This article uses an ethnographic methodology grounded in a transversal understanding of both black feminism and hip hop politics. Using ethnographic fieldwork, including interviews with eight black identified “third culture” women in Dubai, UAE, and featuring three of those interviews, I argue that hip hop provides an important point of encounter to negotiate local to local connections in ways that undermine the national boundaries erected by states and reinforced through racializing practices that are often expressed through the cultural logics of capitalist heteropatriarchy. These reciprocal interviews offer insights into commonalities and differences among black women in very different parts of the world, whose identities are shaped, in part, by their involvement in hip hop culture.

Keywords: Arab women hip hop artists, cultural resistance, Dubai UAE, global hip hop, transversal politics

I am who I am, doing what I came to do, acting upon you like a drug or a chisel to remind you of your me-ness as I discover you in myself.

—Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

Politically driven/on a mission
To execute a solitary’s vision
Raised on foreigners soil/my terre ferme
A country by definition
Fed by strangers/a product of cosmopolitan division
My African heritage/a distant documentary
I see on television.

—“Neither Here Nor There” by Reem Osman
Sudanese spoken word artist who lives in Dubai
Introduction

Over the last twenty years, hip hop has rightly taken some harsh criticism for its misogynist lyrics and sexist videos, but the fact is that hip hop is a complex global form of cultural expression whose ethos, aesthetics, and even style is eclectic and contested. It is not the exclusive domain of male rappers and it is not confined to the United States. All over the world, hip hop provides young women with a venue to express discontent with gender relations, articulate new readings and interpretations of the world around them, as well as build translocal connections with their counterparts elsewhere on the planet. Hip hop provides the context to work through the dialogics of difference and identity that Mae Henderson (2000) argues, “characterizes both black women’s subjectivity and black women’s discourse” (34). Through local to local encounters, black women in hip hop produce counterdiscourses to dominant idioms of blackness that are rooted in singular, geographically nested, and monolithic notions of identity.

In this project, I explore how hip hop provides political space to foment translocal dialogues about race and race making, culture, gender, and resistance in the African diaspora. To explore these issues, I have tried to forge an ethnographic methodology grounded in a transversal understanding of both black feminism and hip hop politics. Black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins (2000) explains “transversal politics” in the following way: It requires “rethinking of cognitive frameworks used to understand the world and to change it. Transversal politics require rejecting the binary thinking that has been so central to oppression of race, class, gender, sexuality and nation” (245). Within this framework, blackness is a relational identity produced by migratory histories and the travel of bodies and narratives across time and space. Within a transversal framework, we can better trace how understandings of identity and black cultural practices morph within and around hip hop as a discursive site. I use fieldwork in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE), built around the voices of Afro-Arab female hip hop generation artists in order to demonstrate the importance of translocal subjectivities in framing analyses of global black women’s political expression. In other words, it is important to look at how women of African descent in specific locales relate to one another and resonate with one another as a form of cultural border crossing and bridge-building.

This project draws inspiration from theoretical and methodological innovations of scholars who write within and across the fields of contemporary hip hop politics and culture, contemporary black feminism, and diverse geographies. The focal point of this article is ethnographic
interviews with three (out of eight interviewed) Dubai-based, black-identified women. In this article I hope to magnify the experiences of subjects who have been overlooked in African diaspora studies: contemporary Afro-Arab women who reside in and move through global cities in the Islamic world. All of the participants are involved in hip hop culture—including rap, spoken word, and female vocalism—that circulate in and around the UAE. By examining a slice of their life histories and artistic expressions, we see another layer of gender and sexual realities among the post-millennial generation of Black-identified women in the Middle East.

Hip hop’s geographic “origins” are rooted in the South Bronx borough of New York (Rose 1994; Watkins 2005; Ogden 2007). Today, hip hop exceeds its origins as the art form has metastasized to different parts of the globe. What we now call “hip hop” is understood to be characterized by a synergy of factors that includes but is not limited to its eclectic musical qualities including: “the break, the flow, mixing, sampling,” alongside hip hop’s stubborn inclination toward cultural hybridization and the incitement of border-bounding oppositional youth politics (Rose, 1994; Chang, 2006; Terkourafi, 2010). Hip hop’s genius is realized through the iconoclastic ways that artists re-imagine the original elements by infusing them with the cultural and aesthetic character of specific geopolitical and cultural locales, while at the same time mapping new forms of genre-bending cultural and artistic resistance (Gupta-Carlson 2010; Osumare 2007; Forman 2002). Hip hop draws attention to what Halifu Osumare (2007) has described as “connective marginalities” between youth from diverse geographic and cultural settings. Within this framework, hip hop functions as an embodied philosophy of urban cultural resistance that has changed and shifted with the heightened realities of travel and cultural osmosis produced by the expansion of digital technology and globalization in the neoliberal era. While, as Marc Perry (2008) notes, “hip hop has become an increasing consequential route of global black identity formation” it has also become a premiere space for female artists to critique micro- and macro-level masculinist state and cultural practices that shape their positionality as black women in a globalized world.

**Hip Hop Feminism as a Global Site of Cultural Insurgency**

As Mark Anthony Neal (2013) teaches us, hip hop cosmopolitanism is “marked in part by a symbolic homelessness from mainstream American morality, political relevancy, and cultural gravitas” (36). While mega-artists like Kanye West and Jay-Z have personified
male-centric notions of hip hop cosmopolitanism through their global capitalist exploits, lesser well known women of color have embraced hip hop as a means to articulate political critique and discontent that are often centered in the experience of not belonging. For example, the music of British recording artist M.I.A., of Tamil (South Indian) descent, exemplifies this trend. Not only do her beats blend American hip hop soul, rhythm and blues (R&B), reggae beats with global electronica, her lyrics take on themes like immigration and state violence with fervor. She addresses a wide range of political issues from Muslim women’s right to drive in Saudi Arabia to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. Several of her songs, including “Paper Planes,” invoke the ideal of “third world democracy” in order to underscore the political and economic interdependence between first world and third world, and the exploitation of the latter by the former. Without falling into the artistic dead-end of proselytization, she advocates for the achievement of global youth solidarity by calling attention to the worldwide problem of racialized poverty by highlighting the social and political disenfranchisement of the children of migrant workers. Importantly, her music also provides insights into the way racialized immigrant youths subvert and challenge global capitalism at first world borders.

