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GLOBAL SOUNDS: UNCOVERING MUSIC FROM POPULAR REFUGEES AS A SPACE
FOR COUNTERNARRATIVES

HENRIQUE VILLELA

140 Pages

As episodes of mass displacement become the subject of worldwide headlines, the news media discourse on refugees seems often to reduce the refugee experience to either depictions of helpless victims or threatening foreigners. However, dynamic media such as music can prove a useful avenue through which refugeeism may be creatively discussed in a new light. Utilizing a counternarrative lens, this thesis presents a textual analysis of music albums from K'naan, M.I.A., and Wyclef Jean, prominent refugee musicians who utilize global expressions of rap to address refugee experiences. Through both points of shared realities and individual perspectives, these artists engage in a music of refuge to challenge dominant narratives of refugees by adding human complexities and a sense of agency to their own stories.

KEYWORDS: Refugees; counternarrative; self-representation; rap; K'naan; M.I.A.; Wyclef Jean

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FOR COUNTERNARRATIVES

HENRIQUE VILLELA

A Thesis Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

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GLOBAL SOUNDS: UNCOVERING MUSIC FROM POPULAR REFUGEES AS A SPACE
FOR COUNTERNARRATIVES

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It feels surreal to have this project done as the crowning achievement of a journey that started years ago, when I first decided to continue the pursuit of my higher education in a different country. As a pandemic sealed international borders and my journey to Illinois State was halted for a year, I had to reorganize my perspectives before finally getting to where I am today - and I could not have done any of that without the support of my family and friends.

To my parents – all four of them – you are the foundational rock of all of my accomplishments. Thank you for raising me to be strong, independent, and for imbuing in me a sense of curiosity and growth that fuels me to this day. Your kindness, care, and love mean the world to me. Thank you.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

“Music is the universal language,” the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow would write in 1835. Almost two centuries later, his words would be backed up by research indicating that not only is music present in every known society but also that people would be able to successfully identify the overall function of a song even from cultures otherwise unfamiliar to them (Mehr et al., 2018). From my personal experience, I must agree with many scholars who argue that music is felt rather than simply listened to (see Habibi & Damasio, 2014; Kemper & Danhauer, 2005; Packalén, 2005). Even though cinema might be my main mediatic passion (and the one I am close to the most, having a journalism degree and writing film reviews for years), when I look back on my journey, music has always been there, even before the movies. I took piano classes as a child, and I often joke that in another life I would be a music producer because the craft of a song and the elements present in it are something I always pay attention to when listening to music – and the reason why I find myself listening to almost every music genre. I imagine the producers behind the music piece carefully choosing what to include, what to omit, and how to build a song. Of particular interest to me, then, is the music that combines elements from different cultures and displays a mix of multinational sounds to tell stories that challenge the norm. This prompted me to arrive at the question that fuels this thesis: do artists who identify as refugees manage and communicate their identities as counternarratives through the musical format?

The idea for this thesis comes from a combination of my passions, namely the music industry, the media, and global migration questions. Namely, if music is something that has the potential to unite people, how do artists negotiate their refugee identities through music when, as a result of forced migration, they have experienced being separated from what they knew as

home and had to face the isolating weights of borders? And how do such presentations of self and lived experiences compare to larger, mainstream depictions of refugees?

As I am an international student, coming from Brazil to the United States was definitely something that required the capacity to adapt. While ideally an adaptation should happen on both ends, as in I should adapt to a culture established long before me and the people around me should be adapting to include the differences into that larger culture as a dynamic thing, I would say that at the end of the day I was the one who most often needed to adjust customs and behaviors – especially moving without any friends or family to a different country. A pressure to adjust – and quickly – was present in many spheres, and even being in a relatively welcoming university, I was immersed in a school system that has clearly been established with its native-born students first to mind. While I am approached with a cultural interest that seems to enjoy the potential difference that I bring to the realm of ideas, the interest in practical change to adapt to different ways of thinking is rarely present – and thus I am the one who is left with the task to conform.

I, however, always had the dream of studying abroad. I used to go to global education fairs while still in high school in Brazil, and I would drag my friends to the international university booths to hear more about them and the opportunities they had. If the process of adaptation can be somewhat difficult for me and other international students who intentionally pursued the goal of studying in another country, I can only imagine what it is like for someone who was forced to migrate to a different nation as a refugee. At this moment, I must use this introductory space to declare that even though I am an international student, I am not a refugee. I do not hold that identity myself and do not aim to speak *for* refugees on this project, but rather to

understand the concepts surrounding the matter and contribute to the research on refugees, identities, and the media.

In this introduction, I (1) lay the groundwork by contextualizing refugees and distinguishing them from general immigrants, (2) explain why their representation (and furthermore self-representation) matters, (3) argue how this study situates and benefits the research on the internationalization of media through music, (4) justify why I am analyzing the work of three different artists and (5) describe my approach to the texts.

Refugees and Immigrants: A Critical Distinction

One reason for studying musical reflections on the refugee experience is the very real need to reconsider what it means to be a refugee in the 21st century. To reclaim a refugee identity, it becomes necessary to differentiate the meaning of the word from a cacophony of other related terms. For people who never left their home country, the terms “refugees” and “immigrants” can be seen used interchangeably. And while both terms can be erroneously perceived as meaning the same thing to many, establishing a difference between refugees and immigrants was one of the longest-standing conceptual debates for researchers. Most of the early literature tended to classify refugees as political migrants, while immigrants would be classified as economic migrants (Hein, 1993). Currently, scholars have a clearer understanding of the elements that distinguish a refugee from an immigrant, namely the forced aspect of migration and the active role of the host nation in the adaptation of refugees.

For legal and political purposes, the official definition of a refugee and the rights to which they are entitled can be found in a document created by the United Nations in the aftermath of World War II. Signed in 1951 by 145 sovereign states, the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees is a multilateral treaty in which a refugee is defined as a person who:

owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (UN General Assembly Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951, p. 152).

There has been a movement to classify as a refugee any person who is not able to meet their basic needs and cannot provide for themselves (Dummet, 2001), even if that does not lead them to a different country. Lister (2013) argues that an expanded definition of a refugee is not necessary and would be counter-effective to assisting the actual refugees as defined by the United Nations Convention – a definition that must be upheld to this day. To Arendt (2017), regardless of the type of refugee, “history has forced the status of outlaws upon both, upon pariahs and parvenus alike” (p. 3). Investigating historical approaches to refugee populations, Marfleet (2007) found that such historical background has been largely neglected by research on migration and Refugee Studies, which started to gain more attention in the last decade or so and places this present study on an upward momentum of long overdue attention to refugees.

Another reason for studying manifestations of the refugee experience is the current relevancy of the topic in light of the dramatic increase in refugee numbers in the last decade. Worldwide, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2022) estimates that 89.3 million people were forcibly displaced by the end of 2021. Of that number, 53.2 million are internally displaced people due to conflict or violence, which highlights the fact that not all people are capable or willing to cross state borders in face of such conditions. Making up the rest

of the statistics, 4.6 million are asylum seekers and 27.1 million are refugees. More than two-thirds (69%) of refugees originate from just five countries: Syrian Arab Republic, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Myanmar. Furthermore, low- and middle-income countries host 83% of the world's refugees, with Türkiye, Colombia, Uganda, Pakistan, and Germany being the countries that host the largest number of refugees.

Data from the United States Department of Homeland Security indicates that in 2020, 11,840 refugees arrived in the American country, a considerably low number compared to the previous year when 29,916 refugees entered the nation. The Covid-19 pandemic and its subsequent travel restrictions were a visible contributing factor not only for the decline of admitted refugees and the rise of involuntary immobility but also for forced return migration (Freier et al., 2020). However, beyond the global shift caused by the pandemic, it cannot be overlooked how the socio-politics and surge of conflicts also influence these numbers. The same Homeland Security report indicates that, since 1999, the highest admission of refugees in the United States happened in 2016, when 84,989 refugees entered the country. The refugee crisis in Europe started to bleed into the Americas, and although the mediatic peak coverage of the events happened in 2015, (Tirosh et al., 2021), Syrian refugee admissions in the U.S. jumped from 1,693 in 2015 to 12,583 in 2016, a 30,590% increase from the 41 refugees admitted in 2011, when the civil war erupted in Syria (Ostrand, 2015).

While it would be expected that an increase in numbers might have prompted a parallel growth of the theme's discussion on the public agenda, Yu (2020) has found that the media and the public have paid less attention to the refugee issue since its peak in 2015, with the topic of refugees in the news media being dormant after coming to an almost halt in 2017. As Kaye (1994) argues, refugees must be present on an agenda that is "distinct both from immigrants on

the one hand, and from ethnic minorities on the other” (p. 144) if there is any hope of tangible political influence in favor of refugees. As long as refugees are thrown in the same bag as these other groups, their particular necessities will keep on being glossed over by the lens of indifference, which might come at a high cost. While adequately dealing with refugees might be expensive, disregarding the refugees’ needs eventually brings much higher costs for host nations that choose to not pay attention to them (Helton, 2002). All that to say, refugees matter on a global scale, and conceptually distinguishing them becomes important to this study while also ratifying its importance.

Representation Matters

The matter of refugee representation is rich and is one that also has started to gain more attention from scholars. Partly due to a resurgence of refugees as a theme of pressing urgency, research activity on media representation of such groups has been on the rise since 2010, as Seo and Kavakli (2022) point out. However, their meta-analysis of research indicates an unbalance in studies available, with countries hosting the largest numbers of refugees often being among the least studied and a prevalence of studies focusing on print media rather than other channels. As the researchers highlight, there is a “need for more comparative and longitudinal studies” (Seo & Kavakli, 2022, p. 9). My proposed thesis falls into the former category, providing an opportunity to compare different discourses of the refugee experience on a mediatic form that is often overlooked in such studies: the music form.

Representations of refugees become important especially since, in most cases, the general public is not experiencing immigrants’ and refugees’ narratives firsthand, but rather using the media to access those stories. With that in mind, it is concerning that refugees are often painted as a negative burden on society, with one study showing that the repertoire of “unwanted

invader” was the principal descriptor through which asylum seekers and refugees were discursively constructed by the print media in the UK and Australia between 2001 and 2010 (Parker, 2015). Esses et al. (2013), argue that elites can take advantage of a climate of uncertainty to reinforce a crisis mentality in which immigrants and refugees are painted as threats to the dominant culture, to physical safety, and to economic stability. A paradoxical climate can then be seen when, on the one side the industry welcomes the cheap labor provided by some migrant populations, and on the other their arrival is met with resistance and disdain by society at large. When 76 Tamil refugees arrived in British Columbia in October 2009, Canadian media covering the fact held foreign individuals in an unfavorable light as it “emphasized issues of criminality and terrorism and constructed the refugees as risk” (Bradimore & Bauder, 2011, p. 637).

A reasonable – and valuable – question when discussing representation is how media depictions affect the subject populations. A recent study conducted by Hetz (2022) sheds some light on the matter by showing that mediatic discourses influence the way asylum seekers tell their own stories. Through narrative analysis of in-depth interviews with Cambodian and Hazara refugees in Australia, Hetz found that the concept of “good refugee” emerged as a prominent theme mostly in refugees’ attempt to find acceptance and belonging in the host country by countering the demonized figure that was the product of Australian media depictions of the refugee experience. Some of the harsher implications of these findings are that, by shaping their discourse to fit the “good refugee” box, asylum seekers can have their own stories silenced in order to have increased chances of belonging and to suit societal expectations.

With this, I arrive at what might be the most relevant aspect of this thesis: self-representation. While a lot of research has been done on the Other (a theoretical concept that is

important to look at for this study and will be discussed in further detail in the second chapter along with some of its applications), there is a gap in research when it comes to self-representation of refugees. Existing research has looked at refugees' selfies examining how, while selfies can simultaneously be an affirmative act of resistance and community building, they can be appropriated and distorted by news media to comply with immigration anxieties (Chouliaraki, 2017; Risam, 2018). In the global policy-making arena, refugees have been fighting to overcome accessibility barriers and have their voices heard to actively participate in decision-making processes (Lenette et al., 2020; Vilorio et al., 2018). Research, however, is scarce when it comes to high-profile refugees who might engage in a discourse battle with the media.

If the representations seen are largely negative and damaging, what can public figures who are refugees do to change the dominant discourse? Is that something even feasible to aspire to? If inserted in the capitalist media system, could an artist have any chance of challenging market trends? These are all questions that permeate this study, and while I do not aim to answer all of them, they fuel the execution of this study.

If most of the cultural impressions of refugees and immigrant experiences are not accessed firsthand, but rather through a news media that often casts negative or threatening lights on these populations (Esses et al., 2013), it is crucial to understand how narratives of lived experiences of refugees are communicated in a distinct, more complex manner through music – part of the so-called entertainment media.

By looking at how musicians who hold refugee identities present themselves in different ways in the ever-shifting landscape of media and use their craft to engage in self-representation,

this study further elucidates how mass media can be a tool of social transformation while also being a battleground of conflicting voices.

Internationalization of Music

A key reason to look at the representation of refugees in music is the global nature of such an art form. As previously mentioned in the Mehr et al. (2018) study, music is present in every known society, and it can transcend geographical borders. While a case can certainly be made that the mainstream music industry is limiting and constraining, the versatility of the medium can prompt a range of shifting influences and the gathering of a following from unexpected places. Perrone and Dunn (2015) argue that musical influences are not always unidirectional (as in, from the center to the periphery), citing the impact of Brazilian band Os Mutantes in the 1990s alternative rock scene of the United States.

Music and its relation to transnational ties have not gone amiss by the industry or researchers. Different studies have been made, for example, under the marketable lens of international music festivals, and how companies that trade cultural goods can take advantage of certain strategies to promote such kinds of festivals while also representing a tourism catalyst for smaller destinations (Brandão & Oliveira, 2019; Rivera et al., 2016). My thesis, however, will not focus on international travel fueled by music, but on something closer to the other way around, providing a look at how forced migration experiences inform the subsequent creation of music.

Another factor that makes music a particularly valuable research subject in this case as opposed to films or TV is that, while major studios and networks control the big-budget productions of Hollywood and primetime television, music might hold the potential to empower, from the ground up, new artists who sing and produce their own stories. In fact, under the right

conditions, music can allow immigrants to become politically mobilized and to express political positions in a more particular way than other forms of art (Martiniello, 2019). New virtual spaces have broadened the avenues through which artists can disseminate music, using channels that are not as directly controlled as traditional music companies. Some of the artists analyzed by this thesis illustrate that as they first gained popularity in social media spaces.

From big-name studio artists to local punk rock bands, music and its relation to politics have been studied in the past by different researchers (see Goshert, 2000; Schwichtenberg et al., 2019; Street, 2003) interested in how musicians would challenge the status quo; bring marginalized voices into the conversation; and advocate for social change through songs, music videos, media statements, and civic engagement. Precisely the ability that music has to carry political statements is yet another reason to analyze music made by refugees in order to assess if they engage in such practices, and, if so, how those messages are incorporated. That becomes even more relevant in light of how immigration as a whole has become more politicized, with parties in different political spectrums engaging in a discursive clash (Grande et al., 2019; Urso, 2018) and prompting society to pick a side.

While the field of communication still has a lot to explore in the matter of refugee identities through the musical form, the field of ethnomusicology has advanced some of the literature on the subject. As Stokes (2020) notes, a few researchers have focused on different facets of the study of migrant and refugee music, with topics including cultural policy, tourism, performance, multigenerational politics, and regionalized impacts. Some of them, however, do not elaborate on the differences between forced or voluntary migration, and if there is not a lot of research particularly focused on the discourse of prominent refugee music, comparative studies are even scarcer.

What kind of music do refugees create? To the industry centered on a mainstream Western sound, an answer might be “world music” – a less academic term comparable to ethnomusicology (Feld, 2000). While world music might have, in its inception, benign intentions of broadening musical horizons and promoting artists who do not fit into the Western sound traditional expectations, the creation of an encompassing category for artists from different places might promote further segregation. Considering a strictly semantic angle, every piece of music made on the planet is world music, since it is characteristic of Earth. However, industry standards reflective of power establishments have relegated any music that cannot be easily classified within the traditional genres present in the United States as “world music.” It is a conundrum that, while such music is often subject to views of *exotica*, US-made music has been incorporating foreign sounds for generations. While this might be related to the rise of globalization, it also raises questions of transnational cultural ownership and appropriation (Hutnyk, 2000), a discussion that is addressed by the artists analyzed here. Commercially, the main genre which the refugee artists I look at are associated with is rap music, an artistic expression of the Hip-hop culture that historically holds the potential to give voice to marginalized communities. Thus, I present a genealogy of Hip-hop in Chapter II in order to contextualize its use by the artists I analyze.

A recent wave of studies has looked at music from the point of view of young immigrants and refugees, analyzing how the musical medium can be a form of cultural persistence. With songs being accessible through various technological pathways, newly arrived refugees and immigrants can be connected to a global music community while also using music to connect with the local community and further a sense of belonging (Marsh, 2012). As Ripani (2022) points out, “Immigrant children mix different musical traditions while using music to navigate

their bicultural identities” (p.271), which might prove relevant when looking into adult refugee musicians who moved to a different country at an early age, such as the case of the artists this study aims to analyze.

If the music made by immigrants and refugees has a natural tendency of blending musical influences from different places, a valid question that might arise is: so, who is the music made by refugees aimed at? Is it made to be consumed by audiences from their origin country, from the host country, or both, or is it aimed at a more loose or broad audience? Toynebee and Dueck (2011) argue that music spawning from migration is highly significant for social-cultural change, and it symbolizes perhaps the most striking mode of performance of otherness to mutual others, suggesting that the music made by refugees would appeal particularly to other refugees or othered identities. A more accurate answer, however, might vary from artist to artist, from song to song, or even from line to line. That is something the present study considers, at least regarding the particular texts observed, to further clarify.

A Triad of Artists

In this thesis, I analyzed works from K’naan, M.I.A., and Wyclef Jean, three distinct refugee artists from three different continents. In order to showcase how their refugee experiences are incorporated into their music, this study looks at one pivotal album from each artist, analyzing its lyrical and musical contents in light of its production context.

Since this study has an increased focus on self-representation, it is important to account for self-identification when selecting artists who have a refugee background. As important as it is to explain why I am looking at these three artists, it is relevant to elucidate why I am *not* working with other refugee artists. Since the goal of the study is also to see how refugees’ identities are portrayed using the musical form in the 21st century, I am choosing to analyze the work of three

artists who self-identify as refugees not only in public life but also *in* their songs, thus incorporating their migration experiences in their art. That decision contributed to the process of narrowing down the pool of artists and excluded potential names such as Regina Spektor and Rita Ora, both artists active in the 2010s who have a refugee background. While they are both outspoken about being refugees in the media, their music is less personal when it comes to accounting for their journey, focusing instead on more abstract or dissociative themes. Another point of this study is to look at contemporary refugees so it can contribute to more recent developments in the field of refugee studies. This justifies the exclusion of prominent names such as Bob Marley and Freddie Mercury, both artists who fled their native countries due to war or persecution and experienced breakthrough success during the 1970s. Acknowledging that there is a considerable number of refugee musicians in the industry, however, is important to this process and warrants further need for studies on their representations of self.

M.I.A., a British/Sri-Lankan musician, is known for her iconoclast attitude and wide-ranging cultural mix manifested through politically charged statements set to alternative electronic beats ready for the club. Born in the United Kingdom as Mathangi “Maya” Arulpragasam, M.I.A. grew up in Sri Lanka, where her parents were born. Her father was associated with the revolutionary group Tamil Tigers, and during the country’s civil war, the family had to relocate to the UK, where they were housed as refugees (Sawyer, 2010). The artist has discussed her refugee identity multiple times, maybe most notably through the 2018 documentary *MATANGI / MAYA / M.I.A.* (Loveridge, 2018), which features homemade footage of her youth years in Sri Lanka, documenting what it was like to grow up on a land stricken by war, her subsequent move to the UK and how she became a music star. To the public, however, her most recognizable output might be the song “Paper Planes,” a Top 5 song in the United

States and several other countries after it was featured in the 2008 film *Slumdog Millionaire* (Boyle, 2008), which went on to win an Academy Award for Best Picture. As a listener, I had my first contact with M.I.A. through this song, a fact that is worth mentioning to also highlight how refugees' music finds an audience. At the time, I had no idea the artist carried a refugee identity, and I was unaware of the song's function as a satire of how immigrants are perceived by society – as many other inattentive listeners probably were. I was intrigued, however, by how global sounds were sampled and blended into her music. On top of hip-hop beats, South-Asian and African sounds, M.I.A.'s music included elements of Brazilian funk music, a rhythm associated with the slums of Rio de Janeiro and often marginalized within my own country (Lippman, 2019). To see an international star on the rise unabashedly incorporating those sounds was kind of exciting, particularly since she sampled Brazilian artists such as Sandy & as Travessas alongside the ranks of Madonna on mixtapes earlier in her career, where she was credited for the “executive mish mash” alongside producer and partner Diplo. My thesis looks at M.I.A.'s 2016 album *AIM*, released soon after the peak Syrian refugee crisis. Featuring tracks titled “Visa,” “Borders,” and “Foreign Friend,” the album was announced, at the time, as the artist's swan song after she stated she would be retiring from making records (Harvilla, 2016).

