Chapter 18
“Why Am I Black?” Gendering Hip-Hop, and Translocal Solidarities in Dubai

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18.1 Introduction

Contrary to the racist and misogynist antics of entertainers like Nicki Minaj, Eminem, and Lil’ Wayne, hip-hop provides young women with an important cultural venue to express discontent with gender relations, articulate new readings and interpretations of Islam, as well as examine the increasing impossibilities of national belonging in the context of migration, gendered racialization, and cultural exchange. In this chapter, I pose the following questions: What happens when two or more distinctive ways of being, understanding, and living blackness operate side-by-side in the same space and time? What new truths and narratives emerge when distinctive histories of migration and identity converge by way of extended dialogues between women involved in global hip-hop culture and politics? To answer these questions, I first develop a black feminist ethnographic methodology grounded in a transversal understanding of both black feminism and hip-hop politics. I then use my ethnographic fieldwork in Dubai, UAE to map a translocal geography of black female political agency using the voices of Afro-Arab female hip-hop generation artists. Lastly, I argue for the importance of locating translocal solidarities to frame analyses of global black women’s political expression. I draw on the theoretical and methodological innovations of scholars who write within and across the fields of contemporary hip-hop politics and culture, contemporary black feminism, and translocal geographies. I show how hip-hop remains a central mode of cultural and political insurgency for young women by enabling multiple articulations of the dis/continuities of race-gender-culture that persist within urban neoliberalization in late modernity. Hip-hop also provides an important space for alternative mappings of geopolitical relationships between women of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, while providing the context to interrogate the continuing appeal of “blackness” as a marker of identity and solidarity for women of color globally. It
is an important point of encounter to negotiate local-to-local connections in ways that undermine the national boundaries erected by states and reinforced through the racist cultural logics of capitalist heteropatriarchy. Hip-hop offers a unique glimpse into the lives of Afro-Arab “third culture” women who live in or around the margins of the Khaleeji culture (Gulf culture) in the Arabian Gulf. The term “third culture kids” refers to children who spend a significant portion of their developmental year living in a culture that is outside of their parent’s passport culture, or, more specifically country of origin (Al-Otaibi 2012).

In this chapter I am most interested in amplifying the voices of Arab black female hip-hop artists who reside in and move through global cities in the Islamic world. Using this vantage point, I direct attention to how hip-hop can operate as a galvanizing cultural force that provides opportunities for the forging of political intimacies between diverse black women.

18.2 Background and Literature Review

An older generation of hip-hop scholars defined its form by four defining elements: emceeing/rapping, deejaying, break dancing, and graffiti. Scholars who interpreted hip-hop through its earliest geographic “origins” consolidated this understanding of hip-hop: its rightful birthplace is the South Bronx borough of New York (Watkins 2005; Ogden 2007). This perspective has been routinely critiqued, as it builds primarily upon the nation-oriented, male-centric histories that relied exclusively on US regional biases to evaluate and authenticate what “real” hip-hop was (Brown 2008; Sharpley-Whiting 2007; Durham 2007; Perry 2004). Today, hip-hop exceeds its four elements 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 (Chang 2006). Terkourafi (2010), locates the transformative quality of hip-hop in the genre’s stubborn inclination toward cultural hybridization and the incitement of border-bouncing oppositional youth politics (p. 12). For Terkourafi, hip-hop is neither confined, nor necessarily defined by its original four elements. Instead, hip-hop’s genius is realized through the iconoclastic ways that artists and activists transform the original elements by infusing them with the shifting cultural and aesthetic character of specific geopolitical locales. Hip-hop draws attention to what Osumare (2007) has described as “connective marginalities” between youth from diverse geographic and cultural settings (p. 172). She explains, “connective marginalities in each global site become bridges across late capitalist manipulations of hip-hop culture, and also help link issues of collective social continuity and individual experience of local realities” (p. 173). Within this framework, hip-hop functions as both an object of commodification and an embodied philosophy of cultural resistance that have morphed and shifted with the heightened realities of travel and cultural osmosis produced expansion of digital technology and globalization in the neoliberal era.
Globally, women of color have embraced hip-hop as means to articulate political critique and discontent. It is a dialogic mode of expression for personal and spiritual exploration and agency within and against a broader male dominated society (Lane 2011; Fernandes 2011; Malone and Martinez 2010). Gender, ethnicity, and culture operate as powerful organizing concepts and discourses in hip-hop. Together they are foundational to its inherent expression (Jeffries 2007) For example, rappers Abeer Al Zinati and Safa Hathoot locate women’s subordination in the interstices of intra-Arab sexism and racist Israeli militarism, actively linking Palestinian national liberation to women’s liberation from patriarchy (Eqeiq 2010). Hip-hop is an important point of encounter between the marginalized youth in the global North, providing opportunities to (bear) witness (to) the contradictions of hyper-invisibility of urban youth culture and the increasingly dismal economic opportunities for young people coming of age in the second decade of the new millennium. Popular 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, and electronica, but also her lyrics take on themes such as immigration and the violence of “citizenship.” She makes connections between Muslim women’s right to drive in Saudi Arabia and the futility of using militarism to solve deeply entrenched social cleavages. Several of her songs invoke the term “third world democracy” in order to underscore the political and economic interdependence between first world and third world. Without falling into the artistic dead-end of proselytization, she advocates for the achievement of global youth solidarity by calling attention to the widespread problem of racialized poverty while highlighting the social and political disenfranchisement of the children of migrant workers. M.I.A.’s music also provides insights into the creative ways that racialized migrants both subvert and manipulate global capital at first world borders.

