

# Hip Hop Highways: Mapping Complex Identities through Moroccan Rap



Figure 1: Popular Moroccan Rap Group H-Kayne

**Anisha Bhat**  
**Academic Director: Taieb Belghazi**  
**Advisor: Youssef Elalami**  
**Pomona College**  
**Major: History**  
**In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Morocco:**  
**Multiculturalism and Human Rights SIT Study Abroad, a program for**  
**World Learning**  
**Spring 2014**

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .....	1
Abstract .....	2
Brief Background.....	3-4
Introduction .....	4-6
Methodology.....	6-8
“Signs of Moroccan Heritage in Hip-Hop.....	8
Struggle for Authenticity.....	8
“Street” Mentality.....	9-12
Competing Claims.....	12-16
Global Versus Local.....	16-21
Manipulation of Language.....	21-25
Class Discourse and the Politics of Marginality.....	25-31
Themes of Fluidity, Change, and Evolution.....	31-33
Resistance and Contestation.....	33
Overt Activism.....	33-36
Contestation through Hip-Hop Culture.....	36-38
Contestation Through Strategy .....	38-40
Contestation Through Solidarity .....	40-42
Conclusions.....	42-43
Reflections/Recommendations .....	44-45
Bibliography.....	46-47
Appendix.....	48-49

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank, first and foremost, my wonderful research participants: Dizzy DROS, L’Fox Man, Adnan Mahyou, Ayman Hosny, Nessyou, Would Cha3b, Moussa Laarif, Moulay Driss Elmaarouf, Achraf Kabbouri, and Momo. Without you, this project would not have been possible. You gave an incredible amount of time and effort to help my cause, despite your busy schedules, and greeted me with open arms—for that I will always be grateful. From you, I have truly learned the meaning of Moroccan hospitality.

I would also like to acknowledge all those who helped me along the trajectory of my research, providing me with recommendations, directing me to new people, and sending me helpful articles—Cristina Moreno Almeida, Moulay Driss Elmaarouf, Ouassim Addoula, and my advisor, Youssouf Elalami.

Though thousands of miles away, thank you to Pomona College and the Posse Foundation for making this trip possible through much appreciated scholarship support and Financial Aid. I hope that I have represented you well!

In addition, I want to thank the SIT staff, particularly our academic director Taieb Belghazi and Nawal Chaib, our Program Assistant. I sincerely appreciate your mentorship and support, and your tolerance of my constant stream of questions.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents. Your diligence and complete devotion to my education is the reason why I am here today—travelling the world, experiencing new cultures, meeting incredible people, and living my dreams. I am so privileged to have you in my life.

## Abstract

During the post-colonial period, Moroccan visual artists belonging to the “School of the Sign” reformulated traditional symbols of Moroccan heritage in new and innovative ways in order to directly challenge orientalist conceptions of Moroccan identity. Today, media outlets have heralded the rise of the musical genre of Moroccan hip-hop as a potential new medium for the transmission of Moroccan youth identity and revolutionary ideals. As a result, the purpose of this study was to investigate how Moroccan rappers assert their personal conceptions of cultural identity in a larger framework of resistance against societal expectations. What, if any, are the “signs” of Moroccan heritage appropriated and refashioned by Moroccan rappers?

In order to ascertain the existence of any links, this study synthesized existing scholarship with information gathered from six semi-structured interviews with Moroccan rappers and four informal interviews with Moroccans intimately involved in the local hip-hop scene.

Ultimately, the results of the study revealed that while Moroccan rappers do not have any coherent strategies for embedding identity into their music, a modern and complex young Moroccan identity nevertheless emerges from the manifestation of hip-hop culture. The preoccupation of Moroccan rappers with certain broader themes—struggles for authenticity, linguistic choice, class discourse, fluidity and change, and resistance and contestation—reveals the way in which rappers craft a dynamic and often conflicted identity that is undeniably Moroccan in character, but nevertheless resists simplistic categorization by external forces.

**Topic Codes: Music, Anthropology (other), Sociology**

## Brief Background

Globalization and circulation of ideas between the so-called “Eastern” and “Western” hemispheres has a rich history stretching back many centuries. One of the chapters in this long saga begins in the early 1980s, when young Moroccan migrants in Europe and the United States returned to Morocco with a new musical style that would rapidly come to have a profound impact on local and global culture—hip-hop (Salime, 2011). This musical style, though justly attributed to the experience of the black community in the United States, nevertheless exemplifies the reality of the modern globalized era. The trajectory of hip-hop arguably has its roots in West Africa before emerging as an innovative art form among black youth in the urban areas of the United States. Now, it is in the process of travelling across the globe, transforming and being transformed along the way.

The first “waves” of Moroccan hip-hop, taking place in the early 90s and the mid 2000s, ignited a storm of media attention from progressive media locally and in the West (Salime, 2011). These media outlets heralded the rise of the musical genre of Moroccan hip-hop as a potential new medium for the transmission of Moroccan youth identity and revolutionary ideals. On the one hand, scholars and journalists emphasized the unique adaptation of hip-hop to the Moroccan context expressed through the intentional blending of standard hip-hop beats with the local dialect, musical instruments and local issues (Kahf, 2007, p. 360). On the other hand, media portrayed Moroccan hip-hop as a force for Arab Spring-era liberal activism and revolutionary youth sentiment, with article titles such as “Rapping the Revolution,” “Poets of Modern Times”, “El Haqed, Morocco’s Hip-Hop Revolutionary,” and “Rappers in Casablanca Rage Against Injustice,” featured in both local magazines such as *TelQuel* and Western media such as *CNN* and *The Guardian*.

Major events in Morocco including the accession of the more liberal King Mohammed VI to the throne in 1998 after the repressive regime of Hassan II, the Casablanca terrorist bombings in 2003 (Almeida, 2013, p. 322), and the arrest of 14 heavy metal musicians accused of satanic worship also in

2003 (Salime, 2011), all served to galvanize Moroccan hip-hop. Thus, the period after Hassan II's death saw an explosion of amateur Moroccan hip-hop groups onto the scene (M. Merhari, personal communication, April 19, 2014). In 2003, the Moroccan weekly magazine *TelQuel* coined the term “Nayda” to describe the “awakening” of Moroccan youth, a term that has come to officially refer to an emerging subversive, socially critical youth culture (Caubet, “Nayda!”).

## Introduction

The documentary, “I Love Hip-Hop in Morocco”, released in 2007 by American filmmakers Joshua Asen and Jennifer Needleman, promulgates a particular view of Moroccan hip-hop that consolidates the two predominant media interpretations—the transformation of hip-hop by the Moroccan identity, and the theme of resistance to authority through hip-hop. As seen in the documentary through interviews with various popular Moroccan rappers, Moroccan identity is manifested in hip-hop through the use of the local dialect, fusion with traditional Chaabi music, lack of profanity to align with a Muslim identity, and occasional nationalist themes. Simultaneously, the music is politically engaged and critical of the government, though often veiled in metaphor (Needleman, 2007).

As a result of this documentary and the slew of media articles related to Moroccan hip-hop, I began to see a relationship between the way Moroccan hip-hop has been characterized in official discourse and another significant artistic movement in Moroccan history. This movement, known as the “School of the Sign”, refers to a group of Moroccan visual artists in the immediate postcolonial period (1950s-1970s). Moroccan artists during the “School of the Sign” period used their work to simultaneously reflect a political and personal identity. On the personal level, the “signs” used within their artwork were symbols from Moroccan popular and folk culture, and as a result, expressed their Moroccan cultural identity and pride in their heritage. On the political level, the way in which these traditional

symbols were re-imagined and innovatively integrated served as a form of direct resistance against the orientalist art of the colonial period and the negative stereotypes of Moroccans associated with that art.

In a similar fashion, media attention on Moroccan hip-hop has emphasized how American hip-hop has been transformed in the Moroccan context by various “signs” of Moroccan heritage, such as fusion with traditional Chaabi music, lack of profanity, the use of Darija, and nationalism (Needleman, 2007). The traditional discourse around Moroccan hip-hop has also underscored how Moroccan hip-hop has been mobilized to resist governmental attempts to restrict the development of a “liberal” youth identity (Salime, 2011).

However, the bulk of media attention, including the documentary “I Love Hip Hop in Morocco,” centers on the period between 2003-2011, as this was the first major wave of Moroccan hip-hop that touched a wide sector of the public. As a result, the purpose of this study was to investigate how Moroccan rappers today assert their personal conceptions of cultural identity in a larger framework of resistance against societal expectations. What, if any, are the “signs” of Moroccan heritage appropriated and refashioned by Moroccan rappers? Have these signs changed in recent years? Are the media representations of Moroccan hip-hop truly aligned with the sentiments of Moroccan rappers and the hip-hop subculture in Morocco as it exists today?

I argue that the majority of media coverage and scholarship surrounding Moroccan hip-hop is too simplistic in its characterization of hip-hop as a coherent and unified movement that a) uses *traditional* symbols of Moroccan heritage to mark Moroccan identity and b) places Moroccan youth into a binary that defines resistance as exclusively political. This study would suggest that while Moroccan rappers do not have any coherent strategies for embedding identity into their music, a modern and complex Moroccan youth identity nevertheless emerges from the manifestation of hip-hop culture. The preoccupation of Moroccan rappers with certain broader themes relevant to their lives— struggles for authenticity, linguistic choice, class discourse, fluidity and change, and resistance and contestation— represent the true “signs” out of which rappers craft a dynamic and often conflicted identity. This

identity is undeniably Moroccan in character, but nevertheless resists simplistic categorization by external forces.

## **Methodology**

In order to expose any links between Moroccan hip-hop, Moroccan identity, and avenues of resistance, this study utilized three main sources of information: 1) Six semi-structured interviews with Moroccan rappers and four informal interviews with Moroccans intimately involved in the local hip-hop scene, 2) Observational data gathered from attendance at hip-hop events and informal interaction with rappers, 3) Pre-existing scholarship and media documentation on the subject. These three sources of information were synthesized so as to situate the results of the field research in the context of existing scholarship, and the extent to which this field research affirmed or contradicted the official discourse.

Initially, I had intended to base my methodology entirely on a minimum of eight semi-structured interviews with Moroccan rappers in order to analyze the personal motivations behind their music in the context of identity. However, it soon became evident that this would not be feasible due to the time constraints of the ISP as well as the busy schedules of many rappers. As a result, I decided to broaden my sources of field information to include informal interviews with Moroccans intimately involved in the hip-hop scene at an organizational, rather than participatory, level as well as observational ethnographic data gathered from immersion in the hip-hop community for the ISP period.

Each of these three methodological approaches served different purposes. The interviews conducted with Moroccan rappers provided direct insight into their internal reflections and perceptions of their musical identity. The interviews conducted with four people organizationally involved in the hip-hop community provided an intermediary perspective on the purpose of Moroccan hip-hop and its impact on Moroccan society. Moreover, as people directly engaged in the young music scene in



Morocco, without actual involvement in the production of music, the opinions of these interviewees enabled me to see the contrast between the intentions of Moroccan rappers, and the manifested effects of those intentions in the eyes of the hip-hop community. Finally, my own observational data gathered from rap concerts, conferences, and time spent informally with rappers, provided a third layer of data that comes from the perspective of an outsider. Thus, the synthesis of these three sources of information lent a more complex and cross-sectional view of how Moroccan rappers conceptualize and manifest signs of their identity within the hip-hop community and the world.

