

Rapping Revolution and Revolt: Hip Hop From the Edge of Lebanon

Francesco Mazzucotelli, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan

The widely acclaimed success of El Général's song *Rayess Le Bled*,¹ which was released at the beginning of the phase of political unrest in Tunisia and became an instant soundtrack of the demonstrations, sparked a wave of interest for Arab hip hop. Circumfused with an aura of contestation, uncommodification, even on the fringe of legality and established order,² hip hop has been hailed as an ideal medium to express the feelings of frustrated masses against authoritarian regimes and oppressive cultural norms. Actually, hip hop has been embraced in the Arab world as a means to express discontent, to vent frustrations, and to combat misperceptions and stigma.³

In the framework of an evolving musical scene that mirrors the complexity of the social and political transformations that are sweeping through the Middle East and North Africa, this essay intends to shed some light on Lebanon's hip hop artists, and their place in civil society.⁴

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jdE_LpmAIQ>

² Rahn, Janice. *Painting Without Permission: Hip-Hop Graffiti Subculture*. Westport: Bergin & Gavey, 2002. xiv-xv, 58-63, 65, 67-69, 70-76, 80.

³ Dmitry, Holiday. "Hip Hop's Responses to the Arab Awakening". *Movements.org*, 12 June 2011. <<http://www.movements.org/blog/entry/soundtrack-of-the-arab-awakening/>>

See also #Jan 25 by Omar Offendum, The Narcicyst, Freeway, Ayah, Amir Sulaiman.

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sCbpiOpLwFg>>

⁴ In this essay, I am focussing specifically on Mcing (rapping), which is only one element of the hip hop culture. Although I am making also a marginal reference to graffiti, the term hip hop here should be assumed as referring to Mcing.

Although the origins of Arab hip hop are disputed,⁵ there is a certain consensus that the genre took roots outside mainstream media and through underground channels in places of intersection with Western musical cultures.⁶ Central to the establishment in the mid-1990s of hip hop in the Arabic-speaking countries is the North African migrant community living in France, which transplanted into the *banlieues* of Paris, Lyon, and Marseille the ghetto narratives of North American hip hop. This North African diaspora can be considered as a cultural bridge, and the forerunner of Arabic hip hop, even though the initial choice of French as a language of expression prevented the circulation of these early songs to non-French-speaking countries.⁷

The city of Lod, near Tel Aviv, with its significant Palestinian population living in conditions of relative marginality, is also highlighted as a beacon of hip hop at the end of the 1990s.⁸

Returning Lebanese and Palestinians from North America and Europe were also vectors of new musical tastes. Lebanese hip hop artist and producer DJ Lethal Skillz recalls that “my friend used to bring in mix-tapes when he’d come back from New York”, and playing the latest jams on pirate radio stations in the late 1990s.⁹

It is also not irrelevant that US-based hip hop acts made references to Beirut and Lebanon, even though later Lebanese hip hop artists have questioned some Western

⁵ Allers, Jackson. *Rhymes and Revolution: Soundtrack to the Arab Spring*.
<<http://soundcloud.com/spotus/rhymes-and-revolution>>

⁶ Puig, Nicolas. “« Bienvenue dans le camps ! ». L’émergence d’un rap palestinien au Liban : une nouvelle chanson sociale et politique.” In *Itinéraires esthétiques et scènes culturelles au Proche-Orient*, Nicolas Puig & Franck Mermier (eds.). Beyrouth: IFPO, 2007. 148-165.

⁷ Allers, *Rhymes and Revolution: Soundtrack to the Arab Spring*, *op. cit.*

⁸ See for instance the caustic *Min irhabi?* by DAM.
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9FVL-Ewlh8>>

⁹ Allers, Jackson. “We out to show the world that we not a bunch of terrorists!”. *Menassat*, 25 December 2007.
<<http://www.menassat.com/?q=en/news-articles/2533-we-out-show-world-we-not-bunch-terrorists>>

misperceptions in those acts, as well as the necessity of a Western validation to legitimize the local scene.

Finally, one personality from North American rap influenced hugely the sprouting underground groups in the Arab world. With his lyrics about racial inequality, social exclusion, harsh living conditions for the poor, Tupac Shakur remains an icon for an entire generation of rappers,¹⁰ exposing hip hop as a powerful vector for many forms of marginalization.

Still, it would be grossly inaccurate to categorize Arab hip hop as a totally imported phenomenon that is entirely based on foreign musical cultures and is unrelated to the local cultural landscape.¹¹ On the one hand, some hip hop artists are aware that it is not obvious to draw overly extreme parallelisms between “black street culture”, ghetto culture, or banlieue culture, and the complexity and peculiarity of the social and political situation on the Middle East and North Africa,¹² no matter how deep are the resonances between African-American tropes of dispossession and contestation and similar dynamics in this part of the world.¹³ After the first, more experimental stages and experiences, what local artists tried to do was the development of their own language and content, beyond a pale imitation of external models.

