members.’ I was really happy, exited and a little proud, because for some time I have sort of felt that I might have become a kind of ‘cultural type’ with all the theatre stuff, I’m doing. However, he reminded me, who I really am deep down: a gang member” (Zaki’s Facebook page, December 9, 2012)

This sarcastic Facebook status update by the above-mentioned Zaki, explaining how he was thrown out of a café stigmatised as a troublemaker, quite clearly illustrates Sara Ahmed’s concept of ‘stranger danger.’ Even though Zaki is an extraordinary example of a dark Danish rapper, who has managed to make it big and get acknowledgement in Denmark not only as a rap artist, but also as an actor and playwright, in this situation he is made strange by his very bodily appearance, through what Ahmed characterizes as techniques of reading the body of the other and telling the differences between what is familiar and what is strange (Ahmed 2000:37).

In Ahmed’s work on what she calls the phenomenology of ‘being stopped,’ she explains how certain bodies are blocked more than others, who pass more freely and extend their physical mobility into social mobility. Generally speaking ‘whiteness’ tends to include people, whereas ‘black’ bodies are

excluded. Being stopped produces ‘the stranger,’ which appears as a figure that is out of place (Ahmed 2007:160-161).

Zaki’s experience of being singled out as a stranger and for this reason ‘stopped’ or excluded because he is imagined to be dangerous and related to trouble and violence is not outstanding. Actually, it is quite the contrary. All the research participants I have talked to during my field research, have had similar stories to tell – experiences of being denied access to clubs and discos, of being stopped by the police for no specific reasons, and of being linked to criminal actions because of their very presence in specific streets or neighbourhoods. Hence, despite being born or at least raised in Denmark, their visible otherness are unavoidable factors they have to deal with in their everyday life.

The experience of being singled out as a stranger induces, as Fanon has described, a special kind of bodily consciousness, and the feeling is one of negation. In his description of how the ‘black’ body is “sealed into that crushing objecthood” (Fanon 1986:82), a central point is how the black man adopts the white gaze. For the black man then, consciousness of the body becomes a kind of third-person consciousness, in trying to reconcile his own experience with the operation of a historico-racial schema within which his own corporeal schema is supposed to fit. Hereby the body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty (Fanon 1986:83-84).

Ataf, a well-established rap artist in his late thirties with Pakistani background, describes this feeling of a ‘double consciousness’ in his description of, why he never enters cafés in Copenhagen, the city where he is born and still lives:

“I never sit down at cafes. [...] Sometimes I walk in to buy a juice or some water, but I always feel that people pull this: ‘what are you doing here?’ It is not spiteful, more like wondering a bit. You get me? I live in this country, I was born and raised here, and I’m just as Danish as you. Or am I? Do you get me? [...] So you create a filter, a sensor, where you quickly can sense that ‘you don’t like me’ or ‘you feel uneasy having me around’” (Interview with Ataf, September 7, 2010)

Such stories of ‘being stopped’ – or stories of ‘stopping oneself’ – stemming from both external and internal singling out, are part of the everyday life

of all dark Danes, I have been in touch with during my field research – and have huge influence on these people’s identity work.

As Stuart Hall has argued, identities – or identification – are constructed within discursive practices as temporary attachments to the subject position. Thus they are always the results of a successful articulation of the subject into the flow of the discourse (Hall 1996:6).

But as I touched on above, a person’s articulation of identity is not always successfully received within the discourse they are articulated. Zaki was denied access and Ataf deliberately avoided engaging, and thus they were both stopped when trying to negotiate particular discourses. These examples show how discursively produced categories like ‘race,’ ‘ethnicity’ or ‘nation’ shape habits of thought and expression in powerful ways that become important aspects of a person’s identity formation – and that once such habits become deeply entrenched, they frequently operate below focal awareness. They are taken for granted and do not come up for consideration as to their origin, nature, or accuracy (Turino 2008:103). In this sense, dark Danes develop a whole set of habits of thought and expression, that lead them to identify with each other and that distinguish them from pale Danes.

As identities are always constituted within, not outside, representation and constructed within, not outside, discourse (Hall 1996:4), rappers have to relate to their otherness and discursive categories like their ‘ethnic background,’ ‘country of origin’ or ‘race’ when working on a successful brand.

As Amro, an upcoming rapper in his mid-twenties, replied, when I asked whether he hoped to get signed by a record company: “I’ve heard that Universal is looking for a new migrant rapper” (Interview with Amro, February 4, 2013). Hereby he pinpoints what many other dark Danish rappers have explained: that their visible otherness is an unavoidable factor and for this reason something that they have to deal with in marketing and branding strategies. The above-mentioned rapper Babak, a university-educated and politically engaged rap artist in his late-twenties, explains, how he experiences being stuck in the role as a ‘migrant rapper’:

“People often look at me from the perspective that I’m a migrant, who has something to say. I become the migrant, who has something

to say, instead of just a someone, who has something to say” (Interview with Babak, July 8, 2010)

Moreover, various of my informants have explained how they, if interviewed by journalists from Danish media, almost always are asked questions like ‘how is it to make rap music as a migrant?’, ‘what do you think about the integration situation in Denmark?’ or ‘do you feel you are Danish or Egyptian?’ To my informants, these are questions that remove focus from the music and themselves as artists, in favour of underlining their social position as migrants and others in the Danish society. What kind of music they do, what they express etc. are looked at in correspondence to their position as strangers. In this way, the rappers experience that they are stuck in the role as ‘migrant rapper,’ which stop them from getting recognition for the very music they produce.

Whereas dark Danish rappers as illustrated experience that they are being stigmatised and marginalised as ‘migrant rappers,’ their otherness is at the same time something they in different ways deliberately use and negotiate in creating a unique brand. These strategic negotiations of otherness can be related to the process of ‘passing.’

Strategies of otherness in play

Passing usually designates a movement through and across. However, passing can also be understood as a social process, making the individual capable of presenting its self as other than the person it normally understands itself to be – or is apprehended of. Of course theories on passing can be rightly criticised for focusing on and fixating categories such as race, ethnicity and gender (Khawaja 2011:286) – often in dichotomous either/or-relations. As a metaphor however, passing can be useful in reflecting on and describing how rap artists strategically accentuate and deliberately negotiate otherness, when trying to gain access to the Danish rap milieu.

According to Sara Ahmed, passing can be considered in terms of ‘ability.’ She describes, how the ‘ability’ for a ‘black’ person to pass as ‘white’ involves a technique of the self, the projection of a bodily image (e.g. alterations of speech, hair, style and gesture), which is conflatable with ‘whiteness.’ In

this sense, bodies become construed and reconstructed through techniques, which serve to approximate a certain image (Ahmed 1999:101).

In my research, 'Danishness' and the ability to 'pass through' as Danish, also seem to be significant factors in determining, which bodies move comfortably through space and time and which do not – factors which of course are also connected to visible phenotypical characteristics such as e.g. skin-colour. Moreover, the stories told by the rappers, I have talked to, speak of not just the one-sided passing technique, trying to pass as a (pale) Dane, but also of more complex and multi-sided passing techniques, where the otherness is bent and modified in different strategic ways, that Ahmed does not take into account.

As analytical categories, I propose the existence of three strategies, by which the individual rapper tries to pass as respectively the dangerous '*perker*'; the inoffensive exotic foreigner; or the confronting and enlightening dark Dane.

The dangerous 'perker'

For some dark Danes, the feeling of exclusion and experiences of being stopped for no other reason but their phenotypical characteristics, has led to dissociation with Denmark and Danish identity. As many informants have explained to me: 'Why bother identify yourself as a Dane, when many people don't accept you as such anyway?' For this reason some young dark Danes choose to establish an identity as '*perker*' – originally a very pejorative and derogative ethnic slur in the Danish language. Etymologically the term '*perker*' is a combination of the Danish words for respectively Persian (i.e. *perser*) and Turk (i.e. *tyrker*). However, in practise the term does not really point to any exact national background, but rather a cultural background of otherness, often referring to people looking Middle Eastern. Furthermore, '*perker*' seems to refer to the social behaviour of a person, indicating that he or she acts in opposition to social norms in Denmark.⁵ Often the term is used to describe young marginalised 'Middle Eastern-looking' boys hanging in the streets (wearing the '*perker* uniform,' i.e. hoodies, baggy pants and Nike shoes) in groups playing it cool and 'looking for trouble.' In this sense *perker* also points to an aggressive and provoking attitude and behaviour.