In addition, the inclusion of pre-existing media and scholarship on the subject was intended to simultaneously contextualize and bolster the field research. Since 10 interviews were not nearly enough to constitute a representative sample, prior interviews with rappers and scholarly analyses of the subject were meant to increase the reliability of the research conclusions. The interaction between the results of my field interviews and the existing corpus of research provided a valuable point of departure for analysis.

Because of time restraints, I chose my sample of Moroccan rappers randomly and without discrimination in terms of geographic location, age, or level of professionalism. With four of the rappers, I conducted a semi-structured interview in person. By this I mean, I arrived with a set of open-ended questions (see appendix for list of questions) that served as a basis from which deeper conversation developed naturally. Two of the rappers were not available to meet in person. As a result, I emailed them the same list of questions and received a response via email. Though my research subjects did not constitute a vulnerable population, I nevertheless provided each participant with a consent form and fully explained the tenets of my research and the interview before obtaining a signature. In this way, I upheld ethical standards.

For the other four interviews with members of the hip-hop community, I conducted informal interviews. This means that I notified my interviewees of my research goals, obtained either verbal or written consent, and proceeded to carry out informal conversations with them regarding Moroccan hip-

hop and my research. Though I took notes during these conversations, I did not come prepared with any pre-designed questions. Below are some brief details regarding my interview subjects.

### **Interviews with Rappers:**

Interview 1: Dizzy DROS; Age: 24; City: Casablanca; Semi-structured interview, live

Interview 2: L’Fox Man; City: Rabat/Salé; Semi-structured interview, live

Interview 3: Ayman Hosny; City: Fez; Semi-structured interview, live

Interview 4: Would Cha3b; Age: 30; City: Rabat; Semi-structured interview, live

Interview 5: Adnan Mahyou/Mr. Draganov; City: Oujda; Semi-structured interview, online

Interview 6: Nessyou; Age: 27; City: Marrakech; Semi-structured interview, online

### **Other Interviews:**

Interview 1: Moussa Laarif, founder of Hip Hop Family Association Rabat and Hip Hop Family Music Festival

Interview 2: Achraf Kabbouri, founder of youth empowerment association Jazz <sup>3/4</sup>

Interview 3: Mohammed Merhari (Momo), co-founder of L’Boulevard Music Festival

Interview 4: Moulay Driss Elmaarouf, scholar, researcher on Moroccan music festivals

## **“Signs” of Moroccan Identity in Hip-Hop Music**

### **Struggle for Authenticity**

A salient feature that manifests itself across existing scholarship on Moroccan hip-hop as well as within the field interviews that I conducted is the struggle between Moroccan rappers over the “authenticity” of their music. The binary between “commercialized” and “authentic” and between “mainstream” and “underground” is a recurring theme within most genres of music, but is particularly important in the context of Moroccan hip-hop because this struggle transmits multiple layers of meaning. On one level, the claim of authenticity aims to legitimize the rapper’s music as a voice for his generation of young Moroccans, more so than other genres of music. On another level, the claim of authenticity seeks to differentiate the Moroccan rapper from his American predecessors, proving that his music is “authentically Moroccan” and represents art rather than imitation. As a result, battles for authenticity within Moroccan hip-hop are one way in which Moroccan identity is inadvertently transmitted.

### **“Street” Mentality.**

One strategy used by Moroccan hip-hop artists to assert their authenticity is to emphasize their connection to the “street”—the neighborhoods, discourses, and lifestyles of lower-middle class young Moroccan audiences. In fact, H. Samy Alim points to the way in which hip hop artists linguistically bolster the legitimacy of their music by varying their speech style to reflect a street-conscious identity (as cited in Kahf, 2007, p. 365). When I interviewed Moroccan rapper Dizzy DROS, he affirms this observation by noting that,

“I like to give street-talk. In Arabic we call the type of language that you hear on TV—I don’t know if the translation is correct—the ‘language of wood’, where you have a man in a suit talking to you for two hours and you don’t understand shit. I really try to stay away from that. Even when I rhyme, and I choose words, I choose the words that are the most used in the streets. The streets of Casablanca. I think that is the main aspect of my style, connecting to the streets. It could sometimes be dark, it could be pink, it could be red, it could be white, it could be black ” (D. DROS, personal communication, April 20, 2014).

Dizzy DROS reveals here the way in which the use of Casablanca street slang in his music constructs an authentic Moroccan youth identity by affirming the lived experiences of a large section of the population. At the same time, the use of this slang also exposes the unrepresentativeness of the official images of elite Moroccans on television. These so-called Moroccans speak a stiff and comical “language of wood” largely unrecognizable to the masses. By expressing authenticity through a replication of “the streets”, Moroccan rappers attempt to construct a Moroccan youth identity in opposition and resistance to larger societal norms and international perceptions of Moroccans—emphasizing the interplay between “who we are” and “who we are not”.

Furthermore Usama Kahf, in his study on Palestinian hip hop, notes that Palestinian rappers establish their authenticity by placing themselves and their personal experiences—rather than official sources of information—at the center of a social analysis. One way in which this is accomplished is through a candid discussion of the debilitating effects of drug use on Palestinian youth, a subject largely ignored in official spheres (2007, p. 371).

Similarly, in an interview with *TelQuel*, the Moroccan rapper Dizzy DROS indicates that, “In my opinion, rap is egoism in a good way. A rapper is obliged to put himself at the center of the world in order to transmit his reality as he truly sees it” (“Dizzy Dros, le rappeur qui monte”). Thus, Moroccan hip-hop artists conceive of “truth”, and therefore, “authenticity” as coming from “the streets” and from daily, lived experiences in opposition to sanctioned authorities. This discourse yet again emphasizes the disconnect between the official social definitions of what it means to be a young Moroccan, and the actual experience of being Moroccan, which only rappers can truly understand and transmit to the world. It also expresses a certain level of distrust for the official, governmentally sanctioned views of Moroccan identity and a desire to resist this discourse with an oppositional assertion of identity fashioned from the fabric of daily experiences “in the street”.

Rapper Adnan Mahyou, who goes by the stage name Mr. Draganov, stated in reference to his music that “[My music is] everything I see, everything I live each day, be it an encounter that upsets me or upsets someone I know... When you are a rapper, you say whatever you think and therefore you examine all of the situations you encounter in life. Thus, rap is a type of music that is extremely personal” (A. Mahyou, personal communication, April 22, 2014). Clearly, Mahyou views rap as a platform for self-meditation and a place to recount lived experiences and react to them in an immediate and honest way. In other words, the construction of authenticity in Mahyou’s music is situated within the physical, geographical realm of his life—the things he sees and the people he encounters while walking in the streets of his city, Oujda.

In addition, rapper Ayman Hosny explained how his lyrical creativity and inspiration depended upon his *physical presence* in the streets of Fez, free styling with his childhood friends on the block where he grew up. He admitted that even as he gained more success, he avoided working in his studio until the moment when the music was ready to be recorded, because he was unable to produce creative lyrics outside of the Fez medina (A. Hosny, personal communication, May 1, 2014). In this way, Moroccan identity is constructed through rap music through a visceral, tangible, and material connection with the

Moroccan geographical and social sphere rather than through intangible symbols or traditions passed down through generations (which is how cultural identity is typically perceived). Moreover, since the physical world that we live in is filled with contradictions, ambiguities, and idiosyncrasies, Moroccan rap music—when it adheres to its most “authentic” form grounded in the “street”—embraces these nuances as part of the unique experience of being Moroccan and rejects an abstracted, ideological view of Moroccan identity.

A focus on the physical world of the Moroccan streets also lends authenticity to Moroccan rap music in another way—by differentiating Moroccan rap from American rap and styles of rap around the world. Dizzy DROS expressed his opinion on this process of differentiation when he stated,

“For the topics too, you won’t find no rapper in Morocco who talks about Lamborghinis or driving Rolls Royces or being in the club with twenty girls in bikinis and stuff. No. What we talk about, we can get as dirty as we want, but we only talk about what happens here. When we talk about clubs, we talk about clubs in Morocco. When we talk about smoking or drinking or whatever, we talk about Morocco. The themes are different, naturally. Maybe, you are too much inspired by the States and you want to rap about the topics that they rap about, but no one will listen to you. People will be like, who are you talking about? This is not us” (D. DROS, personal communication, April 20, 2014).

Hence, Moroccan youth identity is transmitted through Moroccan rap by way of specific experiences that are altered by the physical neighborhoods in which they take place. The rapper is the interlocutor who translates those physical experiences into words and thereby transforms the essence of the streets—whose shape, color, and feel are so different from their counterparts in other parts of the world—into a universally consumable medium (music).

Finally, the framework of hip-hop itself, which positions itself as the voice of the oppressed margins constantly threatened by assimilation into a larger culture, demands from its artists the self-conscious construction of a marginal identity in order to maintain authenticity (Kahf, 2007, p. 362). When placed in the context of Morocco, hip hop artists draw from the idiosyncrasies of their daily lives in the streets of Morocco to fulfill the demands of hip-hop culture, resulting in music that reflects the fabric of their lives as urban youth, and consequently, their identity as young Moroccans.

Muslim is an example of a Moroccan rapper who has achieved significant commercial success, yet still maintains a reputation for “authenticity” and “street credibility.” This is because, as a rapper from Tangier, a marginalized part of Morocco that is far from the cultural centers of Casablanca and Rabat, his discussion of issues related to Tangier allows him to retain an element of marginality despite commercial success (Almeida, 2013, p.327). Indeed, the relationship between the discourse of marginality and cultural identity is not unique to hip-hop. In a study conducted on social movements and collective identity, Dorothy Holland, Gretchen Fox, and Vinci Daro noted how the Mi’kmaq people of Canada came to view subsistence fishing as simultaneously a symbol of their impoverished lifestyles and social marginalization as well as an important marker of an authentic Mi’kmaq identity. After social reforms that gave Mi’kmaq people greater access to the commercial fishing industry, the researchers noticed the disapproval with which many Mi’kmaq regarded those who entered the commercial industry. Upon seeing a commercial fishing boat, one man even exclaimed, ‘But he’s not even a fisherman!’ (2008, p. 105).

Here, subsistence fishing is closely associated with Mi’kmaq identity for two reasons: 1) Fishing represents, symbolically, the economic hardship and suffering faced by the Mi’kmaq people as a result of their marginalization 2) Fishing, as an activity, shaped the physical lives and daily experiences of Mi’kmaq people for generations. “The street” serves the same identity-building purpose in Moroccan hip-hop as subsistence fishing does in Mi’kmaq society. “The street” and its particularities, such as style of dress, slang, and social encounters, symbolizes the social and economic marginalization of Moroccan youth in the context of a conservative Muslim society while simultaneously serving as the geographic space where Moroccan lives unfold. By attempting to legitimize their music through a discourse of marginalization and “the street”, Moroccan rappers inadvertently construct an image of Moroccan youth identity that reflects the unique sum of their life experiences—both emotional and physical.

### **Competing Claims.**

In the battle for authenticity in Moroccan hip-hop, numerous strands, or categories, of hip-hop have emerged, each with their own competing claims suggesting that their ‘type’ of hip-hop is uniquely ‘authentic’. In an interview with Mohammed Merhari, the co-founder of the L’Boulevard Festival in Casablanca (a music festival for metal, hip-hop, and electronic music), he identifies four major categories of Moroccan hip-hop along with examples of Moroccan rap artists aligned with each category:

- 1) ‘Islamic’ rap, associated with the rapper Muslim
  - 2) Nationalist rap, associated with the group Fnaire
  - 3) Rap for the purpose of dancing/entertainment, associated with the group H-Kayne
  - 4) Politically engaged rap, associated with the rapper Moby Dick
- (M. Merhari, personal communication, April 19, 2014).