Gender, culture, ethnicity, and place continue to operate as powerful organizing concepts and oppositional discourses in hip hop in diverse and multifaceted ways (Isoke 2013; Pough 2004). For artists like Reem Osman who is featured in the epigraph, hip hop represents a kind of fluidity, “neither here nor there,” and in that fluid space there is room to re-imagine oneself and the world. For Reem and others, hip hop is practiced as a dialogic mode of cultural expression for personal and spiritual exploration (Lane 2011; Fernandes 2011; Malone and Martinez 2010). In another vein, Palestinian rappers like Abeer Al Zinati and Safa Hathoot, address gender inequality head on, locating women’s subordination in the interstices of intra-Arab sexism and racist Israeli militarism. Both artists passionately link Palestinian national liberation to women’s liberation from patriarchy (Eqeiq 2010). In their music, hip hop serves as a fertile site of encounter between the marginalized youth in the West and Middle East, providing opportunities to (bear) witness (to) the contradictions of hyper-invisibility of global youth culture, on the one hand, and the increasingly dismal economic opportunities and life prospects for urban youths coming of age in the second decade of the 21st century.

Hip hop continues to be a rich and dynamic source of cultural insurgency in many different parts of the world. Among other competing messages, a distinct strand of hip hop culture is one of defiance, resistance to oppression and repression, and impatience with the
status quo. Importantly, female artists have taken center stage in efforts to preserve and perpetuate hip hop as a source of political expression and social transformation for Muslim women. The tensions between women’s ability to express their relation to Islam while criticizing the exclusion of women in the public sphere is a common theme among female rappers in the Middle East. Soultana, a Moroccan hip hop artist, debunks the myth of Muslims as religious extremists and terrorists in her lyrics. Rapping uncovered, Soultana declared, “Our Islam is peace, love and respect. We are a generation calling for peace.” In spite of persistent threats and dismissals by Muslim men in her audiences, she counters, “I read the Koran” (Wright 2011; author’s italics). Her own personal readings and understanding of the Qur’anic scripture trump the opinions of men who rely on patriarchal dogma to interpret the holy book. By rapping, dancing, and singing in public while embracing Islam, Soutlana refuses to capitulate to the dominant ideology of Islam as articulated, practiced, and regulated by the heteromasculinist state. At the same time she asserts her own image of a Muslim woman as sensual, confident, outspoken, and independent.

Doing Hip Hop in Dubai: Feminist Ethnography as an “Improvisation Zone”

On February 28, 2012, just a week before I delivered a version of this article at the first Gender and Women’s Studies in the Middle East Conference in the United Arab Emirates, a Malaysian government committee banned Erykah Badu, an African American neo-soul hip hop artist, from performing at a sold out concert in Kuala Lumpur. Badu was banned because a photo of her body art—which included the word “Allah”—was temporarily tattooed across her left shoulder. In response to the government ban, thousands of would-be concert goers tweeted their outrage and embarrassment about the ban—the image struck a negative cord with Malaysian officials. The ban was as much about gender and corporeality, as it was a rejection of her controversial method of acknowledging God. Badu’s promotional photo not only showed the “offensive” name of God but also, like other popular artists, just a tad too much skin.

Wearing a gele (African head wrap) and dashiki during a press interview immediately following the cancellation, Badu declined to criticize the Malaysian government for its highly paternalist practice of banning female artists. Instead, she surmised, “I think art is often misunderstood in the realm of religion.” Badu carried her eclectic artistic and spiritual sensibilities with her to a different part of the world, and graciously accepted the consequences. Badu, like other
female artists in Malyasia and other parts of the Islamic world, must routinely navigate the terrain of gender, religion, and politics as they “do the knowledge” of hip hop, often facing various forms of state retribution. Badu, like the artists I spent time with in Dubai, understands hip hop to be an important mode of artistic, political and spiritual expression for black women. And they, like Badu, find creative and paradoxical ways to resist political and spiritual orthodoxies through the language and practice of global hip hop.

Within all of this, since hip hop is an African American–derived art form, is the question of how the gendering of blackness is articulated, (re)presented, and resisted by artists in different contexts. Hip hop is an especially productive site to explore diverse and highly mobile forms of black female subjectivity, all the while grounding these explorations in the local. As art and identity categories traverse the globe, as they clash and co-mingle, the agency, aspirations, and politics of young women of the black diaspora are evidenced in all their complexity. This ethnographic study provides one small glimpse into this complex, global reality.

Dubai is a fertile site to examine the negotiation of new modes of cultural expression and political storytelling by black-identified Arab women. Within a period of four weeks in the summer of 2011, I interviewed eight women of diverse racial-ethnic backgrounds involved in some aspect of hip hop culture and politics. Three were Palestinian (one half African American and half Palestinian), two were Lebanese, two were Sudanese, and one was Emirates (UAE citizen). All of the women identified as “black.”

