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Subversion and the State: Politics of Moroccan Hip-Hop and Rap Music

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Abstract

This paper examines the political significance of recent developments within the Moroccan hip-hop scene in the period following the "Arab Spring." Since its emergence in the 1980s, Moroccan hip-hop has been used as a medium through which artists have been able to comment on social and political issues. During the past two decades with Morocco under the rule of King Mohammed VI, the content and implications of this art have undergone a transformation, particularly with regard to political commentary and artists' relationship to the state. This research explores the evolution of hip-hop and rap music in Morocco over that time period, especially analyzing its political implications in the age following the February 20th movement. This study reveals an increasing trend of movement away from explicitly political music, as determined through integration of existing scholarship and semi-structured interviews conducted with seven individuals intimately involved in the hip-hop and musical scenes in Rabat and Casablanca. I argue that this tendency is representative not of decreasing artistic political involvement but rather of a reincarnation of dissent in a unique sociopolitical climate.

Key Terms: Sociology, Music, Dissent

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Since its emergence in the 1980s, Moroccan hip-hop and rap music has transformed in content, aesthetics, medium, and beyond. However, from the beginning, inextricably linked with this music and its creators have been the nation's sociopolitical climate and, accordingly, the state's interaction with this scene. A genre historically associated with social commentary and often outspokenness, hip-hop music and the community it generated in Morocco have previously assumed an inherently political position of engaging in discourse about and with the government. In its beginnings, this often took the form of explicit dissent. The coming to power of King Mohammed VI as well as social, cultural, and political changes in Morocco, however, have contributed to an adaption and complication of this community's relationship with politics and the state (Boum, 2013).

Due to the rapidly changing nature of this field and community in addition to its subsequent role in relation to the government, I wanted to investigate how that manifests currently, in the country's and the moment's unique political atmosphere. Hence, the purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the present significance of political, alternative/hip-hop, and youth music in sociopolitical resistance and subversion in Morocco. To achieve this, this research will attempt to answer the questions: What political spaces do alternative music, hip-hop music, and the artists who create them occupy in Morocco? How do hip-hop artists and music interact with the state, and vice versa? What are the implications of this interplay?

This paper will examine the ways in which hip-hop's political significance has developed, within a historical framework, and will specifically place the contemporary in the context of the Arab Spring[i] and the period of time following the Moroccan February 20th Movement in 2011. I will first provide historical background regarding the emergence and

evolution of hip-hop in Morocco as well as its relationship to concurrent political events and developments. I will then discuss existing literature and scholarship available analyzing these entities and explain the relevancy of this research. Through Asef Bayat's concept of "social nonmovements," in *Life as Politics,* I will introduce the framework through which recent trends in Moroccan hip-hop, departing from explicit political commentary and action, can be evaluated as a distinctive form of organizing and statement-making. I will then provide an explanation of the methods used to evaluate the implications of hip-hop music's recent interactions with the state within the limited scope of this research. Following this, I will report the results gathered from my research and discuss what those outcomes may reveal about the significance of hip-hop within the current political environment. In my conclusion, I will summarize the findings from my research and provide recommendations for future study.

Background

First publicly surfacing in the early 1990s, Moroccan hip-hop and rap music had formerly been developing as an underground movement, consisting primarily of agitated young people. Stylistically and culturally reflecting the musical inventions of African American communities in the United States, the manifestation of this genre in Morocco has been catalyzed and greatly influenced by migration and globalization—particularly through media-sharing with family and friends abroad from its start through the present (Salois, 2014). Additionally, however, many Moroccan hip-hop artists track the lineage of political music, and thus hip-hop, to a Moroccan group called Nas El Ghiwane, who began documenting and exposing oppression under the rule of King Hassan II (Salime, 2011).

The institution of King Mohammed VI as the monarch of Morocco in 1998 brought about symbolic sociopolitical change for the nation and spurred a musical revolution. Contrary to the actions of his father, the current monarch accepted the existence of an emergent contemporary musical scene and facilitated it becoming more public, as it had previously been almost exclusively underground. As an act of distancing himself from the preceding era, the new "king of the youth" encouraged the creation of private radio stations for young people and their music and "somewhat liberalized the political sphere" (Mekouar, 2010). Tackling issues previously deemed taboo—such as corruption, social inequality, and sexuality—young artists had more freedom to express their thoughts and frustrations.