By deliberately articulating an identity as a ‘*perker*,’ people not only indicate that they are foreigners, but also that they place themselves in opposition to the Danish culture and ‘Danishness.’ Drawing on Gayatri C. Spivak’s concept of ‘strategic essentialism’ (Spivak 1988),⁶ I suggest that such construction of a ‘*perker*’-identity can be understood as a kind of strategic re-appropriative essentialism of otherness. It is a passing technique of some young Danish citizens with Middle Eastern minority background, whereby they, as a stigmatised group, revalue and re-appropriate the externally imposed stereotypical and negative label of being ‘*perker*’ by self-assuredly referring to themselves in terms of exactly that label. By doing so, they try to put themselves beyond their social stigma, hereby rebuilding a feeling of being agents of their own identity formation.

In trying to produce a brand as a tough gangsta-rapper from the ghetto, some rappers deliberately accentuate the connotations linked to the ‘*perker*’-identity. They intentionally play on the embodied orientalist conceptions about the other as something dangerous and evil, but yet masculine, wild and fascinating (Koefoed and Simonsen 2010:62, 69-70). By producing rap music with lyrics in the multi-ethnolect often referred to as ‘*Perker*’-Danish (i.e. incorrect Danish mixed with i.a. Arabic, Turkish and English-American words) telling stories of the tough life in the ghetto, where they chill around with hoes in big cars, do drugs and criminal stuff and distance themselves from the Danish system, the rappers make the prejudices and stigmatising stories stand as unchallenged facts supporting the authenticity of the very brand. At times the lyrics also express misogynist views, which conflate with the gangsta-rapper attitude, thus supporting the stereotypical narratives of the others’ unequal gender roles (Koefoed and Simonsen 2011:70-71).

This strategy is used by quite many young underground rappers, who address their music specifically to other adolescents re-appropriating the ‘*perker*’-identity. An example of this is the now disbanded group ‘187,’ whose song and music video ‘Lige her’ [Right here] released in the summer of 2011 within six months gained around 830 thousand views on YouTube. With lyrics like ‘we’re ready to fight,’ ‘we’ll take over the system,’ ‘we hunt in herds’ and ‘if we don’t get something, we’ll make trouble’ (my translations) and a music video situating the rappers among 50-60 other dark Danish young men, making associations to migrant-gangs obvious, they deliberately seem to act out the role as ‘the dangerous stranger.’

Few rappers using this strategy have also managed to gain access to the more established rap scene in Denmark. One of these is Marwan, a rapper with Palestinian background, who released his debut album called *P.E.R.K.E.R.* in 2007 on the Danish independent label Tabu Records. The cover of the album pictures Marwan positioned as a prisoner standing with a name plate identifying him as ‘Marwan P.E.R.K.E.R.’ in his hand, while having his mug shot taken, and the music and lyrics are almost clichés picturing life as a ‘perker.’ The title *P.E.R.K.E.R.* and the branding of himself as such were deliberately strategies designed by Marwan and his record company. “Nobody had used the *perker*-term before, so it’ll be perfect for you right now” (Interview with Marwan March 10, 2014), as Marwan retrospectively has reproduced a conversation he at that time had with his record company. In the case of Marwan, the strategy seems to have provided a way into the Danish rap market, also addressing a pale Danish audience finding the almost caricature image of the tough ‘perker’ fascinating or funny.

The above-mentioned rapper Ataf, who formerly was known as *Den Sorte Slyngel* [*The Black Bastard*], pinpoints how the stereotypical ‘perker’-brand seems to be able to sell records, by explaining how people from record companies have urged him to continue to practise the tough ‘perker’-attitude, he previously did:

“If I go to a record company or to producers, who want to do some of my stuff, they tell me: ‘Hey, man, let’s make it even bigger for your next album.’ Then for instance they suggest to me: ‘Let’s make an album really just about BMW’s, shawarmas and chilling.’ Do you get me? You know, just this stereotypical stuff, because it sells in a funny way.” (Interview with Ataf, September 7, 2010)

The inoffensive exotic foreigner

Unlike the strategy described above, where the rappers negotiate otherness by accentuating the danger of the stranger, another technique, used by some dark rap artists, is to remove the danger from the stranger, hereby passing as an exotic, inoffensive and unproblematic foreigner. The rapper Faraz, mentioned in the beginning of this article, and his strategic self-branding as a ‘dark-skinned pork roast,’ is an example of using this strategy in order to

address a pale Danish audience. As Faraz explains, he makes mainstream Danish party-emo-rap with a “twist of foreigner.” wishing to appear as “a dark-skinned pork roast, dished up for the Danish family” (Interview with Faraz, October 20, 2010).

This strategy seems to involve a technique emphasising the exotic parts of being dark-skinned and downplaying or changing the ‘offensive’ characteristics of the other. The dark body’s otherness is modified to fit with Danish society and ideas of ‘Danishness’, hereby making the rapper able to pass as ‘one of us,’ however still a foreigner. “People might think of me as a foreigner, but not as a *perker*” (Interview with Faraz, September 20, 2010), as Faraz points out.

One aspect of this strategy is to make ‘non-political’ music, so to speak. As Faraz puts it: “Why shoot yourself in the foot by doing all that ‘fuck the police, fuck the Danes, fuck this and fuck that-stuff’” (Interview with Faraz, September 20, 2010). Instead the lyrical focus is on topics like girls (but not ‘hoes’), partying and not least what my informants call the ‘Danish drinking culture.’ The titles of Faraz’ songs ‘*Skål for i aften*’ [*Cheers for tonight*] and ‘*Bartender*’ are musical examples of this strategy. They indicate that even though Faraz might have a Middle Eastern look (and thus might be a Muslim, who do not drink alcohol), he is actively taking part in the ‘Danish drinking culture,’ thus he is not radical in his otherness. The fact that the young upcoming rapper with Iraqi origin, Murad, has chosen to market himself under the alias ‘Ethanol’ is another example of this.

As Faraz describes, this brand has brought him success and consequently a new experience of respect, credit and acknowledgement from pale Danes, who literally have given him access to places that were previously blocked:

“This Saturday, I was booked to a private party downtown. I came with ten of my friends that I was told I could bring along. I looked around, and there were only Danes at the party. And I thought: 2-3 months ago, we sat in our basement and drank cheap wine and dreamed about being invited to such a party. You see, now it was us arriving, and there was a table ‘reserved for Faraz.’ The guard came and cleared the Danish table, we sat down, and the Danes brought

bottles and stuff to us. And took pictures with me. And brought champagne every other hour, all the time asking if everything was fine!" (Interview with Faraz, September 20, 2010)

As can be extracted from this statement, a lot of power relations stemming from Faraz' personal experiences of otherness and of being stopped seem to be at stake in using this strategy. In this sense the self-claimed 'non-political' approach to the rap music can be interpreted as part of a bigger strategy, where Faraz wishes to turn the stigmatising stories and power relations upside down by making personal success.

In tune with this interpretation, the above mentioned rapper Murad points out, that besides personal benefits the position as a well-established rapper, acknowledged by a broad Danish audience, makes it possible, or at least easier, to try to change people's image of dark Danes (Interview with Murad, February 7, 2013).

However, whereas this strategy might gain a profitable position among a pale Danish audience, the image is not always capitalised among ethnic minority youth. "It's a huge taboo," as Faraz points out, while showing me a Facebook posting, he had gotten, suggesting to him to make the next campaign for the Danish Peoples Party.⁷ He continued: "It's not '*perker*' enough, it's too integrated" (Interview with Faraz, September 20, 2010).