Dubai is a highly diverse metropolitan area that attracts immigrants from all over the world. It is part of an Arab coastal kingdom nestled between Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Oman, and the Persian Gulf. According to the Dubai government, in 2011 the total population of Dubai was 1,675,906. Emirate citizens make up a mere 7 percent of the population in the city. The rest of the population (1,552,111) is comprised of non-citizen migrant workers. In 2005, 51% of the city’s resident migrant workers were from India, 16% from Pakistan, 11% from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, 11% from Arab countries, 7% from Africa, and less than 2% from the United States and Europe (Elsheshtawy 2010). White Europeans and Americans are granted visas to work in highly skilled white-collar jobs in corporate satellite offices and universities. However, migrant workers from India, Pakistan, Philippines, and Africa are typically granted visas to work as taxi-drivers, construction workers, and even lower paying jobs like cooks and servers in restaurants and hotels, and as domestic laborers (i.e., nannies, housekeeping, and janitors). The lowest wage earners in Dubai are from non-Arab African nations including Ethiopia and
parts of West Africa. These migrant workers are racialized as “black” in the UAE context (Mahdavi 2011).

Any visitor to Dubai will readily observe the stark racial stratification that comprises the occupational structure in the city. The people working at fast food restaurants and in the food courts of the Dubai Mall and Dragon Mall were often young women of African descent. Alternatively, in the high end luxury hotels and restaurants the counter workers and hostesses were lighter skinned Asian women, presumably from Thailand and the Philippines. Darker skinned Asian and African women typically clean the hotels rooms and work behind the scenes.

Known for its shopping malls, mega engineering projects, and ultra-fancy hotels, Dubai shimmers as a kind a “desert paradise” in the larger public imagination. However, beneath the veneer of a gilded city, Dubai is a globalized city that relies heavily on the labor of people of color from all over the world, including African and other women racialized as “black.” Conscientious Arab, African, and Afro-Arab hip hop artists often critique and expose these structures of power, racial, and ethnic hierarchies and class divides within large global cities like Dubai.

Dubai, a manufactured oasis of highbrow cultural entertainment and nightlife, is also an unlikely hot spot for hip hop. My interlocutors were exposed to artists like Tupac, Bone Thugs-N-Harmony, the Fugees, and Lupe Fiasco as high school and college students, thanks to internationally acclaimed sound mixers, D.J. Solo and D.J. Booth, and through electronic media. As teens, many of the women I interviewed dubbed their mix sequences from broadcasts out of independent stations in Egypt and the Sudan. Dubai has also produced its own noted artists. In 2002, Desert Heat, an Emirati hip hop sibling duo, put Dubai on the scene with their singles “Keep it Desert” and “Dubai, My City.” While celebrating Khaleeji culture, Desert Heat, does not shy away from controversial issues like increasing levels of unemployment and the growing phenomenon of single motherhood. Other performers, including The Narcicyst, an Iraqi rapper; and Feras “Toofless” Ibrahim, a UAE-based Sudanese rapper, were also cited as sources of inspiration.

As a African American feminist doing ethnographic work in Dubai, for me hip hop became, what Anaya McMurray (2008) has called an “improvisation zone”: an interactive and collaborative space in which questions of culture, identity, and artist/political expression between hip hop generation women of diverse racial, national, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds could be shared and explored. As a musical style improvisation happens through intimate yet unscripted interactions between artists and their audiences, and among artists. By listening,
thinking, responding to, and taking highly creative risks based upon their own knowledge-base, the performer and the audience mutually create a unique artistic experience. In hip hop, the language of “freestyle” is commonly used to describe this process. While freestyle is catalyzed by the artist’s skill and mastery of their genre, it is made compelling by the artist’s attempts to “know” and “relate” to the local scene. Shout-outs and pointed references to local artists, clever storytelling about familiar forms of injustice that occur locally, and improvisational riffs on the local style make the freestyle “work.”

Myself, collaborator John Thabiti Willis (a scholar of African history who accompanied and assisted me during the interviews), and our Dubai counterparts, collectively expressed and analyzed how our own personal, musical, cultural, and political histories informed our relationships to hip hop culture.8 We met in restaurants, hookah lounges, nightclubs, and/or in the women’s homes; engaging in our own intellectual and social “freestyling.” Our conversations lasted from one and a half to three hours long. I met with each of the women, except Reem and Zenaib (who will be profiled next) on two or more occasions. We always shared meals and non-alcoholic beverages including tea and coffee. For all of us, hip hop had informed our evolving political views and our identities as young black people living in different parts of the world, but encountering, and responding to racism and feelings of alienation in each context. Most of the women we interviewed were brown-skinned, and about two had a light, olive complexion and straight hair that Americans might typically describe as phenotypically “Middle Eastern.” We all spoke U.S. standard English fluently, often times falling into what Imani Perry (2004) calls African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Throughout our conversations there were slippages into Arabic between our informants to clarify points made that were easily misunderstood because of the way Thabiti and I framed comments and questions. All participants shared equally about themselves, our personal and familial histories and our various relationships with hip hop culture. Over the course of spending about three or four hours together almost every day, we became very familiar with one another.10 In this article, I will focus on three artists in order to examine their struggles around identity and the specific ways that blackness, race, and place inform their cultural practice and sense of themselves.

Some of the specific themes that emerged in our conversations included the continued relevance of blackness as a category of identity in the Arab world, the sexual politics of black womanhood, spiritualized Islamic feminism that both praised and critiqued doctrinal practices, and the struggle for individual and collective freedom. This included the freedom to make personal decisions.
about marriage without being overly beholden to male family members; the freedom to live without military occupation and violence; and the freedom to practice Islam in expressive, nonconventional ways and still be respected as a Muslim woman. There was a mutual sharing of stories that resulted in the development of both emotional and political bonds between us all.