Political hip-hop played a central role in the ignition of youth led revolt during the Arab Spring. In November 2010, a Tunisian rap artist from Sfax called “El General” produced a four-minute music video called “Head of State” that showcased the problems of hunger, poverty, unemployment, and discontent among Tunisian youth. After the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid, El General’s music video spread exploded on Facebook, helping to set off the Jasmine revolution in Tunisia. Muslim women also use hip-hop as a tool for social change. Soultana, a Moroccan rapper, debunks the stereotypes of Muslims as religious extremists and terrorists in her music. 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 was reported to have countered, “I read the Koran” (Robin 2007). Her own personal readings and understanding of the text trump the opinions of men who relied upon masculinist and patriarchal attitudes to interpret the holy book. By rapping, dancing, and singing in public while embracing Islam, Soultana refused to capitulate to the ideology of Islam as articulated, practiced, and regulated by the heteromasculinist state and its enforcers.
18.3 Methodology

This essay relies upon ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the summer of 2011 in Dubai, UAE. Dubai is a fertile site to examine the negotiation of new modes of translocal cultural expression and political storytelling that center the lives of black-identified Arab women. Known for its shopping malls, mega engineering projects, and ultra-luxurious hotels, the city takes the form of 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.”

Within a period of 4 weeks, I interviewed eight women of diverse racial and 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 Emirati (UAE citizen). All of the women were identified as “black.” As an African-American feminist doing ethnographic work in Dubai, hip-hop served what Anaya McMurray (2008) has called an “improvisation zone:” a dynamic space in which questions of culture, identity, and artist/political expression between the hip-hop generation women of diverse racial, ethnic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds were worked through. McMurray explains, “Improvisation occurs within a space structured by the experiences and histories of the people involved (p. 75).” Ethnography was an improvisation zone in which I, my collaborator John Thabiti Willis, a scholar of African history, and the artists we interviewed collectively theorized how our own personal, musical, cultural, and political histories informed our relationships to hip-hop culture. We met in restaurants, hookah lounges, nightclubs, and/or in the women’s homes. Our conversations lasted from one and a half to three hours long. I met with each of the women, except Rafiyah and Zenaib (who will be profiled later) on two or more occasions. We always shared meals and nonalcoholic beverages including tea and coffee. We all agreed that hip-hop was “very political” and spoke openly about how hip-hop had shaped our identities as young black people living in different parts of the world. Most of the women were brown-skinned, and about two had a light olive complexion and straight hair that Americans might typically describe as “Middle Eastern.” We all spoke American 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 3 or 4 h together almost everyday, we became very familiar with one another.1 In this chapter, to do justice to the complexity of the conversations that we

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1 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 Rafiyah’s mother (aged 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
had, as well as to honor the intimacy shared between us, I will analyze and present the findings of three of the eight interviews.

18.4 The Study

It became clear that Dubai was an important locale in which to examine how hip-hop is used as a mode of discursive intervention to the larger structures of power, identity, and location in the Middle East. Some of the major 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 Arab doctrinal practices and traditions, and what can only be described as the struggle for 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. These bonds have persisted over the last 2 years, maturing into strong and meaningful friendships that are sustained digitally through the internet and return visits. During our conversations in Dubai, considerable time was spent both debunking and confirming stereotypes of black women (especially African-American women) as “strong,” and Muslim women as “religious” and “devout.” Consistent effort was made between all of us to expose and critique racializing discourses that are rooted in anti-black/anti-Arab/anti-Islamic attitudes, policies, and state practices. Especially important was the need to distinguish between Arab culture and Islam. Our conversations were consciousness-raising sessions for us all.