This movement, already in motion and with state recognition, was deemed "Nayda," meaning "up" or "awakening" in Darija (Moroccan Arabic) in the early 2000s by Moroccan francophone press and compared to the Spanish *Movida* movement[ii] (Mekour, 2010). This movement was illustrative of the struggle of youth for change and increased openness regarding these sentiments. During this period, the monarchy also sponsored the introduction of grand music festivals. While these festivals—such as the Mawazine festival in Rabat[iii]—sent a message of amplified freedom and openness of expression musically, the state still maintained ultimate control over its content through sponsorship.

This period of gradual social change in conjunction with the passionate political involvement of youth—through art and activism—laid the ground for the protests and political movement surrounding the 20th of February and the "Moroccan Spring," a component of the uprisings constituting the region's "Arab Spring" during that time. The result of the Moroccan uprising, as opposed to those of other participating nations, was not the falling of the government. Rather, King Mohammed VI announced the drafting of a new constitution

increasing powers for parliament while remaining a significant political figure and actor (Hashas, 2013). This historical context contributes to and explains the current political climate of post-February 20th or post-Arab Spring, and thus provides context of the sociopolitical environment in which hip-hop music has existed in recent years and leading up to the present.

Literature Review

Politics of Rap and Hip-Hop

Existent literature and scholarship regarding the political role of rap and hip-hop music in Morocco over the past two decades explore the relationship between artists and the state as well as the art form's role in the 2011 revolution. I will provide an overview of these perspectives as well as background of the Moroccan uprisings in the Arab Spring, specifically, and analysis of hip-hop's significance in this context.

Hip-hop artists hold a variety of levels and natures of relationships with the state, the monarchy, and the *Makhzen,* a term alluding to the state's "central authority" and its elite rulers (Almeida, 2016, p. 187). Cristina Moreno-Almeida, for example, writes about patriotic rap in which artists perpetuate the messages of the government and ruling elites through a genre of music aimed at youth and social commentary. Largely developing after terrorist attacks on May 16, 2003 in Casablanca, patriotic rap arose as a counter-narrative to international criticisms of Morocco that questioned its ability to be an "exception" in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region—a claim the state had made due to the country's moderate Islam and human rights advances. "After the 2003 attacks, rap groups who conveyed a positive image with the country's future in line with the narrative of the Moroccan 'exception' such as Fnaire or H-Kayne were supported by the State" (Almeida, 2016, p. 194). In this piece, Almeida explores the

way that constructing national unity through rap creates an "other," which I believe is, in part, represented through those who oppose the state and, thus, rappers who openly oppose the state.

Through festivals and state-sponsored events, the government is able to publicize artists who it wishes to support and thus maintain control over which political and social messages are being broadcast. "Many hip-hop artists who have not been given similar attention have argued that the government is in the process of domesticating hip-hop and appropriating its message of resistance…these hip-hop artists claim that their participation is not tantamount to domestication but instead is part of the movement of *Nayda*, which does not only expose corruption but also calls on the youth to be more active citizens" (Boum, 2013, p. 174). The role of the state in this movement has created fragmentation within the scene itself, further complicating the link between political musicians and the government.

Almeida, however, in her analysis of cooption and festivals, complicates this view. She writes, "Festivals may be exploited to favour dominant political forces; however, they respond to very complex dynamics" (Almeida, 2013, p. 324). She claims that artists are not without agency and that they may be able to benefit from the co-option of their art through strategic utilization of the knowledge that it exists. She argues that the binary manner through which "corruption" versus "authenticity" is viewed is a simplistic take on a complex issue and community, and thus the "festivalization of dissent" is not simply a top-down move on the part of the king, but a space in which interaction between the monarch and artists occur.

A significant aspect of the last two decades, particularly in the beginning of King Mohammed VI's ruling, was the friction between alternative musicians and the Makhzen. A few musicians have been arrested for their production of music: first, a heavy metal group known as "Reborn" were arrested in 2003 after being accused of participation in a Satanic cult. This event

spurred action among youth and could be credited with an increasing popularization of *Nayda* (Salime, 2011)*.* Almost a decade later in 2012, rapper El Haqed (L7a9d), meaning "the indignant" in Darija, was arrested for "hurting the image of the police" in his song "Klab Dawla" (Shibata, 2015). Though some political groups are supported by the King and the government— and thus given physical and cultural space to express their art through festivals and radio play— artists like El Haqed are unable to produce records within the country. These situations, again, point to a multifaceted and dynamic connection between political artists and the state.

At the same time, it is significant to point out the international and largely Western news coverage frenzy that followed El Haqed's arrests. His case was significant and serious, the Association Morocaine Des Droits Humains (Moroccan Association of Human Rights) actively working on his case, but the vast amount of literature and news coverage available from the west, pointing to Morocco as a repressive state without free speech was significant and grossly simplistic.