If sampling is naturally an essential part of rap music since its 1970s historical roots in the Bronx, New York City, where disc jockeys (DJs) joined forces with “MCs” who came up with rhymes, commentaries, and catchphrases (Marcus, 1990), the juxtaposition of sounds is taken to another level by Wyclef Jean, another refugee artist this thesis will analyze. Born in Haiti, the musician left the conflict-ridden country with his family at the age of nine years old, being housed as a refugee through welfare programs in the United States (Taylor & Lemarie, 2018). Alongside Lauryn Hill and Pras Michel, Wyclef Jean was notoriously a member of the

alternative hip-hop group Fugees, which was highly influential in the 1990s and whose album *The Score* is among the best-selling records of all time (Boucher, 2000). The group's name was an abbreviation of the word refugees, referring to Wyclef Jean and other musicians associated with the group members. Personally, Fugees was my first contact with Wyclef Jean. After the group disbanded to pursue solo endeavors, he went on to release multiple records and to become a prominent advocate for Haiti, funding a charitable foundation to benefit the nation and pledging for international response after the 2010 Haitian earthquake. Wyclef Jean attempted to run for the Haiti's presidency in 2010 before his candidacy was deemed ineligible by the electoral council on the grounds that he was not a resident of the country (Padgett & Desvarieux, 2010). For this thesis, I looked at the second album of his *Carnival* series. Titled *Carnival Vol. II: Memoirs of an Immigrant*, the 2007 project was envisioned as a multicultural album, featuring artists from Jamaica, Colombia, Brazil, Lebanon, India, and other countries, and was released fresh off the success of Shakira and Wyclef Jean's collaboration "Hips Don't Lie" – a global hit that became the highest selling single of 2006.

The third artist my thesis investigates is K'naan, a Somalian-born musician who relocated with his parents and siblings to the United States at the age of 13 and eventually settled in Toronto, Canada, as a refugee. His family was one of artists, and while growing up in Somalia he was influenced by his aunt Magool, a famous Somali singer, and his grandfather, a respected poet, until the civil war erupted. During the conflict, he was chased by gunmen and learned to fire weapons himself (Hannon, 2008). His mom was eventually able to get the paperwork for the family to join their father in the United States, allowing them to get on the last commercial flight before the war closed the airport in 1991. Eight years later, K'naan was invited by a friend to perform at a United Nations anniversary concert, where he presented spoken word poetry that

called attention to failed peacekeeping efforts in Somalia. There, he caught the eye of other musicians and went on to record his own music (Doherty, 2007). My first contact with him happened during his big break in 2010, when his song “Wavin’ Flag” was selected by Coca-Cola as the brand’s promotional anthem for the 2010 World Cup, hosted by South Africa. The song was a hit in Canada when first released in 2008 and reached a wider audience in 2010, when it was rerecorded as a charity single by a group of high-profile Canadian artists including Justin Bieber, Avril Lavigne, and Drake, as part of a campaign to raise funds for Haiti after a massive earthquake hit the country that year. For my thesis, I looked at K’naan’s second studio album *Troubadour*, which was released in 2009 and contains the song “Wavin’ Flag.”

The three artists selected each came from a different continent (Asia, Africa, America) and were housed as refugees in distinct countries (United Kingdom, United States of America, Canada), showcasing a variety of multinational identities. On the musical side, however, it can be argued that they occupy similar places in the industry, being classified as rappers who reached fame and considerable achievements but failed to amass a large following or a lasting audience. Particularly now, when artists arguably have more freedom than they had decades ago, it becomes of interest to note how they might still be constrained by the larger industry. The relevance of a comparative study of their work rests in the ability to showcase further similarities and/or discrepancies and the potential to elucidate where mediated refugees’ experiences fit within the communicational setting of the music industry.

Analyzing Counternarratives as a Method

The present thesis conducts a textual analysis to describe and interpret both contents and functions of the selected texts, namely Wyclef Jean’s 2007 album *Carnival Vol. II: Memoirs of an Immigrant*, K’Naan’s 2009 album *Troubadour*, and M.I.A.’s 2016 album *AIM*. According to

Frey et al. (1999), the qualitative method of textual analysis allows scholars to better investigate the implications associated with messages considering five types of units: meaning, syntactical, referential, character, and physical. My thesis is more concerned with the units of symbolic meaning, which entail referential and thematic units to understand what the topics present in the text are and what they allude to.

The albums' lyrical content was analyzed with the aid of a thematic analysis process, where common themes that can be conceptualized as part of larger categories within the text (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The emerging general themes then assisted in the larger understanding of messages, which, as Hawkins (2017) states, may reflect and challenge political, cultural, historical, and ethical contexts.

To understand symbolic and referential meanings, it is important to be aware of the broader social structures that can influence the text. That is where an extensive review of literature comes into the picture, one that not only situates previous research on representation/self-representation of refugees but provides context on each artist's immigration background. This way, potential connections of the lyrics' themes with lived or shared experiences can be better established and become clearer during the analysis process.

This method is fitting not only for its capacity to provide significant historical and cultural insights over time (Krippendorff, 1980), but it is suitable for this thesis as it allows researchers to rethink the way a refugee is approached. Utilizing a framework of counternarrative, I uncover how, in telling their own story and sharing refugee experiences, these artists can engage in a form of resistance against dominant depictions of refugees. As stated by Mora (2014), the concept of counternarrative has been employed by multiple fields of social science research and its strength resides in the notion that stories from marginalized communities

cannot be adequately told by those in positions of power, but rather that they must be told by the voices of individuals who come from the margin. That way, a counternarrative serves as a tool of empowerment and self-agency as it offers different perspectives and adds complexity to real, lived experiences.

At this point, it is valuable for my thesis to acknowledge and incorporate the communication model of coding and decoding as put forth by Hall (1980). Such a model accounts for the social nature of meaning-making as both communicator and the audience participate in the construction of meaning. If a counternarrative is a resistance to the “reading” of refugees promoted by dominant media messages, the way the artists I analyze negotiate or oppose the intended meaning of these predominant messages is by creating messages of their own. Looking at the gap between the presumption of meanings that can be read as different things from what the communicator intended, the original concept of encoding/decoding and advancements made by other scholars who considered more active roles of the audience were employed in the development of this thesis as they speak to the field of communication.

Looking Ahead: Preview of Chapters and Final Outcomes

Following this introductory chapter, the thesis unfolds in the following chapter breakdown: Chapter II presents an in-depth literature review that deals with contextualizing refugees and their media representation, the mediatic discourse on migration, music and self-expression, political songs inside the industry, the potentialities of rap, and the music of refugees; Chapter III layouts detailed methods used for considering and analyzing the texts, including a conceptualization of communication perspectives, counternarratives, and their potential uses in research; Chapter IV is comprised of the analysis itself; followed by the

discussion of the finding's implications and directions for future research in Chapter IV, which ends with the thesis' concluding remarks.

By considering what existing research has to say about the hegemonic discourses on refugees and by conducting original research on refugees' self-representation in music, this thesis sheds a light on how both outsiders and insiders might be told to understand the refugee experience. In a cacophony of mediatic and often politicized discourses of immigration, the meaning of the word refugee might have gotten lost. As I uncover the meanings available to audiences in news media and entertainment media - and discuss their implications, my thesis makes a key contribution to the field of communication studies as it intersects mass media with refugee studies through the lens of counternarratives and showcases potential efforts to redefine or reclaim what it means to be a refugee.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this section is to elucidate concepts of refugees, the politics governing those who resettle as refugees, the racial aspect of migration, and what it means to be a refugee in the eyes of media. Since this project seeks to analyze how music is an instrument used to create new meanings by the artists who identify as refugees, it is important to look at rap, a genre used by the three musicians in question, to understand why this particular form of expression was found suitable to work out notions of a refugee identity. Lastly, meaningful research on the field of music and migration will be uncovered as it relates to the project at hand.

Contextualizing Refugees

As discussed in Chapter I, the technical and largely officially accepted definition of refugee comes from the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, a 1951 United Nations treaty signed by 145 countries – three quarters of the number of countries recognized by the global organization (Jaeger, 2001). Paraphrasing the treaty, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees defines refugee as someone who was forced to flee their country because of persecution, war, or violence. Refugees are likely unable to return home and have a “well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group” (UNHCR, 2022). If the reasons for fleeing the country of origin and the fears listed by the definition might account for a fraction of the plethora of elements often associated with displaced populations, they are in themselves a lot to unpack, especially considering the history of migration and related studies.

Now seen as an outdated idea, the simple distinction of refugees as political migrants and immigrants as economic migrants is, according to Hein (1993) a problematic dichotomy since political and economic factors are intertwined to a degree to which both are relevant ignitors to

migrant populations. Using global social conflict lens, an updated, more comprehensive perspective is proposed by Hein, acknowledging the interdependence of states on the new globalist sphere and its dynamic political landscape. “Like immigrants, refugees organize migration through social networks, but the composition of their networks and the effects of migration on social identity differ” (Hein, 1993, p. 43), with a highly distinguishable factor being the (technically active) part played by the host nation in the resettling of a refugee.

Although the basic main premise of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees is the principle of non-refoulement, that is, the host nation should not force asylum seekers to return to their country of origin, a series of other rights and responsibilities are spelled out in the document, including rights to public relief and assistance, social security, education, labor, housing, property, and non-discrimination. Bloch (2002) states that there are two types of refugees: quota and spontaneous. Quota refugees arrive in a country in groups as part of an established program and have automatic refugee status, while spontaneous refugees arrive in the country seeking asylum and must wait for their claim to be accepted as legitimate or not (a process during which spontaneous refugees are known as asylum seekers).

Refugees who are found to have a legitimate claim, even those accepted in a quota program, can face many challenges, and not have their rights respected to the full extent of the law. Looking at refugee programs in the 1970s and 1980s, Bloch (2002) found that refugees who were spread across the United Kingdom by the government through a dispersion system had no support services available in the areas to which they were allocated. To those who are not part of a program, the perspective is even more complicated. “The majority of forced migrants come as spontaneous asylum seekers and as a result receive no formal and coordinated assistance” (Bloch, 2002, p. 9).

Migration theories have long tried to explain the causes, factors, and circumstances that make one person leave one place in favor of another. A prominent paradigm in understanding migration is the push-pull factor (Castles and Miller, 1998), where negative elements in one's state such as a weak economy, political turmoil, and persecution constitute push factors that propel the individual to leave, and positive elements in another state such as better employment opportunities and more freedom serve as pull factors, attracting the individual to a different place. In the case of refugees, however, it must be conceded that the pull factor is often forgone in face of major factors that drive citizens out of the country of origin, such as an impending conflict. Nevertheless, a distinction can be made between acute refugees, who migrate upon sudden need and have no time to prepare, and anticipatory refugees, who make a planned move before a conflict or political situation reaches its breaking point (Kunz, 1973). The lack of consideration for historical backgrounds can lead to an incorrect characterization of the latter as a voluntary migrant. That is something more recent scholars point to as a weakness in many theories and models for migration, because they fail to account for the history of the individual, seeing these groups as homogenic masses swayed by socioeconomic factors (Bloch, 2002; Marfleet, 2007).

An alternative approach can be found in migration systems theory (MST), which seeks to be more inclusive by considering multiple levels of factors that explain migrations (Bakewell, 2014). Especially over time, connections are established and reinforced, solidifying flows of migration that become steady. Links that foster migration can be of different natures, such as "political, social, cultural or historical ties, as well as structural homogeneity, geographic contiguity, similarity of migration policies, or common belonging to regional organizations" (Bueno & Prieto-Rosas, 2022, p. 3). Connections may also take the form of imperial-colonial

relations, as seen in many Commonwealth migrants who head to British territory (Bloch, 2002). If MST brings to focus individuals, families, and communities that are linked over space in transnational groups, Bakewell et al. (2012) argues that such a point of view leads to geographical structuring and the clustering of migration pathways. Although widely regarded as a broad, inclusive theory, MST faces criticism by researchers who see the framework as restricting as it limits self-agency and favors the perspective of host nations (Bueno & Prieto-Rosas, 2022).

As argued by Bueno and Prieto-Rosas (2022), not only MST but all the classic theories on migration fail to properly account for forced migration and involuntary displacements in the context of humanitarian crisis. In fact, some scholars go so far as to claim that, due to their lack of connection and frequent generalizations, migration theories will unavoidably be reductionist (Arango, 2002). As they focus largely on trying to explain causes of migration and make disproportionate allegations that do not account for other dimensions, migration theories can face even more challenges than other fields of social sciences. Arango (2002) attributes that complexity to the fact that “its subject matter is hard to define, difficult to measure, extremely multifaceted and multiform, and thus resistant to theory-building” (p. 283).

If a refugee is a unique kind of immigrant, such elements of agency, causal relations and social networks will also have their own particularities, as previously noted in the works of Hein (1993). Looking at data from official migration centers, it is possible to see a broader panorama of refugees, starting with their increase over the years. A 2022 report from the Migration Policy Institute states that “over the last two decades, the forcibly displaced population quintupled from its 20.7 million level in 2000, driven by large flows from Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Myanmar” (Batalova, 2022, p. 7). This rise in the numbers did not happen overnight,

but it also was not a gradual process over the decades. A publication from the United States National Intelligence Council reports that “the number of registered refugees worldwide was essentially stagnant from 1998 to the end of 2012 but shot up by an average of 2 million every year between 2013 and 2017” (National Intelligence Council, 2021, p. 6), which the report also attributes to flows influenced by conflicts and crises in Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan.

Ongoing conflicts remain driving people out of their countries of origin, such as the political and military tensions between Russia and Ukraine. Five months after the Russian invasion in February 2022, it was estimated that roughly 6 million Ukrainians were displaced across Europe, making it one of the largest mass displacements in the world since World War II (Batalova, 2022). Projections expect that not only most of this population will remain displaced abroad, but also that international migration in general is likely to continue rising “because migration drivers, including economic pressures, changing age structures, population growth, rapid urbanization, and environmental stress, are likely to persist and intensify” (National Intelligence Council, 2021, p. 1).

The majority (72%) of refugees and asylum seekers live in neighboring countries (Batalova, 2022). That is also true of overall migrants, the majority of which, as Ravenstein (1885) noted over a century ago, only travel a short distance, relocating to nations that share geographical borders. Interpreting that data along with the previously noted estimative from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2022) that 59% of forcibly displaced people are internally displaced in their countries of origin due to national conflicts, it can be concluded that, if only part of refugees actually leaves their home nations, an even smaller part goes the distance to countries that are not immediate neighbors.

If migration systems theory might be able to shed some light into the networks and ties that make refugees travel far away, it is a tough undertaking to do so without generalizations – which is why a case study approach can be beneficial as it strives to uncover the experienced realities of people.

While the theories here discussed can be useful in making sense of large patterns of migration, it is noticeable that they do not focus on the experiences of refugees themselves. When discussing refugeeism, as important as it might be to consider the perspective of host nations (Bueno & Prieto-Rosas, 2022), it is equally or more important to take into account how refugees see themselves. This thesis adds a new dimension to existing research as it considers multiple perspectives and shift the focus to how refugees present themselves, a perception that is often missing from theories. Next, I move from a macro perspective of refugees and migration to a micro consideration of some of the elements relevant to this project.

From Global to Local

If attempting to explain migration, whether forced or not, through a particular theory can prove challenging amidst the plurality of such phenomena, this thesis aims to find a more fruitful path by focusing on the particularities of the migration faced by the artists who are the subject of this research. Since their artistic expression is often tied to lived experiences, to enlighten the subsequent analysis of the artists' work it is important to consider the immigration policies of host countries and provide a brief history on the migration discourses that have shaped their experiences as refugees. On top of that, an examination of non-white artists such as K'Naan, M.I.A., and Wyclef Jean cannot overlook the aspect of race and its relationship with migration, which is discussed subsequently.

Migration Discourse in Canada

With a large history of accommodating immigrant populations, Canada is often seen as a country that welcomes multiculturalism while at the same time effectively regulates and selects its immigrants. Griffith (2017) states that more than one in every five Canadians residents was born outside the country, becoming residents through a process that values highly skilled workers and still allows for family reunions and refugee settlements. To Griffith, the geographical location of Canada is a major factor that contributes to the nation's efficient control against the intake of massive population flows. That is due to the fact that Canada is largely surrounded by oceans and most of its population lives in the south, where it shares a border with a developed country (Griffith, 2017).

However, a closer look beyond the surface indicates that such a "successful" model might not be so effective in practice. Uncovering the "Canadian Experience" as a selling point of Canada's immigration policies, Sakamoto et al. (2013) discuss the Federal Skilled Worker Program, which evaluates potential immigrants using a points system before granting them residency. The researchers find that the "Canadian Experience" is contradictory, showcasing how mediatic discourses welcome racialized newcomers but at the same time reinscribe privileges of certain populations - an ambivalence that the scholars classify as "democratic racism." Paradoxical discourses are also seen by Sabzalieva et al. (2022), who investigate concepts of the "ideal immigrant" in international student populations that are handpicked to succeed in Canada but are exploited and face discrimination challenges on the industry.

Programs such as Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) were implemented by the government to assist immigrants' integration into Canada, but research shows that this program's curriculum "proliferates inequality between Canadians and newcomers

by fostering an assimilative orientation that subjugates immigrants as problematic Others” (Barker, 2021, p. 75), with immigrants being expected to incorporate dominant Canadian ways. Additionally, the specific construction of refugees as Others has been associated with changing responses and budget cuts of refugee’s assistance in Canada (Olsen et al., 2016).

While immigrants and refugees in Canada face a series of systemic challenges (Simich et al., 2016), they are also encouraged to abandon their own cultural traits. Deconstructing the Canadian discourse of integration, Li (2003) argues that the national approach “endorses a conformity model in assessing immigrants and a monolithic cultural framework that preaches tolerance in the abstract but remains intolerant toward cultural specificities deemed outside the mainstream” (p. 315). Thus, refugees are left with seeking their own cultural-specific support groups, reporting higher social integration and decreased loneliness by connecting with people from the same countries/communities of origin (Stewart et al., 2012).

Migration Discourse in the United Kingdom

The relationship between the British and migration is an ancient one, with communities in the United Kingdom historically demonstrating a large flow of people both inwards and outwards. Over time, the public debate has discussed topics ranging from the perceptiveness of the British who move away to the fear and hostility input on immigrants who arrive in Britain from places such as Ireland, Africa, and the Middle East (Połowska-Kimunguyi, 2022).

A historical review of the discourse concerning immigration in the UK reveals that there was a racialized political concern after Britain encouraged a massive intake of colonial subjects to help rebuild the nation after World War II, with a cabinet committee being tasked with the investigation of checking the immigration of “coloured people” in light of a large number of Indian and Caribbean migrants (Waite, 2022). Thus, Waite asserts that

we need to recognize the emergence of the unofficial hierarchy of immigrants that was established by the British state and in public attitudes more generally. It was clear that the UK desired the ‘right’ type of immigrants, from the white, English-speaking Commonwealth countries like Australia and the United States. (Waite, 2022, p. 4)

Supporting Waite’s claim, a 2020 public opinion survey from The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford found that British people would not only favor skilled laborers but would also prefer immigrants from countries such as Australia over immigrants from Nigeria (Blinder & Richards, 2020). The same report also points to a politicization of the topic, with people who voted for the UK to leave the European Union in 2016 having completely disparate views on immigration than those who voted to remain in the EU. Further discussing Brexit, Zgonjanin (2022) argues that politicians and media deliberately misconstrued the migrant image as a threat, using immigrants as scapegoats and weaponizing the migration discourse to push a “them versus us” rhetoric to the White working class of Britain.

Analyzing British media, Połńska-Kimunguyi (2022) states that refugees are portrayed either as threats to the economy or as victims of circumstances from elsewhere. While missing both refugees’ voices and a contextualization of Britain’s role in conflicts that contribute to refugee flows, the predominant discourse “advances the racialized mix of knowledge and historical amnesia and reproduces the age-old hierarchies of the colonial system.” (p. 1)

Migration Discourse in the United States

Much like the other cases observed, the United States has a long history with migrants and (re)settlers. Over the last decades, the attitude of the U.S. towards refugees has ranged from approval to rejection, from successfully established programs to failed policy efforts, from stories of triumph to fear and perceptions of victimization (Haines, 2012). On the “land of the

free,” largely populated through migration processes, the dangerous migrant is now often a brown-skinned man, while brown-skinned women and children become the dependent migrant (Nawyn, 2019).

On top of a change in immigration policies after the events of September 11, 2001, a mediatic fear was built on terrorists crossing the border to destroy the U.S., with immigration starting to be discussed as a matter of homeland security (Quinsaas, 2014). According to a 2008 report from the Immigration Policy Center, the institutionalized changes had a profound impact on America’s Muslims, Arabs, and South Asians, who, on top of becoming targets of hate and bias crimes after the 9/11 attacks, also were subject to selective enforcement of immigration laws, leading them to become apprehensive of any contact with law enforcement - and sometimes with society in general. To Rodriguez (2008), such national-security-related immigration policies started “exacerbating existing tensions and producing new sets of ethnic and racialized conflicts in the United States.” (p. 379)

Migration has also become a highly political topic, contributing to the polarization of voters. President Donald Trump was notably elected while antagonizing Mexican/Latino immigrants (Martinez-Brawley & Zorita, 2018). The nativist slogan “Build the Wall!” stoked anger by spreading misinformation under a premise of protecting the country and reclaiming “American values” that Graff (2017) argues disguised an attempt to uphold White hegemony and justify imperialistic policies of discrimination.

Investigating the terminology of “refugee crisis,” Nawyn (2019) states that the migration flows in the U.S. are far more predictable than those experienced by the Global South and by neighboring territories of countries such as Syria and Venezuela. So, while the author points out that crisis language promotes a xenophobic and racist fear of refugees, the “crisis” in the U.S.

has less to do with an uncontrollable flow of migration and more to do with politicians being unwilling to act and allocate funds towards protection and integration of immigrants.

After Trump's administration rolled back refugee programs, President Joe Biden signed an executive order in 2021 to "restore the U.S. as the world's haven" (Santana, 2023), calling for support from private initiatives. More recently, the U.S. Department of State announced that citizens would be able to sponsor refugees directly through a federal initiative called the Welcome Corps, which is modeled after a Canadian program (Gunderson, 2023).

