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# The Negotiation Between Ethnicity and Language in German-Immigrant Hip-Hop

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## THE NEGOTIATION BETWEEN ETHNICITY AND LANGUAGE IN GERMAN- IMMIGRANT HIP-HOP

Globalization in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries has brought more cultures into contact with each other than ever before. In every region, country and town, interactions between people-groups play out in different ways, ranging from acceptance to violence. In all of these instances, majority and minority groups are developing ways to communicate with each other, using alternative avenues of communication when discussion and compromise break down on the social and/or governmental levels. German-Turkish, or more accurately German-Immigrant, hip-hop has been used for the past 20 years as one such alternative communication medium. The ways in which groups have navigated this medium to express their attitudes on ethnicity and/or their experiences as minority migrants range across a broad spectrum. In this paper, I will discuss the ways in which many of these groups have used German and non-German languages to popularize political hip-hop that highlights minority integration and cultural issues—from *Microphone Mafia* and *Freundeskreis*, who use multiple languages within one song to the infamous *Cartel*, the German-Turkish hip-hop band whose all-Turkish lyrics made them popular in both Germany and Turkey, to *Brothers Keepers*, the German-Afro-hip-hop conglomerate who use their lyrics to raise money to combat racist violence. In these songs, non-German languages are used not only as ethnic identifiers, but also markers of these groups' various emotional, physical and cultural ties to their 'other' country of origin. This is a story not only of the use of language in minority German hip-hop, but also the evolution of political hip-hop in the greater German consciousness.

Two related concepts in this paper need some clarification before I move on to a

discussion of hip-hop in German culture. The first is hybridity, which denotes the mixing of two or more cultures in varying degrees, but is at heart a static term. That is, while there are many examples of hybridity, the term hybridity refers merely to the fact that two or more cultures have been mixed together. In contrast, transculturation is the process whereby those cultures interact with each other and change over time. It also denotes the ways in which hybridity is realized in a given situation—how much of each culture or what aspects of each culture are preserved in a given situation or cultural product. As such, every group that I discuss is part of our modern hybrid society. The transitions in the ways in which that hybridity is experienced and negotiated by participants are aspects of the transculturation process.

Germans, of course, did not invent hip-hop; Afro-Americans did. As a result, it is little wonder that early hip-hop maintained those linguistic roots. German hip-hop originated as an English language phenomenon—German language raps were unheard of; Turkish, Italian or Esperanto raps even more so. Yet, by the mid-1990s, German hip-hop began to come in multilingual varieties, causing that period to be termed “the *linguistic Babylon* of German hip hop,” by sociolinguists.<sup>1</sup> Humans use language to communicate beyond just the words that are spoken and for reasons other than its lyrical quality—and this is especially true of hip-hop, where it is the *beat* that drives the music. By choosing to use one language over another, we formulate who is part of our in-group, and who is part of the out-group—that is, who can understand what we are saying—and by extension, we give or take away power. Language is used to establish power over those not in the 'know,' or as a way to belittle those who socially ought to be

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1 Jannis Androutsopoulos, “Multilingualism, Ethnicity and Genre in Germany's Migrant Hip Hop,” in *The Languages of Global Hip Hop*, ed. Marina Terkourafi (New York: Continuum, 2010), 22.

addressed in a more formal manner, or in another language altogether.<sup>2</sup> Finally, and perhaps most importantly, language is used as cultural signifier. Languages are changed by culture, and culture changes language. The extent to which American hip-hop has influenced the German hip-hop scene is witnessed by the number of English loan words that are still in the German hip-hop lexicon.<sup>3</sup> The transition from German hip-hop in English to German hip-hop in German is an example of just such a cultural shift. Jan Berns and Peter Schlobinski explain that “[t]hrough the switch from American English into German as the language of the lyrics, not only emancipation was achieved but also a fuller sense of self.”<sup>4</sup> According to their analysis, self-expression is achieved only when the artist has control over the language that is being used. Jannis Androutsopoulos takes the argument further when he uses Jürgen Streeck's earlier research to conclude that “rap artists engage in (lay) sociolinguistics as they draw on a multitude of linguistic varieties and styles in order to state various, often conflicting social voices in their lyrics.”<sup>5</sup> This definition of ethnicity by association has been used in sociolinguistic studies of German hip-hop culture where “assessing which artists and releases shall count as 'migrant' or ethnic' is based on discourse rather than demographics as such. The crucial point is the artist's explicit self-identification with an ethnic group and their engagement with issues of ethnicity and

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2 Werner Kallmeyer and Inken Keim, “Linguistic Variation and the Construction of Social Identity in a German-Turkish Setting: A Case Study of an Immigrant Youth Group in Mannheim, Germany,” in *Discourse Constructions of Youth Identities*, ed. Jannis K. Androutsopoulos and Alexandra Georgakopoulou, (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2003). 31-34, 38-42.