Still, it seems as though few can agree as to which of these genres of rap deserve the title of “authentic”, with rifts opening up along the lines of what constitutes authentic global hip-hop culture, and what constitutes authentic *Moroccan* music. For instance, some scholarship implies that Arab hip-hop that combines elements of Western hip-hop with the local musical instruments and sounds is the *most* authentic because it represents cultural progress and innovation rather than imitation (Kahf, 2007, 377). The documentary *I Love Hip Hop in Morocco* also mirrored this sentiment by discussing the fusion of hip-hop with Moroccan Chaabi music alongside the inclusion of this type of fusion hip-hop on the website for the film (Needleman, 2007).

Yet, Fnaire would be the group most reflective of this aesthetic in Morocco, and many people with whom I spoke explicitly dismissed Fnaire’s authenticity as a group that had been co-opted by the state. Accusations of co-optation are always a grave blow to authenticity, because they imply a loss of artistic freedom in exchange for money and fame, and complicity with the Moroccan government’s attempt to use rap to underscore its own ‘tolerance’ and ‘liberality’ within the international community.

What is more, Moussa Laarif, the founder of the Hip Hop Family Association in Rabat, indicated that this type of fusion hip-hop exemplified by Fnaire was mainly a strategy used by groups to

get played on the radio and television by tempering hip-hop with something familiar and palatable to the older generations. According to Laarif, truly authentic hip-hop is always politically engaged and socially critical, as this is the purpose of hip-hop culture, which is inherently subversive. He named some of these “authentic groups, citing El Haqed, Zanka flow, Capital Clan, and Porosodika (M. Laarif, personal communication, April 21, 2014). Rapper Nessayou also re-iterated his belief in the moral responsibility of the rapper to spread political messages, “For me, authentic Moroccan rap must be an engaged rap, because there are many important causes to defend and problems to address in our society, even if the Moroccan public is not always ready to understand the messages that you try to pass on” (Nessayou, personal communication, May 2, 2014). In a conversation with Moulay Driss Elmaarouf, a scholar on the subject of Moroccan hip-hop, he noted that hip-hop culture recognizes two sides of Morocco: “La Face Zwin (the beautiful side)” and “La Face L’Khayab” (the ugly side) (M.D. Elmaarouf, personal communication, April 14, 2014). According to people such as Elmaarouf, Laarif, and Nessayou, illegitimate hip-hop is hip-hop that focuses on the former and ignores the latter, whereas legitimate hip-hop presumably does the opposite.

Indeed, one way in which a politically engaged authenticity is constructed is through a binary opposition to romantic love songs. When describing his music, Moroccan rapper L’Fox Man made a point, several times, of distancing himself from the traditional genre of Arabic love songs so commonly heard on the radio and consumed by the masses. He stated,

“I began to listen to all the genres of old school and underground rap and hip-hop. That attracted me of course, because I don’t like sentimental music, “I love you, my love”, because I am a man, and that’s not real to me... Personally, I do underground rap, which is also ‘gangster rap.’ I renounce political parties, I crush my enemies, I don’t do sentimental rap, “I love you” and all that, because if I did that, I would no longer be in harmony with my audience” (L’Fox Man, personal communication, April 23, 2014).

This rejection of love songs in the quest for authenticity reflects the intentional creation of a Moroccan youth identity in direct opposition to the older generations whose attachment to love songs are perceived as naïve, overly idealistic, and escapist. Thus, “gangster rap” and “underground rap” are



constructions that assert a Moroccan youth identity that is politically engaged, socially aware, and immersed in the harsh realm of Moroccan reality, unlike romantic love songs.

In contrast, Hicham Abkari, director of the Casablanca Music Festival, stated at a recent conference at the International University of Rabat that rap in Morocco has its geographical and cultural localities, just as rap does in America (e.g. the 'East-Coast,' 'West-Coast' feud). He suggested, consequently, that all types of Moroccan hip-hop are equally authentic in relation to the specific context from which they arose. Indeed, a similar phenomenon can be seen in the Moroccan music style known as rai, which has split into a number of subgenres such as rai love, pop rai, new rai, and beur rai. Rai has been described as 'a banner of conflictual identities', and Moroccan hip-hop appears to be earning this label as well (Davies & Bentahila, 2006, p. 370).

However, I would argue that it is not the label of "authentic" that is significant, but rather, the battle for authenticity itself. As Stuart Hall elaborated, popular culture can be construed as a battlefield where social and cultural contradictions are unraveled and negotiated (as cited in Almeida, 2013, p. 320). Through the various rifts within Moroccan hip-hop, therefore, we can understand many of the major contradictions and ideologies with which Moroccan youth are grappling today. In that way, Moroccan hip-hop is a metaphor for the plurality of Moroccan society and youth identity.

Mohammed Merhari, or Momo as he is known, also acknowledged that these divisions within Moroccan rap reflect the fragmented Moroccan identity. He even indicated that many rappers often contradict themselves within an album, with one song expressing extremely conservative values while the following song shamelessly discusses drugs, money, and women. According to Merhari, this happens because rappers cannot articulate a clear and consistent theme in their music, because their minds are a jumble of contradictions, a reflection of a society in transition between the competing ideologies of modernity and tradition (M. Merhari, personal communication, April 19, 2014). Hence, the fragmentation of Moroccan hip-hop is itself a reflection of a fragmented and ideologically confused Moroccan youth identity.

### **Global Versus Local.**

Yet another conflict in the struggle for authenticity within Moroccan hip-hop is the question of striking a balance between the global and the local. Since hip-hop is essentially a cultural ‘import’, with its origins in the United States, Moroccan rappers are constantly faced with this challenge to their authenticity. How do they take ownership of this art form? How do they localize the global without denying the roots of hip-hop? As Hicham Abkari stated in a conference on Rap and Politics sponsored by Sciences Po Rabat, “It is a war of legitimacy that transforms rap *in Morocco* into *Moroccan rap*.” In many ways, this process is an exercise in the construction of a dual identity that is simultaneously oriented outward toward the globalized world of interconnection, and inward toward a distinct Moroccan character.

When asked what it means to be Moroccan, rapper Adnan Mahyou (Mr. Draganov) replied, “He [a Moroccan] is a human being just like an American or a Somali, but he must not forget his history” (A. Mahyou, personal communication, April 22, 2014). Through this statement, Mahyou hints at the duality of his conception of identity. On the one hand, he likens Moroccans to all other nationalities, and emphasizes the global connections between people. On the other hand, he is cognizant of a unique Moroccan history that influences his individual existence and imparts distinctive qualities.

According to Achraf Kabbouri, the founder of the Rabat youth empowerment organization Jazz  $\frac{3}{4}$ , hip-hop music in Morocco thus far has not succeeded in sufficiently “Moroccanizing” the hip-hop genre. As a result, this art form functions as an imitation of American rap and does not have authenticity. He points to the fact that rap music does not have its historical and cultural roots in Morocco as a reason why it is not possible for Moroccan rap to ever truly achieve authenticity. He suggests that without these roots, the music does not have the power to move young Moroccans emotionally, or to reflect their identities or worldviews. Kabbouri cites the famous Moroccan band Nas

Elghiwane as a counter-example. Nas Elghiwane's style combines traditional music styles from all regions of Morocco and uses the local dialect to craft lyrics ripe with historical, metaphorical, and cultural significance in the Moroccan context (A. Kabbouri, personal communication, April 16, 2014).

I would counter, however, that the interplay between the global and the local in Moroccan hip-hop is actually highly reflective of the social experience of Moroccan youth today. Hence, the process of striking a balance between the two—as it unfolds in Moroccan hip-hop—is in fact representative of a central internal identity conflict that plagues Moroccan youth and youth everywhere who live in the modern era.

On the one hand, Moroccan youth are immersed in a globalized reality that, through technology, exposes them to a variety of different cultures and worldviews. Naturally, this global exposure from a young age becomes embedded into the psyche of new generations of Moroccans and reflects an integral part of their identity. Dizzy DROS recounts how he first became interested in hip-hop music. He says,

“I had a very normal beginning in music. I was 12 when I started listening and defining what type of music I like... I had one cousin that was really into pop music. She used to listen to Back Street Boys and others. That was around 2000, 1999. So I remember going to her house to check out all the tapes she had, watch video clips with her. So I think I went through that door until I found myself listening to rappers that were shining at that time like Eminem, Fifty Cent, and very mainstream ones. But then, I started to find tapes in her house from Tupac, and I was like, oh shit this is not what I see on TV, this is even much better. Then, with internet coming through, we had everything in our hands. You could really look for any rapper you wanted. I started to search and go back to old school and the roots. I started to listen to other types of music, soul and jazz” (D. DROS, personal communication, April 20, 2014).

Clearly, interaction with other cultures was an integral part of DROS's childhood and the formation of his psyche. He, like others of his generation, actively partake in and appropriate processes of globalization for themselves (Hegasy, 2007, p. 31). According to a study conducted by Sonia Hegasy on youth culture in Morocco, the monarchy's stability is tied to the king's ability to include Morocco in the rapidly changing global environment, and Moroccan youth do not view globalization as Western cultural imperialism, but as a process of modernization that any culture ought to aspire to (Hegasy,

2007, p. 31). Indeed, one of the most popular death metal bands across the Arab world is an Israeli band called “Orphanland.” This exemplifies how Arab youth today don’t live in the same paradigms as their parents (Conan, 2008). They increasingly aspire to multicultural and fluid identities, a desire reflected in their hybrid musical creations that draw from various cultures—hip-hop is a prime example. Hence, one major aspect of maintaining authenticity in Moroccan hip-hop involves staying in touch with the global heritage of hip-hop. As rapper Would Cha3b explained to me, he makes it a point to keep up-to-date with the emerging international trends and techniques in hip-hop culture for two reasons. First, in order to stay connected to the global community and respect hip-hop as a global movement, but also to stay modern and relevant in much the same way that one might keep up with new technology (W. Cha3b, personal communication, April 30, 2014). This reflects on Moroccan hip-hop as a space where modern, globalized youth identities are expressed.

However, the challenge to authenticity stems from maintaining a connection to the global hip-hop community without losing a local, Moroccan identity. Rapper Ayman Hosny observed with disappointment that, in his opinion, too many Moroccan youth take up hip-hop without “learning the basics,” and instead simply imitate American rappers. He commented that Morocco has many “Lil Waynes” and “Drakes”, but very few “real MCs” (A. Hosny, personal communication, May 1, 2014). In that respect, many “real MC’s” in Moroccan hip-hop have been very innovative in forging a middle ground between a global and a local identity in order to maintain their authenticity. Moulay Driss Elmaarouf notes that “the production of the authentic is contingent on exclusives which, in the process, are repackaged and reactivated with a renewed task in a trans-border framework, absorbed into the broader (recurrent) anatomy to correspond to the promise of global cultural production” (Elmaarouf, 2013b, p. 6). Thus, hip-hop in its original form is exclusive to American society. This exclusive has been repackaged and exported globally, and has slowly been absorbed into a recurrent anatomy. The task of Moroccan rappers in their search for authenticity is to deconstruct hip-hop in its recurrent form and to refashion it into an exclusive. Yet, the result of this process is the creation of a

style of music, Moroccan hip-hop, that is simultaneously exclusive and recurrent. An example of this type of duality is the manifestation of blackness in the Gnaoua festival of Essaouira. Blackness is a recurrent, but it is displayed through the festival of Gnaoua as an exclusive form of identity, transformed into an exclusive by the Moroccan historical landscape that differentiates and individualizes Gnaoua culture (Elmaarouf, 2013b, p. 6).