Mark Levine writes, "The problem that we must explore is to what extent this release mechanism went from having revolutionary power to erase fear, claim public space (especially streets and squares) and set off protests and even uprisings to merely offering a 'festivalisation of dissent,' as Aomar Boum describes it, containing and dissipating (or at least redirecting) anger and calls for social justice to less threatening ends" (2015, p. 1284). The government's allowance of expression by the people is still a form of exerting authority. So, when the state maintains said authority, to what extent are the people still rebelling? The split in opinion between those who adamantly oppose the government in their music and those who are supported by the king, particularly in hip-hop communities, speaks to the evolution of radical Moroccan music over time, which I wanted to explore in my research.

February 20th Movement and the Arab Spring

Mohammed Hashas writes about the "Moroccan Spring" and "Moroccan exception" leading up to and during the 2011 protests in the MENA region, discussing the specific factors that lead to constitutional reform—but the maintenance of the government structure—in the nation after the demonstrations. He outlines phases in Moroccan constitutional history, leading up to and following the February 20th movement, and discusses the duality of exceptionalism: the positive of reform and the pejorative nature of the monarchy's weakening of the elected government. Additionally, he writes, "Exceptionalism is only a phase in the political life of a changing country; it has yet to face big challenges to consolidate its positive side" (Hashas, 2013, p. 18). This speaks to the uncertain, but certainly changing, political climate in Morocco. The future of hip-hop interaction with politics, therefore, is uncertain as well.

In *'Arab Spring' and Hip Hop 'Cool,'* Almeida speaks to the generalization of popular culture and the strategic understanding of the "Arab Spring" in Morocco. She writes, "The media has taken advantage of this rap's 'coolness' in the context of the MENA Uprisings to depict the image of the revolution of the youth. On many occasions, in its attempt to talk about the youth of the region, it has overlooked the different nuances and contradictions that follow these kinds of discourses" (Almeida, 2014, p. 3). She also states that the media coverage of specific rappers is selective and strategic. Almeida cautions against simplifying and homogenizing rappers and their sociopolitical messages.

Polarized examples of heterogeneity are Don Bigg and El Haqed. During the February 20th movement El Haqed released "Baraka Men Skate," meaning "No More Silence," encouraging protest. Lyrics in this song include "الله الوطن الحرية" meaning "God, the homeland, freedom," a vulgar play on the final line of Morocco's national anthem: "الله الوطن الملك" meaning

"God, the homeland, the King."[iv] This wordplay presented a radical political statement

suggesting the removal of, at least, the significance of the monarchy. Alternatively, Don Bigg

released the song "Mabghitch," meaning "I Don't Want," in which he condemns both those who

"won't fast during Ramadan," non-religious or ex-Muslim youth whom he believes represent the

February 20th movement, or the "bearded men," meaning Islamists.[v] He called for unity under

the king, while El Haqed advocated an oppositional viewpoint, though they were both rappers

interacting with the political climate of that moment.

Zakia Salime's piece, "Rapping the Revolution," published in 2011 during the

continuation of protest, speaks of the importance of hip-hop music and its participation in protest

and mobilization of Moroccans in those demonstrations. She states:

> During the recent uprisings, a new generation has used homemade studios and
> shared YouTube clips to spread Hip Hop music and its long-held desires for
> change through the streets. This music, in turn, has inspired its listeners to reclaim
> their neighborhoods, vocalize their frustrations, and demand their rights. After
> nearly two decades of underground activism in alternative spaces, the region's
> revolutionary music has finally come to the surface.

She claims, despite the supposed progression of increased publicity of formerly

"underground" music gaining more public space for expression under the rule of King

Mohammed VI, the era of the 2011 uprisings facilitated increased production of political rap.

Additionally, hip-hop and rap are media through which political views could be communicated

to the state and one's community, thus occupying political space.

Existing scholarship regarding Moroccan hip-hop, politics, and the Arab Spring focus

primarily on the events of 2011 and their impact on hip-hop, or vice versa, in the period of time

directly following. It has now been six years since the uprisings, and the situation of the state and

the Moroccan people has thus changed. My research contributes to the existing discourse about

this topic by providing a more contemporary look at the political situation, and hip-hop's role in

it, addressing the distance between the present and the February 20ᵗʰ Movement despite still existing in the "post" of that movement.