3 Jannis Androutsopoulos, “Style Online: Doing Hip-Hop on the German-Speaking Web,” in *Style and Social Identities: Alternative Approaches to Linguistic Heterogeneity*, ed. Peter Auer, (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2007), 290-92.

4 Jan Berns and Peter Schlobinski. “Constructions of Identity in German Hip-Hop Culture,” in *Discourse Constructions of Youth Identities*, ed. Jannis K. Androutsopoulos and Alexandra Georgakopoulou, (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 2003), 201.

5 Androutsopoulos, “Style Online,” 282.

migration.”<sup>6</sup> The issue of ethnicity in rap was also muddled in the mid- to late-1990s where the term “oriental hip hop” was used as a marketing term for non-German/English language German hip-hop, encompassing non-”Oriental” languages and cultures..<sup>7</sup> Moreover, for those who don't speak a particular language, when it is incorporated as part of a song, it acts as a cue that conjures up images of the ethnic group the language represents—the language serves the double task of communicating the literal meaning, and the symbolic meaning. Because migrant populations often have two or more languages in their linguistic arsenal, the languages they use to rap represent a conscious, stylistic choice that goes beyond simply what 'sounds good.' What is striking is that German hip-hop rarely incorporates German youth languages, or more than one language in a stanza, further highlighting the choice involved in choosing the language(s) of the lyrics.<sup>8</sup>

There are two areas of scholarship surrounding German hip-hop. One is related to the sociolinguistic patterns of German-migrant hip-hop that I have just discussed, and the other is the sociocultural aspect of hip-hop as more than music or linguistic choice, but as part of a global youth cultural movement. This second aspect in part centers on the use and acquisition of a non-native language. For example in Peter Auer and İnci Dirim's work on the acquisition of Turkish by non-Turkish immigrant children, they explain this trend as part of a “*youth style* and the display of *ethnic* or *cultural* affiliation with 'the Turks'...”<sup>9</sup> They argue that while not every non-Turkish Turkish speaker is identifying with the Turkish subculture, all participants are engaging

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6 Androutsopoulos, “Multilingualism, Ethnicity and Genre,” 22.

7 Androutsopoulos, “Multilingualism, Ethnicity and Genre,” 41, Note 3.

8 Androutsopoulos, “Multilingualism, Ethnicity and Genre” 24-27

9 Peter Auer and İnci Dirim, “Socio-Cultural Orientation, Urban Youth Styles and the Spontaneous Acquisition of Turkish by Non-Turkish Adolescents in Germany,” in *Discourse Constructions of Youth Identities*, ed. Jannis K. Androutsopoulos and Alexandra Georgakopoulou, (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2003) , 233.

in a negotiation of their ethnic and cultural identity within the larger youth culture.<sup>10</sup> Maria Stehle discusses artists' choice of lyrics as a way for them to "inscribe" their presence on a particular *physical* space. By incorporating references to that space in their lyrics, she feels that they are reclaiming areas that may otherwise be unavailable to them because of ethnic, cultural or economic preconditions.<sup>11</sup> Another, aspect of hip-hop culture in Germany is clothing styles, as explained by Cathy Covell Waegner, looks for the Afro-American cultural marks left on the German hip-hop scene. She cites baggy pants, the popularity of basketball and an embrace of gospel music as examples of the Africanization of German youth culture. She even cites a schoolbook that uses hip-hop lyrics and rhythms to help German youth relate to classical poetry. Waegner is mildly skeptical that this trend is a "mixed blessing" for multiethnic relations—on the one hand, it creates a situation in which diversity is both expected and natural, while on the other it causes stereotypes to become more closely associated with a person's skin color.<sup>12</sup> Finally, Ayhan Kaya discusses hip-hop culture in terms of the appropriation of aspects of Turkish cultural identity, an identification with the working-class, and the recognition of graffiti as art-form. What is interesting about Kaya's analysis is that the desire to return to a Turkish identity is largely superficial, with youths simply supporting Turkish soccer teams and/or wearing religious iconography without religious conviction, as these are some of the common markers of Turkish ethnic identity. Dance and graffiti are used as artistic expressions that can be performed competitively between ethnic groups, and ease tensions in a creative, non-violent way, by using

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10 Auer and Dirim, "Socio-Cultural Orientation," 243.