18.5 Theoretical Framework

I employ a transversal theoretical framework to explore blackness and black femininity in Dubai. Transversality, as I am using it here, refers to a particular identity that coalesces with two or more other similar, yet distinct, identities within the same place or geographic locale over extended periods of time. Transversality is different from intersectionality. Intersectionality is based upon the intersection of two or more coherent identity categories or structures of domination that come together to

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 haves and have-nots, the decades long vilification of young black and Arab men as “criminals” and “terrorists” respectively.
forge a specific location based upon race, gender, class, nation, and other relevant axes of social differentiation (See for instance, Crenshaw and Peller 1995; Berger and Guidroz 2009; Isoke 2013).

Alternatively, transversality refers to the relational context that occurs when two or more similar structures of identification produced by differential racialization converge in the same locale. I argue that blackness should be understood as a transversal political identity, rather than one that is static or homogeneous. Collins (2000) explains, “transversal politics 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” (p. 245).

Following Collins, I theorize blackness as a relational identity that is reproduced by the use of hip-hop as a resistive cultural and political practice. In other words, I argue that blackness gets made and remade through what Gilroy (2005) describes as “proliferating encounters with otherness” that form the everyday context of globalization. Hip-hop—for at least two generations of young people coming of age in late modernity—often serves as the context through which young people are exposed to the black or “blackened” other. As such, it makes sense to think about blackness as shifting mode of identification that is produced by the travel of bodies and narratives about blackness. Within a transversal framework, we can better trace how understandings and practices of blackness morph within and around hip-hop as a discursive site. Throughout my fieldwork, I learned to recognize diverse iterations and manifestations of both hip-hop and blackness, while learning to “shift and to pivot as an ongoing aspect of methodological practice” (Pryse 2000, p. 112). For example, while I brought my particular “rootedness” in black culture and politics and investments in black feminism, I had to learn to be strong and agile enough 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).

Taking this shifting 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 in Dubai. Subsequently, any knowledge about “blackness” women was produced dialogically—through exchange and multidirectional communication. Blackness within a transversal knowledge-making process indicated more than just skin color and phenotype; it also acted as a rhetorical strategy used to make sense of being a minoritarian subject (some times of African-descent and other times not).

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2 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.
In other words, blackness was short hand for expressing feelings of otherness, discontent with and tacit opposition to the political status quo, and the prolonged experience of alienation and secondhand citizenship in relation to the dominant class in the city. This spontaneous appeal to blackness during our conversations enabled the negotiation of multiple social boundaries and identities including but not limited to blackness, femaleness, “Middle-Eastern,” “American,” and “hip-hop” (Rose 1994). In Dubai, transversality occurred when I, an African-American woman, came face-to-face with other black-identified women who experience blackness in distinctive ways as a result of ongoing and somewhat paralleling histories of racialization—mine in the USA and theirs, in the Arabian Gulf. The enactment of transversal politics required a shared and collaborative storytelling, as a well as a sustained commitment to insistently interrogate structures of power and marginality that frame knowledge-producing dialogues (Yuval-Davis 1999). Within the context of hip-hop, transversal politics emphasizes both the resonances and limitations and opportunities for knowledge-making that emerge through neoliberalizing social, political, and economic configurations in different parts of the world (Spence 2011; Osumare 2007). It also provides a more honest self-reflexivity about how one can go about creating knowledge, meanings, and enactments of black feminism across geographic locales in ways that are grounded, interpretative, and deeply contextual.

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 et al. 2009). By the seventeenth century, blackness of skin/Africanness became virtually synonymous with slaves or abid (Hunwick and Powell 2002; Segal 2001). Historically, acceptance into Islamic communities via conversion to Islam was essential for inclusion, status, and social recognition 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 northern Africa by Arabs is more easily forgotten than remembered in a region of the world that publically prioritized obeisance to sharia and the Islamic hadiths over skin color, yet privately discriminated against people of African descent in business transactions, marital and inheritance practices, and other areas of everyday life (Mirzai et al. 2009; Hunwick and Powell 2002; Segal 2001). With this said, the liberatory potential of Islam (both historically and in contemporary times) to transgress the limitations of human identitarianism—including race, phenotype, and highly restrictive modalities and practices of nationalism and citizenship—must be fully appreciated in order to understand how the comingling of hip-hop and Islam fuel cultural resistance among women of color in the Arab world. Today hip-hop provides room for a critical remembrance of this (living) history of racial subordination, enabling young women to openly speak about how “blackness” itself still shapes the experience of living as a Muslim woman in a region that is ethnically heterogeneous, yet operates within a consolidated field of theocratic state practices that claim not to “see” race.