Theoretical Framework

I will apply Asef Bayat's theory of "nonmovements" to the state of the hip-hop music scene in Morocco at present. He writes, "So long as the actors carry on with their everyday advances without being confronted seriously by any authority, they are likely to treat their advances as ordinary, everyday exercises. However, once their gains are threatened, they tend to become conscious of their doings and the value of their gains, defending them in often collective and audible fashion" (Bayat, 2010, p. 60). In applying this theory to post-2011 Moroccan hip-hop politics, however, I will additionally introduce a philosophy of "strategic asitism"[vi] associated with this musical nonmovement.

Putting these concepts in conversation with each other, I use them to describe the collective nature of the actions of individual actors as they contribute to sociopolitical sustenance, at least for the time being. I will apply this concept in analysis of the actions of hip-hop artists in Morocco today, in the wake of the Arab Spring.

Methodology

In order to investigate the historical context and current state of hip-hop music and its political engagement, I conducted a qualitative study. Throughout my research, I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with individuals intimately involved in the hip-hop scene in Rabat and Casablanca. Two of these interviews were with rappers; one was with an artist who

composes both metal and hip-hop music; and four of the participants were invested music enthusiasts with insight regarding the communities surrounding the music.

In addition to interviewing, I collected observational data from visiting musical venues and listening to relevant and significant musical pieces ranging from old rap from the early 2000s to newly released tracks. I went to a popular performance space in Casablanca—Boultek Centre de Musiques Actuelles (Boultek Center for Contemporary Music)—and spoke to those involved in performing and supporting artists as well as watching videos of past festivals and concerts by Moroccan artists.

I initially assumed that aspects of the hip-hop and traditionally political music community and art have become more mainstream and thus less radical, but my interviews and participatory research complicated that assertion.

Research Design

I aimed to gain a variety of perspectives and experiences related to hip-hop music, Moroccan politics, and their interactions, so I attempted to set up face-to-face interviews with members of the local musical community to accomplish this. Prior to my interviews, I prepared two outlines of questions: one for musicians and one for community members or music fans. However, when I spoke to participants I opted to use a semi-structured interview technique. I chose this method because I was able to develop a better rapport with interviewees and conversation thus flowed more naturally. Additionally, I was able to gain in-depth understandings of participants' thoughts and gain insight into what they deemed important. So, while I had prepared questions, many of the interviews veered in different directions depending on the respondent's lead.

Although this method allowed me to learn from my participants and adjust my questions accordingly on the spot, I was not able to gain analogous data from each participant by adapting questions and conversation trajectories. The variety what I was able to glean from interviews due to this strategy was thus both a strength and a weakness.

Two of my interviews—one with a musician and his wife (a highly involved music supporter) and one with two Moroccan young adults who are passionate hip-hop fans—were group interviews. The interview with the couple involved the pair and me, while the interview with the two young women involved them, two of my American roommates, and myself in conversation. I also conducted these interviews within a semi-structured framework, but participants were also able to play off of each other's comments. This method usefully allows interviewees to inspire one another's ideas and contributions, but participants also, unfortunately, may have adapted their responses due to what they wanted their friend or spouse to hear them say as opposed to their fully honest thoughts. I believe the variety, between one-on-one and group interviews, allowed for a range of responses that were beneficial to my research.

I also recorded audio, with participants' permission, during each interview. While this did not seem to hinder conversation and participants often seemed indifferent to the phone (recording device), it may have made participants more hesitant to say everything they wanted to. This, however, allowed me as the interviewer to be entirely present in the conversation and transcribe the conversation later.

Site and Populations

Nearly all of my research was conducted in Rabat, Morocco with occasional trips to and conversations with musicians and artists in Casablanca, Morocco. Casablanca is also the city in

which I was able to interact with a significant site for the hip-hop and alternative music scene in Morocco (Boultek). While other cities in Morocco do have their own hip-hop scenes and are significant parts of the nation's musical production and culture, I chose to remain in Rabat because of contacts and support I already had in that city. I met the participants in this study through the help of my adviser's contacts as well as speaking with my Moroccan friends and their connections.

I conducted most interviews in public areas such as parks and cafes, with the exception of one interview in the participant's home at his request. All of my informants spoke English nearly or entirely fluently, so all of my interviews were conducted in English, with the exception of one interview done half in English and half in Spanish—another language in which we shared understanding.[vii]

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

In order to uphold ethical standards throughout this research, I provided each participant with a standard consent form and obtained both written and verbal consent prior to conducting each interview. I also gave each participant the option to be anonymous, use only their first name, or use their full name as they chose. Additionally, I deleted audio recordings after collecting from them for this research.

