

## Configurations of Space and Identity in Hip Hop: Performing “Global South”

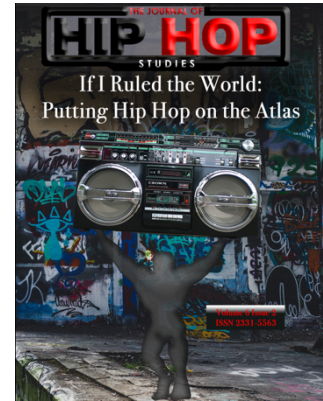
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*Journal of Hip Hop Studies*, Special Issue *If I Ruled the World: Putting Hip Hop on the Atlas*

Volume 6, Issue 2, Winter 2019, pp. 183 – 205

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34718/tbfs-v626>

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## **Configurations of Space and Identity in Hip Hop: Performing “Global South”**

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### **Abstract**

The spatiality of culture, specifically Hip Hop, and the reverberations between space and identity are the core concern of this essay. In deconstructing and contextualizing the concept of the Global South by discussing the practices of respective Hip Hop communities, this paper aims at laying bare the oversimplifications inherent in those seemingly natural spatial dimensions. The Global South can, thus, not be understood as a concise and objective term. Instead, it implies a highly normative concept and can be made to reveal or conceal specific attributes of the culture in question. Deliberately creating a cultural and artistic discourse in which the Hip Hop “tribe” of the Global South can be understood as politically and socially activist, revolutionary, and highly critical of the powers that are, artists use this concept to inspire a sense of collective identity based on the opposition to the global hegemony of the empire and an appreciation of local culture and customs.

Authenticating the cultural practices of Hip Hop through the incorporation of local aesthetics for these artists goes hand in hand with a re-creation of the material and normative structure of Hip Hop, and the re-enactment of the myth of the genesis of Hip Hop. These voices are able to contribute significantly to the continued discourse on global hegemony and resistance as they constantly remind us about the intricacies of colonial, racist, and exoticizing sentiments whose relevance and significance is evident. Their art exemplifies that, like the issue of race in the US which is far from resolved, the issue of European colonialism still has to be surmounted.

## Introduction

In August of 2016, the Canadian First Nation trio, A Tribe Called Red, released a song along with Yasiin Bey (formerly known as Mos Def) and Narcy, an Iraqi-Canadian MC, titled R.E.D.<sup>1</sup> Both the song and accompanying video demonstrate strong signification of solidarity and identification with native communities and other marginalized communities across North America and beyond. The music video depicts a kind of exodus in which Yasiin, with the help of Narcy (aka The Narcycist, Illumini-Narcy or Yassin Alsalman), migrates from the realm of the Alie Nation to the eternal distances of the Halluci Nation, the first being depicted as streets and corners of an urbanized setting, the latter as endless desert and sky. The music is carried by a simple but intense beat, reminiscent of traditional native North American drumming. A narrator introduces and interrupts the song with explications of what the Halluci Nation represents: its people's DNA composed of earth and sky, realizing that everything is connected and all is sacred, while the Alie Nation, the antagonist, pursues alienation from the interconnectedness of all that lives under the sky in its quest for material wealth and power.

Having been produced by First Nation Canadians and featuring both an African-American Muslim and an Iraqi-Canadian, this song is one of countless examples for the global reach and appeal of Hip Hop culture. Since the 1990s, the cultural practices of rapping, tagging, breaking and DJing have been performed in the most diverse locales on the globe. While media and scholarship in most of the "West" often continue to view Hip Hop as a genuine product of US-American popular culture, critics repeatedly decry the popularity of Hip Hop in their societies as "Americanization" (meaning the devaluation of local culture and customs). A close observation of Hip Hop communities worldwide forces us to reconsider essentialist or reductionist notions and labels surrounding Hip Hop.<sup>2</sup> In other words:

The spread of rap music and hip-hop culture cannot only be understood as an American cultural import that has been acquired by youth around the world. Nor is it solely a manifestation of an indigenous art form and local expressive traditions. Rather, inquiry into global hip-hop movements must begin with the examination of local-to-local relationships and the development of global racial identity politics which affect claims to authenticity.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The single is from the album *We Are the Halluci Nation*, Radicalized Records, 2016. The video can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NXVyQiEPqBI> (retrieved November 14, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> I prefer to use the term "community" when speaking of Hip Hop artists and audiences or "consumers." By doing so, I follow Keith Negus who contends that "[...] fans are imaginative, discriminating people who are capable of making a number of fine distinctions and who actively participate in creating the meanings that become associated with popular music. Fans contribute an integral element to how we understand popular music and particular artists." Keith Negus, *Popular Music in Theory: An Introduction* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 26.

<sup>3</sup> Angela Williams, "'We Ain't Terrorists but we Droppin' Bombs': Language Use and Localization in Egyptian Hip Hop", in *The Languages of Global Hip Hop*, ed. Marina Terkourafi (London and New York: Continuum Intl. Publ., 2010), 67-93, 68.

Hip Hop today accommodates all social, ethnic, religious and political affiliations; it is used and recreated by political parties and movements, religious and cultural communities, schools and universities. However, despite this, the meanings attributed to signs, codes and symbols used in the genre can differ considerably between local communities or the ends of political spectrums. In this essay, I focus on Hip Hop from the Global South, including not only the geographical dimension but also pertaining to other politico-cultural spaces formed by the effects of postcolonial heritage, global capitalism, race and diaspora. Accordingly, Hip Hop from the Middle East and Latin America can just as well belong to this category as Hip Hop from immigrant communities in Europe or First Nation North Americans. Global South is, thus, not a geographical construct, but a social and political one – like the Halluci Nation.

Reverberations of the colonial past and the current distribution of power and wealth on a global scale are central in the notion of the Global South. While most former colonies of European powers gained their independence in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the political and social legacy of occupation and inferiority continue to haunt institutional setups and public discourses in the affected societies. In these discourses, the practices of Hip Hop are able to provide ample resources with their historical connection to the Black freedom struggle, which understood the African-American population of the US to be diasporic and colonized at the same time: being robbed from their ancestral land and still bearing the effects of a colonized society within the state of the colonial power itself.<sup>4</sup> Hip Hop as a counter-hegemonic and resistant culture can embody notions of empowerment, agency, strength and independent reasoning, making it a perfect avenue for the expression of opposition and discontent in postcolonial communities and discourses. These discourses cannot be confined to methodological nationalism alone.<sup>5</sup> The state-centric view might be suitable for questions pertaining to domestic policy and national specificities. Researching Hip Hop in the Global South, however, necessitates the realization of Hip Hop not only as a global but also international phenomenon, in which practitioners and fans as well as audiences and critics are able to contribute to a common trans-regional discourse. The selection of examples in this essay, however, covers only a small portion of what Global South commonly incorporates by including native/First Nation/indigenous communities in the Americas, the Middle Eastern region and expatriates who identify as Arab. I don't aim at an exhaustive account, rather, those examples serve as illustration of the theoretical considerations attempted here. Those considerations consist of delineating select features of configurations of space and

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<sup>4</sup> Sohail Daulatzai, *Black Star, Crescent Moon: The Muslim International and Black Freedom Beyond America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 37.

<sup>5</sup> The method followed in most chapters of: Tony Mitchell (ed.), *Global Noise: Rap and Hip Hop Outside the USA* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001); as well as in: H.Samy Alim, Awad Ibrahim and Alastair Pennycook (eds.), *Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language* (Sydney: Routledge, 2009); and: Karin Bock, Stefan Meier and Gunter Süss (eds.), *HipHop meets Academia: Globale Spuren eines lokalen Kulturphänomens* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2007).

identity in Hip Hop that are conducive to understanding the reverberations of Hip Hop's global reality and its appeal in the Global South.