Dubai is a highly diverse metropolitan area that attracts immigrants from all over the world. Dubai is part of an Arab coastal kingdom nestled between Saudi Arabia,
Qatar and Oman, and the Arabian Gulf. According to the Dubai government, in 2011 the total population of Dubai was 1,675,906. Emirati citizens make up just over 7% of the population in the city. The rest of the population (1,552,111) is compromised of non-citizen migrant workers from all over the world. In 2005, 51% of the city’s resident migrant workers were from India, 16% from Pakistan, 11% from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, and 11% from Arab countries, 7% from Africa, and less than 2% from the USA and Europe (Elsheshtawi 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 visa 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).

18.6 Findings

I begin my analysis with my dialogue with Rafiyah and her mother Zenaib. When I interviewed Rafiyah Karimi a.k.a. “Miss Lyrical Nuisance,” she was a 29-year-old Sudanese spoken word artist raised by her mother who was widowed in her late thirties. Thabiti and I interviewed Rafiyah and her mother, Zenaib, jointly at Rafiyah’s request, in their apartment in Dubai. In 1975, at age 19, Rafiyah’s mother, Zenaib, moved to UAE from Sudan. She and her husband moved to Dubai in search of “freedom from the pressure of family.” I found this somewhat strange because 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.” She also described her father as “liberal” because she and her husband were able to marry without too much interference from male relatives. Zenaib recalled, “I went to my father and said, ‘Dad, I love him!’ and he said okay and let us marry.”

Zenaib and her husband chose the UAE for not only the opportunity to get a pay job but because, “Dubai was a good place for entertainment. You know, we were thinking at that time that Sudan was not the right place for us. We liked music, we liked clubs!” Zenaib was married for nearly 5 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 her twenties. At the end of our interview, Zenaib shared old pictures of herself. At first she was very reluctant to do so, as she is now covered, and 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. In the pictures she showed us she sported a bouffant hairstyle styled to look like blown-out Afro. In one she wore colorful button-up shirts with elegant butterfly collars. She flashed long, thickly mascaraed eyelashes with dramatically arched eyebrows and brilliant eye shadow to match. This came as no surprise as
Zenaib donned a burgundy and black, fringed head scarf with her abaya for our interview.3

Zenaib fondly remembered attending several R&B concerts in Dubai, including Diana Ross and the Supremes and Boney M. She hummed and re-sang tunes by Al Green, Isaac Hayes, and the Temptations to help her remember the artists she followed closely during that time. Blues music especially resonated with her. When I asked her why, she explained, “You feel like you are listening to Sudanese music, it was…part of my identity. The hits and the rhythms…it affects you. It feels like you are listening to Sudanese music; and also, because it was black music. I liked it because they are black. I am black! I like it!” In our time spent together, we found out that Zenaib was a poet. She composed what her daughter described as “classical Arabic poetry” throughout her life. They were simple, rhythmic poems, interlaced with lyrical embellishments that showcased the beauty and tenderness of the Arabic language or what Thabiti and I interpreted as “soul.”

Zenaib’s daughter, Rafiyah, clearly shared her mother’s love of “blackness” and poetry, although she attributed much different meanings and practices to these concepts. Mother and daughter signified differently, both imbuing different cultural and temporal locations and imperatives to their appreciation of black music. While Zenaib admired black American culture, she did not tell the story of her life through its signifying practices. Instead, her affinity for black American musicality was more closely tied to her yearning to be understood as a Sudanese Arab. Alternatively, Rafiyah has spent most of her entire life living in a small apartment in Dubai. With this said she is not, nor will she likely ever be, a citizen of the UAE. She is a citizen of Sudan. The only way that a female can become citizen of Dubai is through legal marriage to an Emirati male. Since Rafiyah married a Sudanese man, she will always be beholden to her work visa and guaranteed through the sponsorship of her husband’s employer. Although Rafiyah lives and works in Dubai, her work visa must be renewed every 3 years in order to remain in UAE legally.