Moroccan rappers construct this dual identity in a variety of ways. For instance, many Moroccan rap songs alternate between languages, with large blocks of text composed in Arabic (Darija) with a title and chorus composed in French (Davies & Bentahila, 2006, p. 380-381). When asked which language he prefers to rap in, Moroccan MC Ayman Hosny responded that he raps primarily in Arabic, but also occasionally French and English. Hosny emphasized the need to use Arabic to connect with his fellow Moroccans, but also a desire to introduce his music to other people around the world, and to provide his friends in America and France with access to his songs (A. Hosny, personal communication, May 1, 2014).

Indeed, Eirlys Davies analyzes this strategic code-switching by likening the blocks of text in each language to “windows opening up the song to different audiences” (2006, p. 380-381). On the one hand, both French and Arabic have long and particular histories in Morocco and the paradox of the simultaneous separation and cohesion of the two languages within the song establishes a strong metaphor for Moroccan identity and the legacy of colonialism in North African lived experiences. On the other hand, the blocks of text provide access to foreign audiences who speak only one language or the other. Moreover, the use of a European language for the chorus and the title enable Western audiences to sing along to part of the song. This implies a willingness to engage the West in a musical dialogue and a desire to emphasize the global nature of hip-hop culture. In this way, global and local are reconciled and a dynamic Moroccan identity emerges that acknowledges both its unique particularities and its undeniable connection with the rest of the world.

Moroccan rapper Dizzy DROS expressed this dual vision of hip-hop culture when he stated,

“I believe that, every country has its own specific conditions that reflects on this music. But still, we have this link between us, hip-hop culture. We have rappers, we have DJ’s, we have graffers, and we have dancers. This doesn’t change in all the world. Wherever you go, you gonna find all these people. But when you go inside, you find the particular details. You find the language, the topics we talking about, and even the relation between the artist and the fan” (D. DROS, personal communication, April 20, 2014).

According to Dizzy DROS, Moroccan hip-hop does not lose authenticity as a result of its affiliation with a recurrent hip-hop culture around the globe. In fact, this connection enhances the identity of Moroccan hip-hop by adding another dimension, the global dimension. Furthermore, this global dimension of Moroccan identity provides a platform from which Moroccan rappers are able to dialogue with the West and to contribute to the global discourse in a creative and innovative way. A similar phenomenon can be seen with digital piracy in Morocco. Elmaarouf asserts that, “Many times pirates operate like directors in reverse as they systematically specify famous Hollywood clips along different thematic trails... they update the initial genre through embedded scripts and music. Such remakes... not only modify the scenarios of the original content, but as they Moroccanize and popularize them, they practically re-create them” (Elmaarouf, 2013b, p. 8).

Moroccan hip-hop also uses the global heritage of hip-hop as a springboard for a musical meditation stemming from a uniquely Moroccan point of view. As a result, a new genre is developed that, while manifesting universally recognizable traits associated with hip-hop, is simultaneously particular to the Moroccan context. The global heritage of hip-hop and the Moroccan cultural heritage transform one another in the production of a uniquely Moroccan art form that possesses a hybrid worldview. What is more, by interacting with the cultural specificities that produced hip-hop music in America, Moroccan rappers become more aware of their own cultural identity (Elmaarouf, 2013b, p. 15) and how it is both different from and reflected in global hip-hop norms.

In fact, one could say that hip-hop is like a cultural nomad. Rosi Braidotti, a scholar of nomadic theory, states that, “nomadism consists not so much in being homeless, as in being capable of recreating your home everywhere. The nomad carries his/her essential belongings with her/him

wherever s/he goes and can recreate a home base anywhere” (as cited in Elmaarouf, 2013b, p. 14).

Moussa Laarif, founder of Hip Hop Family Rabat, echoes a nomadic conception of hip-hop when he asserts that while America developed the framework for hip-hop, Moroccan rappers have grafted Moroccan meaning and character onto this basic structure, thereby transforming it (M. Laarif, personal communication, April 21, 2014).

In sum, in their quest for authenticity, Moroccan rappers have created a home for hip-hop on Moroccan soil. While this home is constructed particularly to suit the Moroccan landscape, and therefore is Moroccan in nature, it still represents a singular manifestation of a larger global phenomenon, and hence will always carry the spirit of nomadism in its veins.

## **Manipulation of Language**

One of the most salient and distinctive “signs” of Moroccan identity manifested in Moroccan hip-hop is undoubtedly the use of Darija, the local dialect of Arabic. Darija is an important language in Moroccan hip-hop for several key reasons. First, it is the language commonly used in the street, and therefore is viscerally connected to the lived experiences of all Moroccans. Second, it mirrors the ideology of hip-hop in the sense that Darija is marginalized in the official, public sphere despite being the language of the majority. Similarly, hip-hop posits itself as the voice of the marginalized majority, and Darija is the vehicle for this struggle. Third, Darija is a language originated and innovated by Moroccans. Thus, the language enables hip-hop, an American art form, to grow roots within Moroccan culture. Finally, Darija is a language that is constantly engaged in a process of dynamic change. Therefore, it provides ample opportunity for Moroccan youth to explore their identities through creative development of the language within hip-hop culture.

Moussa Laarif noted that in the initial stages of hip-hop culture in Morocco, many rappers rapped in English or French. However, as they began to develop their own styles and situate

themselves within hip-hop culture, they switched to Darija in order to connect with their audiences (M. Laarif, personal communication, April 21, 2014).

Dizzy DROS confirmed this observation when he remarked,

“The first thing, is the fact that we rap in our local language, that’s the first thing that differentiates us from any other rap all over the world...The language helps us transmit messages in a very straight very direct way. I used to rap, at the beginning in English, with the little bit I knew at that time. But to me, I never wanted to do my career in English. It was just a step, a way to learn how to flow. I used to learn the songs of American rappers. It was a way to teach myself” (D. DROS, personal communication, April 20, 2014).

Dizzy DROS reveals the way in which the process of switching from English to Darija represents a transition from imitation to innovation. Darija is the cultural marker that signifies this shift, as all other languages are viewed as “practice” for a career employing Darija—the language of the streets and of Moroccan authenticity. By using American hip-hop as a template from which to learn the framework of hip-hop, rappers such as Dizzy DROS imply that the switch to Darija represents the process of embedding that framework with the rapper’s own identity. This identity is symbolized by Darija, which is the primary medium for the transmission of emotion, intellect, and humanity in the Moroccan context. As rapper Would Cha3b indicated, he began rapping in French, until he began to really understand that French was the language of the colonizer, and that was “messed up.” Consequently, he switched to Darija, the language of *his* people (W. Cha3b, personal communication, April 30, 2014). His decision to switch to Darija, therefore, symbolizes the shedding of oppressive external influences and the reclamation of an organic Moroccan essence.

I observed first-hand the relationship between Darija and Moroccan identity when I attended a conference at the International University of Rabat on Rap and Politics. The conference contained a panel of Moroccan academics, Moroccan rappers, and Belgian rappers. The Belgian rappers spoke in French, of course, and the Moroccan academics followed suit. However, when the Moroccan rapper Masta Flow began addressing the audience in French, Moussa Laarif called out from the audience, “You are Moroccan right? Speak in Arabic!”



It was interesting to note that while the Moroccan academics were forgiven for their use of French, the Moroccan rappers were expected to use Arabic, regardless of the formal academic setting of the conference. Similarly, at the rap concert associated with the conference, members of the audience called out for the host of the concert to speak in Arabic when he began to address the crowd in French.

These incidents were revealing on many levels. First, Moussa Laarif's statement directly linked the use of Darija with a Moroccan identity ("You are Moroccan, right?"). Second, the fact that this statement was only directed towards the rappers and not to the Moroccan academics suggests that rappers are uniquely viewed as truth-tellers and as vessels for the transmission of ordinary Moroccan identity. Finally, the fact that audiences demanded rappers to violate larger social norms about the use of Darija in formal, public spaces reveals the way in which hip-hop culture is viewed as a rebellion against the image of Moroccan identity promoted in the public sphere. Moroccan rappers are called upon to represent the voice of the marginalized majority in the public sphere, a voice defined and differentiated by its language—Darija.

However, not all people within Moroccan society are pleased with the rapport between Darija and hip-hop culture. According to Achraf Kabbouri, of the youth empowerment association Jazz <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>, rap culture in Morocco has had a negative impact on Darija and on Moroccan cultural identity as a whole. He indicated that Darija used to be a 'shy' language that contained within it rules of respect and social decorum. Kabbouri asserts that hip-hop culture introduced a measure of vulgarity and coarseness into Darija, as youth today use Darija to recklessly insult, disrespect parents and elders, and flout social linguistic conventions. Kabbouri suggests that there are other, more constructive ways to protest social conventions and governmental policies that, nevertheless, maintain standards of basic respect and politesse (A. Kabbouri, personal communication, April 16, 2014).

Russel Potter, in his book, *Spectacular Vernaculars*, also acknowledges the tendency of hip-hop to change the vernaculars and accept discourses of a society, but positions these changes in a largely positive light. He argues that hip hop culture creates a "new vernacular" of "insurrectionary

knowledges” that are opposed to “historical societal forces” that enable the oppressed to resist established power (as cited in Kahf, 2007, p. 365). In the Arab context, the power of a language of resistance can be seen in the *ghinnawas* (little songs) written by young men and women in Egyptian Bedouin societies. These songs expressed sentiments of love and vulnerability that violated the moral codes of the society. In a way, the language of the songs constituted a resistance vernacular that provided avenues for the expression of repressed desires and revolutionary sentiments (Abu-Lughod, 1986, p. xvii).

Nevertheless, Potter recognizes that resistance vernaculars are not always empowering, but they provide the opportunity for empowerment given the right circumstances. Therefore, I would argue that the negative observations made by Achraf Kabbouri regarding the impact of hip-hop on the traditional Darija vernacular are valid in that they represent arbitrary and tactless employment of the resistance vernacular created by Moroccan hip-hop. However, the existence of this resistance vernacular, overall, has the potential for many positive impacts as it lends an unprecedented degree of freedom in self-expression. Moroccan MC Nessyou reflected that, “Rap is disconnected from all taboos, it’s a music where you can express freely everything that you think as well as all the evils of society, unlike other styles of music. Therefore, the role of rap is clearly to know how to pass on a message and awaken the consciousness of people” (Nessyou, personal communication, May 2, 2014). Evidently, when employed in a strategic way, rappers have the ability to use this resistance vernacular to creatively construct a collective identity that works outside of ideological societal norms—they are the “profane prophets” of Moroccan society (M.D. Elmaarouf, personal communication, April 14, 2014).

The Moroccan weekly magazine *TelQuel* acknowledged the uniquely liberating status of Darija when it stated,

“Darija has an advantage over other carefully codified and academic languages in that it provides the liberty to create words and new forms of words without attracting the ire of anyone. And this liberty is found in the street in creations derived from popular neighborhoods, without being vulgar (an adjective too often associated with Darija). Here, the Moroccan language resonates with mixing, blending, and interculturalism” (Caubet, “Naydal”).