The spatial dimension of Hip Hop culture draws together local and global, particular and universal.<sup>6</sup> The forms of its practices are rooted within the immediate surroundings of the artists and their communities while structures are similar on a global scale.<sup>7</sup> Maintaining a deep artistic connection to the local does not preclude that other spatial dimensions might be of significance, like a regional, inter-urban, rural element or even immaterial spheres like an exiled community linked by discourse. Additionally, it is dangerous to essentialize cultural practices from specific geographical entities due to the evolving cultural scene and signifying system. This is deeply connected to the case of identity, understood as amalgamation of several layers of being. Performing identity does not solely involve the local community and "street" together with the representation of Hip Hop as a global culture. The multitude of factors contributing to practices of identification point to its quality as more kaleidoscopic rather than one-sided and homogenous. Additionally, multiple layers of identification enable the practitioners to forge significant ties between Hip Hop adherents over long distances by means of mutual recognition and solidarity. In doing so, Hip Hop culture is able to provide artists and activists in diverse locations with the means to artistically and culturally engage in conversations by using a shared set of practices, codes and signs. In the age of information and digital media, similar topics and issues worked on in different geographical and societal contexts lead to the emergence of trans-regional movements and communities. These post-national "tribes" of Hip Hop culture cannot be limited by geographical or conventional cultural, national or religious borders and boundaries. Appropriating and evolving the cultural practices of Hip Hop, subgroups of the global Hip Hop nation (GHHN) expressly challenge the very discourses that essentialize those borders and boundaries and deconstruct them in their artistic and cultural activity. Concurrently, new forms of demarcations and social as well as discursive formations are created.

### Spatiality – Where We At?

The spatial dimension of Hip Hop culture is usually defined as local and global. Local in the sense that authentication of cultural practices and "realness" as a precondition for cultural acceptance and relevance in immediate social surroundings requires firm rooting in local, social, political, and cultural spheres. Hence the centrality of "the street" in Hip Hop culture as "hip-hop nationalism's mythical wellspring."<sup>8</sup> Maintaining a connection to these "streets" is crucial for the perceived authenticity and

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<sup>6</sup> H. Samy Alim, "Intro: Straight Outta Compton, Straight aus München: Global Linguistic Flows, Identities, and the Politics of Language in a Global Hip Hop Nation," in *Global Linguistic Flows; Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language*, ed. H. Samy Alim et al., (Sydney: Routledge, 2009) 1-22.

<sup>7</sup> I understand the "structure" of cultural practice its rules, conventions and style. The "form," on the other hand, comprises of its aesthetic and affective content and meaning.

<sup>8</sup> Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-hop Generation* (London: Ebury Publishing, 2007), 422.

relevance of artistic interventions as perceived by the respective community. “Street-consciousness” is a “[...] key value for members of the HHN [Hip Hop Nation]” and “street cred(ibility)” signifies not only social and material connections to local surroundings, it also contains a set of normative assumptions about spatiality and sociability, unwritten rules and codes of conduct that have to be deduced by gaining first-hand knowledge and experience.<sup>9</sup> Since the spreading of cultural practices across the globe, we have witnessed Hip Hop becoming an idiom of choice for people all over the world, be it by rapping, tagging, dancing or the appropriation of the culture’s stylistic elements.<sup>10</sup> In a somewhat oxymoronic fashion, the centrality of the local and related normative assumptions were sustained in this development. Hip Hop heads all over the world reconnect with their local surroundings and reflect on them by using practices of Hip Hop culture. As the structure of Hip Hop went global, the genre’s form, contents and aesthetics were sampled, remixed and thus localized.<sup>11</sup> This might be one of the central features of Hip Hop, enabling it to firmly root and authenticate itself in the most diverse communities and locales.

However, acknowledging the centrality of authenticity in practices of Hip Hop culture does not necessitate strict circumscriptions of how this authenticity is signified:

Instead of searching for authentic forms of spontaneous and unmediated black, working class or ethnic expression, [...] we could ask a more specific question: under what conditions and at which moments do particular musical codes, signs and symbols become used and claimed as expression of particular social and cultural identities? This is a question that suggests that a far more actively political *process* is entailed. It also implies that music and cultural forms are just as much a part of the making of cultural identities – the process is not simply one way, whereby some fixed identity leads to (or is ‘reflected’ in) a particular type of music.<sup>12</sup>

In other words: culture cannot so much be defined by asking what it essentially is or entails, but rather by asking how and why it is constructed in a specific way for a specific social, political or religious community.<sup>13</sup> What we are then able to understand is not the

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<sup>9</sup> H. Samy Alim, *Roc the Mic Right: The Language of Hip Hop Culture* (Abingdon-on -Thames: Routledge, 2006), 122. See also: Gabriele Klein and Malte Friedrich, *Is This Real? Die Kultur des HipHop* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003), 42.

<sup>10</sup> Hisham Aidi, *Rebel Music: Race, Empire, and the New Muslim Youth Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2014), xxi. Hisham Aidi adds that it is the idiom of choice for “young” people. James W. Perkinson writes “Hip-hop has become the adolescent ‘idiom of choice’ the world over, today, for negotiating questions of identity and desire.” James W. Perkinson, “Rap as Wrap and Rapture: North American Popular Culture and the Denial of Death”, in *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 131-152, 142. As I find that attribution of “youth” or “adolescence” vague and argue that artists as well as audiences can’t be added to this segment in their entirety, or maybe even majority, I did not include the full quote(s) in the text.

<sup>11</sup> Klein and Friedrich, *Is This Real?*, 10.

<sup>12</sup> Negus, *Popular Music*, 122.

<sup>13</sup> Referencing Raymond Williams’ “social definition”: “[...] cultures are networks of meanings that are embodied, performed and made concrete in particular ways of life.” John Storey, “The Politics of Culture,” *META-Middle East Topics and Arguments*, No. 7 “Culture,” eds. Pierre Hecker/Igor Johannsen, <http://www.meta-journal.net/>.



culture in itself, which is not fixed and will inadvertently change and transform in ways no observer is able to predict, but the construction of culture by humans in their quest to make sense of themselves and their surroundings.<sup>14</sup>

Consequently, the localization and authentication of Hip Hop in some ways not only leads to the incorporation of elements found in local tradition and history, but also to the transformation of the culture's principal vocabulary itself. The first is prefigured in the cultural practice of sampling, not only allowing but almost demanding local practitioners to re-evaluate and re-create local artistic expressions, musically. The second can be deduced by acknowledging that the centrality of the spatial location as a real life setting and point of reference found in Hip Hop, the so-called (urban) street or block, is not necessarily signified using this very expression. In the process of Hip Hop's internationalization, it has reached areas quite separated from the urban setting or even in opposition to urban lifestyle. The connection to rurality is central in the work of artists with a Native North American background, such as Supaman, Drezus or A Tribe Called Red. While Drezus and Supaman show themselves in videos traditionally dressed and located in the vast landscape of North America without any trace of urbanism, A Tribe Called Red portrays the journey from an urban setting to an open rural space as a liberating personal transformation.<sup>15</sup> The urbanity of Hip Hop is accordingly not a prerequisite, like a paved surface for skaters or the wave for surfers, but rather a signification of the environment of its genesis and its main stage. Its centrality in Hip Hop mythology and historiography notwithstanding, urbanity is in no way constitutive to the authentic performance of respective practices. This includes the aesthetic referencing of urbanity in absence of its material reality.<sup>16</sup> A decidedly antagonist comprehension of the environment, like deserts, plains, and forests as well as villages and small towns does indicate a deviation from Hip Hop's aesthetic conventions but may, at the same time, preserve its normative principle of authenticity.<sup>17</sup>