Rafiyah’s first experience with understanding that she is “black” occurred when she was 9 or 10 years old. She recalled, “I attended school in Dubai. Sometimes kids would tease me. I remember one day a young boy came up and asked, “Why are you black?” Rafiyah was shocked because before then she only understood herself to be “Sudanese” and “Muslim.” This experience came as some surprise. Rafiyah was raised not to think about or acknowledge the significance of skin color, let alone “race.” While her mother had a deep affinity for black music, Rafiyah believed that Zenaib was in denial about how antiblack racism from lighter skinned Arabs impacted her experiences while growing up. Zenaib, whose father and ancestors were Egyptian and Saudi and migrated to Sudan, considered herself “Arab.” However, in the minds of others blackness indicated difference, if not blatant inferiority, because her “Arabness” was placed into question.

In contrast, Zenaib made a point of letting us know that she was often mistaken as an “Egyptian,” which was code that she could pass as “Arab” which confirmed a

3 An abaya is a long black robe that is commonly worn by some women in Muslim countries mainly in the Arabian Gulf.
sense of belonging and, perhaps even, entitlement. Her looking “Egyptian” was reference to her fair skin and loosely curled hair texture. Zenaib’s perspective became a point of contention between the mother and daughter during our conversations. Rafiyah, who would likely be described as “brown skinned” by black women in the USA, had a heightened awareness of her darkness, although she was essentially taught by her parents that her blackness was not real. Rafiyah did not understand how to consciously articulate her “blackness” until she immersed herself in hip-hop music. Incidences of what black Americans would plainly call “racism” were explained by both Rafiyah’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.” Rafiyah recalled an incident, when she was 10 years old, of her father going up to the school and confronting the boy about the shaming of his daughter. As she related the story, Rafiyah’s father explained to her that in the Qur’an, and throughout history, Islam was a religion that did not distinguish between “the races,” but only between the devotion of Muslims and the commitment to practice the Five Pillars of Islam.\(^4\) However, as a school girl, Rafiyah faced taunts and questions from her classmates about why she was a different color than her mother, and why her “neck was black.” As a result, Rafiyah’s relationship to “blackness,” vis-à-vis her relationship to African-American music, was different from her mother’s. Rafiyah 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 racism. Black people and their music, for them, was about pure enjoyment and beauty. But for us it was more of like a salvation, freedom thing. 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.”

Throughout the interview there was clear generational tension about significance of relationship between Zenaib’s generation and Rafiyah’s generation and the role that “blackness” played in their cultural/social identities. For Zenaib, racism was not particularly salient. She felt respected and honored as an Arab Sudanese woman in the UAE. Somehow, R&B affirmed her “Sudanese” identity. Alternatively, Rafiyah felt that she was frequently harassed because of her dark skin along with her family’s fragile class status. When her parents left Sudan, they also left the honor and status that came from being part of a wealthy “Arab” Sudanese family. In Dubai, Rafiyah’s family was basically working class. The fact that Rafiyah attended private school and college was culturally and socially irrelevant, except to the extent that it improved her ability to marry into a “good” (read Arab) family. While one was free to consume, consumption did not necessarily transfer into social clout. In Dubai, if you are not Emirati then you are just a “visitor.” Even if a person is born or a permanent, lifelong resident they are still guaranteed few, if any, political or civil rights.

\(^4\) The Five Pillars of Islam are (1) Shahada: To know and believe that there is one God, and that Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) is God’s messenger, (2) Salat: To pray five times a day facing Mecca in Saudi Arabia, (3) Sawm: To fast and pray diligently during the Holy Month of Ramadan from sun up to sun down, (4) Zakat: To provide a portion of one’s income to charity, (5)Hajj: To make a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca.
For Rafiyah, hip-hop music and culture offered a dynamic cultural space to speak out against the antiblack colorism in Dubai that was often subtly and not so subtly practiced by 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 Rafiyah, somewhere in between. Rafiyah’s poetry focuses on the hyper-materialism of Arab culture in Dubai. In “Let it Be Told—Collecting Sense to Make Change” Rafiyah contrasts worship of wealth and consumption in Arab Khaleeji as practiced in Dubai to the deep spiritualism of Islam.

Why has materialism substituted spiritualism as a religion?
And why can’t we petition against politicians
Who have turned us into slaves
in a decaying political system?
“Divinity” and soul prostitution,
Blinded in mental destitution
Why has the media become a parenting institution?
This is neither philosophy nor rhetoric.
This rhyme is not meant to be a mnemonic.
Open your mind and embrace the logic.
Permit the goodness within to shine
Compassion, faith, and integrity are a wise man’s shrine.