It is also quite important to discuss the limitations of my conducting this research. I am an American student who has only been in Morocco, in Rabat, for a single semester. The research period only consisted of four weeks, and I stayed mostly within one city—Rabat—with limited time in Casablanca. As a foreigner with limited skills in Darija and French, the most widely used languages among my potential interviewees, I had a quite limited frame of knowledge beginning this research. Additionally, my outsider status likely influenced that which

16

the people with whom I spoke were willing to reveal to me, because they may want to project a certain picture of their country to the outside or because I do not have the same cultural and historical knowledge as they do and thus, assumed and factually, less of a context for understanding the nuances of their thoughts about Morocco and my research. My status as a foreigner and westerner also greatly contributed to my personal perspective and how I developed my framework for approaching this topic in the first place.

Although I had initially wanted to interview more people, time constraints and scheduling conflicts limited the number of people with whom I was able to speak, thus limiting my scope of perspectives included in my research and data. Additionally, the limited number of participants and small geographical (and exclusively urban) areas in which they live—as well as the fact that I spoke exclusively to those with whom I shared a common language—make my sample size quite limited and thus not fully representative of the Moroccan hip-hop scene. This paper is not comprehensive, and I can in no way claim to speak to the perspectives of everyone in that community.

Findings and Analysis

Movement to Nonmovement

I argue that in the period of time following Morocco's 2011 uprisings, the role of hip-hop and rap has shifted from that of constituting and representing a political movement to making up a political and musical nonmovement. In using the term "nonmovement," I am referring to Asef Bayat's explanation of "the collective endeavors of…noncollective actors, carried out in the main squares, back streets, courthouses, or communities" (2010, p. lx). In the wake of mass movement, Nayda—both the musical movement and the concept of actively standing up—and

active contribution to political conflict and unrest, hip-hop artists are tending away from sociopolitical engagement in previously common forms. Rather, they are collectively contributing to the creation of a nonmovement by committing the political act of "presence" and strategic navigation of the systems that they aim to change.

Hamid, a young rapper with whom I spoke in Rabat, spoke explicitly of the changes in hip-hop production in direct response to the February 20th movement's uprisings and their aftermath. He explained:

> Yeah, [explicitly political musical production] faded a lot. Because, again, it's the king's job. I'm the king, when my people are having doubts about me or they want to start something I give them the idea that I did something good and we believe that. He knows how to play with us and how to control us. He's a good king in this way. So if you're talking about political rap, it faded away a lot. After 20 February and Arab Spring and stuff—our music changed one hundred percent. We developed, and that was his idea. Things that used to be underground—like black metal or even Tupac—right now it's something normal. In his speech he said, our country is a developing country and we're going to do our best. So the music and the movies changed completely from the Arab Spring (Hamid, Personal Communication, April 25, 2017).

As the political climate shifts in response to and in the aftermath protest, and change on the part of the monarch and the state is, at least, perceived, the drive for outspokenness and a public, performative manifestation of dissent shifts. I want to be clear in stating that the urge for and act of dissenting, and using music to do so, do not disappear. While Hamid speaks to the "fading" of political rap, he is referring to previously used styles of explicitly stated commentary on the nation's events and politics: the style in which a great deal of hip-hop first came about at its beginning. As Cristina Moreno-Almeida introduces the complication of the "limiting framework" of a binary of corrupt versus authentic in the Moroccan rap scene, I argue that the classification of artists or work as political or apolitical based on the style or messages of a piece

itself, rather than considering its context and its potential to take up political space simply in its existence, is limiting as well (Almeida, 2013, p. 320).

Given this, the change from outspoken, political music to seemingly unrelated messages, especially within the circumstance of the King attempting to placate the population, is a significant indicator of a new era and new incarnation of opposition in which struggle is not necessarily performed actively and in grand fashion. The musical nonmovement is a concept in which I join Bayat's idea of individual, non-cohesive actions that are not explicitly or, sometimes, even intentionally political, with the history of musical movements like Nayda (Bayat, 2010, p. 64). Subsequently, analyzing the change in Moroccan music since the 2011 protests involves an understanding of change rather than loss. Hamid's sentiment that Moroccan hip-hop is straying from meaningful political substance and impact was echoed, in some manner, in every interview I conducted, certainly pointing toward a widely recognized trend. I argue, however, that it can be interpreted as a political moment and a reaction to the sociopolitical events that preceded it.