Clearly, Darija serves manifold purposes in Moroccan hip-hop. It serves as a unique marker of Moroccan cultural identity while also providing a platform for change and evolution. As a result, Moroccan rappers have the freedom to express multicultural, modern, and globally conscious identities through the manipulation of Darija, while simultaneously retaining a deeply rooted connection to the streets of Morocco and to the Moroccan public consciousness.

In addition, Moroccan rap artists often use linguistic strategies to embed strong in-group markers into their music. For instance, French and Arabic (Darija) are often intricately interwoven in a speech style that is impenetrable for those who are not familiar with both languages (Davies & Bentahila, 2006, 375). However, this style is commonly used among young Moroccans. Indeed, while at a youth open mic event in Rabat, a Moroccan acquaintance dubbed this unique speech style “Farabia” (‘Francais’ + ‘Arabia’). Thus, the use of this style serves to ‘Moroccanize’ an American art form through linguistic exclusion, and by plunging “North African listeners into their own milieu, their own discourse, and their own concerns” (Davies & Bentahila, 2006, 375).

## **Class Discourse and the Politics of Marginality**

Despite the variety of different categories of Moroccan hip-hop, one similarity that underpins most songs is a discourse of social class and the promulgation of a working class, economically disadvantaged identity. This discourse of economic marginality, which is a trait of global hip-hop culture originating within the marginalized black community in the United States, nevertheless manifests in the Moroccan context as a discussion of the specific experience of being a working class Moroccan, thereby reflecting the socioeconomic structure and cultural perceptions of class particular to Moroccan society. As a result, class identity, due to its instrumental role in shaping daily lived experience, is portrayed in Moroccan hip hop as an integral part of Moroccan identity.

In fact, the relatively low-cost of production of hip-hop music in comparison to other art forms lends it a uniquely egalitarian reputation that strengthens its association with economically marginalized

communities. Because hip-hop does not require expensive training to learn or produce, Moroccan youth from working class communities can easily access it and reach large numbers of people.

Achraf Kabbouri cited this ease of access as a negative feature of hip-hop culture. He stated that, “everyone wants to be a rapper” and that the quality of the music suffers as a result. Kabbouri implied that “good” music requires skill—musical training, instrumentation, and lyrical technique, something that he feels is lacking in hip-hop, which gives a platform to youth without any formal training at all (A. Kabbouri, personal communication, April 16, 2014). In contrast, Mohammed Merhari suggests that while the explosion of rappers among youth from all backgrounds certainly produces a lot of low-quality music, there are always a few phenomenal artists who emerge. He believes that the democratic nature of hip-hop is a good thing, because it is a vehicle for free speech among a population that is usually excluded from public discourse—the lower class (M. Merhari, personal communication, April 19, 2014).

Moroccan rapper Si Simo recounts how he was inspired to write music after listening to Bob Marley, but could not afford to buy a guitar. Consequently, he used words as his instrument and began rapping at the age of 15. "I expressed my feelings about things I lived through, the things that hurt me, the life experiences that marked me," he said (Lakhani, 2012). Thus, the drive to create hip-hop music is born out of social exclusion, and therefore is charged with the frustrations caused by economic marginalization. In an interview with NPR, Mark LeVine (author of *Heavy Metal Islam*), states that metal is a music about death that affirms life (Conan, 2008). In a similar way, hip-hop music in Morocco, and elsewhere, is a music about hardship that nevertheless affirms the existence of a marginalized group. Poor Moroccan youth use hip-hop to assert that they exist, that they have life stories, and that those life stories are an integral part of the Moroccan narrative. Mark LeVine also quotes a musician from the Middle East who says to him that, “we listen to heavy metal because our lives are heavy metal”(Conan, 2008). Likewise, hip-hop in Morocco reflects the harshness and

roughness of the lives of poor Moroccan youth, and therefore, class identity is inextricably intertwined with the aesthetic of hip-hop music.

Another interesting phenomenon manifested in Moroccan hip-hop music is the bouzebal/killimini dichotomy. Bouzebal is a derogatory term in Morocco applied to lower-class people, presumably with little education and unrefined manners. The word is derived from ‘Abou’, which means father in Arabic and carries religious connotations, and the word ‘Zbel’, which means trash. Bouzebal literally translates to ‘father of trash’ (M.D. Elmaarouf, personal communication, April 14, 2014). In contrast, the word ‘killimini’ refers to someone who is wealthy and spoiled, and is usually directed at the upper classes by the lower and middle classes. Killimini is derived from three Arabic words: ‘akala’, which means ‘to eat’, and the phrase ‘minni’ which means ‘from me’. When combined, Killimini literally means ‘he eats from me,’ or in other words, ‘he embezzles my money’ (Chentoufi, 2012).

The bouzebal/killimini dichotomy, well-established in Moroccan society, plays out on the stage of Moroccan hip-hop in the form of a blatant acceptance of this term, ‘bouzebal’, as a part of the rapper’s identity and an intentional distancing from a ‘killimini’ identity. Wrapped up in the term ‘bouzebal’ is the story of the hardship, poverty, and discrimination faced by the rapper, and therefore, he uses this term to legitimize his music. On Dizzy DROS’s album “3azzy Aando Stylo,” he has a song entitled “Bouzebal,” that details his life in the streets of Casablanca. The song has an outro performed by the creator of the now-famous “Bouzebal” cartoon series. These cartoons contain a humorous portrayal of a Moroccan ‘bouzebal’ character going about his daily life.

According to Morocco World News,

“The Bouzabal-Killimini dichotomy is a real indicator that the Moroccan social consciousness and social being are set up within the confines of what Marx called the economic structure of society’ or what is commonly known in Marxism as the economic ‘base.’ It is this base that lead to the emergence of such dichotomies like the trashy and the worthy. As a matter of fact, the notion of Bouzaba and Killimini...defines the kind of the state and its political, cultural, social, educational and aesthetic orientations” (Chentoufi, 2012).

Evidently, by embedding references to this dichotomy in Moroccan hip-hop music, rappers are effectively accomplishing two things: 1) They are projecting an identity that is constructed predominantly along class lines 2) They are transmitting a particular class identity formed by the social, political, and cultural landscape of Morocco. To be Moroccan is to be trapped between these opposing forces, to be exploited (“eaten from”) and then discarded (“trash”). When I asked Moroccan rapper Ayman Hosny what it means to be Moroccan, he responded wryly, “to be born in shit” (A. Hosny, personal communication, May 1, 2014). Indeed, popular rapper Don Bigg stated in his song, *Son of 16 May*, written after the 2003 terrorist bombings in Casablanca:

“I want to introduce myself to you...  
 MTV on television and my beard is wet...  
 My motorcycle broke down, while the other is driving a Ferrari...  
 Born with a spoon of shit between the teeth...”  
 ( Song by Don Bigg, translation by Moulay Driss El Maarouf ).

In this song, Bigg blames terrorism on poverty, and criticizes the Moroccan government for the role it plays in perpetuating poverty. What is salient, though, is his intense identification with poverty, and the heightened awareness of the injustice of his own poverty in relation to the images of wealth he sees on TV. In his ‘introduction’, Bigg echoes the sentiments of Ayman Hosny by implying that to be Moroccan is to be a product of Moroccan society, which, in turn, is to be “born with a spoon of shit between the teeth.”

To draw again on the analogy with subsistence fishing among the Mi’kmaq people of Canada, fishing came to represent both a source of sustenance and a cultural activity. Ewing Stevens, an elderly man, recalled watching a little boy so hungry that he sat by the river and ate the first fish he caught completely raw. Thus, fishing represented the hardship and suffering that marked Mi’kmaq lives and defined them as poor and Native in opposition to other, wealthier, and non-Native Canadians (Holland, 2008, p. 103). Similarly, the “bouzebal” concept in Moroccan hip-hop has come to symbolize the suffering endured by ordinary Moroccans living in poverty and the convergence of oppressive societal forces in their lives.

In addition, the term ‘bouzebal’ is being re-appropriated by Moroccan rappers in order to express pride and power through a once-humiliating label. The goal of this re-appropriation is to mock and criticize the society that perpetuates their ‘bouzebal’ status. Montaigne, Swift, and Brown prophesied that the world will be a healthier place not when shit is made invisible but when it is confronted as the other we produce, when false sublimations are denied and a true respect for the fallen body is affirmed (as cited in Elmaarouf, 2014). In embracing their ‘trashiness’ and increasing their visibility in the public sphere, Moroccan rappers are forcing Moroccan society to confront the product of its structural inequality instead of pushing such unpleasant realities to the margins to be ignored. This behavior is what Moulay Driss Elmaarouf calls “excrementality” (Elmaarouf, 2014). Excrementality is similar to what Gayatri Spivak terms “strategic essentialism,” or the intentional essentializing of one’s identity to draw attention to and call into question paradoxical social norms (Spivak, 1988, p. 13). Excrementality manifests in Moroccan hip-hop in both linguistic and visual ways. Linguistically, rappers use the crude language typically associated with trashy ‘bouzebal’ culture. Visually, musical festivals are a venue for the theatrical representation of excrementality. Often, rappers and hip-hop fans cover themselves in dirt, feathers, and other trash-related items to emphasize their ‘bouzebal’ label. Additionally, many of the t-shirts sold at the L’Boulevard festival show images of vomiting, toilets, and other images intended to shock and disgust (Elmaarouf, 2014).

Evidently, excrementality serves to confront and expose the hypocrisies inherent in Moroccan society and Moroccan identity. Post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha, in a broad discussion of colonialism, comments that, “Black skin splits under the racist gaze, displaced into signs of bestiality, genitalia, grotesquerie, which reveal the phobic myth of the undifferentiated whole white body. And the holiest of books—the Bible—bearing both the standard of the cross and the standard of empire finds itself strangely dismembered” (Bhabha, 1997, p. 159). Likewise, Moroccan rappers openly display the “grotesquerie” and vulgarity of their impoverished existence in order to expose the myth of a pristine and immaculate Moroccan society promulgated by the government (e.g. emphasis in the media of Morocco as the most developed nation in Africa and its humanitarian efforts in other countries).

Consequently, Moroccan hip-hop promotes a self-reflective Moroccan identity that recognizes and addresses the injustices and harsh realities contained therein.

However, the central paradox of the class discourse and ‘bouzebal’ identity in Moroccan hip-hop is that it always teeters on the edge of unsustainability. By this, I mean, most Moroccan rappers who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds struggle to support themselves economically through rap music in a country that labels them and their music as ‘trashy’ and ‘unworthy’. As Dizzy DROS somberly noted, “Before I released my album, I told to everybody, including my parents, that I’m gonna release the album, and then I’m gonna get me a job in a call center. Because I need to live, I need to put food on the table. I can’t live very good with my music” (D. DROS, personal communication, April 20, 2014).

At the same time, economic success in rap music threatens to undermine claims to authenticity, as the rapper advances from the position of ‘bouzebal’ to ‘killimini’. In order to strike a balance between the pursuit of economic sustenance and musical authenticity, Moroccan rappers must constantly re-establish their connections with their roots, and with the working-class neighborhoods that gave birth to their worldviews. In an interview with rapper L’Fox Man, he candidly admitted,

“I want to go to Los Angeles and establish a career there. Because Los Angeles doesn’t have poverty. In Morocco, there is poverty. In Los Angeles, no one is interested in Morocco’s problems, because there is financial help [for rappers] in Los Angeles. In Morocco, there is no help for rappers. I hope, God willing, that I can find work abroad because there isn’t any in Morocco. But, of course, I will come back for the sixth edition of the Chebka festival, this time to finance the festival, God willing!” (L’Fox Man, personal communication, April 23, 2014).