11 Maria Stehle, "Ghettos, Hoods, Blocks: The Sounds of German Space in Rap and Hip-Hop," in *Germany in the Loud Twentieth Century: An Introduction*, ed. Florence Feiereisen and Alexandra Merley Hill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 157-59, 168-69.

12 Cathy Covell Waegner, "Rap, Rebounds, and Rocawear: The "Darkening" of German Youth Culture," in *Blackening Europe: The African American Presence*, ed. Heike Raphael-Hernandez (New York: Routledge, 2004), 171, 182-83.

these expressions of hip-hop culture that expand beyond the Turkish and migrant communities.<sup>13</sup> My paper attempts to fill-in the gaps that exist between sociolinguistic and sociocultural discourse by looking at *why* groups are choosing one method of linguistic expression over another, rather than looking simply at either the linguistic features of German-migrant hip-hop, or the cultural aspects that drive the German hip-hop youth movement as a whole.

The largest minority ethnic group in Germany is comprised of the Turkish immigrants who came to Germany in the 1960s and 70s during the period of the German Economic Miracle, when Germany experienced negative unemployment figures. With more jobs than workers, Germany initially opened its job-market to citizens of the EU, recruiting in the comparatively poor Italy, Spain and Greece. When those recruits proved insufficient to meet the demand, the Guest Worker program was extended to Turkey, and to a smaller extent to Portugal and Yugoslavia, however, the majority of these immigrants came from Turkey.<sup>14</sup> These workers were meant to stay only a few years, forced to leave their families behind in their home country as an incentive for the workers to return home after their terms of employment had expired. However, the need for laborers meant that the government was willing to give out residency permits that allowed many of these workers to stay longer and send for their families.<sup>15</sup> Many never returned, and today 2.4% of the German population is comprised of these Guest Workers and their decedents, with even larger percentages in major cities.<sup>16</sup> Until recently, however, these workers

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13 Ayhan Kaya, »*Sicher in Kreuzberg*«: *Constructing Diasporas: Turkish Hip-Hop Youth in Berlin*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2001), 155-75.

14 Veysel Oezcan, "Germany," Migration Information, <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Profiles/display.cfm?id=235> (accessed June 9, 2012).

15 Stephen Castles, "The Guests Who Stayed: The Debate On 'foreigners Policy' in the German Federal Republic," in "Civil Rights and the Sociopolitical Participation of Migrants," special issue, *International Migration Review* 19, no. 3 (Autumn, 1985): 517-34.

16 "Germany," CIA - The World Factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/gm.html> (accessed June 9, 2012).

were unable to acquire citizenship, either for themselves, or their children who were born in Germany. With the passage in 2000 of the Principle of Birthplace Nationality Act, citizenship was opened to children who were born in Germany and had “[o]ne parent... [who]... lived legally in Germany for at least eight years prior to the child’s birth...”.<sup>17</sup> It has since become easier for descendents of the migrants to become citizens, but has done little to remove the stigma attached to non-German ethnicity—a stigma that extends even to half-Germans of white European and American descent, although to a much lesser degree.<sup>18</sup>

The question of ethnicity in Germany is of course, not just an issue related to the Turkish minority population, but extends to other minority ethnicities as well, including the large Greek and Italian populations who preceded the Turks as Guest Workers during Germany's Economic Miracle, and the more recent African migration caused by the violence that has plagued the region in recent decades. Many of the bands I discuss in the following pages are therefore not Turkish per se, but are part of the larger *auslander* (foreigner) population in German. The term *auslander* has taken on negative connotations in Germany, and it is not uncommon that children of one or two non-German parents will band together in groups—whether they are of Turkish descent or not. Non-Turkish minority students will often learn Turkish, or at the very least *Kiezdeutsch*—a hybrid youth language.<sup>19</sup> Auer and Dirim quote a Tunisian youth, Dalal, on her

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17 “Important Questions and Answers Regarding German Citizenship,” Bundesministerium des Innern, [http://www.bmi.bund.de/cln\\_165/sid\\_EC011CBF9A4818138DEEF5893823ED32/SharedDocs/Standardartikel/EN/Themen/Migration/Staatsang/faq.html?nn=439476](http://www.bmi.bund.de/cln_165/sid_EC011CBF9A4818138DEEF5893823ED32/SharedDocs/Standardartikel/EN/Themen/Migration/Staatsang/faq.html?nn=439476) (accessed May 21, 2012).

18 Elijah Teal-Cribbs, conversations with author. My husband, half-German half-American, has discussed with me at length about his experiences as a “half-breed” in Germany, and the stigma attached to even an invisible dual-ethnicity.