The confronting and enlightening dark Dane

While the two above-mentioned strategies, where the rappers respectively accentuate and downplay the danger of the stranger, seem to adjust the popular discourse towards dark people in Denmark, the last strategy, I propose, is very critical towards this discourse.

The rap artists pursuing this strategy use music as an enlightening tool to communicate messages confronting prejudices and stereotyping stories about ethnic and religious minorities that circulates in Danish popular discourse. By articulating their personal stories of being stopped and experiences of estrangement in their rap lyrics, they try to deconstruct the concept of 'stranger danger' and facilitate dialogue, hereby hopefully contributing to a re-positioning of themselves and dark Danes in general.

Rappers using this strategy usually do not become well-known artists with airplay on the mainstream Danish radio stations. However, as the above-mentioned rapper Ali, explains: “I would like to be famous, because then more people will listen to what I say, right? Then I can be an opinion former” (Interview with Ali December 21, 2010). In order to become opinion formers and spread their musically expressed messages, the rappers using this strategy often try to market their music through other channels than only the Danish rap and music media. This is often done, by drawing on network gained through political or social work.

Rappers pursuing this strategy are generally well-educated and socioeconomically advantaged people, and many of them are engaged in social work for instance at youth projects, working with production of rap music in deprived urban neighbourhoods. For this reason, they are often well-known among and admired by many dark adolescents, who also constitute a huge part of the listening audience. Moreover, some of the rappers are involved in different kinds of political work, that provides them with access to perform for instance at demonstrations and events with multicultural aims. By placing themselves as spokespersons and representatives for a section of the Danish population, whose voices often stand unrepresented in the debate, some of the rappers using this strategy also gain access to the Danish media as political commentators. The use of such alternative marketing channels means that these rappers reach people, who normally do not listen to rap music, particularly left-wingers of the Danish population.

Rap songs produced by rappers using this educational and enlightening strategy of negotiating the otherness they experience, are also quite often taken out of their musical contexts and used for instance as teaching resources at elementary schools and high schools. In this sense the songs become a kind of ‘library rap,’ as the rapper Babak has categorized his own music. Babak’s song ‘*Mit Danmark*’ [*My Denmark*] from 2006 (featuring Zaki) is an example of a song, which is often used as a teaching resource. With lyrics describing his personal stories of being stopped, Babak uses the song to express his rights to a Danish identity and to claim Denmark, where he is born and raised, as his home country, hereby negotiating and bending the very concept of ‘Danishness.’

Some of the socioeconomically advantaged rappers also use their musical, educational and personal resources in trying to make the Danish rap industry include and acknowledge ethnic minority rappers as diverse as they come. An example of such an attempt is *Sorte Får Medier* [*Black Sheep Media*], a website and media association initiated by the above-mentioned rapper Ali. 'You have to act on your own, if you want things to change,' as Ali has often put it, hereby making it clear, that he will not wait passively for things to change, thus being stuck in the role as a victim of stigmatising stories. On the contrary he wishes to participate actively in the changing process. By promoting dark Danish rappers just next to pale Danish rap artists and making co-operative musical events like cyphers and concerts, where dark and pale Danish artists perform side by side, such an initiative tries to bridge the divide between the dark and the pale rap milieus in Denmark. An initiative like *Sorte Får Medier* indicates that besides individual ethnic minority rap artists' abilities to gain passage and thus access the Danish rap milieu on its already established terms, some people in the rap business also work on changing these very terms.

Concluding remarks: rights, respect and recognition

In the above, I have explored processes of experienced otherness as it is represented in stories told by dark rap artists in Denmark. Through stories about 'being stopped' it has been illustrated, how dark rappers – because of their visible otherness – are forced to navigate in a discursive landscape that specifically conditions their becoming of subjects as well as rap artists. Individual otherness experienced in everyday encounters, seems to generate habits of thought and expression, which also influence the marketing strategies put in play by dark Danish rappers attempting to get acknowledged in the rap industry. I have proposed three different passing strategies of how this is done: passing as a dangerous '*perker*'; passing as an exotic inoffensive foreigner; and finally a passing strategy that confronts the popular discourse creating alternative and possibly enlightening stories about dark Danes. The ability and intention of the individual rapper seems to underlie, which strategy is chosen, and hereby also which audience strata that are reached.

The strategic use of the rappers' visible otherness in marketing and branding of themselves indicate at least three things. Firstly, that ethnicity and a

persons' visible otherness are unavoidable aspects in the rap business as well as in the every day life of dark Danes. Secondly, that the rappers' experience of otherness is an experience of ambivalence that in some ways are experienced as negative and blocking, but which also deliberately is used to make a unique brand in the music industry. Thirdly, that the rap music scene is a scene where a political power struggle of representation as well as for rights, respect and recognition is fought, and where dichotomies such as Danish-Muslim and us-them are negotiated – a struggle in which the musical expressions themselves are agents.

This raises questions of how much are these different strategic musical negotiations of otherness can be understood as branding strategies adapting to the music industry, and how much can they be understood as agencies in the political struggle for rights, respect and recognition?

As shown, the political struggle for a rights, respect and recognition of the dark Dane is very clear for the rappers using the third branding strategy – a negating counter-strategy where the musical agencies in a dialogical and confronting way attempt at a re-articulation of what it means to be a dark Dane. This strategy is very alike Fanon's perspective that the 'black' man has two possibilities – either he can position himself in accordance with or in opposition to the dominant discourse. "For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white" (Fanon 1986:178), as he concludes.

In this light, it could be argued that the two other suggested strategies then primarily are to be understood as marketing strategies, where the rappers subject and adapt themselves to the market – either as an assimilated exotic migrant or a dangerous or funny stereotypical 'perker.' Or are they also expressions of an agency struggling for rights, respect and recognition?

Looking at the rappers employing the strategy of branding themselves as stereotypical problematic '*perkere*,' my claim is that this can be understood as both subjection and self-determination, both as maintenance and transformation, at the same time. Whereas Fanon explains, how the 'white' gaze on the 'black' man, retain him in the established stereotypes (Fanon 1986), the '*perker*' brand is a deliberate choice, where the individual choose to position himself in line with the stereotyping gaze.

For a rapper like Marwan, the deliberate choice of branding himself as a ‘perker’ was both meant to give him a unique position on the market as a dangerous gangster-rapper or a funny stereotype – but also a way to distance himself from (and hereby in some way put himself behind) the very stereotypical ‘perker’ figure. “I’ll call it *P.E.R.K.E.R.*, because you see me as a *perker*. I don’t see myself as a *perker*, but here you are! I feared the *perker*-term, and I wanted to hit the fear” (Interview with Marwan, March 10, 2014), as he has explained.

Furthermore, Marwan uses his lyrics as a critique of the stereotyping stories of the disingenuous ‘*perker*,’ the refrain of the title song of the album thus stressing “Don’t *B.E.L.I.E.V.E* in a *P.E.R.K.E.R.* / Don’t *T.R.U.S.T* a *H.O.*”⁸ By that he undermines the truth-value of the musical stories of the album and articulates a critical and ironical distance to the very stories and representations, he plays along with.⁹

Regarding the branding as an exotic integrated dark Dane several critical agencies and power struggles are in play as well. On one level we might state that by wanting to brand himself as a ‘dark-skinned pork roast,’ the above-mentioned Faraz hereby adjusts his otherness and articulates it in a way that the pale Danish majority regard as normal or acceptable. Hereby he justifies himself as a subject, who is not met with gazes that demand explanation, which in turn eases the access for instance to gigs at night clubs and discos. On another level, however, this brand also illustrates that it is possible for the rap artists to play along and position themselves in proportion to the discourses that attempt to ‘normalise’ them. With his deliberate branding of himself as a ‘dark-skinned pork roast,’ Faraz, for instance, is not subjected to and controlled by the ‘white’ gaze. As Faraz’ description of his performance at the night club clarifies, this branding is rather to be understood as a relational power counter-strategy, where he in one way submits to ‘Danish norms,’ while at the same time negotiating his position as an other. Thus it is possible for him to position himself in a way, where he is not a passive and powerless ‘victim’ of the demands of assimilation. Hereby, even Faraz’ musical expressions, his seemingly innocuous non-political rap songs, have an underlying connotation of a personal political struggle for the right to be acknowledged as a Danish rapper with a dark touch, as a ‘dark-skinned pork roast’ – even though, as he grins: “Actually, I have no idea, how pork roast tastes” (Interview with Faraz, September 20, 2010).