Race and Migration

As seen above, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States all have racial-ethnic aspects intersecting their migration discourse. As a multifaceted phenomenon, migration runs through a series of different factors that influence how it ultimately comes to fruition. When it comes to the refugee experience, race is one of the main elements that come into play and affect immigration. If, on the one hand, migration can be shaped by race, religion, geography, professional development, and cultural and familiar ties, race itself can have different scientific, religious, and political interpretations. Much research has addressed race and other topics in this literature review, but for the purpose of this thesis I focus on the intersection of such topics with migration discourses and how that might aid in understanding refugees' representations of self.

A common way of understanding race is seeing it as a social construct, a variable that is shaped by larger societal forces and manifests very tangible elements as a consequence of that. Discussing different perspectives on racial formation, Omi and Winant (2014) explain how, in the United States, the "one drop rule" has socially categorized anyone who has Black ancestors as Black, while in Latin American countries such as Brazil, race is a less rigid concept and is more based on appearance, allowing for Black descendants to be categorized as White so long as

they “pass” for it. The framework of racial formation sees race as socially, economic, and politically constructed, a process that is shaped by groups and institutions, ultimately operating both in a level of individual identity and collective structure. While Omi and Winant (2014) try to break away from traditional paradigms of race based in categories of ethnicity, class, and nation, the latter can be useful in a transnational perspective as they mention, for example, that the United States historically identifies itself as white, and U.S. nationalism is still associated with whiteness. As ideas of race and nation intersect, a concept of peoplehood emerges, and racialized Others not only are then united in oppression, but also in resistance. Through racial formation perspective, race is used by society as a social marker as certain traits are intrinsically associated with them, and people ascribe common roles or expectations based on race. Omi and Winant (2014) state that “temperament, sexuality, intelligence, athletic ability, aesthetic preferences and so on are presumed to be fixed and discernible from the palpable mark of race” (p. 7).

As noted by Waite (2022), there is a hierarchy of “preferred” immigrants and refugees, and beyond England each culture has its own preferences. In the U.S., a system of racial stereotypes and perceived meanings feeds into a racial ideology (Omi & Winant, 2014), and the perception of White as “pure” and any racial intermixture as “nonwhite” is something that will summarily affect perceptions of immigrants and refugees. Commenting on the immigration discourse in the US, Akhame (2020) writes that “historically, the United States has treated some immigrant groups as ‘undesirable,’ subjecting them to xenophobia and racism while welcoming other ‘desirable’ groups of immigrants with open arms” (para. 3). This kind of treatment can have lasting consequences. For example, a study of Southeast Asian refugees in Canada found

that refugees who reported having experienced racial discrimination showed higher levels of depression than other refugees (Noh et al., 1999).

Investigating the migration “crisis” in Europe, De Genova (2017) points to a complex relation of the continent with race, finding a pattern of racial denial and a refusal to confront questions of race through seemingly race-neutral terms such as “foreigners,” “Muslims,” or “refugees.” However, a juxtaposition between those terms and the concept of European whiteness reveals contradictions and inequalities, as “the production of ‘Europe’ through the refortification of borders has become synonymous with the utter disposability of black and brown lives” (De Genova, 2017, p. 1779).

Othering

At this point, the discourse constructed around refugees can draw on old and new shapes of discriminatory rhetoric, sometimes being outright racist, anti-Semitic, and xenophobic, according to Krzyżanowski et al. (2018). These authors argue that the characterization of migration flows as a crisis is stigmatizing and unnecessarily alarming, as it becomes ideologically charged in legitimizing policies and discourses that fuel xeno-racist scapegoating and discrimination. With such antagonistic constructions, it becomes necessary to address the concept of Othering, a recurrent term in critical analysis of migration discourses.

The process of forming one’s identity involves how the individual sees themselves and how others perceive them. Because identity-making is so often associated with comparison and differentiation (Dominelli, 2002), those differences used to distinguish one individual or group from another can swiftly transform into opposition and the perception of one characteristic being more desirable than another, as well as a social polarity of inferior-superior.

Building on identity formation theory, I arrive at the concept of Othering, which Jensen (2011) defines as “a discursive processes by which powerful groups, who may or may not make up a numerical majority, define subordinate groups into existence in a reductionist way which ascribe problematic and/or inferior characteristics to these subordinate groups” (p.65). Especially through a European lens, Othering has been a process historically applied to the so-called Orientalism of subjects from Asia and particularly South Asia (Jensen, 2011). The influential work of Edward Said (1979) conceptualizes Orientalism as an institutionalized treatment of the Orient by Western powers that dominate, restructure, and rule over it. In turn, Velho and Thomas-Olalde (2011) state that the racialized other is subject to regular experiences of “exotism, admiration, integration, culturalisation, biologizing, contempt, marginalisation, exclusion, deportation, violence and extinction” (p.38). Such views of exotica and fascination can often clash with views of poverty and inferiority, objectifying the racial Other.

Highlighting differences can aid in the distancing of particular groups from the larger society. Analyzing North-American media representations of migration, Quinsaet (2014) describes the “Immigrant-as-Other” (IAO) frame, which occurs when immigrants are portrayed as unable to assimilate the United States culture due to their original culture being perceived as “diametrically opposed” to the one in the US, in lots of cases painting their countries of origin as remote places untouched by civilization and linked to “provincial Third World roots” (p. 590). Informed with a better understanding of Othering and its occurrences, a broader look at mediatic portrayals of refugees is provided up next.

Refugees in the Media

Regardless of where they come from or the politics in place at their destination, refugees have historically been silenced in the decision-making arena, in academia, and in the media

(Marfleet, 2007). Although there is research showcasing a rise in efforts for more inclusive and positive approaches to the subject by news media, there is still a long way to go in order to achieve something closer to social justice and fair representation of refugees.

Depictions of forced migration have been around since the dawn of literature and art, and can be traced back to early Christian iconography, with Adam and Eve being expelled from the Garden of Eden (Wright, 2002), a subject painted by Masaccio in “The Expulsion from Paradise” (c. 1425–1428). In the painting, the couple is portrayed with no possessions on them – not even clothes – and they display facial expressions that can be read as despair and shame, not unlike more contemporary portrayals. In a visual politics study conducted by Hansen et al. (2021), “tragedy” emerged as the key term adopted by the European Union to justify its border policies around 2014.

While the fictional representations of refugees on the big screen can often be placed in the subgenre of “road movies,” since cinema narratives will usually focus on the journey of getting from Point A to Point B (Wright, 2002), the iconization of real refugee figures can become representative of a larger social issue. Binder and Jaworsky (2018) mention the example of Alan Kurdi, a 2-year-old Syrian boy whose body was photographed lying face down, alone, on the sands of a Turkish beach, an image that became a viral symbol of the urgency of Europe's “refugee crisis” and transcended the borders of its particular context (Gunter, 2015).

Building upon the research of media images, an Australian study has found that newspapers would showcase refugees as large swarms of people with a focus on boat-related images (Bleiker et al., 2013). The authors argue that such focus would contribute to a dehumanization of subjects, and since the majority of images would not feature recognizable, individual faces, the matter of refugees was not presented to the audience as a humanitarian

question, but rather as a threat to the host nation's security and control. The findings are supported by a comparative study by Parker (2015), who found that Australian print news media would build refugee coverage around themes of border protection and keeping people from entering the country.

The politics of fear are not new and can be observed in more recent developments when looking at the Covid-19 pandemic. While highlighting the ways refugees constituted one of the populations with the most need for assistance and protection during the pandemic, leading medical journal *The Lancet* (2021) argues that refugees were actually blamed for spreading the virus, adding to the social stigma casted upon them.

Considering views outside of traditional news media in the English language, findings are not that different. A study looking at Islamophobia and refugee representation in Serbian newspapers found that instances of marginalization were still present, and, furthermore, that journalists faced political interference – which was observed by an accusation made from the Prime Minister that investigative media channels were working with foreign governments to promote internal turmoil in the country (Perovic, 2016). The study argues that journalism is in the grip of a volatile media economy, where opportunism and political bias dictate the news agenda, something that allows the proliferation of stereotypes, hate-speech occurrences and social exclusion of refugees and migrants. It concedes, however, that there have been “inspiring examples of careful, sensitive and ethical journalism” (p. 28) that showed empathy for its subjects.

As perhaps the most prominent catalyst of the discussion of migration in the last decade, the case of Syrian refugees has prompted a lot of research that has reached different – sometimes conflicting - findings. Pointing at more promising developments of refugee representation,

studies looking at portrayals of Syrian refugees in different countries were able to find favorable results. A content analysis of more than a thousand Turkish news articles from major agencies found that while the three main themes found were refugee policy, illegal crossings, and refugee as victim, the last one was the most salient (Sunata & Yıldız, 2018). With a large portion of the news focusing on humanitarian aid, the study concluded that the media assessed the refugees in human terms. The results are particularly relevant considering that, as a neighboring country, Turkey hosts 64.7% of the Syrian refugees.

In the United Kingdom, favorable representation was found in articles by *The Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, *The Mirror* and *The Sun* as they emphasized the vulnerability of Syrian refugees and highlighted a moral obligation of the English in helping Syrians, giving space to individual accounts of refugees (Venir, 2016). The same study, however, found an issue of “childification” of the refugee persona along with a dichotomy of worthy versus unworthy, as Syrians were portrayed as innocent, genuine refugees as opposed to “opportunist” migrants. An analysis of a different newspaper, *The Times*, found that while frames of human interest and administration were not uncommon, the frames used most frequently were the ones of criminality, which “portrayed refugees and asylum seekers as criminals and threats to public safety, as well as the border security frame, which presented the influx of refugees and asylum seekers as an uncontrollable mass ‘flooding’ into Europe” (Braxton, 2021, p. 2). News vehicles themselves engaged in the use of metaphors that not only attempted to describe the entry of refugees but also discursively constructed their presence as a burden inflicted on the host countries, as seen in Abid et al. (2017). The three authors from Iraq, Malaysia, and Oman argue that “media systematically discriminate these minority groups and deem them as a security, economic and hygiene threat to the majority groups” (p. 121).

Beyond print news media, diverse media channels open new avenues of representation. Video games, for example, can use technology to simulate the variety of factors that would make a refugee leave their home country. Sou (2018) argues that, by partially emulating refugee trajectories and providing context to their journeys, serious video games can challenge classic portrayals of refugees as they encourage players' critical reflection on the complexity of the refugee experience. On less interactive mediums, however, limited readings can be prioritized. Using a synthetic discursive psychological approach, Hanson-Easey et al. (2014) analyzed how Sudan refugees were discussed in talk radio. Their findings show that speakers attribute inherently tribal qualities to refugees, characterizing them as possessing shared traits of violence. This links culture to behavior, which the authors argue would ideologically contribute to the rationalization of racism.

Refugees' Representations of Self in Media

If the portrayals conceived by the news media can be damaging and constricting, often Othering refugee populations, perchance the ways refugees themselves engage with media channels to express their voices can showcase a clearer picture of their experiences. Before looking at music as an opportunity of self-expression, it is important to understand how refugees' use of media shapes their self-representation – and vice-versa.

Broadly, the use of media can be defined as the intentional or unintentional use of media channels, devices, content, or platforms, including but not limited to television, internet, smartphones, computers, social networks, gaming consoles, and news (Valkenburg & Oliver, 2019). Social media can be a particularly powerful tool as they allow refugees to share their own stories, documenting them and broadcasting them in real time. With the assistance of activist groups, refugees detained at an Australian offshore immigration center were able to use

Facebook posts to draw attention to violations of human rights and reach a wider audience as their stories got picked up by mainstream media (Rae et al., 2017). This so called “self-represented witnessing” has its limitations, as it only goes so far when it comes to enacting effective policy changes.

Progressively, the development of new technological tools has sparked the interest of researchers and organizations that investigate how such technology might empower underrepresented populations. That is the case of ‘self-sovereign identity’ (SSI) which refers to “user-controlled, decentralized forms of digital identification [that are] closely linked with the distributed ledger technology blockchain” (Cheesman, 2020, p. 134). While technically SSI would give refugees more control over their own biometrical information and general data, Cheesman’s (2009) ethnographic study points out to challenges involving global governance, digital literacy, and economic interests clashing with humanitarian efforts.

On top of that, there is the potential of self-representation acts being corrupted by external media outlets. Chouliaraki (2017) argues that, while refugee selfies have the capacity of acting as an ethical-political statement, they are subject to “symbolic bordering,” a process where the mainstream news media marginalizes and displaces their online testimonies within the Western news cycle. If on the one hand the refugee selfies produce agency and the images themselves are a way to avoid co-optation in damaging media narratives (Risam, 2018), such narratives can contribute to the silence of refugee populations in the first place, as asylum seekers show reluctance to speak up and, when they do, often shape their stories to comply with expectations in order to belong (Hetz, 2022).

Looking at self-identities, Bareka et al. (2019) suggest the concept of embodied political self, where the self is referred to as “an active agent, with a sense of physical cohesion and a

sense of belonging to the wider social and political environment” (p. 80). According to the researchers, social exclusion affects the embodied political self of refugees, especially children.

Outside of the digital landscape, however, there are also favorable studies indicating the role of artmaking in helping refugees - in particular those at a young age - to find and use their voices. Wellman and Bey (2015) argue that visual arts provide constructive platforms for refugee students to cope with the challenges of transitioning to another environment during adolescence. Additionally, the resulting art encourages self-advocacy and cultural preservation as citizens from the host nation can learn about refugee experiences through the pieces.

Music and Self-Expression

When looking at the question of using an artform to express one’s identity, few artistic avenues are as significant as music. Frith (1996), in a crucial exploration of music and identity, argues that both concepts are intertwined to a degree where people instinctively know what kind of music appeals to them and what kind does not, without being able to explain it.

Going against a traditional idea of homology, where music is strictly or directly symbolic of a social experience, Frith (1996) proposes that music is in itself an experience through which society can express ideas and discuss values. While a homologist vision can be reductive as it would see the art form as a product of a social scenario, Frith’s vision places music in a multilayered process, with functions that go beyond a mere cultural expression.

Music, like identity, is both performance and story, describes the social in the individual and the individual in the social, the mind in the body and the body in the mind; identity, like music, is a matter of both ethics and aesthetics (Frith, 1996, p. 109).

Indeed, research has pointed to music affecting cognition, behavior, and emotion, reaching different spheres of the self and the collective (Rentfrow, 2012; Robillard, 2012). While

the functions of music are broad, including being used to regulate emotion, build social connections, and as a self-expression tool, it can also be employed to position people in relation to time, place, values, attitudes, and other people (Ruud, 1997). This social aspect is further developed by Tekman and Hortaçsu (2002), who utilize social identity theory to explore how people will hold higher esteem for the kind of music they like and, in turn, will better evaluate people who listen to similar types of music. Related to the concept of agency previously discussed on refugees' self-representation, music is a multilayered psychosocial resource used to obtain a more acute sense of agency, to perform identity, and to negotiate relationships, supporting the very process of identity-building in teenagers (Saarikallio, 2019).

Theoretically, this thesis draws upon an understanding of music from an ethnomusicology perspective, considering music as a social process with meanings to both practitioners and the audience. From broadly comprehensive origins, music is not only sound, but a system of ideas that assists in understanding a culture from both insider and outsider's perspectives (Nettl, 2005).

Multiple elements contribute to the creation of a person's musical identity, ranging from demographical aspects of age, gender, and general musical preferences, to "cultural, ethnic, religious and national contexts in which people live" (Folkestad, 2002). The aspect of place and belonging, then, seems to be deeply connected with a musical identity – which becomes a relevant point for discussing refugees and music. Discussing the formation of a national musical identity, Folkestad (2002) points to how diversity and multiculturalism have been on the rise, benefitting from factors that include technological advances, globalization, the travel industry, and migration as a whole. With different genres, styles, and influences becoming more easily accessible, it is important to consider how a national identity could endure when the mainstream

consumers of music industry seem to be more interested in global charts than on a specific “national music” (Folkestad, 2002).

While the relationship between music and place of origin will be further discussed later in this chapter, it is important to address another aspect of music: the debate on whether it has the potential to empower marginalized individuals, groups, and topics. A skeptical view is found in McLean et al. (2010), who argue that, while it might seem that technology has provided new platforms for traditionally underrepresented artists to defy the record label system, ultimately the industry’s economic power, scrutiny, and control will subject those artists to surrender to the hegemonic state. Hence, the clash between corporate interests and independent musicians seems to be linked to questions of ownership, commercial force, music communities, and the commodification of art within a capitalist system.

Different perspectives on the issue, however, point to more optimistic scenarios. Vizcaíno-Verdú and Aguaded (2022) recently considered the role of new platforms such as TikTok in the utilization of music frameworks to promote activism and challenge discrimination. The researchers found that, even if operating inside the capitalist machine, users were able to use the platform as a music venue where there was “performance work that addresses issues of gender, sexual orientation, racial discrimination, and other types of current hate speech” (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Aguaded, 2022, p. 157). The relationship between music and TikTok goes a step further, with research showcasing how the platform was responsible for providing traction to new songs and artists who ended up making a splash on musical charts outside the app (Toscher, 2021). This becomes relevant considering that the video-based social media network replaced search-engine Google as the world’s most popular web domain in 2021, suggesting people are engaging with media and finding information in new ways (Aten, 2021).

Music and Politics

When discussing the function of music as a tool for empowerment, it would be amiss not to address how music can become political as it raises issues and voices of communities who are often marginalized because of policies (or the lack of them). From condemning war and intolerance to critiquing hypocrisy and calling out repression in supposedly democratic societies, protest music has assumed many shapes and forms throughout the years, finding new ways to evolve and persist (Rosenstone, 1969).

In the nineteenth century, African American music already assumed forms of protest. Looking at the intricate relationship between theology and protest songs, Spencer (1991) states that spiritual music is the prototypical musical manifestation of Black religion, which is relevant considering that the Black church evolved essentially from Black rebellion. Then, spirituals communicated emotional and sacred urges from slaves, ranging from sorrow songs that were full of grief, such as “O Rocks, Don’t Fall on Me,” to jubilee songs that were more optimistic and conveyed messages of liberation, such as “Roll, Jordan, Roll” (Peretti, 2013). While Peretti describes the existence of coded songs in which slaves mocked white masters, he also states that their agency became obscured by the white observer. Once thousands escaped slavery with the aid of the Underground Railroad organization, white abolitionists portrayed slaves through a sentimental lens, “describing them as powerless victims. This tendency obscured the variety and richness of slave music, at least until the Civil War opened up rural black life to more observation” (Peretti, 2013, p. 9). Early protest songs documented slavery from within, becoming a type of antislavery hymnody, which Spencer (1991) connects as directly influential to gospel, to civil rights songs and to early Blues.

The Civil Rights Movement in the United States is a crucial time for protest music, with prominent artists such as Nina Simone, Sam Cooke, James Brown, and Bob Dylan championing the abolishment of racial segregation. Defining Dylan as an “American tragedian,” Jones (2013) places him alongside the lines of Socrates and Bertrand Russel as a philosopher who found, in describing the pain and lament of a society, a way of taking a stance – even if he doubted that consistent change would actually happen.

Globally, music has played a central role in many social revolutions and uprisings. Byerly (2013) chronicles a history of politically revolutionary music, mentioning how Beethoven’s compositions contained political commentary; how songs became anthems unifying rebels during the American Revolution of 1776, the French Revolution of 1789, the 1917 Russian Revolution, the Chinese Revolution of 1949, and the Cuban Revolution of 1959; and subsequently how counter-culture with a less organized agenda from anti-establishment bands such as the Sex Pistols and the Ramones would become harbingers of “popcorn-protests.” To the author, music appeals to a natural force that Plato used to warn governments about thousands of years ago:

Revolutionaries know the power of music, and rulers fear the influence of music. Music is a double-edged sword, holding both influence for protesters with dire grievances, and menace for those against whom the grievances are held. Music arms and strengthens revolutionaries, and it confounds and weakens rulers. (Byerly, 2013, p. 230)

In more recent geopolitical conflicts, music is still a powerful tool for either commentary or a call to action. On both Iraqi and Syrian civil conflicts, metal music has been a source of empowerment and also an accessory of war (Grant, 2017). Building upon Byerly’s (2013) argument, metal music and its more aggressive subgenres of thrash metal and death metal have

been used as an outlet of anger and a cathartic coping mechanism by fans while also being employed in torture sessions by the military (Grant, 2017).

Investigating protest music under rhetorical dimensions, Knupp (1981) conducted a content analysis of anti-war songs from 1960 and concluded that the majority of them appealed to an in-group sentiment that fostered solidarity. The findings suggest that the songs have a simplistic world view, serving more expressive purposes to react negatively to unwanted circumstances than to enact a desired change. Friedman (2013) concedes that, while a song does not have to be “successful” in promoting change, the protest song as a medium is already part of modern socio-politics. That way, their relevance is beyond whether it achieves practical effects: “The far more lasting significance of the musical canon of protest music is what it reveals about the human condition in the modern world of mass mobilization, mass politics, and mass media” (Friedman, 2013, p. xvii).

The Potentialities of Rap

Among the most researched genres in the axis of music / expression / rebellion, rap is often seen, along with rock and roll music, as a defiant music by nature (Carpentier et al., 2003). If so far this review of literature has, with a few exceptions, tried to shy away from looking at particular genres in order to understand music as a global phenomenon, a more careful examination of rap becomes necessary before it can move on to the final topic of refugees’ music. Being a genre in which all three artists studied by this project often find themselves in, rap music has specific particularities that contribute to making it a compelling vessel for refugee’s messages. Before exploring those potentialities, a history of rap must be presented in order to enlighten historical and social aspects that play a role into transforming the genre into what it is today.