**Theoretical Framework**

I theorize “blackness,” not as an essentialist “fact,” but as a transversal identity that is reproduced by the use of hip hop as an resistive migratory cultural and political practice. Throughout my fieldwork, I learned to recognize diverse iterations and manifestations of both hip hop and blackness (Pryse 2000: 112). For example, while I brought my particular “rootedness” in U.S. black culture and politics and investments in black feminism, I had to learn to work while “suspended across cultural gaps” in order to facilitate the development and exchange of knowledge across cultural, geopolitical, intellectual boundaries (Yuval-Davis 1999). In simpler terms, I had to be conscious of the larger cultural and geopolitical discourses that positioned me as a “stranger” to my interlocutors, while at the same time risking reciprocal exposure and vulnerability within our ongoing dialogues, and I had to let go of U.S.-specific assumptions about what black identity and hip hop culture meant to my counterparts in a very different place (Pratt and Rosner 2012).

Taking this methodological stance, my portrayal and analysis of black womanhood is constituted through my personal, political, and intellectual interests in hip hop and politics and time spent building relationships with black identified women involved in hip hop culture in Dubai. Through our fluid exchanges we negotiated multiple social boundaries and identities including what it meant to be “black,” “female,” “Middle-Eastern,” “American,” and a hip hop artist and/or fan.

Speaking about blackness in the Middle East is not without its risks. First, the historic relationship between Africans and Arabs is shaped by centuries of enslavement which, not surprisingly, coincided with the dissemination of Islam in Africa (Mirzai, Montana, and Lovejoy 2009). By the seventeenth century, blackness of skin/Africaness became virtually synonymous with enslavement (Hunwick and Powell 2002; Segal 2001). Historically, acceptance into Islamic communities via conversion to Islam was essential for inclusion, status, and human dignity in the conquered regions of North and West Africa (Ghazal 2009). The violent history of the importation of African bodies
to the Arabian Gulf, and the conquering of territories across
different parts of the continent by Arabs is easier forgotten than
remembered in a region of the world that publically prioritized
obeisance to sharia and the Islamic hadiths over skin color. Still,
overt discrimination against people of African heritage in business
transactions, marital and inheritance practices, and other areas of
everyday life saturates the history of the region (Mirzai, Montana,
and Lovejoy 2009; Hunwick and Powell 2002; Segal 2002). Hip hop
feminist ethnography provides room for a critical of re-membrance
and revision of this (living) history of racial subordination, enabling
young women to openly speak about how “blackness” itself
regulates the experience of living as a Muslim woman in a region
that is ethnically heterogenous, yet operates within a consolidated
field of monarchal and theocratic state practices that claim not to
“see” race.

Claiming “blackness” in this sense is more than claiming some
knowledge and affinity with the reality of African enslavement, which
by the way, muted in the collective memory and history in Dubai. It
also, as E. Patrick Johnson (2003) explains, lies in the “inexpressible
yet undeniable” racial experience of black people. In this way,
the “living of blackness” becomes a material way of knowing and
expressing the local for people who live in or near the global margins.
With this said, it is important to avoid projecting U.S.-based race-
gender-class analytics onto a group of women’s whose lives and
social–historical positionalities are vastly different on many levels.

Reem and Zenaib

When I interviewed Reem Osman a.k.a. “Miss Lyrical Nuisance,”
she was a 29-year-old Sudanese spoken word artist who had been
raised in Dubai by her widowed mother. The younger sister of Feras
Salim (a.k.a. “Toofless” mentioned above), Reem regularly tuned in to
watch Def Poetry Jam on cable television. In college she honed her
poetic and performance skills and quickly became a widely respected
spoken artist herself. Reem named U.S. artists Mos Def, Talib Kweli,
Common, and Jean Grae as her early primary artistic influences,
along with local artists including her brother, and the Narcicyst.
She also drew inspiration from the Fugees, especially Lauryn Hill’s
ability to so thoroughly “hold her own” on stage alongside talented
and formidable male artists. For Reem spoken word was a way to
give voice to the experiences of immigrant youth—especially young
Sudanese, like herself, growing up in non-African Arab countries.
She grappled with what she called “the expats dilemma”—of
being a born in a place where she does not fully belong. In the piece “Neither Here nor There,” Reem writes;

Sudanese stamped on my passport /but I don’t feel the affiliation/Caught between two systems/with different laws and perceptions/And in I’m written “mixed-breed”/with no definite identification/Culturally flawed / I virtually belong/to no nation.

Although Reem spent most of her life living in an apartment with her family in UAE, she is not nor will she likely ever be a citizen of the UAE. She is a citizen of Sudan. The only way that an immigrant female can become a citizen of UAE is through legal marriage to an Emirate male. Instead citizenship is extended via her parents’ place of origin, the Sudan, and her ethnic ancestry. Since Reem married a Sudanese man, she will always be beholden to her work visa, which could only be guaranteed through the sponsorship of her husband’s employer. Although Reem works in Dubai, her work visa must be renewed every three years or she can and likely will be forced to leave the place she has lived her entire life. Reem’s ability to travel is controlled by the Sudanese government, a place that she visits occasionally, but not a place she considers “home.”

Reem’s story begins with her mother. Thabiti and I interviewed Reem and her mother, Zenaib, jointly at Reem’s request, in their apartment in Bur Dubai neighborhood. Bur Dubai is a section of the city that has largely maintained its character since the boom of the oil and financial boom in the 1990s. In 1975, at age 19, Reem’s mother, Zenaib, moved to UAE from Sudan. She and her husband moved to Dubai in search of “freedom from the pressure of family.” Zenaib initially described her family as “very liberal, very intellectual. My mother was a teacher before she became a housewife, and my father was a chief accountant. They spoke good English.” Zenaib also described her father as “liberal” because she and her husband were able to marry without too much interference from other male relatives.