L’Fox Man’s idealistic image of Los Angeles as a place without poverty reflects, in fact, more profoundly on his own Moroccan identity, which is subsumed by his experience of poverty and economic marginalization. Nevertheless, he seeks financial success outside of Morocco, as most people seek to rise out of their working class status. Yet, even in the event of monetary success he feels the need to remain connected to the Moroccan streets through the Chebka festival, to show that he has not forgotten his identity as a struggling artist shaped by the Moroccan context. Even from Los Angeles, he



would still frame his identity on the basis of three core tenets: hip-hop music, economic hardship, and his local Moroccan community.

## **Themes of Fluidity, Change, and Evolution**

A recurrent motif throughout the interviews I conducted as well as preexisting interviews with Moroccan rappers is an emphasis on fluidity, change, and evolution in Moroccan hip-hop. Rappers were very reluctant to categorize themselves or their music in a static way that might limit their artistic freedom and agency to self-define. For instance, Dizzy DROS remarked,

“...I like to keep myself in the middle. There are some rappers here who say... that rap should be about politics... They put themselves in a box. I don't like to put myself in a box. Today, I could be talking about smoking drugs, tomorrow I'll be talking about having a nice car, the day after I'm going to be talking about the government... I don't like to put myself in a box, because one day you're going to have to change for sure”(D. DROS, personal communication, April 20, 2014).

In saying that he does not want to be put into a “box”, Dizzy DROS is attempting to avoid classification as an artist, but also as an individual. He views it as inauthentic to rap only about one subject, because people are not one-dimensional. They express a wide array of thoughts and emotions that vary on a day-to-day basis. The fact that Dizzy DROS strategically chooses to “keep himself in the middle” is a reflection of his conscious decision to construct a multifaceted identity that is constantly in flux. When I spoke with him, he seemed fatigued by the expectations that many people carried about Moroccan rappers as revolutionaries and subversive social critics. This narrative seems to reflect a larger trend that has emerged since the Arab spring to fetishize the revolutionary character of Arab youth. In that context, Dizzy DROS's attachment to fluidity constitutes a rebellion in itself—a desire to portray Moroccan youth as dynamic human beings with lives and concerns that exist outside of the Western obsession with democratic upheaval in Arab countries.

In an article in the Moroccan online magazine *Bladi*, Moroccan rap group H-Kayne is reported as saying that they refuse the label of “denouncers of social wrongs”. Instead, they claim a positive rap that evokes social problems, certainly, but in the context of a larger story of the day-to-day lives of young Moroccans; their romances, relationships between boys and girls, everything (2003, “Les poètes des temps modernes”). Thus, in rejecting musical labels and affirming a broad musical identity subject to change, Moroccan rappers are choosing to craft an image of Moroccan youth that emphasizes the mundane—because it is in the ordinary, and in the inconsistencies of life’s daily motion, that we see humanity.

Furthermore, Moroccan hip-hop artists closely associate themselves with the personality of the youth, because youth are viewed as constantly changing and growing. Dizzy DROS says, “I chose to work with youth, because my music has the feeling of... my music is young...the grown-ups, I don’t give a fuck about them, they are already grown-ups. I want to work with the smallest ones, because they are just building their lives, trying to figure out what’s happening. I feel more free”(D. DROS, personal communication, April 20, 2014). This statement reveals the way in which Dizzy DROS views hip-hop as a liberating platform for self-exploration and development. He juxtaposes his “young” music with the fixed and unchanging ideology of the older generations thereby constructing a Moroccan youth identity that is rebellious in its ambiguity and powerful in its versatility.

Finally, Moroccan hip-hop embodies the motif of change and evolution in order to construct a progressive identity that is in-tune with the conditions of modernity. At a conference on Rap and Politics, Rabat rapper Moby Dick stated, “as long as things keep changing in society, we are all the first generation [of rappers]”. He means to say that rappers, as commentators on Moroccan society and culture at any given point in time, are always at the cutting edge of social discourse. Moroccan hip-hop, therefore, as the voice of Moroccan youth, embraces a forward-looking youth identity open to change and transformation. As rapper Adnan Mahyou aptly stated, “Music is like technology. It walks alongside

its time. If you live in 2014 and you use old technological devices, that means that you refuse to evolve” (A. Mahyou, personal communication, April 22, 2014).

## Resistance and Contestation

Reporting on Moroccan hip-hop by Western, and even some local, media outlets has emphasized the revolutionary mobilization of Moroccan rappers through traditional avenues of social and political activism. For instance, article titles such as “Rapping the Revolution,” “Poets of Modern Times,” “El Haqed, Morocco’s Hip-Hop Revolutionary,” and “Rappers in Casablanca Rage Against Injustice,” featured in both local magazines such as *TelQuel* and Western media such as *CNN* and *The Guardian* reflect the external conflation of Moroccan hip-hop with a politically subversive Moroccan youth identity that espouses Arab Spring-era liberal values.

While these hip-hop revolutionaries certainly do exist in Morocco, this official discourse incorrectly generalizes the political identity of all Moroccan rappers and ignores a number of other ways in which hip-hop artists creatively resist authority and contest social norms outside of formal political engagement. In my interviews with rappers, I received a full spectrum of responses. Some rappers remained committed to direct political engagement, others claimed that political activism was “a kind of talk that the TV imposed on rappers” (D. DROS, personal communication, April 20, 2014) and chose to focus on the aesthetic of the art, while still others claimed that discussions about the complications of daily life were themselves political (“what you think, what you live, our small sufferings, that is doing political engaged rap”) (A. Mahyou, personal communication, April 22, 2014). Each of these responses represents a different way of manifesting resistance and contestation, and an equally valid way of expressing a Moroccan worldview through hip-hop.

### Overt Activism.

The form of contestation traditionally associated with Moroccan hip-hop is overt political activism and social criticism through music. While this form of contestation has been overrepresented in the media, it nevertheless does characterize the philosophy of many Moroccan rappers. For example, in my interview with L’Fox Man, he defined the purpose of rap music as: “a revolution against the political parties in Morocco.” He went on to describe his song “Free the [prisoners of] 11<sup>th</sup> April”, which he considers to be his most important song. This song directly addressed the government and demands the freedom of people arrested during violence that broke out at a soccer match between the Casablanca and Rabat soccer clubs on April 11, 2013 (L’Fox Man, personal communication, April 23, 2014).

Similarly rapper El Haqed, whose name is best translated as “the indignant,” is known for his radical political engagement and denunciation of the wrongs committed by the Moroccan state (DeGhett, 2012). On March 28, 2012, El Haqed was arrested and sentenced to one year in prison (of which he served four months) for his song entitled “The Dogs of the State” which circulated the Internet in 2008. Officially, he was arrested for a YouTube video accompanying his song that showed images of Moroccan police with donkey heads superimposed over their faces violently suppressing protestors. Despite his hefty prison sentence, El Haqed’s asserted after his release, “I am going to continue to make rap. I am engaged for the people, in order to make their problems heard. There is a new government, but they have not yet rendered judgment on those who stole in the past. We must change all of this, we won’t give up”(Bernas, 2012). His last statement, “we won’t give up” (“on ne lâchera pas”, in French), ties him directly to the February 20<sup>th</sup> movement of youth activists in Morocco—Morocco’s version of the Arab Spring—who used that specific phrase as their slogan. Rapper activists such as L’Fox Man and El Haqed reveal one way in which Moroccan rappers construct a confrontational identity based around reaction to and contestation of the Moroccan socio-political landscape—overt political engagement.

While some politically engaged rappers address the government (the perceived antagonists) in their songs, still others direct their social criticisms toward their audience—the Moroccan public. In his song *Tamarrud* or “Rebellion”, Muslim, a rapper from the north of Morocco, speaks of the country’s “stolen resources” using powerful lyrics and music. In this song he addresses both the government and the people, admonishing the government for withholding the country’s natural resources from the people (Salime, 2011), and galvanizing the Moroccan public into action to claim back the wealth that they deserve (Almeida, 2013, p. 326).

In a similar fashion, rapper Don Bigg, in his song “Moroccans to Death”, urges Moroccans to stay in their country and take an active role in building a better community rather than emigrating in search of more lucrative opportunities (Salime, 2011). The social engagement of rappers such as Muslim and Don Bigg reflect a uniquely Moroccan identity in that their social criticisms exist within the framework of a patriotic love of the country and an earnest desire to improve it. Rapper Would Cha3b reflected this sentiment when he described all that Moroccans have to be thankful for—access to an ocean, a sea, mountains, deserts, and the entire spectrum of climates. The sight of the towering medina walls from behind the glass of the tramway reminds him of his country’s rich history even in the midst of modernity (W. Cha3b, personal communication, April 30, 2014). Thus, part of what it means to be a young Moroccan, in their eyes, is to be deeply invested in alleviating the social and political problems plaguing the country to which they owe love and respect, and of which they are proud.

In contrast, some rappers express a less dutiful sense of social activism and instead use their music as an opportunity to lay bare, without mercy, the problems they see in society. Perhaps the rapper with the most controversial criticisms of Moroccan culture and society is Awdellil. From the safety of anonymity, he spewed such incendiary lyrics as:

“He brought the girl home with him, he duped her, and fucked her, in memory of his many years of frustration. What is she complaining about now? She came there of her free will. What did she believe? That he was interested in anything other than her ass?... The girl went to see her mother and recount her misery. The mother now had a pain in her ass. How was she going to marry her daughter now? How is she going to get rid of her? And the father, what is she

going to tell him? He's a hard man, he would kill her. The good souls, thus, went to a doctor. A few surgical incisions, and the sin is forgotten..." ("Le Rap Marocain").

In this song, entitled "Raw Daw", Awdellil exposes—in a scathingly sarcastic tone—some of the hypocrisies manifested in daily Moroccan life, including the perversion of both modernity and tradition in the process of their collision. Yet, it is important to note the way in which the unique idiosyncrasies and hypocrisies of the Moroccan social context fuel his indignant tone and fearless confrontation of social issues. As a result, his rage is infused with a Moroccan character that differentiates his activist identity from that of other "raptivists" around the world.

Women's political activism through rap also represents a major form of contestation and identity building in Moroccan hip-hop. Because women constitute a marginalized group within hip-hop in addition to a marginalized group within society, they fight two battles simultaneously: the battle for legitimacy in hip-hop and the battle for legitimacy in the larger Moroccan society. Consequently, the personal becomes political in the case of Moroccan women, and every discussion of their lives and experiences in their music constitutes a political discussion. For instance, rapper Soultana is directly politically engaged by writing music that addresses such taboo female issues as sexual harassment, rape, prostitution, and violence towards women. She draws from her own personal experiences as a woman in Morocco, and from the experiences of her friends. She says that she "also talks about women of whom people can be proud" (Mrabet, "Rap au Féminin"). Considering the Moroccan social context, where the women's issues are traditionally confined to the private sphere and concealed in the public sphere, Soultana's mission to wear down the private/public dichotomy and bring women's issues into the limelight reflects the construction of an activist identity shaped and informed by the cultural particularities of Moroccan society, and steeped in her lived experiences as a Moroccan woman.