Globalized Context of Music

The increasingly globalized context in which Moroccan people, and thus musicians, operate and its immense relevance to musical production in Morocco became greatly apparent in this research. Hip-hop in Morocco stemmed from practices of migration and globalization interacting with tradition and the sociopolitical realm specific to the Moroccan context, and the international music industry and its trends, unsurprisingly, still hold weight in influencing the practices within this single nation. While hip-hop and rap in the United States, for example, was primarily used to express the experiences and struggle of black communities, recent trends in

popular rap have veered increasingly toward stardom, wealth, materialism, and expressions of hedonism. The findings of this research sustain that Moroccan rap is also increasingly reflecting these themes.

A 24-year-old hip-hop music fan from Tamara named Kenza stated, "More Moroccans listen to American rap than Moroccan rap. There are young rappers coming up now, but they sing about the same things like 'I want to fight you and get girls' and things like that. They say the same things as American rappers, talking about prostitutes and money and what car they're driving" (Kenza, Personal Communication, April 28, 2017). While figures regarding the country of origin of hip-hop and rap music consumed in Morocco cannot be confirmed, the impact of sharing music across borders is undeniable.

Additionally, aside from sharing stylistic tendencies, the trends within the global hip-hop industry (the business and capital of which is largely dominated by the west and nations like the United States) have significant economic implications for Moroccan artists. Hamid spoke about his observation that a great shift in the content and style of Moroccan rap occurred when the possibility of profiting and making a living from musical production began to seem to be an attainable goal for artists. "How people can make money from hip-hop is not staying underground," he said, and in order to avoid remaining underground they must market themselves to the demands of consumers, who take global trends and influences into account when deciding which music to value and consume (Hamid, Personal Communication, April 25, 2017).

This tendency, however, is not indicative of cultural imperialism. Dr. Moulay Driss El Maarouf describes the "cultural imperialism thesis" in *Nomadictates* as the idea that *"we could be driven, carried in a rush by the Internet and world information networks, toward a blind alley*

that inevitably stops at the hazardous wall of cultural homogeneity or the otherwise related risky barricade of homogeneity of cultural consumption" (2013, p. 6). Despite the potential surface-level appearance that Moroccan and American hip-hop—or those of other international actors—are becoming increasingly similar, the cultural and political significance of these local subsets of the genre hold varying meanings, both locally and translocally. Dr. El Maarouf also asserts, "Even within a country like Morocco we cannot speak about cultural homogeneity, as the different existing regions and ethnicities still uphold and maintain their cultural specificities" (2013, p. 9). As we cannot speak about cultural homogeneity within Morocco, we certainly cannot speak of cultural homogeneity on a global scale.

I argue that, while Moroccan rap and rap internationally may share stylistic similarities and contain overlap in overt messaging, the significance of this trend in Morocco is not a permanent move in the direction of international musical homogeneity but rather a strategy, if an unconscious one, in the sphere of politics. The choice to engage in this manner with international hip-hop developments is a form of strategic asitism, allowing the system to exist "as is" in the wake of revolution and reform. I will refer back to this concept later in my analysis.

Individual Survival and Tactics

A significant aspect of Morocco's hip-hop scene today, and in previous eras, as has been established by preceding literature, is the tactics by which artists navigate systems in place in order to subvert the system to convey controversial views or opposition to the state as well as the tactics by which they choose survival within the existent system. I argue that both forms of maneuvers are, in their own ways, dissident. Determining how to navigate existent structures and either challenge them from within their boundaries, use them to one's own advantage when the system is not built to benefit oneself, or both, is a form of quiet dissent. Dr. Taieb Belghazi

states, "These practices operate the way that de Carteau writes of them; that is to say, as 'tactics' individuals employ to subvert and adopt the regulation and ordering of their everyday lives by the state, to meet their own needs and desires" (Belghazi, 2009, p. 155). Dr. Belghazi speaks of this theory in relation to Moroccan hard rockers, though it is relevant for rockers and hip-hoppers alike due to the alternative nature of their art in addition to the societal and cultural spaces they occupy as a result.

In our conversation, Hamid said, "Right now being an artist is not a hobby, it's a job. Right now, when you want to do something you do it for money" (Hamid, Personal Communication, April 25, 2017). Artists do not exist simply to be voices of the state or of the people; they are individuals who must be able to materially survive in society as well. So, although hip-hop artists in Morocco may, currently, be choosing to adopt styles and messages that are not entirely indicative of their personal experiences, worldviews, or political inclinations,[viii] making it possible for themselves to continue making art and survive in a society in which such a career path is often seen as impractical and trivial—according to Anas, a metal and hip-hop musician outside of his day-job—is, in and of itself, a form of subversion (Anas, Personal Communication, May 2, 2017).