Zenaib and her husband chose the UAE not just for the opportunity to get a good paying job but because, “Dubai was a good place for entertainment” she recalled, “We liked music, we liked clubs!” Zenaib was married for nearly eleven years before giving birth to her first child. During those years she and her husband worked in Dubai and lived a very “contemporary lifestyle.” She proudly proclaimed that she was “one of the first Sudanese women in Dubai to drive a car.” During the interview, Zenaib showed us photos of herself during the 1970s. In the pictures she showed us she sported a bouffant hairstyle styled to look like blown-out Afro.

Zenaib fondly remembered attending several R&B concerts in Dubai, including Diana Ross and the Supremes and Boney M. Blues’
music, which resonated with her. When I asked her why, she explained, “because it was black music. I liked it because they are black. I am black! I like it!” For Zenaib, in this context, it seemed that blackness served as a counterdiscourse to her “otherness” as a young Sudanese woman living in a country that was not her own. She attended concerts and became part of something bigger than herself, but that resonated because it gave her some sense of belonging.

Reem shared her mother’s love of African American music and cultural expressions, although she attributed much different meanings to these cultural preferences, identifications, and aesthetic sensibilities. Reem’s pronounced feeling of “not belonging” was exacerbated by routine forms of anti-black racism and colorism when she was growing up. Reem’s first experience with understanding that she is “black” occurred when she was nine or ten years old. She recalled, “Sometimes kids would tease me. I remember one day a young boy came up and asked, ‘Why are you black?’” Reem was shocked because before then she only understood herself to be “Sudanese” and “Muslim.” Reem was raised not to think about or acknowledge the significance of skin color, let alone “race.” While her mother had a deep appreciation for “black music,” Reem believed that Zenaib was in denial about how anti-black racism from lighter skinned Arabs impacted her own experiences growing up. Zenaib, whose father and ancestors were Egyptian and Turkish and migrated to Sudan, considered herself “Arab.” However, in the minds of others, as evidenced by the negative comments she endured, her deep brown skin—indicated difference, if not blatant inferiority, and it placed her “Arabness” in question.

Reem, who would likely be described as “brown skinned” by black people in the United States, had a heightened awareness of her darkness, although she was essentially taught by her parents that her blackness was not real. It (racial bias) was “other people’s problem.” Incidences of what black Americans would plainly call “racism” were explained by both Reem’s mother and her father (before he died) as the “moral lapses in wrong-headed individuals.” In other words, racist comments and taunts were explained as examples of individuals not being “good Muslims.” Increasingly, Reem saw things quite differently.

As a result of the legibility of her blackness by others, Reem’s relationship to “blackness,” vis-à-vis her relationship to African American music, helped her to identify and articulate the politics of race and color in the UAE in ways her parents had not. Reem explained, “The difference between my mom’s generation and my generation is that we relate more to African American music because of the racism we felt here. But with my mom’s generation there was no (explicitly
perceived) racism. ... We were the ones who actually went through the racism in this country. We’ve undergone a lot of racism from Arabs of different nationalities.” Reem felt she did not know how to consciously articulate her “blackness” until she immersed herself in hip hop music and culture. Lyrics that explored racism and white supremacy stood out for her.

For Reem, hip hop music and culture offered a dynamic cultural space to speak out against anti-black colorism and racism in the UAE that was subtly and not so subtly practiced by many wealthy and lighter skinned Emiratis, and those who could afford to assimilate into the wealth driven culture of the city. In the UAE, Emiratis are both the bearers and cultural and economic beneficiaries of Khaleeji culture; others were simply guests—temporary, permanent, or, like Reem, somewhere in between. Accordingly, some of Reem’s poetry and lyrics focus on the hyper-materialism of Arabic culture in Dubai and its correlation to color, citizenship, and nationality. There, if you are not Emirate, then you are just a “visitor.” Even if one is a permanent, lifelong visitor they are still guaranteed few, if any, political or civil rights. If one could “pass” as an Arab, then one’s automatic relegation to a member of a socially subordinate class (i.e., a “worker”) was deferred. If one cannot pass as “Arab” then one’s status as an outsider is cemented and one is treated accordingly. As a black American woman in Dubai with no “bling,” on many occasions this fact of life became more than obvious. Reem’s lyricism contrasts the worship of wealth and consumption in contemporary Khaleeji culture to the deep spiritualism of Islam. She uses hip hop to speak against Dubai’s alienating landscapes that are intensified by intersection of anti-black sentiments and urban neoliberalization. Not surprisingly, hip hop offers a counter-story to this existence. It offers a space of creativity, critique, and the means to articulate a resistant black subject position and politics.

As an expectant mother, Reem wanted to impart her love of hip hop onto her children. Ironically, while Reem was deeply skeptical of what she called “patriarchal Arab culture,” she, like her mother, has a deep affinity for the Arabic language. For Reem, Arabic language is a way to instill reverence for her and her husband’s imaginings of Sudan as their true “home” and “culture.” With this said, differential racialization in the city of Dubai and the larger UAE, especially the subtle and not so subtle forms of anti-black discrimination, was an intrinsic part of her experience as a young women from the global hip hop generation. It was these experiences that fueled her oppositional stance in regard to Arab consumerism and the way in which it is perpetuated through discriminatory cultural and economic practices that are legislated by the state.
Lynn “Malikah” Fatouh

I saw a publicity image of Lynn “Malikah” Fatouh on the internet before I met her in person. On her CD cover image she wore ripped jean shorts and fishnets, sitting spread eagle, the self-proclaimed “Queen of Arab Hip Hop!” looked defiantly down toward the camera. As a result, I was somewhat surprised when I met her and most of our conversations focused on the topic of religion. She expresses strong feelings about Islam. Politically, she expresses an equally staunch and unapologetic commitment to Palestinian rights and the need to end the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Our conversation consisted of a lively political discussion that touched on issues of imperialism, militarism, and misogyny in Arab culture. These are many of the themes she takes up in her music.