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Notes

¹ All quoted interviews are made (and transcribed) by myself. The interviews are all made in Danish, and the quoted parts are my translations. I refer to the interviews by the name of the interviewed person and the date the interview.

² From 2010-2014 I have, as part of my forthcoming PhD dissertation (2014), conducted participant observation in the multi-ethnic rap milieu in Denmark, focusing on the role of rap music in the tension between inclusion and exclusion of ethnic minorities. I have participated in rap concerts as well as I have hung out with rap artists in studios and at different social projects working with the production of

rap music as a means of integration and socialisation of marginalised adolescence. Likewise, I have carried out interviews with various rap artists, ranging from fifteen years old amateur rappers at elementary schools to highly educated and/or well-established rappers in their thirties. Some of them are born and raised in Denmark, while others came to Denmark, when they were children.

³ Through the article, I will refer to Danish rappers with Middle Eastern background as ‘dark Danish rappers’ (opposed to ‘pale Danish rappers’) unless further information is needed or other terms are used by my research participants. Likewise, I refer to ‘people with Middle Eastern background’ as ‘dark Danes.’ The colour-adjective ‘dark’ (instead of for instance ‘brown’) is chosen in dialogue with some of my research participants. Even though this category is to be understood analytically rather than empirically, I am aware of the fact that it neglects important aspects of the internal diversity and heterogeneity of the group, as well as the danger that my analytical focus on ‘dark Danish rappers’ or ‘dark Danes’ can contribute in a discourse closure around this category, which I personally do not vouch for.

⁴ Cf. (Hervik 2012) or for Danish-speaking readers (Stage 2011) for further information about the Danish cartoon crisis.

⁵ My informants have sometimes used the term *perker* as a verb (e.g. ‘when we *perker*’) or to describe a specific state of mind (e.g. ‘when I’m in *perker*-mood’)..

⁶ The concept of ‘strategic essentialism’ – which, by the way, Spivak herself has disputed – is a path that often is explored as a minority strategy for influencing mainstream society. In this sense, strategic essentialism, as I see it, entails that members of a group, while being differentiated internally, may engage in an essentialising of their public image, in order to advance their group identity in a simplified, collectivised way to achieve certain objectives. Thus essentialism actually has little to do with the theory, which rather serves as a definition of a certain political practise.

⁷ The Danish People’s Party (Dansk Folkeparti) is a national conservative political party founded in 1995, frequently described as right-wing populist by political scientists and commentators (Fryklund 2012). The Danish People’s Party was the supporting party of the former liberal-conservative government, with whom they constituted an absolute majority in the Danish parliament from 2001-2011.

⁸ My translation of the Danish lyrics: “La’ vær’ med at T.R.O. på en P.E.R.K.E.R. / La’ vær’ med at S.T.O.L. på en S.O. vel” (P.E.R.K.E.R.)

⁹ The risk, by taking on this brand and articulate public stories from the position of a ‘perker,’ is that the rappers hereby, may be playing into the hands of those whose essentialism is more powerful than their own – whether they are politicians, empire-builders, researchers etc. Likewise, as Marwan himself has noticed, the ironical and critical distance to the stereotypical ‘perker’ figure might not always be understood by his younger listeners, who might imitate the musically described agencies of the out-law ‘perker’ (Interview with Marwan, March 3, 2014).

Comment:

Global Story

Mark LeVine

Abstract

Hiphop has long been described as a quintessentially globalized music. Similarly, it has been understood as a unique window into the lives', fears and dreams of young people across the Arab and larger Muslim worlds for most of the post-September 11 era. Since young Tunisians revolted against long time dictator Zine El Abidin Ben Ali to the music of El General (or so the story goes), the music has been considered equally central to understanding the dynamics underlying the revolutionary upheavals that have shaken the Arab world during the last three years. This article reviews the history of hiphop across the region and attempts to provide a theoretical grounding for the role of artistic production in the revolutions using the work of Frankfurt School theoreticians Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin on the production, circulation and consumption of culture.

Keywords

Internet, mobile phones, satellite TV, cultural studies, Middle East, music, Arab Spring, rap music

It would be easy to imagine that hip-hop was the first truly globalized musical genre, or has at least become the most ubiquitous. Certainly today rap seems to be the ubiquitous avatar of youth culture across the world, “from Shanghai to Nairobi to São Paulo,” as hip-hop historian and commentator Jeff Chang described it in a 2007 Foreign Policy article, titled “It’s a Hip-Hop World.”¹ The fact that Foreign Policy featured an article with that title tells us something about how elites have perceived hip-hop and its potential impact on their policy agendas.

In one of the longest pieces in the annals of the journal Middle East Report (a full 15 pages), Hishaam Aidi points out that how since the 1990s governments world-wide, from the US to the MENA, have surveilled and attempted variously to coopt, control and repress rap music precisely because

of its immense social power. Of particular concern to those in power is hip-hop's ability to speak to "young people," who were increasingly seen as both the demographic future and threat to existing systems.² From the start, rap music and hip-hop culture more broadly has simultaneously been at the vortex of various struggles over identity (for example, between religious and secular world-views, supporting or opposing existing regimes, calling for revolution or supporting mindless consumption, respecting traditional values and flaunting hyper consumerist and sexualized stylings associated with the increasingly popular sub-genre of Gangsta Rap) and itself a mechanism to penetrate and hopefully control the most fateful generation of the last half century.

It might receive the lion's share of attention today, but hip-hop is neither the first nor even necessarily the most globalized form of music or pop culture. The parents and even grandparents of today's Arab or Iranian (or Turkish and even Pakistani) rappers danced to Elvis and the Beatles, grooved to Miles and Coltrane, headbanged to Black Sabbath, recorded some of the best psychedelic and funk music of the sixties and seventies (sometimes in the same song), and tuned out machine gun and mortar fire to Pink Floyd and Bob Marley. Today's generation of hip-hop heads is joined by punkers, alt-rockers and, of course, some of the fiercest and most devoted metalheads the world over.

Moreover, we have not mentioned the powerful impact of Euro-American commercial pop and dance music styles and musical production technologies on the development of "Arab pop," although these particular exemplars of cultural globalization are not nearly as discussed or celebrated by critics and commentators as are hip-hop, rock, or metal. Even the most electronicized Arab pop is, like rap, metal and rock, still rooted in an historical aesthetic that returns to Africa and, in good measure, to Islamic aesthetic (melodic and rhythmic) idioms, and have made several circuits back and forth across the Atlantic during the modern era before emerging in their more contemporary forms in the latter part of the 20th century.

Simply put, music has been a quintessentially globalizing, or at least hybridizing, form of cultural expression and communication, as long as

humans have communicated with each other in any meaningful sense. In this context, hip-hop's creation owes to the democratizing advances in technologies of production, distribution and consumption brought on by technological globalization. At the same time, it has from the start – and particularly early on in its evolution – powerfully reflected and spoken to the challenges and injustices of life for the masses of humanity under the conditions of late capitalism/neoliberalism.³

There is little surprise, then, that rap music would find a welcome audience among the youth of the MENA, who until quite recently have been among the segments of global society most marginalized by and from the changes associated with the emergence of the contemporary phase of global capitalism known colloquially as “neoliberalism.”⁴ Of particular importance here is the dynamic between hip-hop's early “Do-It-Yourself” (DIY) ethic, which emerged out of necessity when the genre was still a cultural outlier and which afforded culture emerged among the first generation of rappers that promoted the kind of experimentation and risk-taking that allowed rap to flourish in and then graduate from the underground. This same trait, which became a hallmark of hip-hop's “entrepreneurial spirit,” was a vital for survival for underground forms of music in the MENA and other societies where hip-hop, heavy metal and other forms of music have been banned or repressed.