The very normative prerequisite of continuous "street"-connection to be perceived as authentic or "real" is, thus, not connected to the material existence of paved streets in inner cities. Rather, the ability to "overcome" one's material, social, political and

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<sup>14</sup> Stuart Hall, "Introduction," in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (New York: Sage Publications, 1997), 1-11, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Jeremiah Manitoypes (Drezus), "Warpath" Indian Summer. (Up in Arms Studio, 2014) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8Cy1Knyu6A>, and Christian Parrish Takes the Gun (Supaman) "Why" Illuminatives, (2015) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OiVU-W9VT7Q>, may serve as illustrative examples (both retrieved November 14, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Yassin Alsalman, for example, argues that "Hip-hop culture is, by far, the most direct aural and physical tradition of urban life. And by urban, I don't mean young, ethnic, chic or 'cool.' Urbanity in this sense would hold a literal meaning – a lifestyle stemming from an urban environment and therefore not a rural one." Yassin Alsalman, *The Diatribes of a Dying Tribe* (Montreal: Write or Wrong/Paranoid Arab Boy Publishing, 2011), 34.

<sup>17</sup> Another example, from the USA, would be Bubba Sparxxx, as was pointed out by Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, *Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap* (Lawrence: Univiversity Press of Kansas, 2007), 37.

economic surroundings in productive and artistic ways through the cultural practices of Hip Hop is much more relevant. Being able to comprehend these surroundings sufficiently and to reflect on them endows the artist with agency and authorship, elevating the relevance of the art as well as the social position of the artist among his peers and audience. The amplified and distributed voice of Hip Hop artists is thus able to effectively contribute to public and political discourses, to engage in political and religious debates. Commenting on social, political or religious issues from an informed and locally embedded perspective by using the cultural practices of Hip Hop is the very core of authenticity and realness. The issues referred to and their relevance reflects the social and political location of the respective artist. Those issues, however, are often closely connected to the natural environment which represents a significant part of the life-worlds of the respective community. With Hip Hop properly globalized any habitat is now able to function as the background for its practices.

It may even be possible to delineate “the local” in specific Hip Hop communities without reference to any geographical construct. Ana Tijoux, a Chilean Hip Hop artist raised in France, argues in an interview with *Democracy Now* that music can be generally understood as a way or a tool to reflect on the world and the overall political situation. For her, Hip Hop specifically is able to offer itself as “land for the landless,” to provide practitioners with a sense of identity and familial belonging.<sup>18</sup> Yassin Alsalman/Narcy describes the experience of diaspora and the constructive role of Hip Hop in this situation:

We lingered somewhere between the two worlds that made us the hyphen that binds them together, that hyphen is Hip-Hop, a line drawn between the lands that soiled our seed and the one that harbored our fruits.<sup>19</sup>

While a history of migration does not preclude firm identification with a specific city or neighborhood, it may also broaden the local to include a more complex spatial sphere. The global perspective inherent to diasporic identities might grant insight into the construction of local spheres of artists or communities. Hip Hop, the “culture for those lacking roots to their family tree,”<sup>20</sup> can be understood as globally diffused cultural practices that enable an international community to create locality and authenticity through discourse. Thus, Hip Hop itself can be made to serve as “the local” capable of offering globally dispersed individuals a point of reference and cultural retreat.

Rather than being invested solely in commentaries on the social and political situation of the immediate social surrounding, Hip Hop from the Global South is concerned with issues that pertain to postcolonialism, displacement, world politics, war and global marginality. Being able to communicate and share experiences via digital

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<sup>18</sup> Tijoux, Ana, “Chilean Musician Ana Tijoux on Politics, Feminism, Motherhood and Hip-Hop as ‘a land for the landless,’” interview by Amy Goodman with *Democracy Now*, July 10, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EJ3Gr58dpWM> (retrieved November 15, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> Alsalman, *Diatribes*, 19.

<sup>20</sup> Alsalman, *Diatribes*, 27.



media allows the Hip Hop community from the Global South to create an imagined spatiality that can be understood as local in the sense that globally dispersed individuals are able to share, comment and discuss comparable experiences. Thus, the imagined community<sup>21</sup> of the Global South can be delineated by a virtual spatiality circumscribed by discourse, narrative and identity rather than geographical or material space. "Where you're from" is at the core of "where you're at"<sup>22</sup> in this case, as it informs perspectives on (and relevance of) specific social and political discourses connected to postcoloniality, migration, globalization and power.

One of the central themes in the political discourse of the Global South's Hip Hop communities is the decades-old conflict and antagonism in the Middle East, specifically between Israel and Palestine. The history and current configuration of the conflict is seen as an example of the ills produced by imperial hegemony and colonization. In this discourse, Israel is seen as the principal aggressor and heir of imperial European powers. As far as Hip Hop is concerned, related cultural practices are employed literally as cultural weapons from a postcolonial perspective. In 2006, the Israeli-Palestinian Hip Hop formation DAM (Arabic for "blood" and acronym for "Da Arab MCs") posed the rhetorical question "Who is the terrorist?" in their song "Min Irhabi?" which became an instant hit in the Arabic-speaking Hip Hop tribe.<sup>23</sup> Another example for the cultural struggle of Palestinians facing Israeli attempts to annihilate Palestinian culture is the song "Al Kufiya Arabiya" by Shadia Mansour feat. M1 of Dead Prez, published 2011 and already regarded as a classic.<sup>24</sup> The song criticizes the devaluation of a central symbol of Palestinian identity and resistance, the checkered scarf, traditionally in red or black, that is used in many Arab regions and was made a political symbol by the militant Palestinian resistance during the 1970s. In the song, Shadia Mansour expresses outrage over the commodification of this national symbol and reclaims it as a part of the cultural resistance movement, furthermore expressing a clear anti-Zionist perspective. Another one of her songs, "Lazim netghayyar" (We Have To Change), features the Syrian-American rapper Omar Offendum and recapitulates the history of the Israel-Palestine conflict from a Palestinian perspective.<sup>25</sup> This song and the accompanying video are designed to literally school the listener and viewer about the intricacies of the conflict which are often not taken into consideration by major media outlets. Similar to the achievement of the Hip

<sup>21</sup> This term was introduced by Benedict Anderson in his treatment of nationalism. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> The original quote by Rakim Allah is: "It ain't where you from, it's where you at." From the lyrics to "I Know You Got Soul" from the album *Paid in Full* (The Island Def Jam Music Group, 1987).

<sup>23</sup> The video (with English subtitles) can be watched here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=duwsH-gAmuM> (retrieved November 15, 2016).

<sup>24</sup> Shadia Mansour, "Al Kufiya Arabiya," video retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=21OXQ4m1-Bo> (retrieved November 15, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> Shadia Mansour, "Lazim netghayyar (We have to change)." See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7LcLqP-GOj0> for the official video and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=87rk2sd7TCs> for a version with English subtitles (both accessed November 15, 2016).

Hop generation in the US in schooling, its adherents about their history as African-Americans, strengthening the relevance of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, the Civil Rights, Black Arts and Black Power movements, Shadia Mansour uses rap in an effort to realize what the Hip Hop proverb “each one teach one” embodies.