In “Let it Be Told,” Rafiyah works through the alterity of black cosmopolitan subjects who live in hyperdeveloped urban landscapes without formal political voice. For her, hip-hop becomes a way to forge and enact forms of cultural citizenship that are built upon critique of urban neoliberalization in unexpected places. As a Sudanese poet, her agency hinges upon the sharing of new and evolving histories of displacement, while quietly yet insistently pushing for achievement of quotidian literacies that enable young people to articulate civic, cultural, political, and spiritual intellectualisms that open up the possibilities for translocal solidarities (Gilroy 2005). For Rafiyah, hip-hop is not simply about mimesis and repetition that so often structure popular rap music, rather, it is a way to question the logics of late capitalism in ways that articulate local desires for voice and belonging. In her music, she publicly asks questions that Sudanese migrant workers and their children are not allowed to ask. She uses hip-hop to speak against Dubai’s alienating and hostile social and spiritual landscapes that are created by the intersection of antiblack sentiments and neoliberalism. As an expectant mother, Rafiyah wants to impart her love of hip-hop onto her children. Ironically, while Rafiyah was deeply skeptical of what she called “patriarchal Arab culture” she, like her mother, has a deep affinity for the Arabic language. For her, Arabic language is a way to instill reverence for her and her husband’s imaginings of Sudan as their true “home” and “culture.”

I saw a publicity image of Lynn “Malikah” Fatouh before I met her. On her CD cover image she was wearing shorts, sitting spread eagled, and looking defiantly at the camera. I was shocked that most of our conversations were focused on Islam, her staunch and unapologetic commitment to end the Israeli occupation in Palestine, and her insistence that she “is the Queen of Arab Hip Hop”! In person, Lynn was
short, slender, and had the demeanor of a college activist. However, once we began smoking shisha and chatting, our conversation turned into a lively political discussion that touched on issues of imperialism, militarism, and misogyny in Arab culture. 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. The terrace was lit only by candlelight and our lounge sofa was less than 50 ft from the Arabian Gulf, and Malikah’s story was center stage.

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. From her perspective, the western world has basically “declared war” on both Islam and the Palestinian people. Her music talks explicitly about the lives taken by Israeli bulldozers, the Israeli rockets that often flew into parts of Lebanon that inevitably kill and maim civilians, and the world community’s active complicity in sanctioning human rights abuses against Palestinians. To her, the US occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan were wholly unjustified because the perpetrators of the 9/11 attack “were terrorist […] 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? Muslims used to look up to Americans and respect Americans.” This, however, was clearly no longer the case. Our conversations touched on questions of 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. 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 and aggressive vocalist. In previous years, Malikah sang hooks for other male rappers, but was determined to claim and celebrate her own prowess on the microphone. She understands her role as a woman in hip-hop and showing young women and girls—and men—that women can be “strong” and “powerful” and “in control.” Malikah takes pride in dominating male rappers in freestyle competitions and in her own ability to work with and employ other women to now sing hooks for her. Malikah also has a deep and passionate commitment to Islam and the Arab language. She often weaves her own gender progressive interpretation of passages of the Qur’ān into her lyrics. For Malikah, hip-hop is about “Resistance. It is 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 Arab 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 project includes preserving young people’s knowledge, use and reverence of the Arabic language. The Emirates, like other countries in the region, conduct
formal schooling either in Arabic (in public schools) or in English (in most private schools). As a result, young peoples’ knowledge about and proficiency of 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 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 involved encouraging girls and young women to critique Arab sexist and patriarchal practices in the name of Islam—in its language and culture.

We went on to discuss stereotypes about black women. From Malikah’s perspective, African-American women like Beyoncé and Rihanna represented “the most beautiful people on earth.” However, when I pointed out that we are also the least likely group of women to be married, the tenor of the conversation shifted. Thabit and I were raised by single mothers. Unlike Thabit and me, Malikah (and Sara whom I will discuss later) had the privilege of growing up in relatively stable upbringings unmarked by extreme poverty. This was evidenced in their ability to trace their family histories over many generations, and tie their culture to a particular place. Thabit and I talked a lot about the alienation from family and community which was a result of our mothers moving around the country to find a good job and safe community to live in. While Arab women were often surveilled by male family members, many African-American women spent time disconnected from their families, often only seeing them a few times per year. This is especially true for first generation college students from working poor families. In fact, as Thabit and I explained, what was often interpreted as “black women’s strength” is more often a sign of us having to cope with so much social and economic vulnerability on a daily basis, rather the rather romanticized celebration of strength that is promoted in the media. Especially, embarrassing and awkward was our need to debunk the broadly circulated stereotypes of black women as “bitches,” “hos,” and “gold-diggers” who wielded our sexuality for the sake of our own economic advancement. What became clear throughout the evening was that our understanding of each other’s culture and positionality is sharply mediated by racial stereotypes that circulate in global media.