We first met in the terrace lounge of a luxurious hotel in downtown Dubai. The hotel atrium was elaborately decorated with creamed colored roses, tiger orchids, and gentle pools of cool water. The air smelled of candles, fresh cut flowers, and burning oils of blended patchouli and lavender. This was the backdrop against which Malikah told me her story.

Malikah is half-Lebanese and half-Algerian. She grew up in a town near the Lebanon–Israeli border. She is fair skinned, and could easily pass as white. That is, until she starts talking. She spoke with a strong Lebanese Arabic accent that was often interlaced with slang with origins in AAVE. She has a strong identification with both African American and pan-Arab cultures. From her perspective, the western world has basically “declared war” on both Islam and the Palestinian people, with whom she has a strong identification. The lyrics of her songs talk explicitly and passionately about the lives taken by Israeli bulldozers, the Israeli rockets that often flew into parts of Lebanon, killing and maiming civilians, and the world community’s complicity in sanctioning human rights abuses against Palestinians. To her, the U.S. war in Iraq and Afghanistan was wholly unjustified because the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks “were terrorists from Saudi Arabia, they were extremists. The Iraqi people had nothing to do with that. Muslims are peaceful people. We don’t go and start wars with other countries. ...Why do Americans hate us?”

Our conversations turned back to Americans’ complicity in the ongoing “war” against Muslims, and the myths and stereotypes of Muslim women and African American women.

Malikah was proud to have produced two records and to have received regional and international notoriety and respect for her lyrical skills. Sometimes keeping company with notables like Snoop Lion (formerly called “Snoop Dogg”) and the Long Beach–based rap
group “Dogg Pound,” she performs uncovered, often wearing jeans, a bandana, and or a cap with big hoop earrings. While Malikah wears makeup, it is usually sweated off because she is such an energetic, throaty, aggressive vocalist. Malikah used to sing hooks (the background choruses to hip hop songs) for other male rappers, but was determined to claim and celebrate her own prowess on the microphone. She understands that her role as a woman in hip hop requires “showing young women and girls—and men—that women can be strong and powerful and in control.” In an early released single called “Ya Imra’a” she declares in Arabic, “Women! Scream freedom in the name of every woman who cried and argued in the name of humanity/We want to be educated, we want to progress/Shine, excel and dictate our own lives!”

As an artist, Malikah takes pride in dominating male rappers in freestyle competitions, and in her own ability to work with and employ other women to sing hooks for her. She also expresses a deep and passionate commitment to both Islam and Arabic language. She often weaves her own gender progressive interpretation of passages of the Qur’an into her lyrics. For Malikah, hip hop is about “Resistance. It’s all about resistance. To patriarchy, to war, to suffering. Hip hop is about trying to start a revolution to stop the oppression of people.” Malikah’s music takes a strong stance against the abuse and subjugation of women both in what she called “Arabic culture” and in mainstream hip hop culture. In her words, her music “seeks to empower women and girls to be strong and to be all of who they are.”

Part of her work includes preserving young people’s knowledge, use, and reverence of the Arabic language. The Emirates, like many countries in the region, conduct formal schooling in American English. As a result, young peoples’ knowledge about and proficiency in the Arabic language is quickly waning. Malikah now only raps in Arabic, which forced her to study and master the intricacies of the language—its registers, its cadences, and its localized stylist conventions as she performs throughout the Middle East. While Malikah deeply respects many American artists, she feels that it is important to instill pride in being Arab. She declared, “I’ll start rapping in English when English rappers start rapping in Arabic! Although we love American hip hop, we have our own stories to tell and our own histories to learn. Young people, especially girls, have to learn how to love and respect themselves.” Her cultural resistance involves encouraging girls and young women to critique Arab sexist and patriarchal practices within the cultural context of Islam—in its language and within the mythology and symbolism of the Qur’an. Malikah made it a point to dissociate the wearing of the abaya and the veil with piety. In fact, she considered the wearing of the veil...
optional, and in Dubai especially, more a fashion statement than a sign of religiosity or female subjugation. Both she, and the other women we interviewed, traced the suggestion, but not the requirement of women to cover their heads to the Qur’an. What seemed most important in our conversations was the individual commitment to be publicly veiled, and the importance of being consistent.

In the case of Malikah, the deployment of “blackness” as a political identity was used to showcase the problems of the powerlessness that is undergirded by her ferocious critique of what she described as “liberal democracy.” However, Malikah’s claiming of blackness goes deeper than this, signaling a deep sense of solidarity between Africans Americans who had, in her mind, managed to successfully stand up and challenge racial oppression in the United States. “Blackness” mattered because African Americans continued to speak out and challenge the status quo. In our conversations, hip hop became a site to articulate, debate, and affirm diverse modes of “black” politics, perspectives, and positionalities. Hip hop was a cultural space to express rage about the perpetual injustice of the Israeli occupation, as well as critique outdated cultural practices that sought to silence young women’s voices and any critique of patriarchal Arab nationalisms.

Malikah used hip hop to demonstrate love and appreciation of the Arabic language as an effective means in which to resist and subvert forms of U.S. cultural imperialism that were pronounced in the region (i.e., only teaching U.S. English in private schools). For Malikah, learning to resist modes of domination within and through the Arab language held emancipatory potential for black-identified women and girls in the region: hip hop was the creative tool that she used to enact political transversality. Unlike Reem who saw experienced Arab privilege vis-a`-vis Muslim Sudanese immigrants, Malikah saw her embrace of Arab language as a statement against U.S. empire and cultural hegemony.