Other works that comment on the political situation of Palestine include the collaboration between Iraqi-British Lowkey and Immortal Technique from the US called “Voices of the Voiceless.”<sup>26</sup> In the lyrics, Lowkey connects his geographical spatiality to the political geography of Palestine by rapping:

*From West End to the Westbank,  
I write righteous rhymes with my right  
And wrestle the devil with my left hand*

While “West End” refers to a part of London, the home of the artist, the “Westbank” signifies the Palestinian Territories between Israel and the Jordanian Kingdom. The second part of the verse infers Lowkey’s claim to engage in a socially and politically virulent discourse through art, using it as a means to speak truth to power. With this song and others (while Lowkey’s album is called *Soundtrack to the Struggle*, Immortal Technique titled one of his *Revolutionary* and *The 3<sup>rd</sup> World*)<sup>27</sup> both artists position themselves as parts of an international Hip Hop community engaged in exposing what they perceive to be a hegemonic and racist system of world domination upheld by the American empire and its vassals. However, acknowledging that this is accomplished through the cultural practices of Hip Hop does not necessarily mean that Hip Hop is rebellious, that is to say, by definition, a “weapon of the weak.”<sup>28</sup> The very same cultural techniques are employed by those on the opposite side of the political spectrum, like Subliminal or Shadow MC, Israeli Zionist rappers whose songs and videos glorify the state of Israel and its military.<sup>29</sup> The cultural practices of Hip Hop are not exclusive to specific segments of society and this obviously affects the understanding of those practices in different contexts. This is, as Terry Eagleton reminds us, due to the aesthetic comprising “the whole region of human perception and sensation,” that is,

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<sup>26</sup> Felipe Coronel and Kareem Dennis “Voice of the Voiceless” *Soundtrack to the Struggle*. (Mesopotamia Music, 2011). See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-NLH53kIbDk> for a lyrical video (retrieved November 15, 2016).

<sup>27</sup> Lowkey published his album 2011 with Mesopotamia Records. Immortal Technique published *Revolutionary Vol. 1* in 2006, *Revolutionary Vol. 2* 2004 and *The 3<sup>rd</sup> World* in 2008, all with Viper Records.

<sup>28</sup> James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

<sup>29</sup> Sujatha Fernandes, *Close to the Edge: In Search of the Global Hip Hop Generation* (London and New York: Verso, 2011), 15. Their songs often feature light-hearted wishes for peace between Israelis and Palestinians but contain also the glorification of the state, society, history and military of Israel. See “Prachim baKane” (Flowers in the Gun Barrel) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mh94v1zosyg> or “Tikva” (Hope) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ruI9liCHBQ> as examples (both retrieved November 15, 2016).

from the beginning a contradictory, double-edged concept. On the one hand, it figures as a genuinely emancipatory force – as a community of subjects now linked by sensuous impulse and fellow-feeling [...] each safeguarded in its unique particularity while bound at the same time into social harmony [...]. On the other hand, the aesthetic signifies [...] a kind of “internalised repression”. Inserting social power more deeply into the very bodies of those it subjugates, and so operating as a supremely effective mode of political hegemony.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, there may be huge differences between local communities in close proximity while others can be on different continents expressing similar perspectives and attitudes in their art. Rap and Hip Hop became such a universal language that the most diverse political, social and racial affinities are now expressed through the use of its register. Politicians, corporations, teachers, community workers, cultural critics and many more see in Hip Hop culture a kind of toolbox at their disposal for meeting various goals.<sup>31</sup> In this light, I consider it fruitful to identify different Hip Hop communities not by geographical location alone, but also by closely observing discourse and aesthetics or the cognitive and sensual contents of its practices. Consequently, instead of observing national or local Hip Hop communities as Arab, Egyptian or Cairene Hip Hop, I argue that it is imperative to pay attention to the specific aesthetic and ideological connections made within the respective practices in their social and discursive environment. In the case of Egyptian rap, variations concerning connections to the larger Arab world, the significance of the Muslim community, the antagonist position to Israel, the role of poetry in Arab history and tradition or the relevance of historical and political ties to societies with similar postcolonial sentiments might be more central to the artistic expression than national sentiment. In this way, discourse and identity, rather than the immediate material reality or geographical location, is constitutive of the practices employed by the artist(s) at hand.

### Identity – Gaining One’s Definition

Here, identity is not understood as something given, as preordained and inescapable. Instead, I perceive identity as the (un)conscious construction of oneself and others by using language and communication. Concomitant to the diversity of spatial affiliations possible through engaging in Hip Hop’s cultural practices, a plethora of identities can be constructed or claimed on the basis of some perceived features that are deemed crucial by oneself or the social and discursive surroundings. Being identified as “Black,” for example, might be in itself a minor feat for the individual but it gains

<sup>30</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 13 and 28.

<sup>31</sup> Former Democratic presidential nominee and secretary of state Hillary Clinton described Hip Hop as a tool for diplomacy, claiming that “Hip-hop is America” (Aidi, *Rebel Music*, 221). Especially regarding Muslim-majority states and societies: “Hip-hop [...] is the music of choice for ‘perception management’ and ‘strategic communication’ with young Muslims, because of American hip-hop’s long-standing relationship with Islam” (Aidi, *Rebel Music*, 225). The current prime minister of Israel used a song of the Jordanian Hip Hop group *Torabyeh* in one of his campaign videos, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/benjamin-netanyahu-sued-using-jordan-hip-hop-song-likud-campaign-video-featuring-isis-1488537> (retrieved September 27, 2016). Other examples are the numerous grassroots initiatives promoting social, ethnic, political, and cultural awareness through the practices of Hip Hop all over the world.

significance through racist notions, forcing the individual to react to negative attributions others associate with Black. On the other hand, identifying oneself as Black can be the source of genuine empowerment by associating it with several qualities positively distinguishing Blackness from other identity constructions. Constructing one's identity, gaining one's definition,<sup>32</sup> is a complex activity involving cultural and discursive negotiation with the respective social sphere. Defining oneself is as much an action as it is a reaction to the social and material surroundings or, rather, to how one defines these surroundings based on one's own observations from one's own specific point of view. Hence, the definition of Hip Hop as Black culture.<sup>33</sup> This is not to imply that Black culture contains practices crafted or used solely by Black communities, but rather that these practices can be derived from social and cultural situations of those defined as Black during a specific time and at a specific place. Thus, Black culture is endowed with normative foundations related to those communities. Through this connection, the structures of Hip Hop's cultural practices potentially contain qualities of empowerment, authenticity, pride and self-assurance, qualities that enable Hip Hop communities worldwide to use and recreate Hip Hop practices as cultural and artistic weapons.

Consequently, the artists I am concerned with remind us of the global impact of not only Hip Hop's cultural practices, but also of the social and political issues outside of the immediate scope of the North American and European perspective. Utilizing Hip Hop tailored to fit their local, diasporic, political or religious identity, Hip Hoppers are able to respond to master narratives and hegemonic discourses. In the case of Hip Hop from the Global South these hegemonic narratives and discourses emanate from the sphere of the West (or North). In engaging with and challenging them, members of Hip Hop's Global South tribe not only contribute to and complicate the relevant discourses surrounding race, nationalism and power, they also create counter narratives and forge solidarity movements, re-defining their own identity while challenging the essentializing notions projected onto them by hegemonic powers. Narcy, to give one prime example, challenges prevalent stereotyping of Arab culture and identity in Western discourses through his art, be it musically, through accompanying videos and artwork or by lecturing at cultural centers and universities.<sup>34</sup> Being a scholar in addition to being a musician, he teaches classes on Hip Hop culture at the University of Montreal. In this endeavor, he is not only disrupting romanticizing and demonizing notions of Arabs or the religion of Islam in the global (i.e. Western) public discourse; he also actively employs a critique vented towards other Hip Hop artists who use simplified tropes of Arab

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<sup>32</sup> Lonnie Corant Jaman Shuka Rashid Lynn and Thomas DeCarlo Callaway "G.O.D. Gaining One's Definition" *One Day It'll All Make Sense*, Relativity Records, 1997.