The question is, did hip-hop move from merely an alternative or subculture to a counter culture and eventually part of the larger revolutionary culture initiated the uprisings of the last three years, and did the DIY skill set that is at the heart of hip-hop's rise also play a part in developing a revolutionary attitude and capabilities among the cultural avant-garde of today's youth?

Satellite TV, Mobile Phones and the Internet – Hip-Hop's Techno Roots

Hip-hop is not a child or even sibling of the Internet, even if today the two are inextricably tied together. It was, however, a product of the same revolution

in computer and communications technologies that ultimately gave rise to the Internet, and was a primary driver of contemporary globalization more broadly. For musicians, this revolution enabled technologies such as sampling and increasingly cheap but professional-grade recording equipment. These advances were crucial to shaping hip-hop, as they freed artists from having to rely on traditional instrumentation, arrangements, performance venues and ultimately record labels to record and distribute their music.

A comparable if not completely similar situation occurred across the Arab world during the last generation, in which the region has itself experienced the increasing unemployment, poverty and inequality associated with neoliberal structural adjustment in most places in which it is pursued, including the US of the early 1970s.⁵ Not surprisingly, when young Arab fans of rap first listened to the stories of their American heroes and then watched videos shot in the poor urban neighborhoods most called home, the similarities in their two situations was abundantly evident.

One of the most powerful exemplars of this similarity comes from the song “Born Here,” by the Israeli-Palestinian (in their self-description, “1948 Palestinian”) hip-hop group DAM, perhaps the first world renown Arabic-language group, which was filmed on location in the ghetto of Lydda and whose lyrics and visuals clearly evoke the Compton of NWA in its seminal songs like “Straight Outta Compton.” DAM’s other early hit, “Min Irhabi” (Who’s the Terrorist), is considered to be the first Arabic language rap song to have one million YouTube views, but like most Arab rappers, their most important inspirations – 2Pac Shakur, NWA, Public Enemy, chief among them – were the kind of political rappers that these groups sought to become, precisely because they were able to use popular cultural idioms which at least at the start were hard to commodify and coopt, to make a critique very similar to the ones most Arab rappers had of their societies.

But here, as with another popular Western musical import, heavy metal, it would be inaccurate to claim hip-hop’s success as owing to the Internet. Mobile phones and satellite television played an equally important role in its spread. Wael Ghonim famously said, “If you want to liberate people,

give them the Internet.”⁶ But the revolution would not have been possible without the “electronic infitah,” or “opening,” made possible by satellite television, which “even more than the Internet, however, satellite TV has played an increasingly important role in creating more open societies in the Middle East.”⁷

Both mobile phones and satellites became ubiquitous in the 1990s across the region, although before satellite television spread in the 1990s the use of satellites to print international pan-Arab newspapers like al-Hayat was crucial to creating a real-time public sphere across the region already in the 1980s. They became central to the lives of even working class and poorer urban youth by the turn of the century (to cite one of innumerable example, rappers in Iran would keep beats on their cell phones and play them for ad hoc freestyle competitions at local parks, which could easily dissipate if the police suddenly appeared). They constituted the first wave of the communication revolution in the Arab world, which laid the groundwork upon which the rise of the Internet, and ultimately social media, so profoundly shaped the personal, social and political horizons.

Government and private satellite channels came to the MENA between 1991 and 1993, and from the start included a significant amount – legally or pirated – of European (primarily French, English, Italian and some German) channels as well. Of these channels it’s no surprise that MTV was crucial for the first generation of aspiring Arab rappers, for whom watching music videos and shows like “Yo! MTV Raps” (metalheads would watch “Headbangers Ball”) was a key way to begin to absorb rap music and the broader hip-hop culture.

The influence of MTV has received relatively little attention by scholars compared, for example, with the importance given to Al-Jazeera.⁸ Certainly from a broader socio-political context there is good reason for the focus on Al-Jazeera. Its programming quite literally “revolutionized” television viewing in the Arab world both by allowing relatively uncensored reporting of news and opinion on many sensitive subjects, and as important, by

allowing viewers to participate in previous taboo discussions through calling in and otherwise contacting discussion shows like “al-Ittijah al-Mu’akis [The Opposite Direction],” which gave citizens around the region a direct and unfiltered public voice in what quickly became the most important public sphere in the region.

But Al-Jazeera is only one of hundreds of channels that are available to viewers across the Arab world, with many of the countries of the region having penetration rate of well over 80 percent of household, much higher than that of the Internet. At the same time, Al-Jazeera’s Arabic flagship channel did not devote any significant attention to popular music, and even less to emerging youth music such as hip-hop. Instead, MTV – its European as well as American stations – played an outside role in bringing hip-hop, metal and other popular genres to the younger generation (MTV Arabia, the Arabic-language franchise, was started much later, in 2007 and didn’t play a prominent role in this regard) in a manner that the dozens of Arabic language video channels, which focused much more exclusively on highly commercialized Arab pop, did not.⁹

As one of the members of Egypt’s most famous rap group Arabian Knightz, Karim Eissa, explains, “I first started watching MTV around 1997, when hip-hop started getting more play on MTV. New York rap was all over MTV then, including favorites like Nas and Wu Tang. The problem is however that it was precisely the era that MTV started playing rap all the time that fucked hip-hop up. When corporations started playing the rappers, they started doing only the type of music they would play and the type of videos they want to get on MTV. So it affected the music and message, as too much of it too much it went ‘bling bling.’”

At the same time that MTV became focused on commercial hip-hop in the later 1990s the Internet began rapidly to expand across the region. It was not until the latter part of the 2000s that users at home could hope to have access to broadband Internet. Before then, despite an explosive level of growth – upwards of four times the global average – most Internet users

had to settle for dial-up access, which in the words of Eissa, meant that “it would take me a day to stream a [2]pac video but I did wait cuz it was songs we didn’t get on TV.”

Satellite television opened new vistas for audience participation and choice; indeed, before the ubiquitous practice of emailing or tweeting comments to video channels viewers were encouraged to text their messages, which helped determined not merely which videos were aired but the winners of massively popular programs such as “Star Academy.” But the Internet did something even more important than giving average citizens a public voice (or, in a euphemistic/sarcastic jibe at the lack of political democracy, a “vote”), which satellite shows and networks like Al-Jazeera and the many call-in discussion and reality TV shows provided. It offered literally the world at their fingertips, allowing young artists to take complete control of their own musical education – from guitar players learning how to tap or solo over jazz changes on YouTube, to beatmakers searching the online archives of the Smithsonian Institution to find field recordings of genres of music they would have quite possibly never even heard in the pre-Internet era. In a sense, for Arab rappers the Internet became the substitute for the massive record collections that Djs and beatmakers in the USA and Europe would spend years and huge sums of money collecting.

And yet, interviews with dozens of rappers, producers, Djs, musicians and singers from the rap and other hard pop music scenes have demonstrated conclusively that the Internet ultimately can play a facilitating role in the creative process. It can inspire, channel, “catalyze,” augment and amplify creativity. But it is not the source of creativity; nor is it a sufficient or even necessary component of aesthetic movements towards broader social and political change.¹⁰ For this to occur, the virtual realities created and honed during endless hours online trading beats, searching out grooves, studying history and channeling inspiration have to be concretized in face-to-face interactions with other artists and fans, and through them the broader public.