A Genealogy of Rap

Locating rap as analog to the development of African American identity, Richardson (2006) argues that the linguistic component cannot be separated from the sociocultural discourse. From fieldwork songs of the enslavement era to the development of spiritual gospels, rhythm & blues, jazz, funk, and eventually rap, all of these practices were informed by the African American relationship with language and discourse-making.

Like “traditional” African American language data, Hiphop discourse tells us a lot about socioeconomic stratification and the struggle between culture and capital. Hiphop discourse, like previous Afro-American expressive forms, is a Black creative response to absence and desire and a site of epistemological development. Though it is often seen as mere corporate orchestration, Hiphop is a site of identity negotiation. (Richardson, 2006, p. 9)

This identity negotiation feature makes rap an especially effective tool for refugees, and more particularly Black refugees, as they transmute the form to upset and challenge reality based on lived experiences. As Richardson (2006) writes, rap artists “are constantly inventing, (dis) inventing, redefining and reconstructing language to meet their needs and goals, and thus constantly engaged in the discursive (dis)invention of identity and the (dis)invention of language” (p. 21). The Hiphop discourse is placed opposed from Anglo-American traditions of language identity, as it promotes a space for African American, Caribbean English, Spanish, and other languages to come together and move and confront how identities from those languages are framed.

In one of the first comprehensive studies looking at Hiphop manifestations around the globe, Mitchell (2001) argues in *Global noise: Rap and hip-hop outside the USA* that rap and

Hiphop “cannot be viewed simply as an expression of African American culture; [as] it has become a vehicle for global youth affiliations and a tool for reworking local identity all over the world” (p.2). In fact, while the origins of rap in New York during the 1970s cannot be denied, the genre has multiples roots from different geographical and ethnic backgrounds, with a particular circular syncretism between the United States and the Jamaican dancehall being observed. Richardson (2006) also acknowledges a crosscultural inception as rap and its Jamaican counterpart share many similarities, including precolonial oral traditions and linguistic traits. Historically, however, Hiphop has been a resistance language. Even if the African American, Latino, and Caribbean youth of MCs and DJs who contributed to the birth of rap in the U.S. were located in New York, discursively a land of plenty, they were in the poorest neighborhoods of a city that was nearly bankrupt, which contributed to Hiphop culture becoming a sort of response to a political ideology of abandonment of inner-city groups (Richardson, 2006). This same politics of abandonment can be witnessed in the case of many refugee populations who are organized as inner-city communities, making rap a particularly suitable vehicle of expression and resistance.

In an important contribution to the field of social studies, Kelley (1997) stresses that Hiphop culture is more than a response or a product of oppression. For him, Hiphop has been not only a site of playful (dis)inventions, but also a relevant source of income. Fostering an entire underground economy, Hiphop culture has historically provided jobs for working class Black youth and Latinos in deindustrializing cities, from the performing musicians themselves to the support of their craft through advertising, recording and performing logistics, technical apparatus, and even the catering of shows (Kelley, 1997).

The fact that until recently little academic attention has been devoted to global expressions of rap can be frustrating, especially when Mitchell (2001) argues that rap conventions have become more repetitive. While there is a tendency among scholars to look at U.S. rap as intrinsically emancipatory, over the years rap rhetoric started to make way for misogyny, misery, and male sexual dominance, indicating that the emergence of a revitalized underground would need to happen (Mitchell, 2001). More recent readings suggest that such revitalization might be occurring among contemporary rappers using the genre to challenge questions of gender, such as Hall's (2020) Afrafuturist discussion of citizenship in female rappers and Lobdell's (2022) analysis of progressive masculinity in queer artists.

Tracing global accounts of rap music in Japan, Italy, India, Germany, Algeria, England, France, and Latin American countries such as Colombia, Brazil, Chile, and Cuba, Mitchell (2001) cautions against colonialist views of rap as a U.S. *owned* musical subculture. While many examples of Hip-hop occurrences outside the United States have initially mimicked it, a process of negotiation always occurs, with rap addressing local elements and promoting transnational fusions, bringing a sense of innovation to sometimes tired tropes of the genre. "In most countries where rap has taken root, hip-hop scenes have rapidly developed from an adoption to an adaptation of U.S. musical forms and idioms. This has involved an increasing syncretism and incorporation of local linguistic and musical features" (Mitchell, 2001, p. 11). As a process of indigenization shifts the musical landscape, Potter (2006) agrees that Hip-hop can no longer be conceptualized as just a New York product or even as a largely United States manifestation. Considering that rap has always drawn from the local population ever since its multicultural origins in the Bronx, the multi-ethnic expressions observed in different countries that often continue to reflect migrant diasporic communities challenges the assumptions that this is an

exotic and derivative extension of an African American format and that it should be assessed in terms of U.S. norms and standards (Mitchell, 2001). In essence, rap presents a structural skeleton of resistance upon which the specifics of one's local experience can be fleshed out.

Rap as an Empowerment Tool

Hiphop echoes the social, economic, civic, and cultural conditions and realities of global youth (Alridge & Stewart, 2005) being historically a language of resistance. Discussing the role of Hiphop in postmodernity, Potter (2006) writes about concerns that the same cultural industry that removed some of the rebellion out of rock and roll is doing the same to rap, making it harder to locate friction points between mainstream rap and the bourgeois masses. The author states that there are hazards for rap in becoming the most popular music in the world and that it is risky to strive for recognition while seemingly rejecting it – he mentions Ice Cube's famed saying of "Fuck the Grammys" as an example (Potter, 2006, p. 65). Notably, with time, rap has become more celebrated in popular culture, gracing the coveted Halftime Show at the 2022 Super Bowl with a Compton tribute featuring artists such as Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, and Kendrick Lamar, and with a special performance at the Grammys broadcast in 2023 celebrating 50 years of Hiphop. But even if the stage featured dozens of performing artists from past decades, the relationship of music's biggest award with Hiphop has been nothing short of contentious (Gee, 2023). Regardless of the level of critical recognition, Potter (2006) writes that "the most vital and substantial dimension of the politics of hip-hop has always been underground, in its collective verbal, vernacular political sensibility" (p. 66).

While comparisons to the rebellious sense of rock are plenty, Morgan (2001) argues that unlike other genres, rap engages in the appropriation and co-authorship of young urban communities. "In the process, what has taken place is a new form of youth socialization that

explicitly addresses racism, sexism, capitalism, and morality in ways that simultaneously expose, exploit, and critique these practices” (Morgan, 2001, p. 190). As issues of injustice, responsibility, and representation become institutionalized in rap, the audience part of the community engages in corroboration and cooperation.

There are a variety of modalities of rap, including old school, gangster, social and political consciousness, smooth, hardcore, and others (Morgan, 2001). While there is a wide appeal to “keeping it real,” sometimes artists draw on the adoption of personas, constructing their images based on social roles/characters. Investigating gangsta rap and a sense of self, Chidester (2014) suggests that a concept of authentic inauthenticity might be manifested as listeners understand that the persona presented by the artist might not be utterly accurate, but that it is part of a narrative artifice. While gangsta rap, for example, is not always discussing real experienced circumstances, it still represents a way for Black and Brown working-class youth to construct their identities, crafting personas and expressing frustrations with the system, poverty, crime, repressive law enforcement, and lack of jobs (Kelley, 2008).

Individuals can appropriate rap music for means of personal and communitarian growth, serving as a tool of empowerment that assists in the articulation of social identities in the context of a community (Travis et al., 2016). Among the prosocial uses of rap, the discussion of mental health conditions has been pointed out as a theme that has received increased attention in the genre (see Kresovich et al., 2021). Additionally, Travis (2013) indicates that even within commercially available music, rap possesses developmental narratives that are useful in therapeutic self-expression, noting that by voicing perceived realities, Hip-hop “empowerment persists in various reinventions of the culture within the United States and worldwide” (p. 193). As Richardson (2006) notes, the discursive paradigm has shifted from the survival and continuity

of a particular group to the differences and disruptions accentuated by globalization, bringing certain visibility to diasporic complexities.

Refugees and Music

While it is not easy to find studies investigating the self-representation or refugees through music – which warrants the realization of this research – a number of studies look at the general relationship between refugees and music. Lidskog (2016) offers a comprehensive examination of the maintenance and transformation of ethnic identities through music in diasporic situations. They observe that, while music is used to reinforce the identity and consistency of a group, it tends to incorporate new elements when expressed in a different context rather than primarily preserving the cultural identity from the home country. “These transnational flows – both in the home country and in the diasporic communities – mean that music is not only spread but also makes an imprint and has an influence that destabilizes and develops cultural identity” (Lidskog, 2016, p 31).

Other studies have looked at particular roles in which music can play in supporting socialization dimensions, with Lenette and Sunderland (2016) defining music as a key sociocultural determinant of health for asylum seekers and refugees. Not only can music be used as a form of therapy to assist refugees in coping with trauma (Orth, 2005), music practices have demonstrated positive impacts on refugees’ well-being, “enabling the development of emotional expression, improved social relations, self-knowledge and positive self-identification, and a sense of agency” (Millar & Warwick, 2019, p. 67).

With multiple studies investigating the application of music in the education of refugee youth, research has found that immigrant children engage in complex processes of ascribing meaning to the music of their home country and of negotiating this music within their new

context (Karlsen, 2013). Through musical activities that allow for cultural preservation, cross-cultural transmission, as well as verbal and non-verbal communication, Marsh (2012) observes “the development of interpersonal connections, social cohesion, and student empowerment through varied learning, teaching, and performance opportunities” (p. 93).

As digital communication supports the interconnectivity of refugees between their place of origin, their host nation, and a global community, the creation of trans-local cultures is made possible with more ease (Wilding, 2012). Refugees can, through music, build a collective consciousness by telling stories and narrating shared experiences, thus contributing to the negotiation of a collective identity and the promotion of historical remembrance (Lidskog, 2016). Furthermore, Millar and Warwick (2019) write that, amidst the uncertainty of the asylum-seeking process, music “can not only help process the past, and enliven the present, but brighten projections of the future” (p. 77).

Contrasted with other forms of media, music has a particular edge considering its reach, length, and accessibility. When narrating refugee experiences, music can go beyond the traditional “road movie” ethos seen in films (Wright, 2002) and represent a window into what happens next, moving past the initial journey and documenting the emotions associated with the resettlement process.

The ability to record music and easily broadcast it has promoted a change in the flux of influences. Investigating trans-cultural immigrant music in Europe, Miles (2017) notes that, while music made by immigrants is often performed for the fellow immigrant community, the “exchange of recordings between home and immigrant communities opens further avenues of communication, and recorded music flows from immigrant to home cultures, often as much as in the opposite direction” (p. 231).

Among the work of particular refugee musicians, some research has focused specifically on Wyclef Jean, M.I.A., and K'naan. While the current project is the first study of its kind to promote a comparative analysis of their take on refugee experiences, it is useful to consider what previous research has to say about them.

Evidently the least researched of the three artists, K'naan has work that has been studied as an example of using transnational genres, such as the epic, to communicate the refugee experience through a language which Western audiences might be more familiar with (Sobral, 2013). As a testimonial vehicle that allows for transcultural identification, K'naan's first studio album, *The Dusty Foot Philosopher*, merges his own African American cultural heritage with the epic genre, narrating his story through a rap album that encompasses the stages of destruction; confinement; action and commitment; journey to the underworld; and an epilogue on the endless journey.

Examining self-branding practices of politically engaged rappers, Friend (2018) notes how K'naan promotes the label of African poet and displays social awareness but argues that the modality of transmission of his political work (which include charity singles and partnerships with corporate brands for global celebrations) limits the messages' impact as the attention is geared to the rapper's personal brand instead of the causes being supported. A focus group study conducted by Glanville (2018) used a K'naan music video as a subject of workshop discussions including both refugees and citizens. While the framing of refugees as victims was salient, group participants who were refugees found depictions of suffering to be useful and powerful given that, in their experiences, the topic of refugees had been met with growing indifference and antipathy in Canada.

Studies on M.I.A., on the other hand, have investigated the ways the artist uses her transnationalism to define her global image and to position her work as disruptive of refugee contexts as it plays with time and space (Bui, 2021). Looking at the cultural politics of difference in M.I.A.'s work, Saha (2012) argues that M.I.A.'s proficiency rests in the capacity to blend hip-hop beats and playful dance sounds with lyrics that will not always address political issues openly, containing instead subtle hints that a casual radio listener or club-goer might let go unnoticed. Saha (2012) also states that M.I.A. is the rare kind of artist who was able to transcend the normative constraints of the musical niche of artists with Asian heritage as she managed to cross over to the Western pop culture without sacrificing the political statements in her art.

In a study about how M.I.A.'s globalized identity and political activism are an ideal site for analyzing discourses of state power and terrorism, Creech (2014) mentions that she uses Hip-hop "as a cultural form to critique state-sponsored violence while attempting to give rhetorical visibility to marginalized individuals within an international context" (Creech, 2014, p. 268). This is an important dimension for the current project as the perspective of refugees is analyzed as it appears on the work of three different artists who have the potential to bring visibility to those causes. On top of transnationalism, a feminist framework has been used by scholars such as Weems (2014), who argues that M.I.A. resists binary mediatic constructions, rearticulating her position as an outsider to challenge racialized girlhood and multinational citizenship. The researcher writes that M.I.A. "represents a new generation of youth-produced popular media that reflects the kind of fluid ethno-scapes made possible by the transnational migration of cultural, informatic, ideological, technological, and financial forms of currency and recognition" (p. 118).

Wyclef Jean has been studied prominently as an ambassador for Haiti, both through his music and his political aspirations. Critical analysis such as the one by Jean-Charles (2014) note Wyclef's mediatic presence has shaped Haitian American identity, with a before-Wyclef / after-Wyclef dichotomy transforming Haitian into something to be proud of. To Jean-Charles (2014), however, such resignification must be placed amongst broader social-historical contexts. He also argues that Wyclef emblemizes a so-called "myth of diaspora exceptionalism – the idea that the *jaspora* is exclusively positioned to transform the image of Haiti from degradation to idealization" (p. 835). While the concept of diaspora exceptionalism places onto Haiti a stamp of uniqueness, the author stresses the danger of both processes of degradation and idealization, as such discourses displace the human element.

Summary

The official United Nations definition for a refugee as someone forced to flee their country because of persecution, war, or violence, indicates just a few of the elements associated with displaced populations. Host countries often lack adequate policies of integration (Bloch, 2002; Barker, 2021) as refugees navigate a complex system of resettlement. While migration theories are useful in understanding large patterns of migrations, not only they can be reductionist in their approach, but also fail to properly account for forced migration and refugee experiences (Arango, 2002; Bueno & Prieto-Rosas, 2022).

The particular migration discourses observed in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States find convergence in having a hierarchical system of "preferred" immigrants, a system that is marked by racialized and cultural perspectives (Nawyn, 2019; Sakamoto et al., 2013; Waite, 2022). While political discourses and the media seem to reinforce exclusive discourses, refugees and immigrants become subject to Othering perspectives (Jensen, 2011). As

inferior and problematic characteristics are ascribed to these populations, there is a legitimization of xeno-racist scapegoating and discrimination towards them (Krzyżanowski et al., 2018).

Traditional media have the tendency to present refugees as large, dehumanized swarms of people (Abid et al., 2017; Bleiker et al., 2013; Braxton, 2021), overlooking individual stories and perspectives. This reduces the refugee experience to frequent representations that depict refugees either as hopeless victims or threats to security and economy (Połńska-Kimunguyi, 2022; Skuse & Dowling, 2021). While tools such as social media might present opportunities where refugees can engage in self-representation, their online portrayals are still subject to being corrupted by the news media (Chouliaraki, 2017).

Music has been previously established as an outlet of self-expression where people can perform identity, promote agency, and articulate social relationships (Saarikallio, 2019). Considering those potentialities, music has been used not only to comment on society, but to contribute to an understanding of the human condition in modern socio-politics (Byerly, 2013; Friedman, 2013; Rosenstone, 1969).

As a movement rooted in African American languages, Hiphop has been an effective tool for negotiating identity and challenging reality based on lived experiences (Richardson, 2006). Rap music in particular has grown from its multicultural roots in New York to global transmutations of the genre where local elements are incorporated, presenting a stage for rebellion, resistance, and empowerment, upon which specific experiences of repressed identities can be discussed (Mitchell, 2001; Potter, 2006; Travis, 2013).

Considering the many ways refugees might engage with music, studies suggest uses of the form to retain cultural connection with the home country but also to negotiate identity in the

host nation, incorporating transnational sounds with more ease in the context of globalization and rising technological accessibility (Wilding, 2012; Lidskog, 2016; Miles, 2017).

By bridging studies on globalized rap music and media representations of refugees, this study tries to fill a research gap by asking the question: How might popular refugee artists manage and communicate their identities as counternarratives through the musical format? In the following chapter, I lay out the methods and procedures used in the research and analysis process.

CHAPTER III: METHOD

This project conducted a textual analysis of three musical albums of three distinct artists from refugee backgrounds in order to understand how they worked out their refugee experiences through music and how their depictions of refugee life are positioned in relation to the broad mediatic representation of refugees. To achieve that, the themes of each album were identified through their lyrical and aesthetical content, guiding both individual and comparative discussions. I utilized a framework of counternarrative to inform where their discourses fit within the mediatic landscape.

In this chapter, I discuss the methods of textual and thematic analysis that were the foundation of the methodological approach, look at the concept and application of refugees' counternarratives, situate the communication perspective that informed the research process, present an aesthetic typology, outline procedures, and provide a rationale for analyzing the three albums that consist of the objects of this thesis.

Textual Analysis

One of the most prominent research methods in cultural studies, textual analysis has been traditionally used in the communication field as a way of investigating the salient and underlying meanings of a text (Arya, 2020). Considering the guiding question of this thesis (precisely, do artists who identify as refugees manage and communicate their identities as counternarratives through the musical format?), a textual analysis serves as the base method due to its potential of revealing how artists present themselves, discuss their experiences, and make sense of the world. As McKee (2003) writes, textual analysis is a qualitative method particularly useful to researchers “who want to understand the ways in which members of various cultures and

subcultures make sense of who they are, and of how they fit into the world in which they live” (p. 1).

In order to conduct a textual analysis, it is important to understand exactly what is meant by the word “text.” In a textual analysis, text does not refer necessarily to a written document, but it can be anything from which meanings or information can be extracted, such as books, films, plays, records, images, clothing, buildings, and monuments (Nicolas, 2021). Broadly speaking, whenever we interpret or analyze something used to make meaning, we treat it as a text. In the context of this study, the texts are three music albums that discuss refugee experiences. The textual analysis was conducted not only considering the lyrical content, but the aesthetic elements of the music and its sounds.

For the lyrical portion, a content analysis can examine the material in five types of units. Applying the framework of Frey et al. (1999) to musical content, this thesis considers the following units throughout the analysis: *physical units*, related to the length and duration of the album and its songs; *meaning units*, which encompasses the remaining units and refers to what the music symbolizes; *syntactical units*, consisting of particular words, lines, or verses found on the albums that support particular readings; *referential units* that allude to a place, time, person, or circumstance; and *thematic units*, which are the broader topics addressed by the text. While all of these units appear in different ways in the analysis, the clearly identified units of focus in this research are the thematic units, as they uncover the recurrent themes of each album as well as the themes present in all three records. Referential units to the lived experiences or perspectives of the artists are then explored citing syntactical units which back up the interpretation of the text.

Regarding the sound of rap, a genre explored by all three albums analyzed in this thesis, the technique of sampling other songs is a central element to the format, which configures a kind

of intertextuality that is relevant for textual analysis (Arya, 2020). For this study, I utilize the typology of sampling set forth by Sewell (2013), where the three main types of samples are: *structural*, when an existing song serves as the rhythmic foundation for a new one; *surface*, when samples are used to overlap or ornate the foundation of the new song; and *lyric*, when the song borrows parts of another song for their words and phrases of text. The sampling choices and how they are incorporated into the album can also communicate meanings and suggest ideas, something I take into account during the analysis.

If as a method, textual analysis has the capacity to offer relevant historical and cultural insights over time (Krippendorff, 1980), in order to uncover referential and symbolical meaning, it is necessary for the research to be informed by the broader social constructions that might influence the text. The review of literature presented in the previous chapter sought to provide the necessary context for the discussion of refugees' representation, allowing for potential textual references to emerge more clearly in association with not only lived or shared experiences, but beyond that, as this study looks for their implications within the larger mediatic discourse on refugees.

It must be acknowledged here that a reading of a text can be done in multiple ways, and as textual analysis deals with how people engage in sense-making on a particular text, I, as the researcher am also making sense of the material. While it is informed by research and it strives to consider the polysemic nature of signifiers, my interpretation of the text does not claim to be final or absolute, being one of many possible readings. As McKee (2003) and Arya (2020) highlight, no one true meaning to end all others can emerge from a reading, but a textual analysis has the advantage of taking into account the multiplicity of symbols and contributes to the diversity of a research body, which is what this study seeks to do.

Counternarrative

The concept of counternarrative refers to a type of intertextuality where a narrative takes a stance towards another and sets it apart (Lundholt et al., 2018). While that stance does not necessarily have to be directly oppositional to one or more narratives, it has to offer a perspective in some way related to that. A common and crucial resource in the toolkit of critical race theory (CRT), counternarrative challenges the dominant discourse regarding the social status and particular experiences of racialized Others in a given society, with an increasing volume of studies on the systemic oppression of Black people in the United States (Harper, 2009). The dynamicity of counternarrative, however, has been explored and further developed by a series of other fields of research, including migration studies.

The tenet of counternarratives lies in the idea that stories about marginalized individuals cannot be adequately told by those in positions of power, but rather these accounts should come firsthand from those in the margins, who lived and experienced them (Mora, 2014). Counternarratives empower communities by presenting a more accurate glimpse of their complexities.