<sup>33</sup> See the groundbreaking and pioneering work of Tricia Rose, whose title *Black Noise* alludes to understanding Hip Hop as a genuinely "Black" culture. Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

<sup>34</sup> The most obvious example would be the song "Average Type" feat. Meryem Saci off the *We Are the Medium EP*, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Bzaaqmb1V8> for the video (retrieved November 15, 2016). The English lyrics ridicule essentializing attributions of "Arabness."

stereotypes in Hip Hop culture itself.<sup>35</sup> In a reply to Busta Rhymes' "Arab Money," he deconstructs the song as generally being racist towards Arabs by reproducing these essentialized images.<sup>36</sup>

In challenging the simplified notions of identity offered by hegemonic discourses in media, art and scholarship for people from the Global South, artists like Narcy are able to create a transnational community and movement. In the introductory scene to the video of the song P.H.A.T.W.A., he claims that "Iraq is the new black" and in the song he continuously criticizes the effects of the US administration's "War on Terror" following 9/11, rapping:

*We went from supported to subordinate;  
Can't afford it, ordered;  
My motherland smothered and mortared;  
Morbid, at borders;  
I'm sorted out from beardless cats;  
That boarded the plane as I was boarding;  
Then detained, I can't call it;  
Mic check when they search my Jordans.<sup>37</sup>*

Issues of war and racial profiling are dealt with artistically while the claim of representing the "new Black" epitomizes the marginalizing effect of these policies on Arabs. Taking up a different issue in the discourse on terrorism and security, the Phillipino-Syrian rapper Chyno engages artistically with the phenomenon of suicide bombers:

*You idolize sinners, I'll take a ride with 'em;  
To symbolize freedom, I'll dive into hell;  
With all the fire there, I'll find some light in it;  
Strap it to the chest, light the dynamite in us<sup>38</sup>*

In addition to reflecting upon the war in Syria, Chyno comments on the restrictions endured by people like him, who don't enjoy similar rights, freedoms and possibilities

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<sup>35</sup> As Stuart Hall remarked: "[...] the global is the 'self-presentation of the dominant particular,'" which is not only true in political or economic discourse but includes cultural practices and aesthetics that have a global reach and appeal, prime among these is Hip Hop. Quoted in: Negus, *Popular Music*, 174.

<sup>36</sup> Travis George Smith Jr. and Rondell Edwin Turner, "Arab Money," *Back on My B.S.* (Universal Motown, 2009). This observation was made by May Alhassen and presented by her in 2014 during the Annual Academy of Religion Conference (AAR) in San Diego. To obtain more information about her, refer to: <http://www.mayalhassen.com/>. The song by Busta Rhymes is off the album *Back on my B.S.*, Flipmode and Universal Motown 2009. The reply, "The Real Arab Money" by Narcy (then "the Narcycist") can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C0E3BhHkblE> (both retrieved November 15, 2016).

<sup>37</sup> Yassin Alsaman. "P.H.A.T.W.A" *The Narcycys* (Paranoid Arab Boy Music, 2009) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TtoHCUMpNMY> (retrieved November 15, 2016).

<sup>38</sup> Nasser Shorbaji. "O.P.P," *Making Music to Feel at Home.* (Coffeehouse Records, 2015) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5MTGu7SeKc> (retrieved November 15, 2016).



due to their place of origin: “Why these embassies don’t give me no visa? Look, I’m educated and my mother’s Filipina; But your passport says Syria, so you don’t fit our criteria.”<sup>39</sup> That the complex relationship between Global South and West not only includes demonizing and vilifying aspects but also an equally destructive form of romanticizing and objectifying the “other”<sup>40</sup> is reiterated by Narcy in a collaboration with DAM for the song “Hamith Hiloo (Bittersweet).”<sup>41</sup> In it, the fascination with an “Arab Rap” is ridiculed, while at the same time, rappers are criticized for copying their mainstream Western counterparts, including narratives of gangsterism, materialism, misogyny and homophobia. Thus, the cultural practices themselves are viewed as empowering while the mere imitation of US-rap is deemed unauthentic.

These topics account for a part of the issues circumscribing the tribe of the Global South in the GHHN. Shared experiences and comparable methods of reflection on these topics in Hip Hop lead to the creation of a transnational community of the marginalized, drawn together in a shared notion of rebellion against hegemonic imperial powers that materially and discursively colonize people’s minds. This is perceived as being accomplished through political supremacy in connection with massive dissemination and distribution of cultural products and artifacts furthering consumerism at the expense of the disadvantaged. The voice of the Global South positions itself as an advocate of the exploited and colonized on a global scale, the voice of the global poor or the voice of the voiceless. A considerable part of this voice, it is worth noting, uses one or more of the Arabic dialects. Sujatha Fernandes in 2012 posited Arabic as “the new lingua franca of the hip-hop world.”<sup>42</sup>

Emphasizing the solidarity between marginalized communities globally, Ana Tijoux aesthetically unites the struggle of postcolonial subjects in South America, Africa and the Middle East in her song “Somos Sur” (We Are the South).<sup>43</sup> The music video shows her rapping on rooftops in an urban Latin American setting, surrounded by people dressed in traditional garments and dancing together in a traditional, communal way. She is accompanied by Shadia Mansour, who delivers an Arab verse to the song and performs in a traditional Palestinian dress, a trademark of hers used in several videos as well as live performances.

The lyrics propose the Global South to be a social and political space of similarly marginalized communities. Ana Tijoux describes her motivation for this song as wanting

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<sup>39</sup> Nasser Shorbaji “Ballad of an Exodus” (Coffeehouse Records, 2015) see the lyrics here: <http://genius.com/Chyno-ballad-of-an-exodus-lyrics> (retrieved November 15, 2016).

<sup>40</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PLxnXuczz3s> (retrieved November 15, 2016).

<sup>42</sup> Sujatha Fernandes, “The Mixtape of the Revolution”, *The New York Times*, January, 29, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/30/opinion/the-mixtape-of-the-revolution.html> (retrieved October 15, 2016).

<sup>43</sup> The song is off the album *Vengo*, Nacional Records 2014. The video is available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EKGUJXzxNqc> (retrieved November 15, 2016).

to make a connection between countries and societies of the South due to their similarities concerning issues of identity and resistance.<sup>44</sup> This prominence of unity has been a recurrent theme in Hip Hop since its emergence and is re-created and re-imagined for various purposes. Another rap artist from Lebanon, Malukah, which literally translates to "Queen," envisions the unity of the Arab world in her songs and on shows, leading the audience in chants demanding solidarity between Arabs as a precondition for culturally and politically regaining strength and global relevance.<sup>45</sup> The Egyptian group Arabian Knightz realized this unity partly through artistic means with their song "Uknighthed," an eleven-minute piece in which dozens of MCs all over the Arab-speaking world contribute a verse in either Arabic or English. Notably, the refrain consists of the following statement: "Hip Hop ain't dead; it never died; it just moved to the Middle East where the struggle is still alive."<sup>46</sup> The corresponding album bears the programmatic title "Uknighthed States of Arabia."