What Breytenbach has described as the “global village nomads” and Anderson describes as the “postmodern nomads” are in fact the social actors best trained, attuned and positioned to challenge and weave around the striated and hardened political, cultural and economic networks under the control of governments and dominant religious movements the region over, creating and spreading through their art the kind of representational spaces of every day, often “clandestine life” that governments are increasingly desperate to control in the era of neoliberal globalization.¹¹ Most crucial in this regard is how in following such behavior patterns the hip-hop and other scenes were laying the groundwork for revolution. What began as small subcultures composed of youth who’s primary interest was in creating autonomous spaces to develop their art and explore hip-hop culture gradually, at least for some, became increasingly countercultural, challenging the very legitimacy of the system through the creation of highly politicized art.¹²

Finally, for a few crucial artists, the music captured the prevailing mood of an entire generation of protesters, synthesizing their complete dis-allegiance to the existing regime and supporting the mobilization by tens of thousands of people against the “system.” To borrow the title from Fela Kuti’s last album, music became not merely the “weapon of the future,” it became a spark, and the aura, of the revolutions that swept the Arab world beginning in late 2010.

Of Auras and Sparks – Rap and Revolution

One of the primary transformations of artistic creation during the 20th century was the process of industrialized and commodified production and circulation. One result of this transformation was the loss of the “aura” of art, which for centuries had provided it with its ritualistic power. This dynamic was the subject of one of the seminal debates in critical theory, between Walter Benjamin and his good friend Theodor Adorno.

Benjamin believed that the loss of the aura was a positive development because it allowed for artistic production that no longer ritualistically served

existing power structures and thus could enable new and even revolutionary visions of the future. In contrast, for Adorno mass-produced, commodified cultural production led to the creation of a “culture industry” that imposed an artificial aura, the “aura of style” upon cultural production, which reinforced rather than challenged the hegemonic ideology of the system (in this case the emerging consumer capitalism).

What neither Benjamin nor Adorno could anticipate was the rise of new digital technologies associated with satellite television, mobile phones, low-cost personal computers and software and the Internet. These technologies encouraged a true revolution in the production and distribution of artistic production, enabling the growth of largely uncommodified, limitlessly distributed artistic production, especially music. Together, these developments have enabled a return of the aura to artistic production, in particular to music (the genre that most easily could take advantage of the technologies) but to other forms as well. They also rendered most attempts at censorship moot, whether by governments or socially conservative forces.

The aura both enabled and resulted from the simultaneous function of art as immanent critique, as a training ground for the kind of do-it-yourself ethos and skill sets that would prove crucial to underground organizing under authoritarian systems, and as a way of creating solidarity and community (both virtually, and ultimately – and most important – by meeting physically) that are the key to transforming subcultures into countercultures and ultimately into revolutionary movements. Such dynamics helped transform the attitudes of artists and activists alike from what Manuel Castells describes as “resistance” to “project” identities.¹³ The creation of “auratic” spaces, usually clandestine or at least not officially sanctioned, were crucial for creating the solidarities that would allow for the emergence of networks of artists, activists and finally revolutionaries in subsequent years. The precise interaction between the growing virtual and physical presence in various public spheres remains to be studied, but it is clear that the two forms of publicness acted synergistically on each other.

Stages of Emurgence – From Anger to Joy and Back Again

In my work with and research on hip-hop and rock artists across the MENA the importance of constant movement between virtual and materials worlds, between home and “foreign” cultures, was crucial to the development of hip-hop in the region and of activist cultures as well. These dynamics constitute a “new hybridity” – that is, a form of hybridization that truly produces new wholes – identities – that cannot be reduced to the sum of their parts and which enable ever greater creativity and innovation.

Not every group embodies the intersection of digital and material interactions in the same manner. For example, for Egypt’s Arabian Knightz the two major goals from the start were to incorporate traditional live Arab instruments into their arrangements and to make “club banging” music. Their work with the American-Palestinian producer Fredwreck was crucial to realizing these visions. But here it wasn’t the Internet that facilitated their collaboration, but rather the producer’s physical presence in Cairo, which allowed them to meet and develop their sound. This relationship allowed them to share artists like Abdel Halim and Muhammad Mounir with Fredwreck, while Fredwreck shared Led Zeppelin and Outlandish with them.

Somewhat contrasting to this working dynamic is the group Amarada Bizerta, one of the revolutionary hip-hop groups from Tunisia. Though closely connected to the French and French-North African hip-hop scenes which played a pivotal role in the emergence of Francophone rap, Armada Bizerta has its own masterful beatmaker, Gela’i Ahmad, whose skills rival any top European or American producer. Whereas Arabian Knightz has people sending them beats from all over the Arab world and Europe (“Fredwreck does beats on official albums, also we have club wreckers from Morocco and Holland [Amrani] and Iron Curtain from Germany and Mohammed Bittar from Palestine,” explains Eissa), Ahmad derives most of his beats from endless hours spent searching the Internet, moving back and forth across genres from jazz to blues to roots music to find just the right sound for a new groove over which he and the rest of the band can rap.¹⁴

The creative process might be different for every artist and the collaborative networks diverse, but there are crucial dynamics within the creation of hip-hop songs that are the same for most groups. The first is a good knowledge of a European language that links them to global networks, in particular English and French. The second is the development of dense networks of comrades and collaborators both within the Arab world and globally, primarily through the Internet but also through increasing face-to-face meetings at festivals, concerts, and the growing number of workshops and conferences on issues related to Arab youth and the uprisings that have been sponsored by Western governments, universities and NGOs beginning in the latter half of the 2000s.

Based on conversations with many of the more well-known revolutionary artists from Tunisia and Egypt, a basic typology of the changing creative process during the last three years can be pieced together: (1) The pre-revolutionary “shadow years,” (2) rising anger, (3) the Woodstock moment, (4) joy, and (5) the post-revolutionary grind. I have described these stages in greater detail elsewhere;¹⁵ here I will just summarize them. The pre-revolutionary years were the years of subcultural existence, and comprised for most rap, rock and metal artists a period from the early 1990s through the mid-2000s. During this period they and their music were often if not largely marginalized from their mainstream cultures. Although hip-hop did not suffer the indignities that heavy metal did in most countries in the Arab world (there were no mass arrests and trials for Satan worship), the music was still viewed with suspicion and there was little space for rappers to come together openly and perform.

The second period, beginning in the later part of the last decade, at the same time youth-led opposition movements like Kifaya in Egypt and the networks behind Lebanon’s “Cedar Spring” began to gather steam. By this time hip-hop had become increasingly public. Groups like DAM in Palestine, Akkser and Rayess Bek in Lebanon, H-Kayne and Bigg Da Don in Morocco, and Iranian rappers like Salome and Hich Kas, all moved to the forefront of an emergent genre of American gangsta rap inspired, socially conscious

songs that were known both for their lyrical content and their unique and innovative Arab-gangsta sound. It was during this period that some groups would begin straddling the line between sub and countercultures as the music became more critical of their governments (or in the case of a group like DAM and the growing Palestinian rap community, more critical of the Israeli occupation).

The third period encompasses the lead-up to the revolutions and the explosion of political and musical enthusiasm of the revolutions themselves. It was then that hip-hop became truly “auratic” and, as I and my colleague Bryan Reynolds have termed it, “emurgent” (that is, both politically urgent and also developing very rapidly).¹⁶ As epitomized most famously by the song “Rais Lebled” (President of the Country) by Tunisian rapper El Général, the music galvanized and, as important, mobilized large numbers of citizens, especially young people, at the moment their countries were beginning to explode politically. In whichever country, most of the songs shared certain sonic and lyrical similarities – minor key patterns, sparse yet intense arrangements, and plainspoken lyrics that were highly critical of the government and even the leaders themselves. Songs like Lak3y’s “Tounis Bikhair,” Armada Bizerta’s “Touche pas a ma Tunisie,” Arabian Knightz “Prisoner” and “Rebel,” heralded a wave of songs made right before and then during the revolutionary waves in countries across the MENA, from Morocco to Syria.

The fourth period I term “joy.” Coming in the midst of the revolution and its wake, it was the product of a psychological break experienced by millions of people across the region, artists and fans alike: This break with fear that had ruled their lives for generations. I saw the joy on the faces of artists across the region during and after the initial faces of the revolutions. In Tahrir Square the joy appeared around February 4, 2011, when protesters finally one control of the Midan and victory, however difficult, seemed ultimately certain. In Tunis it occurred towards the final days of the protests against Ben Ali’s rule, when it was clear that the hacktivists and revolutionaries had the upper hand against a disintegrating state. This is a state, not surprisingly,

that has been far less in evidence in other so-called Arab Spring countries, although the entire cycle can develop incredibly rapidly in countries where there was very little hip-hop before.