19 *Kiezdeutsch* is also derogatively named *Kanak Sprak* (*Kanake* is a term that is best transliterated as 'nigger'), a term that some Turkish youth have taken as their own, but which is only occasionally used in academic discussion as a synonym for *Kiezdeutsch*. For an argument against using *Kanaksprak* see: Ulrike Freywald, Katharina Mayr, and Tiner Özçelik, “*Kiezdeutsch* as a Multiethnolect,” in *Ethnic Styles of Speaking in European Metropolitan Areas*, ed. Friederike Kern and Margret Selting (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing



reasons for learning Turkish to illustrate this point: “Here in Germany, usually, when I am together with foreigners(...) I am also together with Germans, but not—as often because with foreigners, it is the same culture... and for this reason, most foreigners—you tend to stick with them...and so for that reason it is mainly the Turks...”<sup>20</sup> Additionally, these groups often follow a (male) Turkish pattern, because it represents the dominant minority culture—even women tend to follow the male pattern of communication and bantering, in opposition to the submissive female Turkish roles, establishing their independence vis-à-vis their ethnically German counterparts.<sup>21</sup> Even when they do not follow the dominate (Turkish) minority culture, these groups have come to be seen by some Germans as related to Turkish groups, who are in turn related to a violent culture based in manual labor.<sup>22</sup> It is therefore difficult to remove the “Turkish Question” from the dialog surrounding other migrant children, no matter what their social-economic or ethnic status may actually be.

Before I can discuss the linguistic variation in German-Migrant hip-hop, it is important to understand some of the reasons why hip-hop became one of the prominent mediums for this expression. It is my view that minority groups have resorted to music as a way to open dialog

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Company, 2011), 45-46. For an argument for using the term see: Arnulf Deppermann, “Playing with the Voice of the Other: Stylized Kanakspråk in Conversations among German Adolescents,” in *Style and Social Identities: Alternative Approaches to Linguistic Heterogeneity*, ed. Peter Auer (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2007), 325-26. For an explanation and examples of the use of Kanak by Turks in Germany, see: Ayhan Kaya, »*Sicher in Kreuzberg*«: *Constructing Diasporas: Turkish Hip-Hop Youth in Berlin*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2001), 189-90. It is nevertheless rare to see Kiezdeutsch used in German hip-hop, see: Jannis Androutsopoulos, “Multilingualism, Ethnicity and Genre in Germany's Migrant Hip Hop,” in *The Languages of Global Hip Hop*, ed. Marina Terkourafi (New York: Continuum, 2010).

20 Quoted in, Auer and Dirim, “Socio-Cultural Orientation,” 233.

21 Inken Keim, “Socio-Cultural Identity, Communicative Style, and their Change Over Time: A Case Study of a Group of German-Turkish Girls in Mannheim/Germany,” in *Style and Social Identities: Alternative Approaches to Linguistic Heterogeneity*, ed. Peter Auer (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2007), 161.

22 Dirk Baier and Christian Pfeiffer, “Disintegration and Violence among Migrants in Germany: Turkish and Russian Youths versus German Youths,” in *Youth, Violence, and Social Disintegration*, Fall 2008., ed. Wilhelm Heitmeyer and Sandra Legge, *New Directions for Youth Development* (San Francisco: Wiley Periodicals, Inc., 2008), 151.

with ethnic Germans, because traditional methods have failed. Most communications media are dominated by ethnic Germans—even when minority communication is the explicit mission of a newspaper, television or radio station, as is the case with Radio MultiKulti. In her book, *Migrant Media*, Kira Kosnick talks about her experiences as an intern at Radio MultiKulti, a government funded radio station in Berlin intended to give migrants a voice that speaks not only to their communities, but to the broader ethnic German audience. While the mission of this station has been applauded by the international community, the reality is that the stations' supposed authenticity is merely a facade. For example, Kosnick explains that “only one out of eleven fully employed [editorial] staff members had an immigrant background.”<sup>23</sup> As a result, the immigrant voice is lost. Kosnick does acknowledge that the station has “lamented” this ongoing problem; however, they have done little to actually rectify it.<sup>24</sup> Further diluting the immigrants’ voices is MultiKulti's practice that when minorities are presented in the German-speaking portions of the programming, they are expected to speak with an accent—to show their “otherness.” However, the reality is that most second and third generation immigrant children—that is, the majority of the immigrant population—speak fluent and un-accented German.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, she further exposes that for the Turkish-speaking programming, participants are expected to speak flawless “Istanbul” Turkish—something that, again, the majority of the immigrant population cannot do.<sup>26</sup> In her analysis, Kosnick provides a compelling example of how immigrant voices are stifled and/or changed in what can only be described as a perversion of their story.