Sarah Naser

Of all the women I spent time with in Dubai, I developed the closest relationship with Sarah. At the time we met, Sarah was twenty-five years old, five months pregnant, and only married for seven months. Sarah is half Palestinian and half African American. She has golden brown skin, wavy black hair with auburn highlights, and deeply set black eyes. Her father is a wealthy Palestinian businessman and her mother a working-class black American woman who lives in Kansas. While living with her father, she enjoyed the assistance
of a housekeeper, a luxurious home, and access to the family cars. Sarah speaks AAVE and Arabic fluently. She was taken from her mother by her father when she was one year old and raised as a Palestinian Muslim. Sarah is a U.S. citizen who has lived in Israel, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Dubai. Since our interviews she has moved to Kuwait. A short time before we met Sarah had reluctantly married a Russian Muslim businessman to appease her father. Sarah’s fragile economic standing was tied to her consistently defying her father’s wishes—always trying but often failing to place her own needs over his demands.

Sarah and I became very close during my time spent in Dubai. In our conversations, I learned that Sarah is a survivor of a physically abusive relationship and had recently been coerced into a marriage of convenience (not to her abuser). Sarah quit her job as a marketing analyst shortly after getting married and then became pregnant. It was an unhappy marriage and Sarah felt trapped and vulnerable. In 2012, she left her husband and moved to Kuwait with her aunt. She is now recording tracks on a second album. After leaving Dubai, Sarah and I spoke regularly. Today, as a recording artist and single mother, Sarah is slowly coming into her own as an artist and an independent woman.

Sarah is a songstress who provides the seductive, throaty vocals of urban lounge music with Arabic melodies and overtones. Her voice is a deep and sultry alto. She writes many of her own songs while she struggles to get a record deal of her own. Sarah’s musical style can be described as blues melodies on top of house beats. She wrote songs about getting hit by her lover and enduring the heartbreak, and infidelity. She envied my ability to be “independent,” to be a “single mom and a professor,” and yet was at the same time terrified by the prospect of that kind of independence. She understood that if she left her husband—she would also leave behind her father’s blessings and would be very economically and socially vulnerable. While she was raised as “Arab,” her affinity for her black “American roots,” including hip hop, marked her as an oppositional “bad girl” to be reined in and put in her place—her nonconformity to the stereotype as a “good Muslim” always an issue. Moving outside the bounds of female respectability would also further jeopardize the precariousness of her status as “Arab.”

**Hip Hop and the Global Intimacies of Blackness**

The women in this study are not only the privileged offspring of diplomats, they are also the dark-skinned children of migrant
workers from Lebanon, and the Sudan, among other places. They are part of a larger translocal black cosmopolitan: a generation of black people who move in and between places, culture, and geopolitical landscapes (often under arduous conditions) while drawing upon global hip hop culture to nourish them and give a sense of connectedness (Nuttal and Mbembe 2008). Despite very different national identities, phenotypes, and class and immigrant statuses, these women found hip hop to be a common ground for expression and critical analysis, as well as a cultural bridge connecting them to other parts of the African diaspora, and to one another.

In conclusion, as previous scholars have noticed, blackness emerged as a transnational site of identification and self-making (Perry 2008). It is much more than a simple “worldliness” that is enabled through money, power, and privilege. Hip hop is a cosmopolitanism artform and culture provides opportunities to carefully examine how “the local” makes blackness real. The articulation of blackness as a transversal identity was a way to build personal relationships with other women, but more importantly it was through hip hop that these conversations enabled the articulation of a more self-consciously anti-racist and feminist politic and worldview.

In Dubai, hip hop was the canvas for women to grapple with and critique gender and race in their own society and in the larger world, and was a creative channel for them to express and forge hybrid local and transnational identities. Artists like Malikah, Reem, and Sarah, and many others, have created a political and cultural space within hip hop where the voices, perspectives, interests, and experiences of contemporary Middle-Eastern women can re-define the parameters of cultural resistance in geopolitical spaces that deny the very existence of race. Hip hop ethnography created opportunities for women especially to engage questions of social location and identity from a translocal vantage point. The concept of transversality enabled us to situate our conversations about hip hop within a larger context of traveling bodies and discourses about blackness and black womanhood. For Reem, blackness became a way to shape and frame her own “otherness” in the midst heterogeneity and discursive diversity in Dubai. “Blackness” became the way as Michelle Wright (2004) explains, “to connect with others while recognizing our own subjectivity.” Difference itself was the means by which we could speak with and thus be recognized as black subjects.

Through my research I share the conclusion of many other scholars that hip hop offers the cultural subtext to examine the continuing relevance of “blackness” as a marker of identity and solidarity. As an influence upon ethnographic praxis, hip hop culture becomes the
point of encounter to negotiate local to local connections in ways that undermine the national boundaries erected and reinforced through racializing practices that are often expressed through the cultural logics of state-enacted capitalist heteropatriarchy.

Through this article I hope to offer another set of experiences, centered on young African diasporic subjects, through which to interrogate how place, migration, and the search for personal, intellectual, political fulfillment could be actualized through conversations about hip hop (broadly construed) and our life’s work as resistant hip hop cultural practitioners.

Black feminist ethnographies can provide a way to “upend hierarchies of space and scale” that often delimit the multiple ways women around the world become legible as black racialized subjects (Pratt and Rosner 2012). Hip hop continues to be a rich, although complicated and at times contradictory, cultural space in which to critique and expose the duplicity of societies that claim to be colorblind, yet in both formal and informal ways compromise the life chances and opportunities of people of color. As consumers and practitioners of global hip hop in the academy, in studios and clubs, and in popular culture, new generations of young women are able to articulate deeply personal social grievances that arise in the process of defining and locating ourselves in a dynamic, and often hostile, globalized world.