These songs and the accompanying videos exemplify perfectly the way in which Hip Hop is used as a basis for re-imagining postcolonial identities. While the absence of politically charged and conscious Hip Hop is decried in media and scholarship concerned with the genre's US-American platform,<sup>47</sup> Hip Hop as voice of the excluded and alienated continues to thrive in the Global South. Hip Hop did not only travel to every corner of the world, it is being re-created to fit the needs and artistic expressions of diverse social, political and religious communities. The noteworthy connection of the essentially "modern" (or postmodern) form of music-making in Hip Hop, born in postindustrial urban settings of the USA in the late 1970s, with clearly indigenous or "folk" aesthetics expressed by traditional garments and dance confirms this observation visually and acoustically. That makes it not only possible but consistent to use originally very "American" cultural practices to demand that all "Yankees" in Latin America should leave the continent.<sup>48</sup> Thus, it is indeed questionable to support the claim of Hip Hop

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<sup>44</sup> Tijoux, *Democracy Now*.

<sup>45</sup> That could be observed, for example, during her performance at the "The Word Is Yours"-Festival in Amman, Jordan in October 2015, a small festival with several known and lesser known rap artists from the region that was free to the public and staged on the premises of the 7Hills Skatepark in downtown Amman.

<sup>46</sup> Karim Adel, Hesham Abed, and Ehab Adel, "Uknighthed," *Uknighthed State of Arabia* (Magnum Opus Music 2012), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ma-avgYw5Sw> (retrieved 15 November, 2016).

<sup>47</sup> Patrick Neate, UK novelist, argued in his book *Where You're At: Notes from the Frontline of a Hip Hop Planet* (London, Bloomsbury, 2003) that "the voice of the excluded does little but reinforce their exclusion. Worse still, the success of mainstream hip hop actually deprives the excluded of the choice to express themselves or to hear beyond the appropriated exclusion which has become a bizarre sort of norm," (quoted in Mitchell, *African*, 234). This stands clearly as a valid critique against mainstream rap and the appropriation of significations of alienation and rebellion by corporate business and marketing. Nonetheless, the argument is not sufficient to proclaim the ultimate end of Hip Hop as voice from the margins, as it seems to be oblivious to the scope of Hip Hop globally, not to mention the diverse underground scene in the USA.

<sup>48</sup> As Ana Tijoux raps in "Somos Sur": "fuera yanquis de América Latina, Franceses, ingleses y holandeses, yo te quiero libre Palestina" (Get out Yankees from Latin America, French, English and Dutch, I want you Free Palestine).

being a way of ‘Americanizing’ other cultures and societies or to view its popularity as an American success story. When A Tribe Called Red, Ana Tijoux, Shadia Mansour, Lowkey, Arabian Knightz, Malikah or Narcy combine the resources of Hip Hop with the ingredients of postcolonial identity and tradition, they automatically challenge this discourse and re-root Hip Hop culture outside of its spatial origin. Materialism, drug abuse, violence and misogyny - topics that often dominate discussions about Hip Hop in North America and Europe<sup>49</sup> - are comparably marginal in the political discourses of Hip Hop in the Global South. However, the empowering quality endowed to Hip Hop by its founding myth<sup>50</sup> forms a crucial aspect of its re-creation under postcolonial, neocolonial and diasporic conditions.

During the uprisings in a series of Middle Eastern and North African countries in the beginning of 2011, Hip Hop became a powerful and convincing soundtrack as people freestyled during demonstrations, uploaded explicit videos shot during clashes in the streets to accompany their songs and were heralded by media outlets, scholars, film makers and others as agents of the revolution: Documentaries on these political developments used Hip Hop music as a soundtrack for their depiction of the events; journalists interviewed artists from the region; scholarly publications focused on the role of music acknowledged the public impact of Hip Hop, rap, and graffiti during the Arab Spring.<sup>51</sup> The musical production surrounding these historic events is impressive. In Egypt, the Arabian Knightz, MC Amin, Revolution Records and MC Deeb were among the most cited rappers addressing the revolution in their songs,<sup>52</sup> but also formerly quietist artists like Ahmed Mekky contributed to this Hip Hop “cypher” of the revolution(s).<sup>53</sup> Additionally, songs were produced as a gesture of solidarity by artists in the North American diaspora, prime among these a song featuring Narcy, Omar Offendum, Shadia Mansour, Freeway and others called “#25Jan” alluding to the Egyptian uprising’s date of inception.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*.

<sup>50</sup> I understand “myth” not as fictitious tale, but as lived reality that inhabits a normative thrust, in this case the empowerment through a rejection of the experienced marginalization, and is constantly re-created and actualized. Klein and Friedrich, *Is This Real?*, 62. See also Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, selected and translated by Anette Lavers (London: Vintage Books, 2000), 109-110.

<sup>51</sup> Aidi, *Rebel Music*, 232.

<sup>52</sup> The video to the song “Prisoner” by Arabian Knightz and featuring Shadia Mansour contains graphic material from the riots during the uprising: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=schIdC3LdLk>; MC Amin claimed that the revolution will continue with his song “El Thawra Mostamera” (The Revolution Continues): [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYNy1rA\\_SsM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYNy1rA_SsM); Revolution Records, a studio as well as a crew, claim to be more than numbers with their song “Ana msh 3adad” (I’m not a Number): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oly4L50otwk>; MC Deeb demanded Egyptians to rise with “Qum Ya Misri” (Stand Up Egyptian): [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIxIHjUWA\\_I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIxIHjUWA_I) (all retrieved November 15, 2016).

<sup>53</sup> See Ahmed Mekky, “25 January,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2vFdpKqg0wQ> (retrieved November 15, 2016).

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sCbpiOpLwFg> (retrieved November 15, 2016)

Although one should be cautious about overemphasizing the role of Hip Hop artists during the Middle Eastern and North African uprisings – which were politically and economically rather than culturally motivated and encompassed all social strata, of which the majority certainly had no relation to Hip Hop – local and regional Hip Hop scenes witnessed a remarkable boost in visibility and relevance. Many artists were able to travel and present their art to foreign audiences in the aftermath of 2011; others strengthened their politically and socially committed outlook.<sup>55</sup> Although Hip Hop practices are often romanticized by the media as popular culture originating from the “liberal” and “democratic” West, now being used by Arab youth to challenge their governments and societies in a quest for freedom and democracy – a view that must be discarded as one-sided and uninformed – they still may signify an authentic form of cultural resistance.<sup>56</sup> The continual repetition and invocation of this myth eventually leads to its realization by affirmation and belief; the myth is not mirroring the material reality, but the confirmation of its relevance leads to it becoming a social and discursive reality.

For some, however, the image of Hip Hop as a culture of resistance is so decisive that Hip Hop from the cultural spheres of the hegemon seems almost impossible. Shadia Mansour, for example, views Israeli Zionist Hip Hop as being an oxymoron, because you can't be the oppressor and authentically engage in cultural practices of the oppressed.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> The Danish NGO “Rapolitics,” for example, repeatedly invited Hip Hop artists from Egypt to take part in their workshops and organizing tours in Denmark. Rapolitics, <http://www.rapolitics.org/> (retrieved November 15, 2016).