Conceptually, a counternarrative must be related to a master narrative, which is a dominant account often understood as a universal truth about a certain group, usually presenting caricatures of such populations in unfavorable ways. The literature on the representation of refugees sheds light on such damaging master narratives and frequent tropes. Summarizing the overall mediatic depiction of refugees, Skuse and Dowling (2021) state that “refugees are commonly portrayed in the media as passive, dependent, helpless, hopeless or, in a more sinister vein, as a burden, a threat or a problem” (p. 424).

Studies on refugees' counternarratives have found that they provide agency and a space where refugees can work out concepts of identity related to physical space and historical experiences (Tabar, 2007). Furthermore, mediated narratives driven by refugees "offer a significant counternarrative to the mainstream media attempts to erase or flatten out individual stories" (Martínez García, 2021, p. 210). When the stories come from refugees themselves, nuances of lived experiences are set forth and a sense of agency is highlighted both for refugee populations and the audiences who have access to more humanized accounts of an issue so often politicized and discussed under socioeconomic interests.

A particularly relevant finding on refugee's self-accounts points to a sense of melancholy as a reiteration of loss gets worked through longing and sadness after violent experiences of dispossession and colonial oppression (Tabar, 2007). Such melancholia "is incorporated into the self and informs counter-definitions of subjectivity, agency and community" (p. 6).

Understanding how counternarratives give a platform to refugees, performative actions such as theatre or music are an appropriate stage where identity can be explored and challenged.

Investigating the use of Theatre of the Oppressed by Black African-Canadians with refugee backgrounds, Schroeter (2013) identified that citizenship status, language, and race were limiting factors that constrained the imagined social future of participants. Still, the act of performance allowed them to use "their identities, symbolism, and ambiguity to challenge authorized discourses and show how their identities intersected" (Schroeter, 2013, p. 394).

Studies that integrate counternarrative as a method allow researchers to present stories that have likely been underexplored and to unearth marginalized experiences that have often been overlooked (Milner & Howard, 2013). While questions of commodification and ethics of mediation regarding vulnerability and suffering can present pitfalls in their effectiveness,

Martínez García (2021) argues that counternarratives such as the ones explored by this thesis carry the potential to influence the audience perspective and to enact social change.

Communication Perspective

Given that textual analyses can be multidisciplinary in nature, the consideration of how people make sense of the world and create meaning through music is rooted, for the purposes of my analysis, in a communication perspective that builds upon Stuart Hall's (1980) classical model of encoding and decoding. The model was chosen to inform the research process due to its consideration of the social nature of meaning-making as both communicator and the audience participate in the construction of meaning.

In Hall's (1980) model, the audience can assume three positions when decoding a message. The first position is the dominant-hegemonic, where the message is decoded the way the dominant ideology intended; the second is the negotiated position, where the audience neither totally accepts or rejects the message, but acknowledges parts of it and adapts others; and the third position is oppositional, where the audience might understand the intended meaning, but chooses to reject it and take on an alternative meaning.

Ever since the original publication of Hall's "Encoding/decoding" (1980) became a major work in the field of communication and cultural studies - maintaining its relevance to this day, many scholars have contributed to advancing its central concepts. While representation and ideology are key elements of Hall's work, as seen in Rojek (2009), it was not until his later research on articulation theory that he truly explored the ways through which discursive formations bring people together in a sense of shared identity. Among a series of insightful critiques to the encoding and decoding model, I choose to highlight the contribution of Lu

(2021), who looks at readings of popular music and suggests that the audience can take on a fourth, even more active position that engages in creative decoding.

All of that ties into the research question as it relates to the concept of counternarrative, which is in itself a resistance to a dominant reading. In this case, if the meaning produced by the mass media on refugees frames them as helpless victims or threatening burdens (Skuse and Dowling, 2021), the artists I analyze here challenge the dominant messages by taking on that fourth, active position and creatively producing counter-messages that resist hegemonic discourses, highlight self-agency, and create a sense of shared identity that speaks to other refugees. Here, Ross' (2011) suggestion of dividing not only the decoding process, but also the encoding into dominant, negotiated, and oppositional aspects, becomes fruitful as these artists can encode their own messages through an oppositional or negotiated perspective. On top of offering a counterpoint to the original assumption that all messages are produced within a dominant hegemony, this approach also allows for both text and reading to be oppositional, creating a space where refugees can come together both as producers and audiences who reject dominant, constrictive meanings.

Procedures

For this thesis, the textual analysis was operationalized in a few ways. Here, I describe the procedures and steps I took. First, I gathered all the lyrical content of each album. To facilitate viewing and to guide my own process of analysis, I started with a preliminary reading of the songs and conceptualized the central theme of each song, placing them on a table and summarizing each one in a couple of sentences. Over the course of the research process, I listened to these songs many times, and both their lyrical content and their aesthetic content,

which I made note of while carefully going through each song, revealed new facets in different stages of research.

After the gathering process, I moved into a more in-depth analysis of the content, looking for thematic units that would appear in the songs. To achieve that, I coded the lyrics using a thematic analysis where common themes were highlighted and grouped into larger categories, which Strauss and Corbin (1998) define as a process of conceptualization. Such practice allowed for the overall themes of each album to emerge, and for those themes to be contrasted with each other. In the analysis chapter, the discussion is structured first by the overall themes of each album and then on their collective significance.

Even though the choice of analyzing albums instead of individual songs meant that there was significantly more material to deal with, analyzing these songs detached from their albums would not reveal the overall discursive element intended by the artists. While emerging artists in the music industry gradually gravitate into more individualized releases of songs as singles, the album is still the main avenue through which musicians tell a larger story and create complete, long-lasting artistic statements (McGuire, 2020). So, while I engage in the discussion of particularly eloquent moments in the songs as they pertain to the focus of this thesis, the study is ultimately more interested in where those songs fit into the larger narrative of the album and in uncovering those grand artistic statements in a cohesive body of work.

In this thesis, I analyze Wyclef Jean's 2007 album *Carnival Vol. II: Memoirs of an Immigrant*, K'Naan's 2009 album *Troubadour*, and M.I.A.'s 2016 album *AIM*. These albums serve as the text for this study and were selected based on the relative prominence of the recording artists and their refugee backgrounds, the rap genre they work with, their release dates

falling within the span of a decade, their relevancy to the topic of refugees, and their significant context within each artists' trajectory. These elements are all addressed in the analysis chapter.

By conducting a textual analysis of three albums from refugee artists that offer their perspectives on a series of topics, this study seeks to find how their refugee experiences are discussed through music and where do their potential counternarratives fit in relation to mediatic master narratives on refugees.

CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I analyze the albums *Carnival Vol. II: Memoirs of an Immigrant* (Wyclef Jean, 2007), *Troubadour* (K'Naan, 2009), and *AIM* (M.I.A., 2016). Presented first is an individual analysis of each album considering its own context, lyrical content, aesthetic elements, sociocultural period, and where it fits in each artist's career. Then, I move from a look at individual themes to an examination of shared themes across the albums to understand what they have to say about the refugee experience and their discourses on migration. While some of these shared themes are mentioned in the individual analysis, a more in-depth consideration of them is found in the conjunctive discussion of the three albums. Considering this project's aim to present a comparative analysis, the differences between albums and their approaches are also discussed in the shared analysis.

Considering both points of convergence and dissonance, the analysis of these albums highlights the multifaceted aspect of the refugee experience and migration addressed by the literature review. While a few elements are points of shared reality, others manifest some quite distinct, individual experiences of refugeeism, which speaks to the importance of a context-based approach to the theme amidst the plurality of migration as a phenomenon. The implications of these findings are further addressed in the final chapter.

Carnival Vol. II: Memoirs of an Immigrant

Wyclef Jean is a Haitian-born musician who moved to the United States with his family at the age of nine in 1978. His relocation is situated in the earlier years of Haitian refugee migration to the U.S., before the flow of migration exponentially increased as the result of political turmoil (Stepick, 1992). Historically, political tensions and dictatorial persecution have caused thousands of Haitians to flee the country to the United States, often to be only faced with

more repression as U.S. federal policy in the 1980s and 1990s refused to recognize their refugee status and implemented an interdiction-at-sea program, intercepting refugee boats and returning 25,551 Haitians to Port-au-Prince (Gavigan, 1997). Wyclef Jean has always been political about his home country, notoriously running for president in the third democratic elections of Haiti in 2010.

While Wyclef's 2007 album *Carnival Vol. II: Memoirs of an Immigrant* is his sixth studio album, it is also a sequel to his Grammy-nominated debut record *Wyclef Jean Presents The Carnival* (Wyclef Jean, 1997) and, as the title suggests, it finds him sharing impressions and recollections as an immigrant while collaborating with 19 other featured artists. Upon its release, the album peaked in #28 at the U.S. Billboard Charts and its lead single, "Sweetest Girl (Dollar Bill)" featuring Akon, Lil Wayne and Niia, peaked at #12 on the song charts, also appearing on the year-end song charts of 2007. As the second installment of a trilogy, the album was followed by *Carnival III: The Fall and Rise of a Refugee* (Wyclef Jean, 2017). With an interval of 10 years between each album, the records feature Wyclef's evolving views on matters related to multiculturalism and his life experiences. While the sophomore album might be the one with the most expressive fusion of international sounds across its 14 tracks, it is worth noting that with each release, the albums showed a decrease on openly political content and were met with subsequently smaller commercial success and critical acclaim.

Thematically, the major themes of *Carnival Vol. II* (Wyclef Jean, 2007) are a celebration of subaltern cultures around the globe; discussions of violence in the streets; the struggles of living as an immigrant; the nervous state of the world; enjoying the present while hoping for better days; and calls for peace. While these themes go beyond the refugee journey, they are always informed by Wyclef's own experience as an immigrant and refugee, with his perspective

on global issues of war, greed, and conflict being based on his views of how damaging all of these can be. Throughout the album, he presents music as a potential tool of union and a way of bringing people of all backgrounds together to celebrate life and the present.

Carnival Vol. II (Wyclef Jean, 2007) does not have interludes or prelude tracks like the first album in the trilogy, which finds Wyclef on trial for supposedly being a negative influence and has tracks of fully spoken word dialogue. The sequel album, however, has an intro and an outro, which serve to contextualize the album as an intellectual exercise, featuring sounds of a pencil writing in paper. Set to the electric guitar that continues into the second track on the album, Wyclef states that “a lot of things changed” since his last *Carnival* album, with the world going into “panic mode” (2007). As Jean declares that, we listen to the faint sound of a child wailing in the background, to which Jean replies “Come on, chill out, Angie / Let daddy finish writin’” (2007). Angie is the nickname of Angelina, adopted daughter of Jean and his wife Marie Claudinette. Such juxtaposition implies that Jean’s political protest and comments on global tensions are intercepted and informed by his personal experiences, which help ground his perspectives. The importance of personal and familiar experiences can be further seen on track “What About the Baby,” which paints the portrait of a family falling apart, featuring Wyclef Jean and Mary J. Blige taking on the roles of an absent father and a struggling mother speaking on the phone while the father asks for another chance.

Apart from the intro and outro, the only track that does not have a featured artist on the album is “Heaven’s in New York.” While this highlights the overall collaborative nature of the record, it also draws particular attention to the solo track, which finds Wyclef reflecting on the state of things and hoping for better days. While he is in the United States, notably a developed country, he talks about shootings and abusive taxes, and then nods to the damage of terrorist acts

with the lines “First thing I’d do is go back in time / Take the Twin Towers put it back in the skyline” (Wyclef Jean, 2007). With sacred imagery, he cites Psalm 23:4 from the Bible, “Even though I walk through the valley of shadow of death / I fear no evil, for you are with me” and hopes for a paradise where “the blind can see, the mute can talk, the crippled can walk, but for now heaven is in New York” (Wyclef Jean, 2007). Given the implication that no matter where in the world, there are still going to be problems, Wyclef Jean (2007) dedicates this song to refugees, saying

Yeah, this one goes out to all my refugees,

That leave the land where they from, to come to the land of the free

But don't forget once you get that dream,

To take it back to your country and give them a piece of that inspiration.

The motif of giving back to the home country can be manifested in different ways, and, considering the artist’s life and music, sometimes it happens financially (sending money back home), logistically (helping other people to immigrate), politically (trying to institute a change), or simply inspirationally (motivating people by showing it is possible to succeed).

The song “Hollywood Meets Bollywood (Immigration)” is perhaps the one that most openly addresses the experiences and difficulties of life as an immigrant and refugee. Connecting subaltern cultures across the world, the globalist anthem features U.S. rapper Chamillionaire and Indian composer Aadesh Shrivastava, samples Egyptian composer Mohammed Abdel Wahab, and greets, during the song’s introduction, the United Kingdom, the United States, Egypt, India, Israel, China, Africa, South America, New Jerusalem, New Jersey, Russia, Brooklyn, Canada, and Asia. Wyclef begins his first verse with “Marco Polo was an immigrant / Columbus was an immigrant / Even America was named after an immigrant” (Wyclef Jean, 2007), lines to which a

group of voices in the background reply each time with “yes it was.” Here, Wyclef challenges the concept of immigrant by connecting European explorers and the colonizers as immigrants. This callout seems particularly piercing considering that people from host nations can expose immigrants to xenophobic attitudes and behaviors, when it is likely that their own ancestors were once immigrants. Writing about the dangers of a Eurocentric view of history, Zerubavel (2003) states that “by saying that Columbus discovered America, we somehow imply that there was nobody there before him, thereby tacitly suppressing the memory of the millions of people who were actually living there at the time of his arrival” (p. ix). On top of silencing Native American populations, the traditional account of discovery of the Americas might have also erased some of the native culture in the naming of the continent, as the term Americas is derived from Amerigo Vespucci, Italian navigator who further explored the continent after Columbus. Wyclef Jean (2007) not only nods to that, but connects abolitionist movements to refugee networks with the lyrics:

Let me tell you 'bout the South,
Harriet Tubman, Underground, Underground Railroad
Refugees, in the seas, see them in their sailboats,
I got love for Miami all day,
But if my Cubans get to stay, why y'all turn my Haitians away?

While many refugees are trying to escape oppressive conditions, Wyclef questions a seemingly disparate treatment in granting asylum to some people but sending others back to their countries. Historically, people fleeing communist regimes are treated more sympathetically by the US law than other kinds of asylum seekers, which has given Cubans a leg up in becoming legal residents even if Haitians would also face political persecution (Drew, 2003). Upon such

difficulties, many refugees arrive without proper documentation and have to either file for asylum - with the risk of being sent back to their countries of origin - or remain undocumented. Wyclef comments on the troubles of living under such circumstances with the verses “Immigration knocking at my door / I don't know what they knocking for / It's so hard to live as illegal aliens” (Wyclef Jean, 2007).

Influenced by South Asian rhythms, the song “Welcome to the East” features Jamaican rapper Sizzla and touches upon topics such as misery, teen pregnancy, domestic violence, and war. With the chorus reflecting “When the East is in the house, sometimes I ask myself ‘will the violence ever cease?’” the line “It's too hot on the floor” is repeated and Wyclef sings in between “They got the M-15's / We got the M-16's” while background vocals shout “Oh my God, that's dangerous” (Wyclef Jean, 2007). Amidst the mentions of guns and brutality, the song talks about people dancing and wishing the violence would end. A similar concept appears in “Slow Down,” which features U.S. rapper T.I. and has a discourse of “keeping it real.” As mentions of drug dealing and violence in the streets appear, the lyrics mention that “We cry for peace, but we live for war” and that “Everybody’s a gangster, but nobody wanna die” while the song’s hook urges people to “slow down” (Wyclef Jean, 2007). A genuine call for peace is materialized towards the end of the album with song “Any Other Day,” featuring U.S. artist Norah Jones. In the track, Wyclef alludes to a waving flag, possibly pledging for a ceasefire with the repetition of the lines “Tell the boat over here, man / We’re waving the flag” (Wyclef Jean, 2007).

Arguably the centerpiece of the album, the 13-minute song “Touch Your Button (Carnival Jam)” is a sprawling celebration of Carnival through different countries and cultures. Over three distinct sections, the song features U.S. artist will.i.am, Mexican singer Melissa Jiménez, Trinidadian artist Machel Montano, Brazilian singer Daniela Mercury, Haitian rapper

Black Alex, Jamaican musician Shabba, and Haitian band Djakout Mizik. The first section finds will.i.am and Melissa Jiménez going back and forth on themes of love and sex to a funky groove, with the hook repeating the innuendo “Let me touch your button” multiple times. While a radio friendly version of this first section of the song (clocking under 4 minutes) was released as a single, the second section moves into more typical forms of celebrating Carnival in Central and South America with Machel Montano, Daniela Mercury, and Black Alex singing in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. Introducing Mercury over a samba percussion line, Wyclef Jean states “They say a Carnival ain’t a Carnival unless Brazil is in the house” (2007). *Carnaval*, the Latin-derived word for the celebration, is an integral part of Brazilian culture, with the Carnival in Rio de Janeiro attracting millions of people every year and is also a major event in Trinidad and Tobago, where it lasts for months. Common in Catholic countries, Carnival can be etymologically associated to the words “farewell to meat,” and originally occurred in anticipation of a period of fasting, where people would engage in indulgences and parties before a season of introspectiveness and reflection (Lozica, 2007). Nowadays, the celebration has transcended its religious origins and represents a time of bringing people together to party, dance, and celebrate life and connection through music.

The third and final section of the song is a slower, mellow ballad including French and Haitian Creole chants before an electric guitar solo brings the song to an end. Transitioning into this third section, Wyclef states, “The promoter is telling me it’s time to get off stage, but before we go, listen...” evoking a live performance, he then asks the DJ to bring the music down and, as the instrumental fades, he says, “If you want the killing and the wars to stop around the world, let me see some signals now, signals from your cellular phones” (Wyclef Jean, 2007). The almost ritualistic moment in concerts when the audience, in the dark, turns on the flashlights in their

phones can represent another moment of union through music. From the stage perspective, the mass of people under the shining lights swaying from one side to another becomes hard to distinguish, and the individuals all become one. In a song with at least five different languages, Wyclef seems to hint that understanding the lyrics are not the most important thing here, but rather the union and fusion of cultures, peoples, and nations through a musical celebration.

While Carnival has an edge of cultural politics that often make it a stage for social and racial protests (Dunn, 1992), observers – especially tourists –often miss the significance of those manifestations. Analyzing the historical development and the meanings found in carnival, Lozica (2009) writes that the manifestation “contains and mixes good and evil, truth and lies, love and hatred, seriousness and jokes, tears and laughter, fear and joy, the village and the town, the rich and the poor, the rulers and the subjects, sex and death” (p. 89), being polysemic by nature. At the end of the day, *Carnival Vol. II* seems to embody just that.

After “Touch Your Button (Carnival Jam),” the album comes to an end with the “Outro,” a 20 second track where all we hear is the sound of a pencil writing on paper over the instrumental of faint violins. A sharp thud on paper underscores the end of the record with a period. While the album displays a reflection and incorporation of cultural politics, just like the celebration it is named after, it is welcoming of a fellow listener not only to witness but also to join the party and invite all to come together in music, even if just for a fleeting moment.

Troubadour

K’naan is a rapper born in Somalia who was granted asylum as a refugee in Canada with his family when he was a teenager. While he describes his early years as peaceful, the rising tensions of a civil war that broke up in Somalia in the early 1990s marked some of his youth with views of conflict until he was able to flee the country at the age of 13 along with his siblings and

his mother (Quill, 2012). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2022) defines the Somali diaspora as one of the most challenging mass displacements in the world. With tensions that trace back to the triple colonization of the country by the United Kingdom, France, and Italy, after the nation gained independence in 1960, different groups tried to seize political power. A military government from 1969 to 1991 kept the nation relatively steady in its first years, but territorial disputes with Ethiopia and increased uprisings led to the collapse of the administration, and while militia violence proliferated, at least three distinct major movements currently claim authority over Somali territory (The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, 2021). Ever since K'naan began performing spoken word and eventually rap music, he has always tried to call attention to the situation of his home country, describing the war conditions he witnessed and pledging for the violence to stop. Akin to his debut album *The Dusty Foot Philosopher* (K'naan, 2005), his sophomore record *Troubadour* (K'naan, 2009) reminisces about his journey as a refugee, discussing the violence of war and its negative impacts while he dreams about better days.

The 14-track album peaked at #32 on the U.S. charts, while in Canada it reached the #7 spot. Its second single, "Wavin' Flag" became K'naan's most successful song first in Canada when it was remade as a charity single to raise funds for Haiti after the 2010 earthquake – debuting at #1 on the Canadian music charts - and then a global hit after it was selected by Coca Cola to be remixed as the brand's anthem for the 2010 FIFA World Cup, with multiple official and unofficial versions in collaboration with artists from dozens of nations turning the song into a Top 5 single in Italy, Ireland, France, Israel, Spain, the United Kingdom and other countries.

While K'naan's first studio album *The Dusty Foot Philosopher* (K'naan, 2005) placed his refugee story inside the epic genre (Sobral, 2013) and won him the Juno Award for Rap

Recording of the Year in Canada in 2006, his following studio record *Troubadour* (K'naan, 2009) displays a broader palette of genres, collaborating with U.S. artists to discuss cultural differences and personal tales of overcoming hardship.

A thematic analysis of the record revealed the following emerging themes on *Troubadour* (K'naan, 2009): memories of the home country, the violence in the streets, hope for better days, trying to stay positive and to have fun amidst the hardships, ruminations about wasted futures due to conflict, and financial struggles. All of these themes have a direct connection to K'naan's refugee background, as he reminisces about the tribulations he faced in the home country and his adaptation to a new land, making sense of his newfound reality while paying tribute to his heritage and wishing for peace.