Notes

1. Scholar-blogger Moya Bailey of the Crunk Feminist Collective has referred to anti-black misogyny in American culture as misogynoir. Misogynoir relies almost exclusively upon nihilist forms of representational violence that portrays black women as abject, unworthy, and sexually expendable with inter- and intra-modes of popular cultural expression. Lil Wayne has been broadly critiqued by black feminist bloggers for egregious instances of misogynoir in his lyrics.

2. I extend a note of gratitute to a series of scholars who have closely read and provided insightful feedback upon this article, thereby exponentially increasing its relevance to the fields of black and Middle Eastern studies. These include: Barbara Ransby, Mark Anthony Neal, Rana Raddawi, Dayo Gore, Moya Bailey, Nikol Alexander-Floyd, and Julia Jordan-Zachery. I would also like to thank the Imagine Fund of the University of Minnesota for its generous support of the broader umbrella project that this research is based on, called, Unheard Voices at the Bottom of Empire: Translocal Sites of Black Feminist Resistance.

3. “Reem Osman” and “Sara Naser” are pseudonyms that have been used to protect the anonymity of the women interviewed.


5. Alternatively, the “youth wing” of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) repeatedly touted the concert ban as a victory on Twitter.

6. A gele is a colorful, artfully stacked headwrap sported by many Muslim and non-Muslim women in West Africa. Especially popular in the late 1960s, and then again in the 1990s, black women in the United States and the Caribbean embraced the wearing of the gele as a sign of black racial pride and cultural resistance to dominant white culture.

7. I was invited take part in a larger documentary film project on Women and Hip Hop in the Middle-East being produced by Thabiti Willis, an Assistant Professor of African History at Carleton
College. I was invited because of my own expertise in hip hop feminism as an educator and activist in the United States. Dr. Willis also moderated a highly successful panel on Global Hip Hop at the Vices to Verses: a New Era and Action in April of 2010 that myself and students from my Sex, Politics and Global Hip Hop classes co-convened at the University of Minnesota in the United States. Several incredibly insightful dialogues emerged from this panel, including a dynamic presentation by Palestinian hip hop artist, Abeer Alzinati, also known as “Sabrina da Witch”; we decided to continue working to increase the visibility of Middle Eastern women involved in hip hop culture and politics.

8. In “Keep it Desert,” a spin off of the hip hop idiom “Keep it real,” brother Ilmiyah and Arableak soundly chastise other Arab hip artists for uncritically appropriating and mimicking the commodified version of gangsta rap without attending to the specific geopolitical circumstances that shaped the experiences of Arab youths.

9. It is important to note that Desert Heat was banned from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait for reasons that are not entirely clear.

10. Our conversations were unscripted, spontaneous, and had a collaborative quality. We learned from each other. All of us were between 25 and 35 years old, with the exception of Reem’s mother (age 65) whom she insisted that we interview with her. All of the artists were college educated and either employed or seeking employment in their chosen field. We were a part of what Bakari Kitwana has called the “hip hop generation,” young people who came of age during the maturation of neoliberalism. Born between 1965 and 1985, the hip hop generation has had to deal with the roll-back of the welfare state under Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan and the widening gaps between have and have-nots, the decades-long vilification of young black and Arab men as “criminals” and “terrorists,” respectively.

11. I write as a feminist, transdisciplinary scholar. I seek to transcend the false demarcations produced by disciplinary territorialism. Instead, taking the lead from M. Jacqui Alexander (2005), I am more concerned with the “imperative of making the world in which we live intelligible to ourselves—in other words teaching ourselves” (6) rather than teaching white dominated, and historically racist and racializing academic disciplines about black women’s culture and politics. Toward this aim, I both center and contribute to the intellectual-activist itineraries of feminists who have advocated for the decolonization of the academy, the de-territorialization of disciplines, and the inclusion of voices from the global margins (see for instance Pryse 2000; Nagar 2013; Alexander 2005; Mohanty 2003; Boyce Davies 2003).

12. In The African Diaspora in the Mediterranean Lands of Islam, Hunwick and Powell (2002) write: “Even to this day, the words for Africans in many Arab dialects is abid, or slaves.”

13. It was clearly explained to all informants that Thabiti and I were “researchers.” This means that we had to get informed consent to do the interviews, even though we did not use any formal interview scripts. Thabiti and I sometimes met to discuss what we wanted to talk about and which conversations that each of us would prompt. John Thabiti Willis is Assistant Professor of African History at Carleton College. Having visited Dubai on several occasions he was interested in studying what he called, “Afro-Arab women and hip hop.” Thabiti and I worked together to organize the From Vices to Verses Conference, and we thought it would be great to continue this collaboration to study women and hip hop in the Arab world, to make uses of our diverse areas of expertise. Thabiti and I, and one of the artists we interviewed (”Malikah”) presented a preliminary version of this project at the Gender and Women’s Studies in the Arab World conference at American University of Sharjah in the UAE.

14. Initially, Zenaib was very reluctant to show photos of herself during that time. As she was then covered (i.e., wore a veil to cover her head), she did not find it appropriate to revel in photos of herself uncovered. However, after so many laughs and tears, several cups of tea, dates, and fresh fruits, she decided it was okay.

15. It should be noted that during this particular discussion there were other women present including Sarah and other women who were “interviewed” but are not featured in this article.


17. An abaya is a long black robe that is commonly worn by women in Muslim countries in the Persian Gulf. Many women, especially Emirate women, wear a (usually black) veil that covers the head, forehead, and shoulders. Abaya in Dubai are often adorned with black or colored sequins around the wrists, shoulders, and down the shoulders and legs. Many Emirate women demonstrate their wealth, standing with very expensive designer shoes and purses and eye makeup. In Dubai it is a mistake to assume that because women wear an abaya that they are especially pious or oppressed; rather, in many cases abaya represents Arab citizenship, which, for the most part, grants financial stability through the family and extended family unit.
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### About the Author

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