<sup>56</sup> Robin Wright, *Rock the Casbah: Rage and Rebellion across the Islamic World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011). Robin Wright clearly overemphasizes the role of popular culture and Hip Hop prior to and during the uprisings, tracing the energy she perceives in these political movements back to an American origin. This leads to implicitly neglecting the agency of the very artists and societies she is speaking about. Arguing that “[h]ip-hop was the first voice of political opposition, even before the street protests erupted in 2011” (123) or that “hip-hop has given a new voice to young Muslims, who now dominate the faith from Morocco to Malaysia” (120), as well as “[j]ust as rap initially provided an alternative to gang violence for young blacks in the Bronx, hip-hop has offered an alternative to suicide bombs and Molotov cocktails among Palestinians” (127) is obviously the result of cultural oversimplification and romanticizing of Hip Hop, if not outright false (Hip Hop was obviously *not* the first voice of opposition in any of the societies affected by the uprisings in 2011). Worse still, this perspective feeds the conviction that Hip Hop initiatives of the State Department from the mid-2000s would have been instrumental in sowing the seeds of revolution (Aidi, *Rebel Music*, 232), an outrageous claim considering the criticism against US foreign policy in respective Hip Hop communities (Aidi, *Rebel Music*, 250).

<sup>57</sup> Shadia Mansour made this claim on Facebook. The complete post reads: “How could you be an Israeli Zionist AND emcee at the same time? Isn't emceeing an element of Hip Hop? and isn't Hip Hop a cultural response to systematic, political and economic slavery/oppression? Im not saying being 'israeli' disallows a person from being an emcee but practicing the ideology of Zionism and channeling israeli patriotism into your music without ever mentioning the ethnic cleansing of African refugees in 'Israel' or the 200,000 Africans currently jailed in Israeli detention centres in the Negev Desert raises concerns. How can an Israeli Zionist MC consider themselves a member of Hip Hop culture when we have never heard a song highlighting the expulsion and punishment of the very people in which hip hop was created by and for? Bottom line is.... #IsraeliHipHopdoesnotexist #freepalestine” (Shadia-Mansour, April 28, 2016. <https://www.facebook.com/Shadia-Mansour-35106008298/?fref=ts>).

While this is not my argument in this paper, it still shows the potential thrust of such a claim in the GHHN, where many would agree that resistance to oppression and injustice is at the core of Hip Hop culture's normative foundation and a prerequisite for authenticity. The problem with this and other rather essentializing notions is the vagueness of central terms. Depending on points of view, social and political circumstances, economical configuration, respective public discourses *etcetera*, attributing the identities of oppressor and resistance or freedom-fighter to certain groups will be frequently contested. Considering Israel's narrative of being the sole democratic polity in a region surrounded by enemies, the role of the resistance fighter is claimed by Israeli Zionist MCs as well. The appeal of the rebels' symbol leads to its invocation in seemingly opposite contexts for opposing reasons. Indeed, the claim to be rebellious, to be the underdog, the just champion of freedom is itself a deeply cultural endeavor, as is our condoning or challenging of this claim.

### **Excursus: Hip Hop and the Transregional Discourse on Islam**

The connections between Hip Hop and Islam have been elaborated upon in several publications, discussions and workshops before.<sup>58</sup> However, most examinations of the diverse ways the signifier Islam is comprehended have been rather cursory. In regard to the relevance of Islam concerning the origin and normative structure of US Hip Hop culture, rather specific images will be associated with the term, such as Malcolm X, the Nation of Islam and the Black Power movement. Considering Islam's role in Hip Hop's emergence and formation within the context of US-American culture as well as its role in reconnecting African Americans to their supposedly original religious zeal and reminding them of their cultural heritage, observers may be tempted to deem the migration of cultural practices infused with these forms of "Islamic" credentials as a reverse importation of Islam, or of a specific strand of it, to the Middle East.<sup>59</sup> While the Nation of Islam's or the Nation of Gods and Earths's (Five Percenter) philosophy and theology may have a certain effect on the belief system of Hip Hop adherents in countries of Muslim majorities, this particular fan base seems much more prone to view "its" Islam as the foundation of these tenets. Rather than being influenced by "Hip Hop's official

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<sup>58</sup> Daulatzai, *Black Star*; Aidi, *Rebel Music*; Alim, *Roc the Mic*; and Juan M. Floyd-Thomas, "A Jihad of Words: The Evolution of African-American Islam and Contemporary Hip-Hop" in Anthony B. Pinn (ed.), *Noise and Spirit*, 49-69, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2003) are but a few examples.

<sup>59</sup> Bader al-Saif, "American Muslim Rap: Reverse Exportation of Islam to the Middle East" (paper presented at the conference Trans-L-Encounters, Religious Education and Islamic Popular Culture in Asia and the Middle East, University of Marburg, Germany, May 2016). In his presentation, he argued that Islamic motifs in US Hip Hop were conducive for a changed perception of religion and religiosity by Hip Hop communities in the Middle East.



religion," they take comfort in viewing it as their cultural and religious contribution to Hip Hop's origin.<sup>60</sup>

The Syrian duo Black Bannerz allude in their name to the Abbasids, a dynasty that ruled the expanding Islamic empire from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, epitomizing Arabic prowess and an age of great progress in the sciences and arts. The point of reference is, thus, the historical period that signifies the pinnacle of the Arabic-Islamic civilization. They complete their politico-religious outlook with individual stage names, calling themselves Holywar and S.O.T.A. (Slave Of The Almighty).<sup>61</sup> In this context, it's especially noteworthy that, although they mostly rap in Modern Standard Arabic—a variant perceived as a sophisticated dialect of the elite and used by international media outlets such as Al Jazeera—the Black Bannerz have given themselves a name using American vernacular popularized through Hip Hop, in this particular case American English with a "z" instead of the standard plural "s." These seeming contradictions point to the complex configuration of Hip Hop in a globalized world, in which a multitude of cultural influences converge with political and social discourses that are not confined by geographical frontiers and thus enable practitioners to engage in cross-regional and global communication. Of course, misunderstandings or false interpretations may abound in this context. In a move that shook several Western critics, the Tunisian MC El General published the song "Allahu Akbar" (God is Great) shortly after the Tunisian revolution and deposing of former President Ben Ali, expressing in the lyrics his wish to die as a martyr in the fight for Islam.<sup>62</sup> The lyrics utilize the vocabulary of fundamentalists in active warfare against the West or America much more than they reflect on religiosity in the way done by artists such as Gang Starr, Rakim, Yasiin Bey or Jay Electronica—US artists and adherents of either the Nation of Islam, the Five Percenters, or Sunni Islam. El General, previously judged by *Time* magazine as being one of the one hundred most influential people in 2011, subsequently lost his image as champion of a "democratic and secular" revolution, an image that Western audiences had enthusiastically bestowed upon him after his song "Rais LeBled" had widely been perceived as a revolutionary battle cry.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Journalist Harry Allen in 1991, quoted in Alim, *Roc the Mic*, 22.

<sup>61</sup> For more information visit their Facebook and YouTube profiles: [https://www.facebook.com/BlackBannerz/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/BlackBannerz/about/?ref=page_internal) and <https://www.youtube.com/user/BlackBannerz> (both retrieved November 15, 2016).

<sup>62</sup> A version of the corresponding video with English subtitles can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1QhfyKQsj0> (retrieved November 15, 2016).