### **Contestation Through Hip-Hop Culture.**

At a conference on Rap and Politics, rapper Moby Dick suggested that the form of hip-hop culture, not just the lyrics of rap songs, could constitute resistance. By saying this, he meant to demonstrate how Moroccan rappers, regardless of whether or not they have overtly political lyrics, can still challenge social norms through the aesthetic of their music and its location within a broader framework of subversive hip-hop culture.

For instance, the Moroccan weekly magazine *TelQuel* used the term “Nayda” in 2006 to describe the artistic changes taking place since the accession of King Mohamed VI to power in 1999, including the rise of Moroccan hip-hop (Caubet). Nayda, which means “stand up” or “wake up” in Darija, was used by *TelQuel* to give word to the new discourse of openness and modernity among Moroccan youth. The term also carried the connotations of a revolutionary youth artistic movement that defied social norms. While scholars such as Aomar Boum and Samir Ben-Layashi have occasionally used this term to perpetuate the stereotype of Moroccan rappers constituting a unified movement of young political activists (as cited in Almeida, 2013, p. 322), in fact, the term “Nayda” can be applied to a broader trend of movement and openness within the hip-hop scene that is unorganized yet still impactful.

The way in which Moroccan rappers themselves perceive the term “Nayda” provides insight into how this term actually manifests itself in hip-hop culture. When asked about Nayda, rapper Masta Flow suggested that youth associate the term with partying and dancing, not with a politicized movement. Similarly, when I asked rapper Ayman Hosny about the meaning of Nayda, he responded with a chuckle, “partying” (A. Hosny, personal communication, May 1, 2014). When H-Kayne uses the term Nayda in their hit song, “Issawa Style,” they use it in a way that invites the audience to stand up and move: “All Moroccans! H-Kayne brings the catchy Issawi rhythm, get up, wake up, lets go crazy!” (as cited in Almeida, 2013, p. 322).

Indeed, when I attended a rap concert with Masta Flow, Moby Dick, and Shayfeen at the Renaissance Center in Rabat, I was overcome by the amount of movement and energy displayed by the audience. During one of the numbers by Moby Dick, I was nearly trampled as the entire audience

began dancing violently, flailing jumping, and moving with complete abandon. Not even at hip-hop concerts in America had I ever witnessed such a high level of energy displayed by nearly every single audience member. As Dizzy DROS put it,

“My style is, music full of energy, positive energy. It could be sometimes, bad energy. This I feel, when I go to concerts. All my fans are full of energy. And when I’m on stage, the level of energy that I see, makes me want to keep going. It tells me that I’m doing the right thing because I want to talk to people who, still, can change” (D. DROS, personal communication, April 20, 2014).

From these observations, a new meaning of the term *Nayda* begins to emerge. *Nayda* in hip-hop culture is synonymous with movement, freedom, and shedding of inhibitions. This wild and frenzied behavior, often labeled as “partying” or “dancing,” is itself a form of resistance and contestation—it is a way of physically and metaphorically transgressing restricting social norms through an outburst of repressed emotion and energy. The purpose of the music is to facilitate this process, and to fuel this energy. Inadvertently, this also creates a more politically engaged youth that is primed to “shake things up” and draw an old and traditional society out of its slumber and into the motion of their frenetic lifestyle. In this way, the culture surrounding Moroccan hip-hop has just as much power as the lyrics of songs in constructing a Moroccan youth identity that is confrontational, active, and engaged—“awakened” to the Moroccan social reality.

### **Contestation Through Strategy.**

A form of contestation in Moroccan hip-hop that is particular to the Moroccan social context is the use of clever maneuvering and strategy in the creation of one’s music in order to bypass social constraints. Dizzy DROS is very explicit about the fact that he intentionally shifts between creating meaningless songs and creating socially critical songs as a part of his overall strategy as a hip-hop artist. He says,

“For the government, I think rap it’s a way for the system to show that Morocco is a beautiful country: look, we have rap, we are cool, we have rappers, we put them on big stages, they can organize their festivals, they can be on TV. But still, there are some red lines that you should not go over, because if you do so, they won’t put you in jail, but you won’t find yourself in any



concert. Nobody will call you for TV. You see? You gonna stay in your neighborhood. So that's why I told you about being smart. Because there are two things, if you get one of them, you lose the other. There is the street and the government. ...We have both types of rappers in Morocco. I think you have to be smart to play between them. Any rapper would like to be in those biggest festivals and get played on the radio and the TV and do commercials. Be that icon for people. But then you have to be smart for that, because shit is pretty much controlled" (D. DROS, personal communication, April 20, 2014).

Clearly, Dizzy DROS exhibits a striking awareness of the Moroccan social landscape and a concerted effort to navigate these obstacles and evade governmental control over his music. His emphasis on "being smart" and knowing how to work the Moroccan "system" when creating his music is, rather than "selling-out", a strategy of resistance forged by the social maze of Moroccan society. He is using his knowledge of the ideologies of the state to his advantage, without necessarily adhering to those ideologies himself.

Furthermore, Dizzy DROS explains why he believes that strategy is more important, and in fact, more subversive than overt social activism in Moroccan hip-hop. He notes,

"It's about trying to gain as many fans as you can. That is the power of the artist...I mean the radio and TV can ignore you as much as they can, but when they see that you got the biggest fan base they gonna call you, and you gonna be able to say what you have to say in front of them, and they cannot stop you. But then there are some other rappers that choose to stay in the dark, like, always criticize, always insult...But then you won't get nowhere with this music. You have to be smart...Because we are all against the system. We all hate what it's like in Morocco... And we don't need a rapper to tell us about that. You can go to a taxi and have a conversation with him and he can give you the deepest punch lines ever. Doesn't need to be a rapper to know what it is in Morocco. But then, you have to be smart enough, so you can introduce these messages [to the public sphere] the right way" (D. DROS, personal communication, April 20, 2014).

Likewise, when asked whether his music was politically engaged, rapper Nessyou responded that it was "a little, just the necessary amount," because "a lot of politically engaged artists in Morocco find themselves now at the margins of society and I don't want to belong to the margins" (Nessyou, personal communication, May 2, 2014). Here, Dizzy DROS and Nessyou demonstrate an intimate knowledge of what constitutes social change in the Moroccan context, and how to craft a strategy of resistance best suited to the Moroccan context. They express awareness of the private/public dichotomy in Moroccan culture and the fact that real change can only take place when important

messages are introduced in the public sphere (as opposed to the margins), where they are seen as legitimate. The result of this strategy is the production of hip-hop music in which subversive themes are veiled and shrouded in ambiguity, hidden among an exterior that promotes governmentally sanctioned themes. As Nessayou explained it, “My rap is a reflection of the citizens of Marrakech, it is funny! But, also full of messages that come through in a subtle manner” (Nessayou, personal communication, May 2, 2014).

This is akin to what post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha calls the “area between mimicry and mockery”, where the colonial subject is “almost the same, but not quite,” and the subtle appearance of difference is at once “resemblance and menace”, because the colonizer cannot tell whether he is in charge, or the subject of a joke—his failure to fully assimilate the colonial subject a constant reminder of the futility of his project (Bhabha, 1997, 154).

Likewise, many Moroccan hip-hop artists such as Dizzy DROS and Nessayou, strategically engage in a process of “mimicry” by adhering to governmental restrictions regarding their music in order to advance into the public sphere. Once in the public sphere, the “slippage” begins to appear, the subtle manifestation of the rapper’s independent political voice sprinkled here and there among songs seemingly geared toward mindless entertainment. As a result, the rapper exploits his constructed ambiguity to access public platforms for his music from official authorities, while simultaneously using that public platform to subtly mock the authorities. This strategy in hip-hop stems from the particular power relations and social constraints of Moroccan society, and as a result, is a form of contestation that is representative of a uniquely Moroccan psychology and identity.

### **Contestation Through Solidarity.**

As discussed before, differences in geographic location, family upbringing, and political orientation of rappers naturally leads to the fragmentation of hip-hop culture into many different categories (Bennett, 2000, p. 183). Therefore, it is false to describe Moroccan hip-hop as an overarching

social movement oriented toward singular liberal goals, the way that many media outlets have.

However, attempts by the government to exploit these fragmentations by co-opting some genres of Moroccan hip-hop and excluding others have prompted resistance from the hip-hop community in the form of cross-genre and interregional solidarity between hip-hop artists, unrelated to musical style or ideology. This solidarity posits the hip-hop community as a space for experimentation with identity and ideology that nevertheless constitutes a collective identity as part of the hip-hop movement (Bennett, 2000, p. 183).

There are countless examples to prove the strong links of solidarity and community responsibility exhibited by Moroccan hip-hop artists from all backgrounds. Don Bigg and Moby Dick are examples of two very different rappers who have gained significant commercial success who are nonetheless dedicated to giving back to the community and to elevating new rappers. In doing so, they aim to prove that they have not been co-opted, and that their first loyalty is still to the local hip-hop scene. Indeed, Bigg recently produced a mixtape showcasing several new rappers of the Moroccan scene (Almeida, 2013, p. 325). Rapper Moby Dick, seeing potential in then amateur rapper Ayman Hosny, contacted him via Facebook to exchange advice and offer Hosny the use of his studio (A. Hosny, personal communication, May 1, 2014). When I asked rapper Would Cha3b what his ambitions for the future were, he expressed his desire to someday become an executive music producer in order to help other struggling young Moroccan rappers to make albums and start their careers. He compared the hip-hop community to a sports team, with every person engaged in their separate roles (rappers, DJ's, dancers, producers, engineers, editors etc.) working together to achieve communal success. And, when you get old, "you should come back as a coach," he said (W. Cha3b, personal communication, April 30, 2014).

In fact, Bayat's concept of "social nonmovement" is a useful way of viewing this unique phenomenon within the hip-hop community in Morocco. According to Bayat, "nonmovements refers to the collective actions of noncollective actors; they embody shared practices of large numbers of

ordinary people whose fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change, even though these practices are rarely guided by an ideology or recognizable leadership and organization” (as cited in Almeida, 2013, p. 323).

Evidently, the hip-hop community as a whole, because it does not espouse a unified ideology, represents a body of noncollective actors with “fragmented but similar activities”. Therefore, the bonds of solidarity between rappers across ideological and musical categories facilitate the progression of this social “nonmovement,” whereby hip-hop culture rapidly infiltrates Moroccan society, but exposes Moroccan youth to a wide variety of different and, often conflicting, political and social attitudes.

The focal point that unifies all of these rappers is their shared commitment to the advancement of hip-hop in Moroccan society. In a song by the Casa Crew, featuring Meknes-based H-Kayne, called “Koulchi Khoute” (We are all brothers), the rappers repeatedly refer to their separate cities (Casablanca and Meknes), while pointing out that they are united through rap (as cited in Almeida, 2013, p. 326). Rapper Adnan Mahyou reiterates his commitment to doing collaborations with other rappers because he believes that “it is collaborations that create the hip-hop movement. In truth, we all walk down the same path” (A. Mahyou, personal communication, April 22, 2014).

Bound together by the marginality of hip-hop culture in Moroccan society, Moroccan rappers actively work to promote networks of solidarity as a strategy of resistance against a government that would use ideology to divide and control them. This, in turn, promotes a plural Moroccan identity in hip-hop music that allows for a wide variety of ideological beliefs, cultural practices, and geographic specificities to coexist under the same banner. In the words of rapper Nessayou, “The thing about being Moroccan, I can tell you that we are not all the same. We each have our different personalities and characters, like everywhere else in the world” (Nessayou, personal communication, May 2, 2014).