This in fact occurred in revolutionary Libya, where, according to one report written after most of Libya was liberated but Gaddafi had yet to be killed, “studios have been popping up in homes and apartment blocks across Free Libya, rebel fighters have been listening to Tupac on the front line, impromptu gigs have sprung up in backyards, and aspiring rappers have been selling their demos on the street corners of Benghazi. Even the National Transitional Council has taken to sponsoring the emerging young artists whose music is so popular with the young revolutionaries of Libya. In only a few months a vibrant music community has appeared from almost nowhere.”¹⁷ On the other hand, Bahrain, which had a more established rap scene, has seen almost no political, never mind revolutionary rap, as the government has retained a considerable hold over most every genre within the island’s small but well-known music scenes.

The joyful aesthetics of groups such as Amarda Bizerta who are at the heart of youth-inspired revolutions challenge Adorno’s belief that critical music in the age of mass reproduction and consumption has to be, essentially, hard to listen to (like his mentors and inspirations, Schoenberg and Berg – in order to make the listener think critically and perhaps even motivated to take some form of action. Instead, the music can be quite joyful, a kind of gospel of or at least call to revolution. Armada Bizerta epitomize what could be termed this “ferocious joy” that lays at the heart of the music of the explosive phase of the revolution. It was a sentiment that was visible on artists such as Ramy Essam and Emel Mathlouthi – quasi official “singers” of the Egyptian and Tunisia revolutions – as well

In the months after the successful denouement of the first phases of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya’s revolutions one could feel the joy in the explosion of music and, quite literally on the smiles of the faces of the artists. But such a state of musico-political tarab, or ecstasy, can no more last indefinitely

under conditions of long-term political struggle than it can in a traditional song. And so by the first anniversary of the revolutions, as even the “success stories” were experiencing ongoing political conflict and violence, most of the revolutionary artists in whatever genre they worked, had moved from the stage of joy to that of the grind. Faced with challenges ranging from severely challenged economies to outright counter-revolutions, artists have had to adjust to realities in which the promises of the revolutions, in which they’d invested so much (and been so invested), will come far more slowly if at all, than had previously been hoped.

Rappers have faced myriad challenges. In Tunisia, El General moved almost as soon as Ben Ali was gone towards the rapidly developing Islamist parties, out of conviction or fear few have been able to say with certainty. Armada Bizerta, who achieved sudden international renown because of their sophisticated beats and upbeat vibes, literally split in half as two of the band’s four members disappeared in the middle of their first European tour, deciding that even with their success they’d rather live as illegal migrants in Italy and France than return to Tunis. In Egypt artists like Arabian Knightz and Ramy Donjewan saw their recognition grow but while Arabian Knightz has continued writing music throughout the transition period (focusing increasing attention on criticising the Brotherhood and supporting the military as of the summer of 2013), Donjewan became increasingly frustrated to the point of being unable to write or record any new material in over a year. Meanwhile Syria’s burgeoning hip-hop community exists in good measure in Lebanese exile, using their music to keep the conscience of the Arab world and the broader global hip-hop public, on the ongoing catastrophe in their country.

The present struggles of so many artists across the Arab world should not suggest that the revolution is over; it most definitely continues, and as it does new forms of music written by artists who no one has previously heard of will no doubt come to define the coming phase in their countries’ political evolution. If, despite the grind of the revolution, the Arab world’s revolutionary rappers are able to keep the music honest and innovative, and

point people's attentions towards thoughtful political critique while also giving them something to shout out to, there's every likelihood that hip-hop and other forms of revolutionary popular movement will continue to play central cultural roles in the unfolding political transformations in the Arab world.

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Notes

¹ See Chang 2007.

² See Aidi 2011.

³ Specifically, it was born in the cauldron of American neoliberalism – the decaying inner cities of the early “structural adjustment” era of the 1970s. The growth of unemployment and deindustrialization in working class minority urban areas left many an un(der)employed young black men with vocational skills that allowed them

to develop or adapt various instruments – turntables and DJ mixers among them – that are at the heart of hip-hop creativity.

⁴ I explore many of these themes in my *Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam* (See LeVine 2008).

⁵ For an analysis of the various statistics related to youth, see chapters 3–4 of LeVine 2005 and the Arab Human Development Report 2009, World Bank and UNDP annual statistics.

⁶ Wael Ghonim, quoted in NPR.org 2010.

⁷ Middle East Outreach Council 2010.

⁸ The most updated bibliography of works on al-Jazeera and the broader impact of satellite television in the region is available at the al-Jazeera Center for Studies (AlJazeera.net 2013).

⁹ See Hawkes 2011.

¹⁰ Cf. Anderson 2013.

¹¹ For Breytenbach's notion of global village nomads, see chapters 7–8 of LeVine 2005. For the discussion of various types of spatial practices see Lefebvre 1990.

¹² This assessment of the process of politicization is drawn from interviews with rappers in Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, Syria and Iran.

¹³ Castells 1996.

¹⁴ These conclusions and quotations are based on numerous interviews with members of both groups from 2011–2013 in Tunis, Bizerta, Cairo and through online conversations/interviews.

¹⁵ See LeVine 2011 and LeVine forthcoming.

¹⁶ LeVine and Bryan forthcoming.

¹⁷ The Phonograph 2011.

Review:

Religion and Hip Hop

Kalle Berggren

Keywords

study of religion, art, religious authority, cultural studies, identity, music

Religion and Hip Hop. Monica R. Miller. Routledge 2012, ISBN 0415628571, 220 pages.

As a hip hop researcher based in northern Europe, my initial reaction to the title of Monica R. Miller's interesting book *Religion and Hip Hop* is that it is too general. Although the first sentence of the book speaks of the "global and transnational ascendance of hip hop" (p.1), the study remains limited to the US context only. It turns out, however, that Miller has a more general and ambitious purpose with this book: to rethink the relation between religion and hip hop, with the hope that "religious studies of Hip-Hop culture can begin again" (p.179).

Miller's original impetus for studying religion in hip hop comes from the public scapegoating discourses which construct hip hop as dirt, risky and a societal threat. Such discourses often cast religion in the role of sanitizer, as an "agent of moral maintenance and deviance management" (p. 6). In contrast, Miller first set out to document and analyze the religious meaning-making within hip hop culture. This proves to be easier said than done, since popular culture, and hip hop in particular, is complex, contradictory and has a somewhat anti-proper quality, twisting and turning religiosity in unpredictable ways. This "failure" to simply locate the religious within hip hop is what prompts Miller's interesting re-thinking of the religious, the book's most central contribution.

About half of the book is devoted to critique of approaches found in previous research on religion and hip hop. Chapters 3 and 4 offer a detailed

critique of authors such as Michael Eric Dyson, Cornel West and Anthony B. Pinn, as well as approaches that make use of hip hop culture as a bait for strengthening church activity. In one way or another, according to Miller, these perspectives fail to interrogate critically the notion of “the religious.” In so doing, they often remain explicitly or implicitly stuck with a predefined notion of the religious as “a confessional, coherent, decipherable inward essence that is self-evident” (p. 179). Drawing instead on a wide range of cultural theorists, philosophers and religious scholars, she argues for a constructivist approach that calls into question the religious as a proper object. This approach thus enables “the exploration of why certain social processes come to be understood and classified as religious, and furthermore what these classifications accomplish among particular groups across time and space” (p. 178).