The results of my research suggest that, outside of official state-sanctioned regulations regarding speech, social restrictions and industry restrictions may contribute to what language and themes artists select to utilize in their work. When I spoke with a Rabat-based rapper named Abdelkader Fares, who uses the name "Fares Vox" for his hip-hop music, he said, "Nobody's taking a stand, not because they don't want to or because they don't care, but it's just because if they fuck up with the radio, they fuck up with the shows. They need to sell their music...they self-censor" (A. Fares, Personal Communication, April 22, 2017). The reasoning for

decreasingly political or socially controversial content is more complex than aesthetic evolution. Thus, "selling out" or straying from authenticity for the sake of remaining in the scene and continuing to occupy societal space as an artist is a political move. I argue that by doing so, artists may practice what Bayat calls the "art of presence," by asserting themselves as agents within the society, enduring despite occupying a space contrary to the dominant (2010, p. 15).

I argue that the ways in which artists navigate these systems and (sometimes unspoken) regulations in order to still deliver their desired messages covertly is also a form of resistance. Though their dissent is not explicit or grand, as that is the point of this strategy, it is significant. In his interview, Anas explained:

> Here, you can make the music and be aware it might make a problem—only for the lyrics. When you're writing your lyrics, for example, you can make subliminal messages, but they can't be explicit. You can't say, 'I hate this system,' but you can make a metaphor to give the message you want to the person listening to you. You must be smart in order to protect yourself (Anas, Personal Communication, May 2, 2017).

By using metaphor and subtexts to create accounts of experiences clandestinely in their music, artists operate within the rules of the present while subtly encroaching on them. This is a manifestation of resistance and political involvement without blatantly or drastically demanding or making change. I also claim that the tendency to operate within systemic boundaries, even while subtly subverting them, is indicative of an asitistic attitude in the present Moroccan political condition.

New Age of Resistance

The current political atmosphere in Morocco is that of the post—post-Arab Spring and post-uprising, with a somewhat indeterminate future. As many hip-hop artists were intimately involved in the February 20th movement, whether "plant[ing] the seeds of

revolt," as Zakia Salime writes, like El Haqed, openly opposing the pro-democracy movement and actively standing with the Makhzen, like Don Bigg, or another manifestation of participation, they and their art are thus intrinsically tied to the aftermath of that effort (Salime, 2011).

The Moroccan February 20th movement demanded "freedom, dignity, and social justice" and improvement of social welfare services in addition to requests in the spheres of economics, cultural recognition, and workers' rights. While King Mohammed VI had instituted symbolic social changes from his coming to power until that point, he had not provided corresponding constitutional change. The points at which the presidents of Tunisia and Egypt fell pushed him to react more seriously to the protests within his own country (Hashas, 2013, p. 11). The reforms made as a result, however, separate Morocco significantly from neighboring countries with concurrent protests in that they facilitate a transitional phase toward parliamentary monarchy in which the King still holds significant power, while the leaders of other countries were ousted (Hashas, 2013, p. 15). During a period in which parliamentary seats are not filled, such as the months following the 2016 elections, the king is, for all intents and purposes, the government.

Due to this, Morocco is following its own post-revolution trajectory while progressing alongside nations and governments that experienced more drastic change and thus instability in the time during which King Mohammed VI instituted reforms. I quoted Hamid earlier, discussing the change in music and "development" in the aftermath of these protests. The appeasement of the people through reform contributed to a calming of grand protest, which Hamid attributed to the political strategy of the king; this was a common sentiment in my research (Hamid, Personal Communication, April 25, 2017). Additionally, I repeatedly heard the idea that in the global context, Morocco is doing relatively well or that participants were unsure

of a better governmental and political situation. Therefore, they accepted it and began to figure out how to make small social change or navigate the existent system rather than working against it.

Fares Vox, when discussing politically outspoken musicians, said, "You're not going to bring me someone here talkin' 'bout 'we're not living well.' Don't blame shit on the government" (A. Fares, Personal Communication, April 22, 2017). While recognizing the existence of social problems in Morocco, he advocates working to alleviate those problems individually or on community levels as opposed to targeting the government through music or other forms of protest. Additionally, within the conversation from which this statement originated, Fares spoke favorably of life in Morocco in comparison with that in Venezuela currently.[ix] I believe that the threat of decline during this uncertain time of gradual change through reform, especially when compared with tangible crisis and tragedy in other places in the world, contributes to a response of stillness: of asitism.