<sup>63</sup> The song "Rais LeBled" addresses the then-current president of Tunisia and accuses him of ignoring the population's dire situation, becoming an anthem of the Tunisian Revolution. The video can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IeGJJ7OouR0> with English subtitles (retrieved November 15, 2016). The German newspaper *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* published an interview with El General under the headline "Generation Revolte: Der tunesische Polit-Rapper El General über Jugendproteste, Facebook und Islam" (Generation Revolt: The Tunisian Political Rapper El General on Youth Protest, Facebook, and Islam), treating him as a spokesperson of his generation. Jonathan Fischer and Reem Ensslen

The trait of being a Muslim or adhering to Islam can signify different things in the context of cultural practices such as Hip Hop. Expressing one's belief in its terms is just one of many more alternatives. In specific social, cultural, and political discourses, expressions of a "Muslim" identity may signify commonality or difference, it may act as an inclusive force or an indication of some exclusivity; what it accomplishes must be determined with regard to the relevant public discourse and cannot be taken out of context without altering its meaning. The aforementioned song, "Allahu Akbar" by El General, can be perceived as a form of "singing back" against hegemonic pressures emanating from the Western hemisphere and infringing upon the motivations and goals of the region's protesters by strongly imposing a specific path to democratic polity (by using the European model) upon them. In a comparable move, the Egyptian rapper Sphinx confirmed his decidedly cultural – as opposed to strictly religious – identity to be Muslim in a song called "Muslim"<sup>64</sup> following the online-release of a low budget movie ridiculing the prophet Muhammad and sparking violent protests across the region in late 2012.<sup>65</sup> In this particular case, I argue that identifying oneself as being Muslim must be culturally and socially understood, considering how just a few days before the song was released, Sphinx claimed to be non-religious and that religion and religiosity play no significant role in his artistic expressions.<sup>66</sup> The song and his claim are still not as discrepant or contradictory as one might be led to believe. Rather, the context is crucial: Sphinx was not referring to his personal beliefs. Instead, he was engaging in a cross-regional and cross-cultural public discourse in which he saw the religion of his social surroundings vilified and misunderstood, leading him to proclaim – rapping in English – that he, too, is part of the corresponding cultural circle, and not by coincidence, but openly and proudly. For Sphinx, religion in itself was not the central feature in this discourse; the power to create words, images, and meanings and the empowerment of those who were being ridiculed was.

### Concluding Remarks

Hip Hop is a phenomenal culture containing practices whose global spread and appeal are unparalleled. The visibility and relevance of Hip Hop is staggering, as can be seen not only by examining different Hip Hop communities and their cultural and artistic activities but also by considering the genre's reverberations on societies as is reflected in the amount and quality of Hip Hop scholarship and media. While most of these publications are mainly focused on phenomena related to the broad community of North

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(translator), "Generation Revolte: Der tunesische Polit-Rapper El General über Jugendproteste, Facebook und Islam," *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, no. 44, November 23, 2011, p. 11.

<sup>64</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DChSzksTbXI> (retrieved November 15, 2016).

<sup>65</sup> Chris Stephen, Eileen Byrne and Peter Beaumont, "Controversial Film Sparks Protests and Violence across the Muslim World," *The Guardian*, September 14, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/sep/14/islam-film-muslim-protests>

<sup>66</sup> Hesham Abed, personal conversation with author, September 20, 2012.

American Hip Hop and mainstream rap, this essay set out to examine aspects of researching a trans-national Hip Hop tribe delineated by a common set of aesthetic, artistic and discursive features. By utilizing the practices of Hip Hop and accentuating the rebellious and empowering quality inherent in its founding myth, these artists are able to use Hip Hop to engage in a global cultural communication. Going against hegemonic narratives of the so-called civilized West vs. the barbaric East, of rational and secular democracies vs. ignorant or fanatically religious societies ruled by autocrats, Hip Hop artists remind us of the reverberations of colonialism and the continued relevance and impact of global white supremacy. Through their music and their aesthetics, the artists spoken of above reflect on what they perceive to be injustices and essentialisms in - as well as symptoms of - a complex net of exploitation, war and crisis on a global scale. If we understand Hip Hop as a cultural response to racism, colonization and oppression, then the Global South represents the zeal of the culture from a global perspective

In our discussion about the culture of Hip Hop, its relevance, its role in and for society, its lyrical and aesthetical contents, we should constantly remind ourselves of the existence of a plethora of tribes, subgroups and local or international communities that might not be included by using restricted attributions, fetishizing, demonizing or strictly circumscribing the genre's structures and forms in an attempt to exhaustively capture its scope and reality. The allegiance to a specific understanding of Hip Hop as a culture often emerges from interpreting the content of practices and art-forms without acknowledging that the decoding process is neither necessarily correct, nor does it have to be an exhaustive account of the artists' reflections on a given subject or meta-narrative. A thorough contextualization, historiography and sufficient theoretical framework are necessary to arrive at satisfactory delineations and definitions; even so, the scrutinized culture will most certainly expose a new facet previously not taken into account. To make things more complex, our position as scholars will have to be questioned repeatedly in the process, as academia itself is replete with specific cultural practices, myths, signs and symbols that inform our daily conduct and intellectual productivity and is by no means free from inherent power-relationships. This, in turn, informs not only our daily conduct and life-world, but may lead to flaws in our research agenda and our use of key terms.

As for the conundrum dealt with in this essay, it is not enough to limit the scope of spatiality in Hip Hop - or, for that matter, culture generally - as lingering along the confines of strictly geographical or political constructs. To be clear, those dimensions naturally have an impact on artistic and cultural production and practice. But to ascribe geographical adjectives to cultural practice may also lead to simplifications that limit our ability to comprehend fully what we observe. Notwithstanding the potential importance of the local, national, regional, or global environment envisioned through cultural practice, the readiness to attach labels like Egyptian rap or Chilean Hip Hop, along with the notorious understanding of Hip Hop from the USA as a sort of default mode, inhibit more creative ways of understanding Hip Hop communities and networks. This is especially the case when Hip Hop communities in close proximity (e.g. in the same city, region, or state) showcase extremely diverging ways of dealing with the aesthetics and meanings of the cultural practices. An affirmation of the local and the global as

constitutive for Hip Hop today does not have to incorporate geographical entities to be authentic. Instead, Hip Hop culture itself, its myths, narratives, and practices can be constructed as “the local.” This locality consists of a multitude of Hip Hop communities whose aesthetic and discursive form endows its members with a sense of belonging and identity. The instability and fluidity of signifying systems hints at the ever-changing nature of culture and may be perceived as comparably soft arena for identification. It is, however, culture that determines our understanding of spatial dimensions, which means that it is not the state that is producing national culture; rather, the state itself – and the state-centric view still very much prevalent in academia, including Hip Hop studies – is a product of culture. While culture created nationalism and the state, its general ambiguousness and fluidity implies that it does not remain in its confines. Concurrently, Hip Hop cannot be bracketed, labelled and essentialized; it rose as set of practices that were distinctly urban and American but has since acquired a much more complex identity.

In the end, we don’t have to—because we literally can’t—arrive at a static definition of Hip Hop as a culture. Instead, we must acknowledge that Hip Hop can be the “cultural arm of predatory capitalism” and that it can uplift society, that it can be exploited for secondary petty goals by politicians and effectively empower marginalized communities through reiteration of its rebellious posture.<sup>67</sup> The picture we get of the culture as a whole, when taking into consideration the global and international scope of Hip Hop, is not as bleak as one might expect. That Hip Hop continues to be a force to reckon with in public discourses is demonstrated not only by the recent revival of the Black Power discourse and the Black Lives Matter movement in the US, where a series of artists, both mainstream and underground, contributed through lyrical and aesthetic interventions; it can also be witnessed in the discourse touched upon in this essay. While visual and acoustic reminders of the 1960s make a clear political statement in the context of movements like Black Lives Matter— based as it is on the criticism of the embarrassingly prevalent racism in the US—, similar references can be found in the cultural products and practices of artists from what is called the Global South, reminding us of the embarrassingly unresolved problem of colonialism in the past and present as well as its reverberations on local communities and global discourses.

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<sup>67</sup> Tricia Rose referencing “mainstream American Hip Hop” at the Google vs. Debate, “Hip hop on Trial,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3-7Y0xG89Q> (at 36:10, retrieved November 15, 2016).

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