The album's title refers to the lyrical poets and singers from the medieval era who, in exchange for their artistic works, received the benefits of a life in court (Kay, 1990). The title proves itself particularly insightful in a couple of ways. Considering that troubadours came from a variety of backgrounds, including from the lower ranks in the feudal society, and achieved a higher status by entertaining the elite, K'naan may be commenting on his own journey and social rise in some way. The comparison itself might have a political edge as Léglu (1999) reminds us that, while troubadours became known for their explorations of love, the satirical and moral aspect of their lyrics often included political commentary and expressions of rebellion, which not only are present in K'naan's album but also relate to the potentialities of rap previously discussed.

The first lyrics on *Troubadour* are as much a wish as they are a warning: "I hope you got your passports and vaccine shots" (K'naan, 2009). The sentence is fully spoken, setting it apart from the rapped flow of the rest of album-opener song "T.I.A.," which is an acronym for "This is

Africa.” Considering the globalist influences of the album, this opening statement sets the tone for the themes K’naan touches on throughout the record. Even before we listen to the rapper’s voice, we hear a chopped-up chorus from the 1963 song “Simmer Down” from The Wailers. As Demers (2002) notes, sampling is not only an integral part of rap, but it has been used as a way to create lineage and self-assertion. Here, the choice to open with a sample from a Jamaican ska group not only pays homage and recognizes some of the transcultural roots of Hip-hop but also nods to another prominent refugee musician, as “Simmer Down” was Bob Marley’s first hit.

The incorporation of the sample becomes even more interesting as the song reveals its primary theme of comparing the reality of street life in Africa with the street life in the USA. As K’naan raps about the violence in the streets he experienced, he calls out the boasting of gangsta rappers with verses such as “I take rappers on a field trip any day / They never been opposite real clip anyway” and “Oh you from the hood huh, who say? / My Nigerian n***** would call you pussy / My Somali n***** are quick to grab the Uzi” (K’naan, 2009). What might seem like an attempt to outdo said rappers and celebrate violence actually becomes the opposite when analyzing the use of the sample. The distorted “Simmer Down” chant is interpolated with “T.I.A.”’s hook to resemble a conversation, as K’naan states that “the streets are tricky in these parts here,” and the sample responds with “simmer down.” The plea is the same as when the original song was recorded in 1963, as it asked the perpetrators of crime to cool down the wave of violence in Kingston, Jamaica (Brodber, 1998). This also sets out an important theme for the album. While the mentions of violence in the streets are frequent, they are not precisely celebrated, but are rather a reluctant reality. Lines such as “I wasn’t ever looking for street cred / But these streets bred me to be street safe” (K’naan, 2009), indicate a concept of assimilation and rejection as the rapper could replicate the violence experienced in the streets, but in also learning

to be safe in the streets, he now chooses to walk in peace instead. From the comparisons made with gangster life in the Americas, the international perspective can be that the violence witnessed in his place of origin has taught him how to navigate the violence he might encounter in the new land, and while he has lived amidst crime, he does not live by it – even though it was a formative part of his life.

Reluctancy also appears in “Somalia,” a track named after K’naan’s home country. While he grapples with questions of representation, conceding that “it’s an ode, I admit it” and “it’s only right to represent my hood,” he states, “I’m not particularly proud of this predicament, but I’m born and bred in this tenement” (K’naan, 2010). The song further reveals hard conditions witnessed by K’naan and visions that haunt him – “when I try to sleep, I see coffins closing” (K’naan, 2010). In tune with counternarrative findings that demonstrate a sense of melancholy through longing and sadness after violent experiences of dispossession (Tabar, 2007), K’naan also talks about a cycle of violence, lamenting that “she got a gun but coulda been a model or physician” (K’naan, 2010). As wasted futures due to war or violence become a recurrent theme on the record, the rapper stresses that it is important to communicate his views to the Western world even if they are filled with a bittersweet sense of achievement and frustration:

Do you see why it’s amazing?

When someone comes out of such a dire situation

And learns the English language just to share his observation?

Probably get a Grammy without a grammar education

So fuck you, school, and fuck you, immigration! (K’naan, 2009)

Aesthetically, the song also pays tribute to K’naan’s heritage beyond the lyrics, recognizing the legacy of a neighboring country. Even though the song is titled “Somalia,” he

chooses to sample a lauded Ethiopian singer, Tilahun Gessesse, as the song “Yene Mastawesha” becomes the structural sample of the track (Sewell, 2013). In fact, there are multiples examples of Ethiopian music sampled across the album, including other songs from Tilahun Gessesse, Alemayehu Eshete, Mulatu Astatke and Getatchew Mekurya. All of these musicians are prominent Ethiopian jazz performers, which is in itself a genre notorious for its musical fusion of global elements (Shifferaw, 2018).

Transnational ties are also curiously showcased in subsequent song “America,” which despite the title features an Ethiopian sample and multiple verses in Somali. With featured artists Mos Def and Chali 2na, both Black U.S. rappers, the choice of naming a song “America” and performing it in both English and Somali to Ethiopian rhythms subverts the expectations of a traditionally white, Anglo-European America, honoring instead African American traditions. Utilizing once again transnational identities, K’naan highlights the multiculturalism in the Horn of Africa by blending Somali and Ethiopian sounds that can be associated with refugee journeys as well. While neighboring countries of Somalia such as Yemen and Ethiopia have their own internal conflicts that trigger forced migration, as noted by The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2022), most Somali refugees find asylum in these nations. Honoring Ethiopia in particular seems to be an acknowledgment of cultural resilience considering that the country has historically resisted colonialism, maintaining a dynamic and vivid artistic scene of ample ethnic diversity (Adugna, 2021).

The sample from The Wailers used on the album’s opening comes full circle on the track “I Come Prepared,” which features Bob Marley’s son Damian “Jr. Gong” Marley. The Jamaican singer has a verse on the song with globalist imagery, where he raps that “the Marleys and Somalis are some mad people / We a travel with some long strap in a vehicle / And a screech

across the border like a Latino / Moving through the LAXs and London Heathrows” (Marley, 2009). Here, the rappers connect the experience of refugees from different nationalities, considering Bob Marley was a political refugee in the United Kingdom and K’naan is just one of many Somali refugees who found asylum outside their home country. Jamaicans are also part of a few diasporas, with a notable population in the United States and a large influx of people headed towards the UK post-World War II to aid in the reconstruction of Britain (Waite, 2022), a fact that highlights the references of US and UK airports as significant lyrical choices.

It is worth noting that while the song essentially discusses life as an immigrant and a refugee from both artists’ perspectives, it is the closest example of a boasting track on the album, a particular type of rap where artists brag about themselves with pride often including put-downs and disses (Edwards, 2009). Examples of this can be found in K’naan’s verses such as “I’m honor roll, you ain’t know East African rock ‘n roll / You don’t know what time it is like your clock is old” and “So come now don’t you try to play the hero / Around here we’ve got pirates with torpedoes / Alongside all the warlords and beardos” (K’naan, 2009). Such verses are indicative of a particular type of boasting where K’naan suggests to those in his new land that their sense of self-superiority is not so special after all, validating the realities, the culture, and experiences of his home nation.

“I Come Prepared” is not the only track in the album to mention pirates, as they also appear on the chorus of “Somalia” when K’naan asks “So what you know about the pirates who terrorize the ocean? / To never know a single day without a big commotion? / It can’t be healthy just to live with such a steep emotion” (K’naan, 2009). Somali piracy has been a hot topic in the media and an “international obsession” (Marchal, 2011), with a few different narratives being adopted on its discussion. For example, a critical analysis discourse by Way (2013) has found

that *BBC News* articles would negatively portray pirates while positively representing Western military forces. The implication of such coverage is that legitimating military presence and action - while not providing context to the Somalis - does not contribute to an end of piracy nor address its root causes. According to K'naan, the piracy in the country's coastlines started as a response to toxic nuclear waste being dumped on Somali shores, until it became about greed. On an interview to *Hard Knock TV* (2008), he further argued that the environmental damage (which keeps happening) is worse than robbery as it has a generational impact.

Perhaps the most direct recount of K'naan's experience fleeing Somalia as a refugee, the song "People Like Me" is a fascinating exercise in storytelling. The closing track on the album features three verses, each one narrating a different story: the first one finds K'Naan assuming the perspective of a soldier stationed (or rather stuck) in Iraq grappling with the inefficacy of war; on the second verse, the rapper introduces Sara, a character who is a single mother in the suburbs and gets fired from her job after being the victim of sexual harassment; and on the last verse K'naan talks about himself and his cousin, who both grew up amid civil conflicts before K'naan was able to leave the country with his mother - while his cousin was left behind and they never saw each other again. By remembering his cousin, he also traces his early connection with rap music, which he would later use to tell his own story: "He and I grew up where the sun shines / And we both partook in the gun crimes / And we both liked American rap rhymes / Even though we didn't understand one line" (K'naan, 2009). He recounts how they got separated stating

When the country became frantic
My mother tried to get us out, planned it
To the last detail, except the plan got derailed

Cus there wasn't enough money for the plane tickets
How bitter when my mother had to choose who to take with her
So my cousin got left in the war
And that's just hard to record. (2009)

The connecting element to three narratives in the song is suffering. The hook resembles a prayer, stating “Heaven, is there a chance that you could come down and open doors to hurting people like me” (K’naan, 2009), which shares similarities with African American spirituals from the nineteenth century (Peretti, 2013). K’naan starts the last verse with “I guess I told you about myself to a degree just by telling you about people like me” (K’naan, 2009). In connecting his suffering with other people from different nationalities (the lyrics hint that the characters from the first two verses are from the United States), K’naan suggests that hurting is not exclusive to immigrants or refugees but is rather a human experience, that unites people through wishes of deliverance and hope for better days.

Loved ones left behind also appear in “Fatima,” a song that essentially functions as a love letter to a Somali teenage girl who was murdered. In the song, K’naan recounts how he fell in love with the neighbor’s daughter at the age of 12, and they frequently met after school to study until one day she failed to show up because she was a casualty in a shooting. Writing in the present, K’naan raps “Fatima, I'm in America / I make rhymes and I make 'em delicate / You would have liked the parks in Connecticut / You would have said I'm working too hard again” (K’naan, 2009). While he questions love and unfulfilled promises, he states in the song’s outro that this is not a mourning song, but rather a celebration of her memory and legacy.

Amidst all the gruesomeness of violence, crimes, and war, K'naan's *Troubadour* makes a case of persevering feelings and of endurance, establishing a memorial of life and human experiences.

AIM

M.I.A. was born in the United Kingdom to Sri-Lankan parents, who moved the family back to Sri Lanka when M.I.A. was 6 months old. She grew up in Sri Lanka and lived in India for a period of time when the Sri Lankan civil war escalated, eventually being housed as a refugee with family back in London when she was 10 years old.

After Sri Lanka's independence from Britain in 1948, tensions between the minority ethnic group of Tamils and the majority group of Sinhalese had been bubbling up in the form of riots since 1956. It was not until 1983, however, that the insurgent group Tamil Tigers claimed their own independent state in the northeast portion of the country as a response to the systematic discrimination and persecution by the Sinhalese government (Szczepanski, 2019). While M.I.A. fled the country with her mother and siblings in 1986, her father stayed and rallied alongside the movement for Tamil independence (Ray, 2021). It took another 23 years and the killing of more than 100,000 people for the war to come to an end when the Tamil Tigers were defeated in 2009 by the Sri Lankan army (Ellis-Petersen, 2022).

Throughout her work as a musician and activist, M.I.A. has brought attention to minority cultures around the world and to the genocide of the Sri Lankan Tamils after the war came to an end, even as she had not officially backed up the Tigers nor the government, positioning her efforts instead as a reminder that "it's the civilians and refugees that get caught up in the cross fire of politics" in an interview for *EGO* (Heller, 2005). Her fifth studio album *AIM* (M.I.A., 2016) was announced as her final record and found the singer looking back on her career,

making statements about her legacy as well as referencing topics of refugees, borders, foreigners, life journeys, and identities. With 12 tracks, the album peaked at #66 on the U.S. album charts and at #63 in the United Kingdom. Despite being her least successful album on the general charts since the 2005 debut *Arular* and without a particular single impacting a mainstream ranking, the record still debuted at #1 on the Billboard U.S. Dance/Electronic Albums charts - like her previous three records, and at #4 on the U.S. Rap albums chart.

Following the naming of her previous albums after her father (*Arular*), her mother (*Kala*), herself (*Maya*) and a Hindu goddess (*Matangi*), M.I.A. named her 2016 record *AIM*, which is both a play on her stage name (here, spelled backwards) and a word in itself. While there is certainly a sense of aiming at goals and aspirations in life, aim is also a word that communicates pending violence, suggesting M.I.A. might be aiming at something she is preparing to shoot. As the album deals with ideas of staying focused on her mission amidst being criticized or dismissed, the title suggests she might be ready to shoot down naysayers after all she has been through. With four albums and a career spanning over a decade in the music industry, M.I.A. still uses her fifth record to comment on immigration and refugees, but also to look back on her trajectory and to reassure her legacy, which becomes poignant considering she announced *AIM* was set to be her final album.

A thematic analysis of the record uncovers that the major themes in *AIM* are a summary of M.I.A.'s career, questions regarding political issues and the state of the media, statements about bravado and resilience, the visibility of marginalized populations, life as an immigrant and refugee with financial struggles, and the difficulties of crossing borders. Such themes are informed by a transnational perspective, bringing different cultures together through the use of sound and making a case for the union of marginalized people.

The opening track, “Borders,” questions a wide range of elements, mentioning terms such as borders, politics, identities, police shots, values, privileges, ego, power, freedom, “boat people,” and “broke people” while the rapper repeatedly asks, “What's up with that?” (M.I.A., 2016). While it can sound like a cheap or trepid provocation, the assured texture of the song achieved by the forceful electronic rap beat and an assertive fast-paced vocal delivery contribute to how it holds up. On the bridge, she states “We representing peeps, they don't play us on the FM / We talkin' in our sleep, they still listen on a system” (M.I.A., 2016). With this assertion, she presents an awareness that she represents a set of people who are not traditionally seen in the media, or in this case, heard, as the cultural politics in music have the result that artists of South-Asian heritage rarely get played on the radio – let alone a South Asian refugee (Saha, 2012).

Produced by DJ Skrillex, the follow-up song “Go Off” is one of the many heavily electronic tracks on the album. With a lyrical motif of maintaining focus and resilience while she is being attacked, the song conjures images of bombs “going off.” As someone who attracted a fair share of controversy over her career for speaking her mind, M.I.A. comments on how her nationality might play a part in how she is seen in the song’s bridge, where she states, “At least you tell your children I came from London / Start talking about me long time like she was random” (M.I.A., 2016). Even though she grew up in Sri Lanka, for critics of the artist, perhaps her most salient quality is the fact that she was born in a first world country. Speaking to *Rolling Stone* about fighting to be heard and looking back on her life, she said, “It took me 20 years to get over here, learn the language, become a pop star and say, 'Finally, I get the microphone!' This is what I was going to say if I got it when I was 10” (Eliscu, 2010).

An experimental sound palette can be found in a few tracks on the album, namely “Bird Song - Blaqstarr remix,” “Jump In,” and “Fly Pirate.” On the first song, the rapper uses

metaphors of birds and playful word choices to talk about her attitude while sounds of birds are used as driving samples. She mentions how birds use their wings to migrate seasonally, and even makes a possible nod to cultural appropriation with the lines “Sure ain't a vulture / Don't swallow that cause I make the culture” (M.I.A., 2016). The artist has commented in the past about how she was accused of preying on the weaker (as a vulture would) and of exploiting a culture that is not her own to her benefit - to which she responded that it wouldn't make sense for an artist like her to showcase Anglo-European influences like many Western artists do, but instead she tries to bring a spotlight to artists and places that wouldn't normally be on the map, using her visibility for good (Lockett, 2015). In “Jump In,” a feeling of restlessness is transmitted as the song is an aesthetical match between her words and the beat, with a series of choppy vocals used as a secondary percussion rhythm. Lyrically, the song addresses someone leaving their home country and crossing a border without the proper documentation, praying, dreaming of better days, and hitting the sea “like Noah's ark illegal” (M.I.A., 2016). While in the biblical account, Noah was tasked with warning his peers and building an ark in which humanity could be saved from a global flood, M.I.A. connects the story with the refugee experience, in which many refugees cross the seas with not much besides hope and a cultural memory that could (but likely will not) be preserved in a new land. Then, on “Fly Pirate,” lyrics seem to be almost an accessory to the incisive sound palette, with a hook repeatedly stating the words “drop that” and “fly pirate” while the sounds of sirens rise in the background.

It is relevant to note that the title of the song “Fly Pirate” was a source of legal trouble to the artist when she wore an altered shirt of French soccer team Paris Saint Germain in the music video for “Borders” (which displays extensive imagery of refugees on boats), and the words “Fly Emirates” from sponsor Emirates airlines were changed to “Fly Pirates.” In the aftermath of the

music video's release, the soccer club asked for the video to stop being broadcasted and threatened to sue M.I.A., which she found hypocritical arguing that "They don't want association to people who are not privileged [...] Yet they have players who are 2nd gen migrants" (Toor, 2016). On the song, she expresses herself as a pirate flying over the map, looking to connect with other people from underprivileged backgrounds and touching on subject matters that might be controversial, but are important to her, as she states on the lyrics, to "hit things that brings me to link the people on the brink, cos that's where my heart's at" (M.I.A., 2016).

Featuring Jamaican artist Dexta Daps, the song "Foreign Friend" discusses transnational friendships between locals and newcomers, with M.I.A. singing "Gonna be your best friend / Gonna make that shit trend / I'm gonna be your foreign friend / All the way to the end" (M.I.A., 2016). While the lyrics seem to point to a real, lasting bond through thick and thin with lines such as "Partner defend to the end / All people depend on a friend" and "Always there when I break up bad / In bed feeling so sad / You were always there as a comrade," parts such as the one where she talks about making it trend and the song's bridge might point to a vapid experience where a refugee is reduced to its foreign status:

I said as a refugee, you know
Where we come from, we get out our tent
Then we climb over the fence
We don't wanna cause an offence
Then we get a Benz, flat screen TV, then we pay rent
Then we think we made it
Then we be your foreign friend. (M.I.A., 2016)

Even if a refugee has to overcome an extensive number of obstacles to feel like they belong and achieve a number of things to have a sense of normalcy in life, at the end of the day they might not amount to more than a “foreign friend” qualifier in the eyes of local friends. After working hard in the pursuit of all the trappings of class that often grant people a seat at the high table based on social status, refugees will still be looked down as the “foreign friend” of an affluent person who might not be able to understand the physical efforts and/or psychological impacts of a refugee’s journey. That is why, on top of a lack of adequate support and integration policies on host nations, refugees often resort to searching community groups of people from the same place of origin, with whom a more leveled connection can be established (Stewart et al., 2012).

The other feature on the album has former One Direction band member Zayn, on track “Freedun.” Son of an immigrant Pakistani and a British mother, Zayn was born in the UK, and he recorded his vocals remotely for the track after he and M.I.A. connected via WhatsApp, being added to the record days before it was officially announced (Phillips, 2016). While the song is the closest to a pop ballad on the album, with Zayn’s voice appearing almost as a ghostly presence on the somewhat romantic hook, the verses find M.I.A. looking back on her career and summarizing her path of spreading a globalist message. “I just got my own little mission / It grew bigger than a politician / Yeah, history is just a competition” (M.I.A., 2016), she states, hinting at an acknowledgment that history is made of conflicts and fights for power, but also that maybe those who write history are themselves competing to have their version of a narrative recognized as the real one. She also presents a social contrast on the lines “Some people fuck it up, take vacations / Refugees learn about patience” (M.I.A., 2016), which I understand as a reference to people in privileged positions who, after making offensive remarks or a

reprehensible mistake, just have to step down from the public eye for a while before making their return, sometimes going on expensive vacations or retreats. Meanwhile, refugees do not have the means to take time off in tranquility somewhere else, sometimes living for years in refugee camps that were meant to be a temporary solution while waiting for a decision regarding a request for asylum (Kight, 2022).

As the album opens with a plea for unity with the lines “Freedom, 'T'dom, 'Me'dom / Where's your 'We'dom? / This world needs a brand new 'Re'dom” (M.I.A., 2016) on the song “Borders,” the theme is brought back on “A.M.P (All My People),” where M.I.A. raps about the resilience of coming back and rising each time she is put down. On the track, she presents a chain of music and information distribution, akin to an underground clandestine organization that dismisses the big media, stating that “This is immediate / We don't need no media / Feel it, reel it, pull it / We gon' light the city up” (M.I.A., 2016). As with other lyrics on the album, she talks about being united with the struggling people and speaking their truth. In the song “Finally,” she prides herself in reaching a point where she is unbothered by the haters and can be unapologetically herself now that she is sure of her legacy and her mission of shedding light on neglected people: “underneath my case / I'm gonna find me the bass / You get through / You get truth / And that's how it's gonna be / Cause I'm free and I'm a freak / All the people I love I try to keep” (M.I.A., 2016).

Album closer “Survivor” summarizes her trajectory and attitudes one more time, finding gratefulness in achieving what she did while still struggling with the hardships of the conflict witnessed in her youth and the price of being politically engaged in the media. Lines such as “Looking in the mirror, mood emoji fire / Trying not to remember my time in the fire” and “This war is never over / I ride through the sea like a pirate / Just to flow with the water” (M.I.A.,

2016), reinforce the ongoing battle of dealing with past traumas and keep on persevering on her goals. At last, she manifests the power of the 'We'dom conjured on the opening track. On the hook of "Survivor," she proudly and calmly defines herself as a "Survivor, survivor / Who said it was easy? / They can never stop we" (M.I.A., 2016). As tough as things might be, there is comfort to be found in knowing that humanity and unity persevere at the end of the day.