As we became more absorbed into Malikah’s deep and passionate articulation for justice in Palestine, it became clear that it was more than fiery rhetoric and nationalist extremism—rather her story unfolded within the context of a longstanding family history and culture that is tied to the land of Palestine. At face value, the deployment of “blackness” as a political identity was used to showcase the problems of the powerless that is undergirded by a ferocious critique that “liberal democracy” fails to acknowledge and respect long histories of violence and land dispossession. However, her 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 USA. In our conversations, hip-hop was the language that was used to articulate, debate, and affirms diverse modes of “black” politics, perspectives, and positionalities.
Of all the women I spent time with in Dubai, I developed the closest relationship with Sara Nasar. At the time, Sara was 25 years old, she was 5 months pregnant, and was only married for 7 months. Sara 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 woman who lives in Kansas. Sara speaks AAVE and Arabic fluently. She was taken from her mother when she was 1 year old and raised as a Palestinian Muslim by her father and his second wife. Sara has lived in Lebanon, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the USA, Russia, and Dubai. She now lives in Kuwait. She is a US citizen; however she married a Russian to appease her father. Sara is a songstress who provides the seductive, throaty vocals of urban lounge music and Arabic hip-hop. Her voice is a deep and sultry contralto. Her style can be described as blues melodies on top of house beats. She writes many of her own songs; however, she collaborates with Malikah and other producers by singing hooks (the choruses to hip-hop songs) to keep a steady flow of income while she struggles to get a record deal of her own.

Sara and I became very close during my time spent in Dubai. I learned that Sara is a survivor of a severely abusive relationship and had recently entered into a marriage of convenience. With this said, she is very proud of the extravagant wedding she planned with her father. She showed us pictures of her stunningly wearing a snug fitting white wedding gown, standing with her beautiful younger sisters and her debonair father. While she took extreme pleasure in the visuals of her wedding ceremony and reception, she was scared to death of marriage, particularly the prospect of having to move permanently to Russia with her husband.

Sara quit her job as a marketing analyst shortly after getting married and finding out that she was pregnant. In her mind, her marriage secured her dowry, and ensured that she would continue to enjoy the patronage of her father. During her pregnancy she continued to write and record music, collaborating with Malikah. However, she stayed with her father in a large compound in the wealthier section of Dubai. While living with her father, she enjoyed the assistance of housekeeper, a luxurious home, and access to the family Hummer. While on her own, with or without her husband, she lost any and all privileges associated with her father’s wealth and good name. She was tethered to her father, and her father used her husband to keep her firmly under his control. Sara wanted desperately to live in Dubai, to escape her husband’s increasingly violent outbursts and what she described as his “shady business practices.” However, her father would not permit her to stay in Dubai without her husband. Without her father’s permission and without a work visa, Sara had to either go back to the USA or go back to Russia to her husband. In 2012, she left her husband and moved to Kuwait with her aunt. She is now recording her second album. After leaving Dubai, Sara and I spoke regularly about our relationships, especially the way our economic standing compromised our ability to be happy and secure. When we first met, Sara was pregnant and vulnerable, while at the same time defiant and brave. She spoke eloquently and passionately about her situation, and was determined to live the best of both worlds at all costs. Sara’s fragile economic standing was tied to her consistently defying her father’s wishes—trying but failing to place her own needs over his demands.
Sara wrote songs about getting hit by her lover and wanting to stay through heartbreak, and infidelity. She envied my ability to be “independent,” to be a “single mom and a professor,” but was simultaneously afraid of that independence. She understood that if she left her husband—she would also leave behind her father’s blessings and most likely end up as a black single mother in Arkansas, or a severely isolated black, Muslim woman in Russia. 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 reigned in and put in her place. Sara, who was close to her mother via Skype and cell phone calls, was often challenged to break away from her bad relationships and to take the necessary risks to establish her independence. However this move would require that she forsake all privileges that were associated with her father’s wealth and status—in fact such a move would further jeopardize the fragile contingency of her “Arabness.”