This situation has done little to create a larger scholarly dialog surrounding transcultural

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23 Kira Kosnick, *Migrant Media*, (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), 58.

24 Kosnick, *Migrant Media*, 59.

25 Kosnick, *Migrant Media*, 53-56.

26 Kosnick, *Migrant Media*, 70-76.

and transnational aspects of German culture. Sara Lennox argues that non-German German historians have been on the cutting edge of the discussion of transnational research.<sup>27</sup> While I agree with her analysis, she gives little reason as to *why* this is the case. Without pushing too far the trope of the German (and international) preoccupation with WWII (either in the acts of forgetting or remembering), it is nevertheless difficult for German scholars to acknowledge other areas in which Germans have behaved nationalistically, or at the very least, with a tinge of ethnic pride. Additionally, Lennox points to Edward Said's failure to discuss German colonial achievements and designs as just another instance of (even) non-German scholars avoiding or ignoring the issue to focus on 'the usual suspects' (France and Britain)<sup>28</sup>—a failing that is common in colonial discourse. The German hip-hop scene is not influenced by German colonialism per se, as the presence of most ethnic minorities in Germany are a result of the Guest Worker program, and not colonialism. However, discussions of the modern Turkish Question, when juxtaposed with the relatively new dialog surrounding German colonialism, and with the greater specter of WWII, summon up images of the German hate/violence gene—that Germans are somehow predisposed to racial hatred—something that everyone would rather avoid. It is therefore important to acknowledge this new dialog, as it affects not only the way nationality and transnationality are used in scholarship surrounding the migrant question, but also affects the response of German academics. It is the combination of these factors that, in Lennox's view, cause the discussions surrounding colonialism and, in my view the larger migrant question, to be initiated from the outside. What is unique about German hip-hop scholarship is that the majority

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27 Sara Lennox, "From Postcolonial to Transnational Approaches in German Studies," in *Hybrid Cultures—Nervous States: Britain and Germany in a (Post)Colonial World*, ed. Ulrike Linder et al. (New York: Rodopi, 2010), lii-lv.

28 Lennox, "From Postcolonial to Transnational Approaches," liii.

of English language scholarship has been spearheaded by those with a migrant heritage, which supports the idea that German minority scholarship is being pushed from non-ethnic German circles, while at the same time it complicates Lennox's analysis that minorities are absent from their own academic discourse. Her analysis is nevertheless accurate with regard to colonial scholarship where even external dialogs woefully lack participation by the minority groups involved.<sup>29</sup> Even with the participation of ethnically diverse scholars, much like we see with Radio MultiKulti, the voice of the migrants or formerly colonized can easily be changed or ignored by the larger ethnic German communities. With academic and media outlets shut off, music, and specifically hip-hop have become one of the only ways in which young migrants feel they can reach an ethnically German audience with their concerns. While these are, of course, only a few examples of stifled migrant voices, they highlight the challenges that immigrant and minority groups face when attempting to communicate their experiences to the dominant ethnic German communities.

There is, of course, the question of how Turkish in-migration relates, if at all, to these larger debates surrounding colonialism. What makes the current situation in Europe unique is the reversal in the direction of migration. Instead of European settlers migrating to the periphery, people from either former colonies, or areas that would have been lucrative colonies, are migrating to the European metropole. Mary Louise Pratt can in many ways be considered one of the earliest forces in colonial scholarship to acknowledge that colonized people maintained some agency in determining the ways in which they interacted with and mimicked European settlers. This analysis can be taken a step further if we look at the ways in which modern migration patterns are removing the dynamics of metropole vs. periphery and argue that while there was

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<sup>29</sup> Lennox, "From Postcolonial to Transnational Approaches," lxiii.

never an equal exchange between the cultures, each culture had its own metropole, and exported the contents to what would have been their periphery. In Germany, this migration has not come from former colonies where trade and colonial rule has resulted in centuries of transculturation, but from the Guest Workers, whose recent migration has posed specific challenges for Germany that other European countries have not had to face. Regardless of the circumstances surrounding migration, migrant children are left not just with one metropole, but two, and there is no periphery—unless we speak of both the country of origin and the country of settlement as both a metropole *and* a periphery, which is perhaps the most accurate description. By viewing colonial and German-Turkish relations in this way, a Venn-diagram situation emerges, in which children born after the mixing process has begun end up in the middle. At this point, a new metropole is created that is caught between the two cultures—two distinctly different peripheries. If we acknowledge that European colonial and migrant scholarship are not two distinctive and mutually exclusive fields—that is, if they are both based on a large migration of people or power from one area to another—then we can use scholarship from each of these areas to broaden the scope of both dialogs. More importantly, we can take a fresh look at an issue that has heretofore been dominated by European designs and aspirations from the perspective of those caught in between cultures.