Chapter 5 offers a critique of empirical, quantitative research on youth religiosity in America: “How is religion measured in such studies? What counts as religious when doing the work of social science, and what is left unexamined?” (p. 124) Similar to the critique of theoretical approaches, here Miller argues that this empirical research suffers from a lack of inquiry into its central concepts. Particularly there are often taken for granted assumptions that conflate religiosity with either moral efficacy or institutional participation. The critique of theoretical and empirical ways of studying religion and hip hop is both theoretically informed and concrete and detailed, which makes it likely to be a point of reference for future work on religion and hip hop. One of the strengths of Miller’s critique is the way it makes creative use of insights and concepts from authors ranging from constructivist religious scholar Russell T. McCutcheon, via critical theorists such as Althusser, Gramsci, Bourdieu and Derrida, to the queer theories of Judith Butler and Jasbir Puar. However, there are also many well-known tensions between these theoretical approaches, and Miller’s book could have profited from a clearer recognition of some of them. This could have strengthened Miller’s own perspective and avoided the book’s quite eclectic impression.

In the other half of the book, Miller sets her own approach to work. Going beyond rap lyrics as data, she analyzes the public debate on hip hop in the 2007 “Don Imus controversy” in chapter 1, the use of religious tropes in books by hip hop artists in chapter 2, and dance practices in David LaChapelle’s 2005 documentary film *Rize* in chapter 6. These chapters are thus spread out over the book, and could perhaps have formed a more distinct “second part” of *Religion and Hip Hop*. The analysis of the Don Imus controversy challenges a race-only paradigm, advocating instead a queer intersectional approach that is able to pay appropriate attention to gender and sexuality. While this analysis is thoroughly convincing, it could have been more contextualized. I feel that the chapter is a bit apart from the rest of the book, since it focuses on race, gender and sexuality more than religion. In the rest of the book it is the other way around, and the promising queer intersectional approach of this chapter unfortunately disappears after this analysis. The reader is also left wondering how similar or different this 2007 public debate on hip hop is, compared with, for instance Kimberlé Crenshaw’s classic intersectional analysis of the public debate on the obscenity charges against 2 Live Crew.

The chapter which is most likely to appeal to a broad hip hop scholarly audience is the analysis of the recent books by 50 Cent, KRS One and RZA of Wu-Tang Clan. It is in this chapter that we can best understand the benefits of Miller’s constructivist approach. Rather than asking the conventional question “what is religious in hip hop,” Miller asks what that which is seen as religious accomplishes within the context of hip hop. This allows her to track the uses of religious tropes in books that cannot straightforwardly be described as religious. While 50 Cent’s book *The 50th Law* is fashioned after a King James Version of the Bible, RZA’s book is called *The Tao of Wu*. KRS One’s book is called *The Gospel of Hip Hop*, and proclaims, among other things, that hip hop is proof of God’s existence. The constructivist approach thus allows Miller to investigate into how “KRS makes use of the already established power of traditional theology, specifically Christian thought, to make a case for the grandiosity and significance of Hip-Hop culture.” (p. 58) In this way, an analysis of religion and hip hop can go far

beyond that which is religious according to researcher's predefined ideas, and instead investigate into what religious signs do.

Despite some minor reservations, *Religion and Hip Hop* is a book that offers a theoretically informed and detailed critique of approaches hitherto found in the small but emerging body of work on hip hop and religion. In this respect, the book makes a significant contribution by incorporating some critical tools of constructivist social and cultural theory. It is likely to become a point of reference for subsequent analysis of the interface between religion and popular culture, particularly hip hop. Furthermore, it sets Miller's constructivist approach to work on a range of data from hip hop culture, opening up interesting ways of researching religion and hip hop that should merit attention beyond the U.S. context.

Review:

Turkish Metal – Music, Meaning and Morality in a Muslim Society

Johan Cato

Keywords

popular culture, music, identity, gender, Turkey

Turkish Metal – Music, Meaning and Morality in a Muslim Society. Pierre Hecker. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012. ISBN: 140943849X, 230 pages.

Turkish Metal – Music, Meaning and Morality in a Muslim Society, written by German scholar Pierre Hecker is certainly a very captivating book, since it combines the study of Islam and heavy metal music, which is an area in need of more scholarly attention. The book is divided into seven chapters that deal with a variety of topics related to heavy metal, Turkey and Islam. The topics include questions concerning gender, nationalism, media coverage and satanic panic. The book is based on a broad range of materials, which include in-depth interviews with musicians and *metalheads* active on the scene, interviews with journalists and documentary analysis in the form of Turkish daily newspapers and material from the scene like fanzines, flyers, lyrics and webzines. When it comes to defining metal Hecker emphasises the lucid character of all forms of cultural phenomenons. They are not once and for all set in stone, rather they are dynamic and renegotiated and changed due to circumstances and change over time. Moreover, what constitutes metal or heavy metal culture is heavily dependent on the eye of the beholders specific perspective.

Hecker tells a vivid story about the early days of the Turkish heavy metal scene from the 1980s and onwards and the hardships Turkish metalheads had to endure to get a hold of a foreign metal albums, magazines, instruments and

other forms of merchandise associated with the metal scene. The hardships were not only due to the political and economic situation post the *1980 Turkish coup d'état* but the Turkish states monopoly of national media meant that there were almost no outlets for rock or metal music on national radio or TV. But as we all probably know, necessity is the mother of inventions and in relation to the Turkish metal scene this meant several things. Hecker shows how important the developments of informal structures are in the dissemination of different cultural expressions. For someone grown up in the global digital era of mp3 files and social media, it seems somewhat obsolete and maybe strange with a concept like *tapetrading*, but Hecker in a convincing way describes just how important this was in establishing a vibrant Turkish metal scene. Remember that this was almost always done on a non-monetary level, which therefore during the economic recession in the 1980s in Turkey, helped a lot of bands to get hold of foreign music and at the same time promote their own bands.

One of the chapters deals with the accusations of Satanism among metalheads in Turkey through the prism of moral panic. The growing visibility of metal in urban public spaces in the 1980s and early 1990s is described as one of several factors in the Turkish media campaign against heavy metal and its listeners as deviant Satan worshipping lunatics.

In relation to Islam one of the common accusations against metalheads was that their love of extreme music also entailed a renunciation of Islam. Hecker illustrates how the use of certain anti-Christian themes, common to heavy metal and black metal, like inverted crosses, became interpreted as signs of a rejection of Islam and an embrace of the Christian creed. Hecker concludes that one way of understanding the ambivalence of these (anti)-Christian symbols in a Muslim society (not familiar with symbols within the metal scene) are as a threat not only to Islam but also to the Turkish national identity, since Sunni Islam is an important aspect of nationalism in the country.

One of the most stimulating parts of the book is the one that deals with questions concerning gender and metal and its consequences for

female metalheads and musicians in Turkey. Hecker displays how female metalheads appropriate metal culture in their own way and that their way of doing metal is not different from male members of the scene. But at the same time there is ambivalence, since there are strong patriarchal norms that govern gender roles not just within the metal scene but also in Turkish society. Metal is considered to be a male bastion and in line with concepts of masculinity, which in turn means, that male participants in the scene often denote women as lacking the right dedication or simply being uninformed. In the interviews with female participants in the metal scene, it is evident that they don't perceive themselves as subordinate or repressed. Instead they create their own female space within metal, that stands on its own, which is further supported by the fact of an ever-growing number of all-female bands. Hecker analysis therefore points to heavy metals subversive potential when it comes to challenging dominant concepts regarding femininity and masculinity, a challenge that goes both ways. The female participants in the scene challenge dominant understandings of morality by appropriating spaces like (rock bars) and behavior (drinking, smoking, staying out late at night) that are considered to be masculine traits. On the other hand male participants challenge norms concerning behavior and gender specific roles by their appearances (long hair, earrings) that are thought of as feminine forms of appearance.

All in all, this is a well written and thought provoking book. On a more critical note it would have been interesting to have a more in-depth discussion about the different theological understandings of music within Islam and its importance for the development of the heavy metal scene in Turkey *vis-à-vis* the religious establishment. In line with this it could also have been interesting to have a larger discussion about the metalheads thoughts about religion in general, Islam and secularism and its effects on their self-understanding, identity and the Turkish metal scenes future. This is of course just minor remarks and does not in any way obscure that Hecker's book is fascinating and a excellent contribution to a research area that deserves much more attention.