Today, as a recording artist and mother of an 18-month-old boy, Sara is slowly but surely coming fully into her own self-defined womanhood. She and I continue to walk this path together. Sara and I bonded not only because we found each other culturally familiar and comforting, but because, for a time, both sacrificed our African American mothers’ taste for independence and autonomy for survival in an expensive, hyper-materialist, consumer-driven culture. I did it in my first relationship with my children’s father, and Sara was going through it with her new husband. We were both pregnant within a year of meeting our partners. As result, we had to reconcile our personal ambitions for success with our grudging economic dependence on men. We found that our experiences as young black women of the hip-hop generation struggling with motherhood, were quite similar although we lived over 10,000 miles away from each other. We both risked our independence to engage in ambitious and risky career endeavors—mine in women’s studies studying hip-hop, and hers as an aspiring R&B vocalist in the Middle East. Predictably our conversations were personal and intimate. In September of 2012, Sara released her first single while I was editing the proofs of my first book. Hip-hop feminism was the cultural space through which this new relationship was built. Our politics consisted of building strong and resistive relationships across rigid geopolitical and cultural boundaries. We contested the alienating tendencies of neoliberalization through the building of trust, rapport, and cross-racial and cross-ethnic solidarity—something that was only achieved through the cultural rubric of hip-hop.

Conclusion

Hip-hop provides the field of engagement for personal sharing, and truth-telling about the intricacies and intimacies of blackness in a globalized world. It is a space in which we can engage and flow across our differences with passion, respect, and admiration. Hip-hop was the cipher in which a transversal politics was enacted: it was the common discourse in which we gave voice to histories and realities on our own terms without fear of condemnation or judgment—with attention paid to
questions of justice, representation, recognition, and solidarity. Hip-hop, as Paul Gilroy (2005) writes, provided the “spirit of connection...that can be recycled and employed to transform our understanding of how translocal solidarity can work so that we are more informed, more sensitive, less intimidated, and more likely to act (p. 79).”

In Dubai, hip-hop is used as a space to wrestle the spiritual fruit of Islam from the dogmas of state patriarchy, and to contend with the contemporary challenges of motherhood in the hyper-material, fast-paced, and high-stress digital age. Artists like Malikah, Rafiyah, and Sara, 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 redefine the parameters of cultural resistance in places that deny the very existence of race. All women we spent time with participated in the creation of cultural spaces in their communities to transform the meanings and practice of art, politics, and activism, while redefining the contours of antiracist, antisexist, class conscious revolutionary struggle.

Hip-hop feminist ethnography created opportunities for women, especially to engage with 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. Furthermore, a transversal epistemological standpoint enabled us to productively 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. We opened some very important new questions for further research in the Middle East, and particularly Dubai. These questions include: Will hip-hop generation women be content with the lack of formal political representation in Arab states? Will “blackness” as a social and political identity remain a useful marker to call attention to patterns of racialized poverty, urban containment, and political disenfranchisement among new generations of people of color in the Arab world? Finally, how will blackened hip-hop generation Arab women incorporate their love and appreciation of hip-hop music and culture into their approaches to motherhood? While answers to these questions remain outside the purview of this chapter, they are well within the project of transversal feminist ethnography. These are the kinds of questions that will provide insight into the lives and perspectives of emerging generations of multinational, multiethnic black-identified women all over the world. This work will provide new ways of understanding the emergence and consolidation of cultural identities vis-à-vis cultural citizenship, as well as demonstrate how art itself can be a springboard into telling new stories about place, politics, and cultural resistance among diverse women in the Global North and South, including especially women in the Arab world.

Finally, this provides a glimpse into the cultural and social minefields that are produced by largely unacknowledged racial and cultural hierarchies that persist as a by-product of antiblack prejudice, US cultural imperialism, and race-based social inequities. Hip-hop continues to be a rich cultural space in which to articulate the paradoxical state of societies that claim to be colorblind, yet in both formal and
informal ways, restrict the building of deep and abiding social relationships across racial and ethnic difference. As consumers and practices 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 transnational family and society. Hip-hop provides a cultural space in which profoundly different women can in small, yet meaningful ways, make place and community in territories that deny us the rights of citizens and, as a result, full participation in the cultural landscapes of the places that we live our lives, but that we are never fully allowed to embrace as home.

References


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