As Lennox is quick to point out, the limitations of German Studies, whether it is film, literature or history, is that scholars are often limited to *German* as their linguistic mode of communication. When dealing with minority issues, whether they come from former colonies, or are part of the much larger Guest Worker immigrant population, there is little research or

discussion in those native languages.<sup>30</sup> My own lack of Turkish as a language becomes, at this point, a major limiting factor. Fortunately for my study of the Turkish-speaking hip-hop group, *Cartel*, Ayhan Kaya has dedicated a chapter in his book »*Sicher in Kreuzberg*« (Safe in Kreuzberg) to the ways in which the Turkish language is used by *Cartel* and similar groups. What is unique about *Cartel* in relation to *Microphone Mafia* and *Freundeskreis* is that by using the Turkish language, they are excluding a large portion of the ethnically German population from their audience—limiting it to Turkish speakers. On the other hand, it is equally clear that their music was meant expressly for the Turkish audience *in Germany*, as witnessed by its reception in Turkey, where, according to Kaya, their songs “suddenly became one of the main pillars of popular Turkish nationalism. ... MC *Erci-E* [one of the band members]... expressed his surprise and shock at this enthusiastic reception by the extreme-right wing youths, and complained about the misunderstanding of the Turkish audience.”<sup>31</sup>

Their lyrics, which discuss the difficulties of Turks in Germany, and the need for the Turkish Diaspora to assert their rights in relation to the majority German population was misinterpreted in Turkey as the need to rise up and form a pan-Turkish movement that includes all of the Turkish Diaspora. In »*Sicher in Kreuzberg*«, Kaya translates the *Cartel* song, “Kankardesler” or “Bloodbrothers,” which highlights how easily the song could be misinterpreted outside of Germany. Consider the excerpts below:

... We said, “piss off skinhead!”

When we said we were Turks,

We were labelled [sic] as fascist. ...

Turk, Kurd, Laz and Circassian

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30 Lennox, “From Postcolonial to Transnational Approaches,” lxx-lxxi.

31 Kaya, »*Sicher in Kreuzberg*«, 183-84.

We will lose if we disunite ...

All together we will break up the chains...<sup>32</sup>

In a German context, this song is engaging in the dialog surrounding the negative stereotypes of Turks in Germany as thieves and abusers of women's rights. They are arguing that if minorities do not unite together against the German majority, these prejudices, labels and misconceptions will only continue and get worse. This seems a reasonable request, but if you look at the song from the perspective of Turkey, then the song is asking Turks to rise up against *everyone* who judges Turkish customs, and that Turks, no matter where they are, need to unite against their oppressors—which implies a pan-Turkish movement, as opposed to the minority rights issues that are raised if it is looked at in the intended German context.

Thus, even as *Cartel* explicitly links themselves with the Turkish Diaspora and Turkey in their choice of Turkish as their primary musical language, they are also distancing themselves from the political and cultural issues of Turkey. Their concern is the Turkish situation in Germany. What is particularly interesting is Kaya's argument that all-Turkish hip-hop bands like *Cartel* model themselves after the Turkish minstrels of legend.<sup>33</sup> Kaya calls this appropriation of language and linkage to historical forms of Turkish performance art an “imaginative journey back home,” where the ties to Turkey are fantasized but not realized<sup>34</sup>—a form of self-Orientalization of their Turkish counterparts in Turkey. If that is the case, then the process of transculturation that plays out most strongly in *Cartel's* music is not, as with multi-lingual bands, part of a larger political message aimed at an ethnically German population, but a way to use language as an expression of ethnic identity, and as an appropriation of hip-hop as a new

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32 Kaya, »*Sicher in Kreuzberg*«, 186-87.

33 Kaya, »*Sicher in Kreuzberg*«, 180-82.

34 Kaya, »*Sicher in Kreuzberg*«, 184.

expression of ancient Turkish musical traditions.