Mehdi, a twenty-two-year-old college student and musician in Rabat, also expressed newfound appreciation for the king. He expressed that although he had previously held stark views against the monarchy, in educating himself he realized that there was not a better option within reach and began to reassess his approach to understanding Moroccan politics (Mehdi, Personal Communication, April 26, 2017). These echoed perspectives of caution and desire for stability over drastic revolution at this point in time are representative of the reaction to revolution and a tendency toward allowance of remainder of existence. Citizens' individual decisions to abstain and let remain in regard to the political sphere are reflected in the trends of the hip-hop community and industry as well, as I have demonstrated by describing its recent trajectory.

25

Conclusion

In all, Morocco has reached a unique political moment in the period of time following the Arab Spring and pro-democracy protesting, and hip-hop music—which, as a genre, is intrinsically linked with politics and the state—has adjusted to meet the needs of this historical moment. It has done so through the adoption of "asitism" within the nonmovement that constructs its collective messaging.

Interviews with three local hip-hop artists and four young people closely involved with the community and the art it produces revealed trends in ideas about present politics, observations about the tendencies of new music as well as the industry in which it is being produced, and the strategies used by individuals to navigate such systems. In this paper, I gave historical and political context to the present moment in Moroccan politics. Using existing scholarship, I examined the role of hip-hop in the political scene and, specifically, how that manifested during the February 20th Movement in 2011. I applied Asef Bayat's theory of nonmovements to the functionality and impact of current hip-hop political involvement as well as Dr. Moulay Driss El Maaroof and Michelle Grand's concept of "asitism." I argued that recent tendencies in the production and orientation of hip-hop point to a manifestation of strategic asitism in a political moment of uncertainty.

Recommendations

My research, in its very limited and not necessarily nationally applicable capacity, revealed the variety of ways in which individual artists interact with the state, and have over time, and spoke to a time of decreased friction and interaction between these entities, recently. Hip-hop and its artists occupy political space by constituting a nonmovement, reflecting the

political condition of citizens while simultaneously having an impact on consciousness regarding that condition. The future manifestations of this movement are currently unclear, but it is inevitable that the moment of strategic asitism will end. Based on my research, I would argue that Moroccan hip-hop and rap have certainly not reached a point of depoliticization, and that occurrence is quite unlikely in the foreseeable future. However, it will likely continue to adapt to the political climate, taking on a variety of forms, styles, and meaning in its reflection of the political sphere.

I have spoken to the limitations of this study, and, for those reasons, conduction of additional and related research in the future would help to expand its scope and test the results in a broader context. Additionally, with most existing scholarship surrounding the Arab Spring and its significance without deeply exploring the present effects of that historical moment on current events and hip-hop music, I would recommend continued study as time since 2011 passes. A comparison between the hip-hop scenes in a variety of countries impacted by the Arab Spring would also contribute significantly to this scholarship. Additionally, due to time and travel constraints, I was only able to speak to people in a limited number of cities. Studying and analyzing the similarities and differences between the hip-hop scenes in a variety of Moroccan cities would contribute an interesting layer of the narrative of Moroccan hip-hop.

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Endnotes

[i] Recognizing the problematic nature of simplifying and homogenizing the idea of the Arab Spring, I chose to use this term throughout this paper for the purpose of utilizing common language regarding the protests and the concept of a historical sociopolitical moment.

[ii] La Movida Madrileña was an artistic and socio-cultural movement occurring in Spain during the Spanish transition to democracy in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Following the death of conservative dictator Francisco Franco, a sort of cultural explosion occurred in the wake of relaxed state censorship and enforced societal tradition.

[iii] Mawazine is a largely attended music festival that was introduced in 2001 and takes place annually in Morocco's capital, Rabat.

[iv] Translation and cultural context provided by Khaoula, a Moroccan friend of mine who aided me with translation and understanding of Darija rap throughout my research.

[v] Also translated and interpreted by Khaoula.

[vi] A term attributed to Michelle Grand and Moulay Driss El Maarouf in an upcoming article, which I interpret as relating to the state of letting something be as-it-is as a deliberate approach to the achievement of an aim.

[vii] I previously translated quotations and references to the interview conducted in English and Spanish entirely into English, and they will appear in this paper exclusively in English for the purpose of continuity and clarity.

[viii] This is not to suggest that these styles and themes are inherently in conflict with those of artists, but rather some of these tactics may be used for self-preservation rather than entirely based in personal desire.

[ix] Venezuela is experiencing the worst economic depression its history currently, leaving necessities and resources incredibly difficult to obtain.