The Big Picture

After a look at these albums separately, their common themes can be noted with more assertiveness as they start to repeatedly emerge across the records. Collectively, the three albums analyzed by this study paint a portrait of life as a refugee with the following shared themes: hopefulness amidst hardships; work and hustle; ambivalence towards law enforcement; faith; and blending of musical scenes.

The theme of staying positive and maintaining hope amidst hardships is the most clearly identifiable as a shared element throughout the albums. In K'naan's record, it appears multiple times, but most notably in the song "Dreamer," which makes a case for having fun, dancing, and dreaming despite the problems, and in the smash hit "Wavin' Flag," which is an inspiring anthem for overcoming harsh conditions and a call for union in peace. For M.I.A., resilience and hopefulness are rooted in her own journey of coming back despite being put down, particularly in the songs "Finally" and "Survivor," which feature, respectively, the lyrics "I keep it moving forward to what's ahead of me / You gonna see I'm not gonna waste energy" and "I stay fly / Focus on staying higher" (M.I.A., 2016). Wyclef Jean notably hopes for better days on the song "Heaven's in New York," with a more doubtful attitude in "Welcome to the East," with a line that asks, "will there ever be peace on the Earth?" (Wyclef Jean, 2007). However, on the song "Selena," a tribute to the influential *Tejano* singer in the title becomes a celebration of

immigration and offers inspiration as the key to motivating immigrants on their journey, with the lyrics “Selena brought pride to a generation / Inspiration is the hope / For the immigration” (Wyclef Jean, 2007).

While not a new theme for these artists, mentions of unwanted police encounters as a refugee and immigrant, either documented or not, reflect a tangible aspect of immigrant life, which is marked by an ambivalence towards the police (Armenta & Rosales, 2019; Becerra et al., 2017). As a legally admitted immigrant, K’naan describes an encounter with law enforcement where a cop pulls him over and asks, “How many immigrants are in this sedan / And is anyone carryin’ any contraband?” to which he replies, “Not really but I’m late for my concert, man / And here’s a card for my lawyer Mr. Sam Goldman” (K’naan, 2009). Even as a recording artist and performer, K’naan still has to deal with common assumptions of drugs and criminality that are politically associated with immigrants (Bohn et al., 2014), being subjected to a biased line of questioning by a police officer. The misconception propagated by the media is unjust, as research shows that, in Canada, an increase in immigration is actually associated with a decrease in crime (Jung, 2020), and, in the U.S., native citizens are proportionally more likely to be arrested for drug crimes than both legal and undocumented immigrants (Light et al, 2020). While K’naan experiences the same kind of harassment many immigrants are subject to, in this case the artist expresses having an edge when compared to other refugees as his status as an established musician allows him to casually pull a lawyer’s business card and go about his day.

In the song “Visa,” M.I.A. comments on a vehicle crossing the U.S. border from Mexico. With a playful rhythm that gives a satirical edge to the song, she states “Mexicans say “hola!” / At the border I see the patroller cruising past in their car / Hiding in my Toyota Corolla, everybody say ‘Y.A.L.A.!’” (M.I.A., 2016). Data from the United States Customs and Border

Protection (2019) indicates that at least 8,000 people died while attempting to cross the U.S–Mexico border between 1998 and 2018. While the number of casualties includes accidental deaths related to drownings or extreme heat and dehydration in enclosed spaces, some were the results of use of force by Customs and Border Protection officers, with reported victims of fatal car chases and gunshots fired by federal agents (Salam, 2022). In the song “Visa,” the acronym “Y.A.L.A.,” which is recurrent for M.I.A., means “you always live again” and it is a play on the motto “Y.O.L.O.” - “you only live once,” popularized by rap artists such as Drake. In line with the Buddhist and Hindu belief of reincarnation, Y.A.L.A. has a practical effect here that is rather similar to Y.O.L.O., as in whether by believing one will be reborn multiple times or by assuming you only have this life, one should not be afraid of trying new things and living to the fullest. In this song, the characters hiding in the car to cross the border try to make the most out of the present by fearlessly going to a new land - even if it means they might lose their lives in the process.

In Wyclef’s album, a prime example of both an attempt to evade law enforcement and financial struggles can be found in the song “Hollywood Meets Bollywood (Immigration).” The song’s hook addresses a fear of law enforcement with the lyrics “Bounce when you hear the sound of them sirens / Bounce when they pull them guns cause they firing” (Wyclef Jean, 2007), and being overworked with lines in Spanish and English stating “mucho trabajo, poquito dinero / I can't take this no more, I've got to bounce” (Wyclef Jean, 2007). The album’s lead single, “Sweetest Girl (Dollar Bill)” goes all the way around to discuss how money drives the world and corrupts people. With lyrics such as “Some live for the bill, some kill for the bill (Yeah) / She whined for the bill, grind for the bill (Whoa) / And she used to be the sweetest girl,” Wyclef and featured artists Akon and Lil Wayne comment on how an immigrant single mother who was

once a promising student turned to sex work in order to pay the bills, facing violence in the streets when “She ended up in the wrong car / Bruised up, scarred hard (...) She take the loss 'cause she don't wanna see her child lose” (Wyclef Jean, 2007).

The hustle for money is the central theme of “Ali R U OK?” by M.I.A., a song which is essentially a conversation between an immigrant couple where the wife pleads the overworked husband to take some time off. A proverb popularized by the horror movie *The Shining* (Kubrick, 1980) is referenced in the wife’s verse “All work and no play / I think we need a holiday / All work and no play / Tell em it’s your birthday / All your best days are given to your boss way” (M.I.A., 2016). The response from the husband comes in the particularly enlightening verse where he justifies why he works so hard, saying “Sorry if I’m flaking / All this money that I be taking / I’m just shaking what I’m making / I’m sending bread and bacon / Back home so they can / Fix what's broken” (M.I.A., 2016). This scenario alludes to financial remittance, a common shared practice of immigrants who work not only to sustain themselves but also to send money back home (Amuedo-Dorantes et al., 2005). This reality is also reflected on K’naan’s track “15 Minutes Away,” which presents the excitement of someone getting a call from the bank saying that a money transfer is available to be picked up in 15 minutes. Divided in three sections, the song offers two personal perspectives of K’naan first struggling to pay the rent and getting a money transfer from his girlfriend then later making money as a musician and sending it back home to his grandmother, and the additional perspective of a Brazilian sex worker receiving a money transfer from a U.S. tourist.

Faith is a shared characteristic of the albums as they mention prayers for liberation and peace, with references to the Bible. On the same song that refers to Noah’s ark, M.I.A. writes from the perspective of someone crossing a border “I make a plan / Put it in God's hand / And

Jump in to that van,” (M.I.A., 2016) suggesting how faith and trusting a higher power are part of the refugee journey. In “Welcome to the East,” Wyclef Jean comments on the challenges of reconciling the faith with a violent world amidst so much death: “I can't count the hearses / That come out to masses, to churches, the verse is / Do unto others as you would have done unto you / Well welcome to the devil's penthouse, overlooking hell's view” (Wyclef Jean, 2007). While both K’naan and Wyclef have songs with spiritually melodic hooks that resemble prayers, such as “People Like Me” and “Heaven’s in New York,” respectively, the struggle of maintaining the faith goes a level beyond in K’naan’s song “15 Minutes Away,” in which he opens up to his grandmother back home about his career as a musician on the rise and maintaining his values (and spirituality) in the new land.

Soon as I leave the venue, this money I will send you
I still haven't gone astray, don't drink or smoke and sway
Though sometimes I don't pray
Your boy has grown up decent, grandma can you believe it? (K’naan, 2009)

The spirituality found in these works can be correlated to research that suggests religion is a strong coping mechanism for refugees processing grief and trauma (Adedoyin et al., 2016). While the congregation in faith-based groups has been linked to improved overcoming of tragedy, Deslandes and Anderson (2019) state that religion can have a paradoxical impact on the settling of refugees, as it has historically facilitated both tolerance and intolerance towards refugee groups.

While not always a lyrical theme, the fusion of different sounds coming from diverse corners of the globe and the exploration of distinct genres besides rap becomes a common element of the artists and albums analyzed. Although Wyclef’s album is the most clearly

collaborative record out of the three, featuring musicians from different ethnic rhythms and frequently namedropping cities and countries across the songs, K'naan's album features Ethiopian jazz samples and Jamaican ska and reggae, while M.I.A.'s explorative electronic sound palette incorporates Indian music samples and collaborations with musicians from countries such as Brazil and Jamaica. Rock music in particular gets a moment in the spotlight for Wyclef and K'naan, in songs "Riot" and "If Rap Gets Jealous," respectively. While the former features Lebanese singer Serj Tankian from heavy metal band System of a Down and Jamaican reggae musician Sizzla, the latter features guitarist Kirk Hammett from heavy metal band Metallica. The songs not only incorporate rock elements aesthetically, but lyrically place rock music alongside rap as a rebellious genre. Wyclef's song also throws reggae into the mix, mentioning in the hook that "It's them hip-hop boys, turn your radio down / It's the rock 'n roll boys, turn your radio down / It's them reggae boys, turn your radio down" (Wyclef Jean, 2007). By situating the three types of music as unwanted genres in a collaboration with artists who represent those genres, Wyclef uses sarcasm to promote the union of marginalized music. In a song that discusses the world's descent into despair, as he recounts being pulled over in Texas by a police officer who lets him go after Wyclef plays him an Elvis Presley song, music seems to be what ultimately unites people. K'naan, on the other hand, claims himself to be a rockstar and shoots down claims that he is not a legitimate rapper with the hook "If rap gets jealous cause of where I'm headed, I used to be a public enemy, don't forget it" (K'naan, 2009), which not only refers to the potential status of public enemy of a citizen evading a civil war but also is a reference to the influential Hiphop group Public Enemy, assembled in the U.S. in 1985. As a Black artist concerned with providing for his hometown, he further justifies his reasons for

incorporating rock music in a rap album and for not working with big name rap producers in the verse

I'm not white but I figured do it big because the slum needs me,
So instead of getting a beat from Kanye who would probably take half my budget,
I could save the back end and send it back to Mogadishu,
Where my family and friends getting patched up again. (K'naan, 2009)

While in his early days U.S. rapper and producer Kanye West charged \$250 dollars for producing a song, after he assisted in the making of #1 hit songs with Jay-Z in 2001 and became a big-name producer, he was reportedly charging \$30,000 per track (Barber, 2020). While the song “If Rap Gets Jealous” in *Troubadour* (K'naan, 2009) is a rework of a song present on K'naan's first album, the lines mentioning Kanye are new, and hint that even as he became a more established musician with a budget for his sophomore record, K'naan would rather save by not spending hefty sums on working with famous producers and instead remit money back to his hometown. Interestingly, *Troubadour* (K'naan, 2009) features songs produced by Hawaiian musician Bruno Mars months before he became a well-known – and more expensive - artist when he debuted as a vocalist on the track “Nothin' on You,” which went on to the top of the U.S. charts in 2010.

Finally, as all these albums tackle the refugee experience in ways that often overlap, they also possess discerning aspects that are particular of their artists. In K'naan's case, that particularity is manifested by the candid explorations and memories of his home country, which are marked by ambivalence as he longs for the people left behind and comments on the violence and lack of capital, education, and infrastructure in Somalia on songs such as “ABCs,” which features the lyrics

These streets ain't paved with no gold
Matter fact someone stole the light bulb
Nobody fat enough for lypo
They don't teach us to read and write, so...
They don't teach us the ABCs
We play on the hard concrete
All we got is life on the streets. (K'naan, 2009)

As a children's choir joins to sing the hook that starts with the line "They don't teach us the ABCs," K'naan points to how an education deficit prompts kids to be raised by the streets and to learn violence instead of being properly taught to read. While Wyclef Jean argues for fair immigration treatment for Haitians and M.I.A. raps about crossing borders, none of them dig deep into memories or the state of their home countries the way K'naan does.

Wyclef's particular approach is focused on the multicultural celebration of music and life manifested through carnival/carnaval. Out of the three albums in the *Carnival* series, *Carnival Vol. II: Memoirs of an Immigrant* (Wyclef Jean, 2007) is the one that most embodies festivity in its title both aesthetically and lyrically. Considering the other albums in the trilogy and the other two records analyzed in the study, it is the only album whose artwork does not feature the recording artist in the cover. Instead, *Vol. II's* cover features a single, bright Carnival mask against a dark background, highlighting the spark of color brought by the celebration and reminding the audience that in Carnival the individual is overshadowed by the collective - it does not matter who; everyone is welcome to join the dance as the music brings all together. Precisely because of that, Wyclef's album is the most collaborative of all three, weaving together a series of cultural celebrations around the globe for one big party celebrating immigration and

pledging for peace. While K'naan and M.I.A. have featured artists on their albums, the number of tracks with guest musicians does not outweigh the number of solo tracks, and their albums are not anchored on a particular cultural movement.

Lastly, *AIM* (M.I.A., 2016) is strongly concerned with making statements that are related to M.I.A.'s career and to her legacy both as a musician and someone with a socio-political mission. Likely because it was conceived as the artist's final album at the time, there are several songs that can be read as a summary of M.I.A.'s trajectory thus far, such as "Freedun" and "Survivor." Since K'naan and Wyclef Jean were in different career stages with no signs of stopping at the time of their albums' release, that is not a major concern on their records. Aesthetically, *AIM* (M.I.A., 2016) is also set apart by its heavily electronic sound, which is not only a common characteristic of M.I.A.'s work - frequently beat driven - but is also indicative of a shifting, complex UK Hip-hop scene in which the music is often tactical and de-lyricized (Mitchell, 2001).

It is worth noting that, among the analyzed albums, violent metaphors for love are a theme common to both Wyclef Jean and K'naan, but are not present in M.I.A. In *Troubadour* (K'naan, 2009), for example, the radiophonic single "Bang Bang" featuring Adam Levine from U.S. pop rock band Maroon 5 uses a gunshot as a metaphor for an Ethiopian woman breaking K'naan's heart. There is even a full-circle moment as a popular song recorded by Wyclef Jean's group Fugees is referenced by K'naan in the lines "Killing me softly, Lauryn or Kevorkian" (K'naan, 2009). While he struggles to figure out what are this woman's feelings for him, he wonders if she will gently mesmerize him, like Lauryn Hill's voice in the Fugees song, or if she will lead him to his death, the way Dr. Jack Kevorkian facilitated the assisted suicide of dozens of patients in the 1990s, becoming known in the media as "Dr. Death" (Roberts, & Kjellstrand,

1996). Teaming up again with Shakira after the success of “Hips Don’t Lie,” Wyclef discusses a battle for a lover’s attention in the song “King & Queen,” where “Many fight for the crown, but there's only one king / Many girls want the title, but there's only one queen” (Wyclef Jean, 2007). While in M.I.A. there are violent metaphors, such as bombs going off being related to assertiveness in “Go Off,” or even the album’s title hinting at an impending gunshot, none of the metaphors are related to a romantic interest. In fact, the closest the album comes to a romantic reference is in Zayn’s hook on the song “Freedun,” which might point to a different approach of the subject based on the gender of the artists – something that is ultimately beyond the scope of this study.

Final Thoughts

By highlighting aspects of hopefulness amidst hardships; work and hustle; ambivalence towards law enforcement; faith; blending of musical scenes; and showcasing individuality which sets their perspectives apart, the albums analyzed from Wyclef Jean, K’naan, and M.I.A. present multifaced portrayals of their refugee experiences. Through their music, these artists challenge master narratives of victimized and/or threatening refugees by adding human complexities to refugee trajectories as it provides them with agency to work out and make sense of their reality and allows for a heightened sense of identification and empathy on the listeners.

The refugee experiences expressed in the three albums bring attention to often overlooked aspects of refugeeism. The theme of staying hopeful amidst hardships directly opposes common depictions of refugees as hopeless (Skuse & Dowling, 2021), showcasing that their strength and positivity comes both from their own resilience and from their peers who motivate and inspire them. Faith can also be seen as a harbinger of hope, as the artists engage in prayers, incorporate sacred language and conversations with God, asking Him for protection,

guidance, and better days. Ideas of conflict and security can be observed in the theme of ambivalence towards law enforcement, which is reflective of a misconception that commonly associates immigrants with drugs and crime (Bohn et al., 2014; Jung, 2020), leading refugees to be cautious of encounters with police officers. Themes of work and hustle are seen as the songs present overworked characters who are trying not only to achieve a higher social status to gain societal respect, but are working twice as hard to sustain loved ones both in the new land and back home, as financial remittance becomes a shared practice among immigrants. Lastly, the musical fusion through a blending of musical scenes is observed both in aesthetic elements that incorporate transnational sounds and lyrics that promote a congregation of genres, musical celebrations, and display a variety of languages.

Considering the multiple readings that listeners can engage in decoding the musical texts, these albums might present different meanings to distinct groups of people. For fellow refugees and immigrants, the music analyzed might communicate a sense of protest and self-advocacy that speaks to in-group solidarity. For people in the host countries where these artists resettled to or stayed back home, the message might be one that discusses plights and hardships but frames them as globalized issues that the entire world is subject to, dismantling Othering views in the process and presenting music as a tool for compassion, union, and peace. However, for refugees who might not feel represented by Wyclef Jean, K'naan, and M.I.A.'s work, as well as for those in host nations who dismiss their musical discourse for whatever reason, the meanings here presented will not amount to much as they either might not perceive it to be reflective of reality or to not have any practical influence. These potential readings are further addressed in the conclusion chapter, along with a discussion of the implication of these findings.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

The present study sought to understand how refugee musicians utilize the music form to discuss their refugee identities and whether or not their representations of self differ from major media depictions of refugees. A textual analysis of three albums from refugee artists from different nations has uncovered how their music can represent a counternarrative that challenges dominant narratives of hopeless or threatening refugees (Skuse & Dowling, 2021). The artists here analyzed use their music to work out their transnational identities through rap sampling, international collaborations, and lyrical themes that highlight their hopes and dreams, their refugee experiences, and their personal issues. Adding complexity to refugee portrayals, these self-accounts and musical explorations contribute to the scholarly and mediatic discussion of what it means to be a refugee in the 21st century.

With this study, I argue for a music of refuge, a space where artists who hold refugee and immigrant identities can work out individual and shared identities while engaging in resistance to dominant media narratives. Combining a sense of self-agency with counternarratives that challenge dehumanized news media representations, the music of refuge is an aesthetic practice that holds social power as it allows for a more dynamic, creative, and encompassing arena of existence and subsistence for refugees.

The present analysis uncovered three distinct (yet complementary) modes of time that artists can employ inside the music of refugee. The first looks at the past, as exemplified by K'naan's frequent memories of the home country, and grapples with what could have been done and the disruption caused by conflict. The second looks at the present, as exemplified by Wyclef Jean's multicultural celebration of music and life, focusing on the current state of the world and what can be done in the micro level (family) and the macro (society) to inspire peace. The third

and final mode looks at the future, as exemplified by M.I.A.'s statements about career and legacy, pondering about the impacts of actions on the future, imagining tomorrow, and asserting individual and shared missions.

These three modes are not mutually exclusive, but rather can occur simultaneously. As noticed in the albums analyzed, even though they have a predominant mode, they also engage in different perspectives. For example, unlike the distinctive quality of *Troubadour*, that looks at what was left behind, K'naan's song "Dreamer" operates in the present mode when suggesting a party where people can "forget all the fighting" for a moment and in the future mode as it imagines peace stretching across the seas, resulting in a world where there would be no need for refugees.

This chapter summarizes this thesis' findings and their implications by discussing what they mean for refugee studies, how they can be read as refugee counternarratives, what their contributions are to the mediatic landscape, and where they fit into the Hip-hop discourse and the music industry. The study's limitations and directions for future research are also provided before the concluding remarks.

Refugee Studies

Considering that historical background has been largely neglected by research on migration and Refugee Studies and that refugee populations have been "silenced" by history (Marfleet, 2007), this study is placed on an upward momentum of long overdue attention to refugees and their stories. By presenting a careful examination of texts from refugee authors who discuss their own refugee experiences while placing their remarks in the context of migration studies, mediatic discourses on migration, and the background of their home countries, the present thesis contributes to a growing attention on how refugees tell their own stories. Using an

artistic expression of Hiphop, these artists found a way to fight back against being historically silenced, reaching multiple countries with their music and making their voices heard beyond the musical industry, but also impacting scholarly research.

If Kaye (1994) argues that refugees must be present on an agenda that is distinct from immigrants and from ethnic minorities, the works from refugees analyzed here seem to go in a different direction, being inclusive of both immigrant populations and ethnic minorities. Perhaps due to the fact that both refugees and immigrants organize migration through social networks (Hein, 1993) and the three artists analyzed here are also part of marginalized ethnic backgrounds, they do not take on exclusive stances against those groups. On the contrary, while often discussing the refugee experience in particular, they address and celebrate immigration in all of its forms. That is seen particularly on Wyclef Jean's album, which brings the world immigrant on the title and tackles the immigrant experience in the U.S. with guest musicians coming from different countries.

On the topic of race, while K'naan frames his Blackness as not an issue in the context of African countries; his album indicates that being Black in North America has historically been associated with violent discrimination. In the song "America," U.S. rapper Chali 2na states, "If you pay attention to the past you will see / Not long ago you black they'd hang your ass from a tree" (K'naan, 2009). While the verse acutely reminds listeners of the lynching and killing of Black people by white supremacy groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, who aimed to "purify" the nation (Quarles, 1999), it is relevant to note that this is the only time when racial conflicts are explicitly addressed in the albums analyzed for this study. Even if the artists' ethnic backgrounds influenced their experiences, they seem more concerned with either addressing refugeeism and

migration in particular or simply advocating and identifying with marginalized populations in general.