Of all the bands discussed in this paper, *Microphone Mafia* (originally *TCA Microphone Mafia* before they signed with Day-Glo Records) are the most linguistically diverse—they are also one of the most diverse in their band members' ethnic composition, and are openly anti-racist. The group is composed of an ethnic German, an Italian-German and two Turkish-Germans. One of their earlier songs, *Say What?* (1996), incorporates German, Italian, Turkish and English languages, where the catchy (if cliché) chorus is in English—the more universal language—and the verses are in the national languages of the band members. The promotions for the album highlight that while you may not understand every word they are saying, how is that any different from American raps, when they are so different from the English you learn in school? [paraphrase of my translation].<sup>35</sup> That is to say, German hip-hop is about the way it makes you feel—or at least, that is the official marketing. However, by actively embracing linguistic diversity, *Microphone Mafia* are making a statement about multiculturalism, not only in Germany, but throughout the world. Their approach attempts to create an environment where there are no linguistic out-groups, and their music is targeted at a pan-European audience that incorporates all the cultural peripheries. The repetitious chorus “say what we wanna say, do what we wanna do”<sup>36</sup> in context of the linguistic diversity of the song implies that each person has a *choice* in how they communicate, to whom and when—and by using multiple languages, they are expressing a desire to communicate with as many people as possible.

While *Microphone Mafia* later broke with their themes of multilingualism, their latest 2008 album, *Per La Vita* (Italian for *For Life*, in German *Für das Leben*), incorporates vocals

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35 “Microphone Mafia,” day-glo.de, <http://www.day-glo.de/vendetta.htm> (accessed May 28, 2012).

36 Microphone Mafia, *Say What?* In *Vendetta*, Day-Glo Records, CD, 1996



from one of the few remaining German-Jewish Auschwitz survivors, Esther Bejarano. Beyond the overt anti-racist statement that such a headliner represents, this album also signifies a return to *Microphone Mafia's* multilingual roots. For *Der Spiegel*, this highlights “*Microphone Mafia's* focus on social dislocation” as their form of ethnic discourse. This time around, *Microphone Mafia* have added Yiddish and Hebrew to their linguistic mix. This album also represents generational linguistic challenges as well. *Der Spiegel* also quotes Kutlu Yurtseven talking about his first encounter with Bejarano: “When I said who I was, there was complete silence on the line. The she asked, 'which mafia?'”<sup>37</sup> While the quote may seem anecdotal, it shows how even a shared language, used between cultures—in this case, generational cultures—can at times need translation. This latest album represents another attempt by *Microphone Mafia* to bridge those gaps and reach out as far as possible linguistically.

*Freundeskreis* may be as linguistically diverse as *Microphone Mafia*, incorporating Esperanto, French and German into their lyrics, but the difference is that they were one of the first bands to popularize political hip-hop—by using German lyrics to express political messages. It is their German-English songs—not their arguably more uniquely multilingual affair—that resonate with the larger ethnic German population. “Leg dein Ohr auf die Schiene der Geschichte” (Put your Ear to the Tracks of History), according to their biography on laut.de, was one of the first songs that showed it was possible to produce political hip-hop in Germany. [paraphrase of my translation]<sup>38</sup> As with *Microphone Mafia*, in this song we see the chorus being sung in English, the international language of hip-hop. The verses are sung in German,

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37 Charles Hawley, “Holocaust Hip Hop,” *Der Spiegel*, January 26, 2010.

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/holocaust-hip-hop-an-auschwitz-survivor-and-her-new-rap-band-a-674190.html> (accessed May 28, 2012).

38 “Freundeskreis Biografie,” laut.de, <http://www.laut.de/Freundeskreis> (accessed May 28, 2012).

positioning all Germans, and the international community as the audience. Here, we do not find an anti-racist song, but an anti-USA/anti-big business song, that discusses the abuses of the CIA, and the tragedy of Chernobyl, using the format of relating these internationally relevant events to personally important events, such as the year he was born, or when he turned 18.<sup>39</sup> While it does not fit neatly into the migrant discourse of this paper, it is important to note that not all multilingual bands focused exclusively on anti-racist or immigrant-only concerns, but that those dialogs were, and are, part of a larger political movement in German hip-hop culture, beginning its mainstream debut in 1997 with *Freundeskreis*.

The last group I will discuss, *Brothers Keepers*, serves as a culmination not only of the political hip-hop movement that was discussed above, but of ethnic and cultural tensions that came to a head in the early 2000s—the same time that citizenship opened up ever so slightly for German children of migrant parents. On June 14, 2000, three drunken neo-Nazis in Dessau, Germany attacked and killed Alberto Adriano of Mozambique. He had been living and working in Germany for 20 years—since he was 19.<sup>40</sup> While there has always been intermittent racist violence in Germany, as throughout the world, this attack coincided with the culmination of political migrant hip-hop in Germany, beginning with *Cartel* in 1995, *Microphone Mafia* in 1996, and then *Freundeskreis* who in 1997 popularized the genre. Three years later, in 2000, there were more than enough migrant hip-hop rappers who were willing to participate in a project against this kind of violence.