## Conclusions

Overall, the agenda of the Moroccan hip-hop movement cannot be reduced to a unified movement of radicalized and politicized youth, just as its aesthetic cannot be reduced to the infusion of American hip-hop music with “oriental” sounds. This image of Moroccan hip-hop largely represents an identity thrust upon the movement by Western and local media in an attempt to fulfill *their* fantasies about what this genre *should* represent. A clear example of this phenomenon is the gulf between the portrayal of the term “Nayda” in the media, and the meaning of the same term within the hip-hop community.

Instead, interviews conducted with six local rappers and four members of the hip-hop community in organizational roles, as well as the body of previous scholarship and interview materials, reveal the larger trends through which Moroccan rappers manifest their identity. In the struggle for authenticity, rappers construct a dynamic and cross-sectional identity that is connected to the lived experiences in the Moroccan “streets” while also fragmenting into a variety of ideologies and forging a middle ground between global and local heritages. The manipulation of language, the employment of a class discourse of marginality, and the emphasis of fluidity and transformation in Moroccan hip-hop are also three major “signs” used by rappers to illustrate a complex identity that reconceives what it means to be Moroccan. Finally, the theme of contestation in hip-hop, demonstrated through overt activism, hip-hop culture, business strategy, and networks of solidarity, also represents the creation of an engaged and aware Moroccan youth identity that extends beyond ideological social norms.

In sum, the treatment of these five themes in Moroccan hip-hop results in the promulgation of a youth identity that broadens the definition of what it means to be Moroccan to include ideological inconsistencies, global connections, idiosyncrasies of lived experience, and social concerns. Thus, Moroccan hip-hop weaves an intricate, quilted Moroccan identity that reflects the turbulence and contradiction characteristic of life in the modern world.

## **Reflections/Recommendations**

This study recognizes that its small sample size is not representative of the entire body of Moroccan rappers. It is for this reason that the study chose to characterize the field research as a supplementary contribution to the existing scholarship rather than an independent body of work.

Furthermore, this study took place over the span of three weeks. This was insufficient time to network, develop rapport with rappers, and acquire a large and representative sample. As a result, the study could not afford to be selective about the interviews accepted. The sample of seven rappers and four Moroccans involved in the hip-hop scene was geographically biased towards people from Rabat and Casablanca, linguistically biased towards rappers who spoke English or French, and was, therefore, not a representative sample of the entire Moroccan hip-hop community. Given many more months, it may have been possible to acquire an adequately sized and representative sample that could stand on its own as a source of information from which to make generalized claims. As it is, this study relied heavily on preexisting scholarship to bolster field data, which may have affected the conclusions drawn. Particularly, this may have increased the breadth of the analytical conclusions at the expense of depth.

It is also important to note that time and travel constraints as well as the busy schedules of many rappers resulted in two out of the six semi-structured interviews taking place online via email. The online medium may also have affected the responses, as people have a tendency to communicate ideas differently in writing than in speech. Online interviews also blocked the opportunity to ask follow-up questions on the spot, which might have resulted in less dynamic responses.

Given these limitations, it would be interesting to continue this study at a later date to see if the research conclusions change. In the future, it would be worthwhile to interview more rappers from different cities representing all of the major geographic regions of Morocco. This would also lend itself to a comparative analysis of hip-hop culture between Moroccan cities and the ways in which geographic specificities add another dimension to the manifestation of Moroccan identity through hip-hop. Another possible angle from which to approach this subject is a generational one—how does the

perception of Moroccan identity change between young hip-hop fans and their parents, for example?

Indeed, these subjects are ripe for further investigation.

## Bibliography

### Works Cited

- Abu-Lughod, L. (1986). *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Almeida, C. M. (2013). Unravelling Distinct Voices in Moroccan Rap—Evading Control, Weaving Solidarities, and Building New Spaces for Self-Expression. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 25(3), 319-332.
- Bennet, A. (2000). Theorizing Music and the Social. New Approaches to Understanding Musical Meaning in Everyday Life. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 17(3), 181-184.
- Bernas, A. (2012, July 28). Le Rappeur Marocain Mouad Belghouat Condamné en Appel à un an de Prison, *rfl*. Retrieved from <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20120728-rappeur-marocain-mouad-belghouat-condamne-appel-an-prison/>
- Bhabha, H. (1997). Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse. In F. Cooper and A.L. Stoler (Eds.), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (pp. 152-163). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Caubet, D. Nayda! *TelQuel*. Retrieved from [http://www.telquel-online.com/archives/229/couverture\\_229\\_1.shtml](http://www.telquel-online.com/archives/229/couverture_229_1.shtml)
- Chentoufi, H. (2012, August 6). Marx and the Bouzabal-Killimini Split, *Morocco World News*. Retrieved from <http://www.morocoworldnews.com/2012/08/50732/marx-and-the-bouzabal-killimini-split/>
- Conan, N. (Narrator). (2008, July 8). How Heavy Metal is Working its Way Into Islam. In L. Bishop & S. Goodwin (Producers), *Talk of the Nation*. Washington, DC: National Public Radio.
- Davies E., Bentahila A. (2006). Code Switching and the Globalisation of Popular Music: The Case of North African Rai and Rap, *Multilingua*, 25(4), 367-392.
- DeGhett, T.R. (2012, April 17). El Haqed, Morocco's Hip Hop Revolutionary, *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/apr/17/el-haqed-morocco-hip-hop-revolutionary>
- Dizzy Dros, le rappeur qui monte. (2013, December 8). *TelQuel*. Retrieved from <http://telquel-online.com/content/dizzy-dros-le-rappeur-qui-monte>
- El Maarouf, M.D. (2013b). Nomadictates: Staging Roots and Routes in the Essaouira Gnawa Festival. *Globalizations*, 1-17.
- El Maarouf, M.D. (2014), *The Aesthetic and Practical Fields of Excrementality of L'Boulevard Festival*. Manuscript in preparation.



- Holland, D., Fox, G., Daro, V. (2008). Meaning-Making in social movements. *Social movements and Collective Identity: A Decentered, Dialogical View. Anthropological Quarterly*, 81, 95-126.
- Kahf, U. (2007). Arabic Hip Hop: Claims of Authenticity and Identity of a New Genre *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 19(4), 359–385.
- Lakhani, L. (2012, October 19). Rappers in Casablanca Rage Against Injustice, *CNN*. Retrieved from <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/10/19/world/meast/casablanca-morocco-protest-hiphop/>
- Les poètes des temps modernes. (2003, June 10). *Bladi.net*. Retrieved from <http://www.bladi.net/les-poetes-des-temps-modernes.html>
- Le Rap Marocain. Retrieved from [http://www.france-jeunes.net/imprim-  
html.php?type=article&tid=16637](http://www.france-jeunes.net/imprim-html.php?type=article&tid=16637)
- Mrabet, A. Musique. Rap au Féminin, *TelQuel*. Retrieved from [http://www.telquel-  
online.com/archives/450/mage\\_culture\\_450.shtml#top](http://www.telquel-online.com/archives/450/mage_culture_450.shtml#top)
- Needleman, Jennifer. *I Love Hip Hop in Morocco*. DVD. Directed by Joshua Asen and Jennifer Needleman. Pleasantville: Rizz Productions, 2007.
- Salime, Z. (2011, May 28). Rapping the Revolution, *Muftah*. Retrieved from <http://muftah.org/rapping-the-revolution/#.U2VDbsfaQxV>
- Spivak, G.C. (1988). *Selected Subaltern Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

### **Works Consulted:**

- Bahmad, J. (2014). Rebels with a Cause: Youth, Globalization and Postcolonial Agency in Moroccan Cinema. *The Journal of North African Studies*, 19(2).
- Callen, J. (2006). *French Fries in the Tagine: Re-imagining Moroccan Popular Music* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of California at Los Angeles, Los Angeles.
- El Maarouf, M.D. (2013a). Local Arts Versus Global Terrorism: The Manifestations of Trauma and Modes of Reconciliation in Moroccan Music Festivals. In L. Bisschoff & S. Van de Peer (Eds.), *Art and Trauma in Africa: Representations of Reconciliation in Music, Visual Arts, Literature, and Film* (pp. 69-88). New York, NY: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd.
- El Maarouf, M.D. (2012). World Cultural Nomadictates: An inquiry into the Trans-local Dynamics of Music Festivals in Morocco. *Études Caribéennes*, 22.
- Stuckey, M. (2013, February 20). Sultana: ‘The Voice of Women’ Raps in Morocco, *PRI*. Retrieved from <http://www.pri.org/stories/2013-02-20/sultana-voice-women-raps-morocco>
- Ziraoui, Y. Rap. Tel père, tel fils, *TelQuel*. Retrieved from [http://www.telquel-  
online.com/archives/470/mage\\_culture2\\_470.shtml](http://www.telquel-online.com/archives/470/mage_culture2_470.shtml)

## Appendix

### A. Interview Questions

1. Where did you grow up and go to school? What was it like?
2. What drew you to hip-hop music initially?
3. Please describe your music briefly
4. Which of your songs is the most meaningful to you and why?
5. Who are your musical influences? Why do you admire them?
6. Describe your life as a musician. Where do you perform? How often?
7. What do you consider to be the purpose or goal of your music?
8. What do you think the role of hip-hop music is or should be in Moroccan society?
9. What language do you rap in? Why?
10. Would you say that your music reflects your personal values? If so, how?
11. What does it mean to be Moroccan?
  - a. What does it mean to be a young Moroccan?
12. Do you consider your music to be different from American rap music, and other types of rap music around the world? If so, how?
13. What do you think of American rap music?
14. What do you think are the stereotypes about Moroccans?
15. What do you think about the February 20<sup>th</sup> movement in Morocco?
16. Would you say that you are politically active?
  - a. If so, does your music reflect this?
17. Do you collaborate with other rappers? Other musicians?
18. How would you describe the hip-hop community in Casablanca?
19. What are your personal ambitions for the future?
20. What are your hopes for Morocco in the future?
21. What do you think is the perception of hip-hop and rap music in Morocco? Does it differ between generations?

## B. Flyer for Conference and Concert Attended as Part of Observational Research

**RAP & POLITIQUE**  
URBANITÉ(S) ET CONTESTATION(S) ?

**LES MERCREDIS DE SCIENCES PO RABAT**

**CONFÉRENCE: MERCREDI 23 AVRIL À 18H À L'UIR,**  
(AMPHI 1 BÂTIMENT 1, TECHNOPOULIS, ROCADE DE RABAT SALE) ENTRÉE LIBRE. CONTACT : 06 63 73 39 68 / 06 6010 76 77

HICHAM ABKARI - ENRIQUE KLAUS - FARID EL ASRI  
ARTISTES BELGES ET MAROCAINS

JAMES DEANO - MANZA - LMOUTCHOU - SCYLLA - MASTA FLOW - GROUPE SHAYFEEN

**CONCERT: SAMEDI 26 AVRIL À 20H AU CINÉMA RENAISSANCE**  
360, BD MOHAMED V - RABAT. CONTACT : +212 05 37 73 80 49. MAIL: contact@renaissance.ma

AVEC LES ARTISTES DE LA CONFÉRENCE - PRIX ETUDIANT 50 DH  
PLACES LIMITÉES