While the artists promote a sense of union through music, Kaye's (1994) argument of separating refugee discourse seems particularly aimed at real political change that must be more considerate of refugee matters, something that the artists analyzed here seem to hint through their activist work focused on people of shared backgrounds. M.I.A. in particular has drawn mediatic attention for claiming that U.S. media are less acceptive of Syrian, Muslim, and Pakistani topics than other issues, stating for *ES Magazine*, "It's interesting that in America the problem you're allowed to talk about is Black Lives Matter. It's not a new thing to me — it's what Lauryn Hill was saying in the 1990s, or Public Enemy in the 1980s" (Godwin, 2016, para. 12). While this study is focused on what the artists have to tell about refugeeism through music, it is relevant to acknowledge that they can use public statements to differentiate the refugee cause from other topics of social relevance.

As many migration theories and models for migration fail to consider the history of the individual (Bloch, 2002; Marfleet, 2007) the perspective offered from refugees who use music to tell their own stories to a broad audience contributes to research as analyses such as this one investigate their counternarratives and histories. If even more inclusive frameworks such as Migration Systems Theory lack unique dimensions of migration and limit refugees' self-agency (Bueno & Prieto-Rosas, 2022), music proves to be an avenue through which refugees can choose to focus on the dimensions they want, highlighting the multifaceted and multiform aspects of migration that are challenging for theory building (Arango, 2002). Thus, the case study and comparative approach here employed is valuable as it uncovers both shared experiences and particular realities of people from refugee backgrounds.

Refugee Counternarratives

The albums here analyzed present a counternarrative to dominant narratives of refugees by discussing the refugee experience through a new light that is both thematically broader and more focused in individual accounts. Amidst a plethora of mediatic sources and channels and political discussions of migration, K'naan, M.I.A. and Wyclef Jean use music as a way to work out their identities and contribute their own perspective on what it means to be a refugee.

Although the dominant narrative on refugees often labels them as either helpless victims of distant contexts or as threats to economy and security (Skuse & Dowling, 2021; Połowska-Kimunguyi, 2022), the three albums analyzed in this thesis offer new dimensions and meanings of the refugee experience.

Wyclef Jean (2007) uses *Carnival Vol. II: Memoirs of an Immigrant* to present a celebration of subaltern cultures around the globe; discussions of violence in the streets; the struggles of living as an immigrant; the nervous state of the world; an enjoyment of the present while hoping for better days; and calls for peace. On *Troubadour*, K'naan (2009) deals with memories of his home country; the violence in the streets; hope for better days; an attempt to stay positive and to have fun amidst the hardships; ruminations about wasted futures due to conflict; and financial struggles. Finally, *AIM* finds M.I.A. (2016) presenting a summary of her career; questions regarding political issues and the state of the media; statements about bravado and resilience; the visibility of marginalized populations; life as an immigrant and refugee with financial struggles; and the difficulties of crossing borders.

While it is possible that some of these themes offer readings that would fit within dominant narratives of refugees as victims or as threats, all of these albums add complexity to those topics by offering new perspectives on them. If the refugees presented in the songs found

themselves in difficult conditions, the songs also present how *they* dealt with it, highlighting the self-agency of these populations and going against portrayals that present refugees as passive. Themes of faith also appear throughout the records, showcasing a source of hope for the refugees. Whether tied to religion or not, the music highlights how hope and positiveness are very much still a part of these refugees' lives, opposing dominant representations of them as hopeless. When it comes to threatening frames, while all these artists discuss themes of security and economy, it becomes clear that they all ultimately seek peace and comfort. On Wyclef's album, both a capitalist society where money corrupts people and the nervous state of a world stricken by wars can be alleviated, even if just for a moment, with a musical celebration that unites people. K'naan's record offers many memories and ruminations about the artist's homeland which is marked by conflict and financial difficulty. However, he presents these themes as important not for their proliferation, but to bring awareness of East African contexts to Western audiences. The financial struggles present in all three albums are also marked by the artists' desire to give back to their home countries, aiming to benefit not only themselves, but family and friends facing economic vulnerability. While these are just some of the themes found on the albums, they add new depths to the common narratives of refugees. As Mora (2014) reminds us, the power of a counternarrative lies in the fact that stories from marginalized groups must be told by individuals who come from the margins. The artists here analyzed do precisely that, engaging at times in a discourse directly oppositional to one or more narratives, but always offering a new perspective and insights that are missing from master narratives.

The findings here unearthed also can be linked to previous refugee counternarrative studies conducted in social spheres other than music. K'naan's reminiscence of home combines sadness, longing, and reflection, resembling the research outcomes by Tabar (2007), who

identified a sense of melancholy on refugees' self-accounts after those refugees faced violent experiences of dispossession. This melancholy further informed counter-definitions of subjectivity and agency, which can be noticed in K'naan's ruminations about wasted futures due to war and the wish expressed in the song "Dreamer," where he visualizes a world where refugees were not a reality with lyrics that imagine, "Instead peace could stretch across the seas / So finally we could just rest and ease, no refugees" (K'naan, 2009). It is also useful to consider that, among the artists analyzed, K'naan is the one who is further away from his home country – geographically speaking, at least. That might not only increase a sense of having to adjust to a nation that is half a world apart from his native land, but also to the feeling of isolation inflicted by the distance.

The present study uncovers counternarratives that, in line with Martínez García (2021), go against mainstream attempts to wipe out or flatten out stories from individuals. Furthermore, studies that use a counternarrative lens such as this thesis reveal stories and marginalized experiences that have been potentially underexplored and overlooked (Milner & Howard, 2013). By analyzing refugee stories that come directly from people from refugee backgrounds instead of the hegemonic news media discourse on refugees, a more accurate glimpse of their complexities is revealed.

Communication

As K'naan, M.I.A., and Wyclef Jean use music to work out their identities and try to make sense of the world we live in, they create meanings through music and present avenues for a counternarrative that potentially redefines and reclaims what refugeeism means. The textual analysis conducted in this thesis uncovers those meanings available to audiences and what they might mean in relation to mass media narratives built on refugees.

Considering Hall's (1980) communication model, the artists here analyzed both negotiate and reject hegemonic messages on refugees coded by the dominant news media that presents threatening or victimized refugees. As their songs show discursive formations that can bring people together in a sense of union and shared identities, their music could represent a more active decoding of dominant messages as the songs resist and create new meanings that challenges dominant discourses and speak not only to fellow refugees, but to the people of their host country, to those back home, and to a broader audience.

Considering the updated model proposed by Ross (2011), in which both coding and decoding can happen through dominant, negotiated, and oppositional positions, this thesis finds that K'naan, M.I.A., and Wyclef Jean produce messages from negotiated and oppositional sites as they present their own refugee views that differ from the mainstream discourse and advocate for marginalized immigrants and other groups. When the audience reads such messages as oppositional and/or negotiated, it is likely that the artist's goal is achieved, as a sense of understanding, identification, and community is built between the musicians and their listeners. When a message coded from an oppositional stance is decoded with a dominant meaning, Ross' (2011) model indicates that there is a misinterpretation of the intended meaning. In this case, arguments involving ethics and commodification of social struggles could lead audiences to read some of the messages brought forth by the music as dominant, perhaps pointing out that these artists have record deals and a platform to distribute their music and still profit from it while living in developed countries. However, the case persists that these artists use their achieved platforms to present messages that contrast and add depth to common portrayals of refugeeism.

In a world where refugees have been historically silenced in a number of spheres including the media, decision-making arenas, and scholarship (Marfleet, 2007), the visibility

achieved by the artists who choose to use their music to work out refugee experiences and discuss their own journeys is quite an accomplishment.

Featuring perspectives of individual stories and impressions presented by K'naan, M.I.A., and Wyclef Jean, their music offers a relevant counterpoint to newspapers that showcase refugees as large, dehumanized swarms of people (Bleiker et al., 2013; Abid et al., 2017; Braxton, 2021). As news media portrayals lacking personal accounts are likely to show an incoming mass of people as a threat to national security, the music from refugee artists offers a multifaceted account on refugee journeys, focusing on human perspectives of people who faced displacement situations.

“Tragedy” becomes a common mediatic and political motif when addressing refugees (Hansen, 2021). And while the news agenda can promote social exclusion of refugees and migrants (Perovic, 2016), the works analyzed here propose instead a celebration. Whether by celebrating their cultural and musical heritage, celebrating their own trajectories when facing adversities, or inviting all people to celebrate life through music, the artists shift the discourse focus from fearfulness and hesitation to hope and community.

Discourses of Race and Politics

Previous studies on the migration discourses in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States describe racialized and political discourses as part of these countries' public agenda. As Waite (2022) noticed, Britain has a hierarchy of “preferred” immigrants and refugees; the U.S. became concerned with the brown-skinned man (Nawyn, 2019); and Canada expects immigrants to incorporate Canadian ways, ultimately reacting with intolerance towards cultural particularities (Li, 2003). While race does not become a major conversation in the albums analyzed, there are permeating ideas that are associated with race throughout them.

Featuring Black U.S. rappers and verses in English and Somali set to Ethiopian rhythms, K'naan's song "America" challenges the racial paradigm of nation where the United States is traditionally identified as white, pointing perhaps to a shifting demographic composition of the U.S.. As the nation is on a steady journey of a majority nonwhite population, a "majority minority" society emerges, being fueled especially by immigration (Omi & Winant, 2014). Furthermore, when rapper Chali 2na offers a sharp reminder of racial oppression and violence manifested in the United States, the song becomes a materialized place of resistance for racialized others.

When Wyclef questions disparities in the treatment between refugees from Cuba and Haiti, he does not offer an answer as to why Cubans "get to stay" and Haitians are "turned away," but it is likely that race and economic aspects of class play a role in that distinction. While Cubans are politically privileged by U.S. law for escaping communist regimes (Drew, 2003), the majority of them identify as white, while Haitian immigrants - largely of African descent - get consistently denied asylum and face significantly more challenges to legal residence (Neilan, 2011). Such racially marked rejection is systemically legitimized by political figures such as President Donald Trump who reportedly questioned why the United States should welcome "immigrants from Haiti and 'shithole countries' in Africa" (Fram & Lemire, 2018) rather than from predominantly white, Scandinavian places like Norway. Freedom also might cost more for Black immigrants according to The Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services (2020), which found that bail bonds for Haitian immigrants detained by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) costed 54% higher than for other immigrants.

If social, economic, and political forces determine the substance and value of racial categories according to racial formation theory (Omi & Winant, 2014), it is natural to conjecture

that these nonwhite artists refugee experiences would be different had they looked or acted more like the people from their host nation. If the UK, for example, has been historically more welcoming of white immigrants from countries that are culturally more similar to them (Waite, 2022), it is likely that M.I.A. would have a different, perhaps more positive refugee experience than the experience she had coming from a South Asian country with distinct ethnical and cultural formations.

Since race is socially perceived as a marker to which specific characteristics are associated (Omi & Winant, 2014), it is possible that some of the themes discussed by the albums were exacerbated as they intersected with racialized and ethnic conflicts. That might be particularly true for the theme of ambivalence towards law enforcement, which research has shown intersects with race and migration as Muslim, Arab, and South Asian individuals were subject to discriminatory enforcement of legislation and became apprehensive of contacts with law enforcement and society in general as they were targets of hate and bias crimes after the 9/11 attacks in the U.S. (Immigration Policy Center, 2008). Additionally, data indicates that Black immigrants are more likely to be detained for criminal convictions than the overall immigrant population (Trostle & Zheng, 2016), with a noted racial disparity in the enforcement system of immigration policies.

When looking at the British migration discourse, Zgonjanin (2022) found a rhetoric of “them versus us” being pushed to the white working class as migrants were discursively painted as threats and used as political scapegoats. In M.I.A’s album, a rhetoric of “them versus us” might be alluded to in the themes that deal with questions regarding political issues and the state of the media; statements about bravado and resilience; and the visibility of marginalized populations. As the final song in the album features the line “They can never stop we” (M.I.A.,

2016) a few times, we are reminded that the process of constructing identities is often based on comparison, differentiation, and opposition (Dominelli, 2002). After the analysis of the entire album, however, it can be argued that the rhetorical difference between the British political discourse and M.I.A.'s message rests in the fact that nationalist discourse attempts to squash and flush whole populations off the map, while the discourse exemplified by the line found in the song "Survivor" expresses precisely what its title says: a desire to survive and persevere as a group, resisting oppressive campaigns.

Finally, an insightful demystification of the Other can be observed through the analysis of the albums. As those in positions of power discursively define subordinate groups and ascribe them with problematic or inferior characteristics, these groups start to become socially perceived as Others (Jensen, 2011). If the mainstream news media traditionally inputs on refugees traits of victims or threats, the records from K'naan, M.I.A., and Wyclef Jean resist Othering views not only by adding complexity to their portrayals and revealing multifaced journeys, but also by connecting immigrant stories to social struggles and showing how violence and wars are a global issue. That way, they indicate that anyone, regardless of being a refugee or not, is subject to being a victim of despairing twists of fate and that conflict is a reality not just in "remote" places, but also right by where those in positions of power are. In a context where people are displaced everywhere, with particularly overlooked cases of internal displacement, these albums encourage people to think about all kinds of displacement, including those happening around us.

Music Industry and Hip-hop

As musicians dealing with questions of representation, K'naan, M.I.A., and Wyclef Jean discursively use their music to address political questions. While in the eyes of the audience and the industry the fact that their music is charged with sociopolitical issues can make their work

less palatable when seeing music as an entertainment device, their music speaks to concepts of social expression where the music is both informed by the social effect on the individual and the role of the individual in the society (Frith, 1996). Conversely, the artists become subject to questioning regarding their credibility, even if they come from refugee backgrounds, as their social status as popular recording artists who are signed to industry labels might prompt speculations that they are not qualified to talk about the refugee situation or lead people to wonder if their songs have any relevance as protests (McLean et al., 2010). However, the question of their impact and reach must be acknowledged as, precisely for operating within well-established record labels, the artists were able to have successful commercial releases with campaigns that included high-budgets for music videos, collaboration with high-profile artists and a wide distribution that allowed their records to reach mainstream music charts – which ultimately granted more visibility to the songs and their themes.

Showcasing the potential of music as a tool of self-expression, the artists analyzed in this thesis perform identities, create songs with a sense of agency, and negotiate social relationships, backing Ruud's (1997) claim that music can be used by people to position themselves in relation to time, place, values, attitudes, and other people.

While the songs analyzed are not placed in a particular revolutionary context, they work to promote union between refugees and the general public, offering the artists' perspective on issues such as immigration policies, as the artists engage in anti-war discourse. The calls for peace present in the albums in some ways relate to what Knupp (1981) observed in anti-war songs from the 1960s that appealed to solidarity and did more in the way of reacting to unwanted circumstances than to enact desired changes. Nonetheless, as Friedman (2013) would posit, songs with protest messages inserted in the industry system are a part of modern socio-politics,

and regardless of achieving practical results or not, they prove relevant as they are an expression of the human condition of refugees.

The findings also relate to studies that point to the internationalization of music and multicultural tendencies brought forth by globalization (Folkestad, 2002). Particularly through the practice of sampling songs from their places of origin or from neighboring countries, the artists I analyze find ways to incorporate the musical legacy of their home nations and honor that in their new countries. These tendencies further corroborate a tendency observed in studies where refugees will not necessarily focus on preserving the cultural identity from their home country, but rather negotiate the culture of the new country to incorporate innovative elements in cross-cultural musical expressions (Marsh, 2012; Karlsen, 2013; Lidskog, 2016).

Understanding Hiphop as a global phenomenon, the rap genre has been used to create a space for refugee narratives to exist and express different modes of music of refuge. As a multifaceted, available artform, rap allows refugees to represent themselves in a way that is distinct from major news media portrayals, crafting counternarratives in entertainment media while also presenting ideas that aid in society's understanding of what it means to be a refugee in the 21st century.

Considering the historical origins of rap, K'naan, M.I.A., and Wyclef Jean further use the medium as socially conscious expression of rebellion, highlighting the genre's characteristics of identity negotiation (Richardson, 2006) to challenge dominant discourses based on lived experiences. These artists experiment with aesthetical potentialities that honor traditions and blend seemingly disparate influences, engage in wordplay, the use of metaphors, and chopped up vocals to invent, redefine, and reconstruct language as needed. They also take such language exploration to another level by acknowledging and incorporating multiple languages across the

records, sometimes switching idioms in the same line - which is reflective of bilingual identities and the fact that all of these artists had to learn a new language to navigate life in their host country.

As Kelley (1997) argues, Hiphop is not only a site of identity negotiation, but it has practical implications in the economic lives of Black and Brown artists and their surrounding personnel. If, on the one hand, the musicians here analyzed rise to fame prompted them to secure record deals operating inside the capitalist system, their artistry and control over their music started through self-managed careers and was supported by an underground economy that gave them visibility in the first place. Considering rap not only as a musical expression of culture but a form of viable subsistence, the self-agency of refugee artists is taken to a practical level that goes beyond the realm of musical signifiers and manifests itself as a real tool of change in their lives as it allows them to reach new places in the society.

Lastly, the albums analyzed in this study argue for music that is more globalized than ever. By intentionally collaborating with other artists from different countries and incorporating meaningful samples from Jamaican and Ethiopian origins, for example, they promote transnational fusions and nod to global negotiations of rap, where a fusion with international sounds becomes part of the message.

Directions for Future Research

Considering the present study's limitations as potential directions for future research, I ponder here both possible drawbacks of this study and constructive pathways for further investigation. If, on the one hand, the works analyzed here showcase the multifaceted aspects of forced migration, they also make it difficult to state that even their shared characteristics will be common to all or most refugees.

As there are multiple factors that affect migration, it is possible that the experience of the majority of refugees who move to neighboring countries, for example, will be different than those artists here analyzed, who moved further away than their immediate neighbors. In fact, it is very likely that such experience will be dissimilar considering that neighboring countries might have a higher overlap in cultural elements and the social impact may be lesser than other countries. That is further suggested by media studies that show, for example, that Türkiye – which hosts 64.7% of the Syrian refugees – would mostly assess refugees in human terms in the Turkish news media (Sunata & Yıldız, 2018). Future studies could aim to assess how the themes found in the music from refugees who move to neighbor countries compare to the themes here uncovered, which would potentially showcase discursive variations on migration.

Based on the meta-analysis by Seo and Kavakli (2022), the present study met one of the potential avenues for new research as it presented a comparative look at three different refugee accounts coming from different nations. However, the authors also highlight a need for more longitudinal studies, which would look at a particular subject over time. Future studies could benefit from focusing on how a particular portrayal has evolved through the years and could also investigate the music coming from countries that host the highest number of refugees- namely Türkiye, Colombia, and Uganda (UNHCR, 2022).

While K'naan, M.I.A., and Wyclef Jean present ethnic diversity as they each come from different displacement routes (Somalia/Canada, Sri Lanka/United Kingdom, Haiti/United States), they all represent individuals coming from the Global South to the Global North, relocating to nations where the primary language is English. This might contribute to more shared themes, which is useful for this study but might fail to grasp a broader reality of refugeeism. Thus, future studies could look at works from refugee artists who moved within their global pole or

experienced the arguably rarer North to South migration, as well as to nations where English is not the primary language.

Additional avenues for investigation could also consider intersectional identities in more detail. For populations who, on top of being a refugee, are also part of other traditionally marginalized groups, research indicates that the matter of representation is even more challenging. A photojournalism study by Amores et al. (2020) found that refugee women were not only underrepresented, but they were also associated with a more passive, condescending secondary role when compared to men, which can contribute to what the researchers point to as symbolic annihilation. Moreover, for LGBTQIA+ refugee populations, storytelling can be a powerful tool to validate truths, but the societal structure can work against them by “silencing their voices and reproducing power hierarchies” (Hanson-Easey et al., 2014, p. 362). While the most notable difference between the male artists analyzed and M.I.A. was the lack of romantic themes from her own perspective, questions of gender and sexual orientation might further affect both refugee experiences and their depictions.

While the counternarrative lens here employed mainly considered how the texts presented refugeeism in light of dominant narratives, contrasting the musical discourse with the public life of the artists themselves beyond the music might also prove interesting. Wyclef Jean, for example, was the subject of controversy when his charitable foundation for Haiti went out of business after mishandling donations that did little to actually improve Haitian projects (Sontag, 2012). Frequent subject of public scrutiny, M.I.A. went from being involved in discourses against big-pharma to voicing a distrust of vaccines and 5-G technology (Snapes, 2020) during the pandemic, which might have contributed to the spread of misinformation. Questions of ethical responsibility of public figures were beyond the scope of this textual analysis that focused

on the discursive themes found on particular albums, but future studies could investigate how the stances of public figures in social media and other outlets might intersect with the reception of their music, artistic credibility, and potential for representation.

While music can represent a particular type of media that grants the artists more freedom, it is important to acknowledge that media texts function within a broader range of public discourse. That way, the small handful of representations analyzed here might not have a major influence on overall refugee representations. While it is important to understand how refugees use a specific media to challenge master narratives, studies that measure the impact of such counternarrative stories are needed.

Closing Remarks

As topics of immigration and refugees become the issue of political debates and the news media glosses over complexities of mass displacements, it becomes increasingly important to listen, first of all, to refugees themselves in order to understand who they are, what they go through, and what they represent. As this study shows, music can be a particularly effective avenue through which refugees can work out their identities and resist dominant narratives.

Using a musical genre historically situated in resistance, K'naan, M.I.A., and Wyclef Jean are just a few examples of refugees who find creative mediatic ways to manifest their identities and stories by creating their own narratives. While it is my hope that more research can shine a light on this matter, it is rewarding to unpack the power of music as a universal language that manages to uplift voices, tell stories, and promote union.

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