*Brothers Keepers* is not a band, but a confederation of minority artist whose non-profit

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39 *Freundeskreis*, *Leg dein Ohr Auf die Schiene der Geschichte*, Four Music and Columbia, CD Single, 1997.

40 Rob Broomby, "Race Hate in Germany," *BBC News*, September 3, 2000.[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from\\_our\\_own\\_correspondent/908592.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/908592.stm) (accessed May 28, 2012).

organization channels money from their songs and film into anti-racist campaigns. In their song “Adriano—Letzte Warnung” (Adriano—the Last Warning), they discuss their relationship with the German-Migrant hip-hop scene. In what could almost be considered an apology for not engaging in political commentary before, the lyrics say “In all den Jahren in denen wir airplay verschwendet haben / Man könnte denken, wir Rapper hätten nichts zu sagen” (In all the years that we have wasted airplay / One could think that we Rappers had nothing to say [translation mine]). They even quote this line from the song on their website, [brotherskeepers.org](http://brotherskeepers.org).<sup>41</sup> This could, of course, be interpreted that no political hip-hop activity had occurred prior to the release of this song and the formation of this loosely organized group. However, in light of the earlier examples of political representation in German hip-hop, it is more likely that this is an apology for the general state of German hip-hop lyrics, which have traditionally revolved around love and relationship issues.<sup>42</sup>

The song, primarily in German, but with some English verses, is addressed directly to both the ethnic German population as a warning that violence against minorities is not going to be tolerated anymore, and a warning to the minority communities that if they do not band together and do something, violence will continue to happen, reminiscent of the *Cartel* song quoted earlier. Yet, unlike *Cartel*, there is no doubt who the audience is. Further, by using English throughout, they are also addressing a broader European and American audience, where similar ethnic tensions remain unresolved.

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41 “Wir Über Uns: Das Musikprojekt Brothers Keepers...,” Brothers Keepers, <http://www.brotherskeepers.org/wirueberuns.php> (accessed May 28, 2012).

42 As an example, see the Platinum artist Xavier Naidoo, whose 1999 hit, “Sie sieht mich nicht” (She doesn't see me) was used in the 1999 live action version of *Asterix & Obelix Take On Caesar*, and became a Platinum single. [http://www.musikindustrie.de/no\\_cache/gold\\_platin\\_datenbank/#topSearch](http://www.musikindustrie.de/no_cache/gold_platin_datenbank/#topSearch) Compare those earlier love songs to his latest album from 2009, *Alles Kann Besser Werden* (Everything can be better).

In this paper, I have attempted to show how German-Immigrant hip-hop represented an aspect of transculturation in late 1990s early 2000s where language choice and lyrics were the forerunners of political expression—an expression that was aimed at many different audiences which represent each band’s relation to their ethnic homeland, and to Germany. While *Cartel* comes closest to identifying with the country of origin, they cannot escape the fact that they are a product of German culture—their views, experiences and dreams have little in common with their counterparts in Turkey. *Microphone Mafia* and *Freundeskreis* attempt to maintain connections to their ethnic communities by incorporating alternative languages into their songs. However, while their songs might be political, they do not necessarily engage in the dialog surrounding ethnicity explicitly in their lyrics. They use language to express their ethnicity, and lyrics to express the concerns of many Germans. Finally, *Brothers Keepers* reject the notion of using language as an ethnic identifier, opting instead for lyrics that boldly and directly engage in the discourse surrounding racial violence and prejudice—but they do so in a German-centric way. Despite these differences in the experiences of transculturation, all of these bands, and many more that I have not discussed, use hip-hop to engage either directly or indirectly in the dialog of German-Immigrant relations.

There are many aspects of German-Turkish hip-hop that my paper has not discussed, due to its length. I have not tackled the reactions of neo-Nazis to this aspect of the German hip-hop scene<sup>43</sup> or sympathetic ethnic German rappers, who are both an essential part of the transculturation process. Nor have I discuss the role of female rappers who bring their own

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43 For example Maria Stehle's discussion of Bushido, one of the more popular nationalist rappers, see: Stehle, "Ghettos, Hoods, Blocks," 164-67. Also of interest is Maren Möhring's discussion of neo-Nazi reactions to German-Turkish cuisine, see: Maren Möhring, "Döner Kebab and West German Consumer (Multi-)Cultures," in *Hybrid Cultures—Nervous States: Britain and Germany in a (Post)Colonial World*, ed. Ulrike Linder et al. (New York: Rodopi, 2010), 158-63.

dimension to the ongoing dialog. However, for a complete understanding of the processes by which hip-hop participates in German-Immigrant transculturation, these areas will need to be explored by scholars.