On the other hand, most Arab hip hop artists claim that they felt the essential necessity of using Arabic as a medium of expression, despite some initial criticisms,¹⁴ they even position themselves as modern time poets who, while definitely not falling

¹⁰ Puig, “« Bienvenue dans le camps ! »...”, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Tobia, Micheline. “The Big Brother of Arabic Hip Hop”. *Mashallah News*, 23 June 2011. <<http://mashallahnews.com/?p=3662>>

¹² Allers, “We out to show the world...”, *op. cit.*

¹³ Osumare, Halifu. “Beat Streets in the Global Hood: Connective Marginalities of the Hip Hop Globe”. *Journal of American and Comparative Culture* 24: 1-2, 2001. 171-181.

¹⁴ Tobia, “The Big Brother of Arabic Hip Hop”, *op. cit.*

into the same traditional guidelines of *zajal* or classical poetry, capitalize on the rich poetic imagery of Arabic literature,¹⁵ the power of the word, the local heritage of lyrical expressivity and performative traditions.

While Osumare correctly reminds that it is problematic to draw a definitive line between what is “local” and what is “global”,¹⁶ especially in relation to a subculture that strongly revolves around the notion of contestation of existing boundaries, it is probably fair to say that different elements, both endogenous and imported, blend through compounded appropriations in forms of expression that also relate to class, gender, and power dynamics that are locally, spatially, and temporally determined.

It would also be inaccurate to oversimplify the positioning of hip hop in Lebanon in terms of an ostracized, underground trend that is totally unrelated to the rest of the society, in particular to the musical and art scene. Such an estimation would underestimate the complexity of Beirut’s soundscape, which can be safely assumed as a place where different sounds, rhythms, and musical languages have been merging, clashing, and interpenetrating for a long time in a wider context of different (and sometimes clashing) cultural projects. Propped by the emergence of a vast array of militia-operated and pirate radios and broadcasting stations, a variety of musical genres and styles shaped the musical ear of the Lebanese public.

Highly commercial pan-Arab pop music, supported by a huge video industry, came to dominate the musical scene since the early 1990s, but alternative styles and networks, sometimes relying on established artists such as Ziad Rahbani, Marcel Khalifeh, or Rabih Mroue, formed a subcultural scene ranging from rock, jazz, heavy metal to electro and trip hop.

¹⁵ Tobia, Micheline. “Fareeq El Atrash. Modern Time Poetry”. Mashallah News, 16 April 2011.

<<http://mashallahnews.com/?p=2588>>

¹⁶ Osumare, “Beat Streets...”, *op. cit.*

Lebanon's soundscape includes indie rock or post-punk bands such as Scrambled Eggs or Lazy Lung,¹⁷ electro bands such as Lumi, or the indie electro-pop of Soapkills (which has been boxed as "Oriental style trip hop"),¹⁸ the edgy punk-influenced rock of The New Government, and the fusion projects of Zeid Hamdan and Yasmin Hamdan (Y.A.S.),¹⁹ in addition to a considerable number of local DJs. In short, musical experimentalism through a variety of languages is not entirely new to Beirut, and it would be way too simplistic to refer to the hip hop scene as the only form of musical alternative to commodified Arabic pop, global pop, or dance hits.²⁰

This subcultural scene has been growing in Beirut-based locations such as art galleries, theaters, association centers and clubs, such as (among others) Espace SD, Al-Madina theater, Zico House, Basement, Walima, Club Social, Art Lounge, Ta Marbouta and other cafés in the neighborhood of Hamra, in addition to cultural institutions.²¹

While criticizing some aspects of the society they live in, Burkhalter highlights how the artists who are gravitating around this network of "alternative" scenes can be described as "situated in urban, intellectual, economically privileged strata".²² They can afford the luxury to lead an alternative (or supposedly alternative) lifestyle and

¹⁷ Allers, Jackson. "Live from Beirut... Lazy Lung the Arab alt-rock Olympians!". *U Men*, December 2010. 74-75.

<<http://jacksonallers.files.wordpress.com/2011/09/umen-lazy-lung-art-pg-1.jpg>>

¹⁸ <http://www.underprod.com/pf_soapkills.htm>

¹⁹ See a comprehensive map of the scene here:

<<http://www.lebaneseunderground.com/music/music.asp?gid=3>>

²⁰ See the trailer of the documentary *Yallah Underground* by Farid Eslam.

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cp5MYx3lx3A>>

²¹ Burkhalter, Thomas. "Mapping Out the Sound Memory of Beirut: A Survey of the Music of a War Generation". In *Itinéraires esthétiques et scènes culturelles au Proche-Orient*, Nicolas Puig & Franck Mermier (eds.), Beyrouth: IFPO, 2007. 103-125.

²² *Ibid.*

express their artistic ambitions, they are connected to transnational networks and trends, they are informed about the latest global and regional developments.

In short, they are hardly representative of the most marginalized and the most disinherited strata of Lebanon's social fabric.

A comprehensive history of hip hop in Lebanon remains yet to be written, but a few milestones can be singled out along its path. Wael Kodeih, better known with his stage name Rayyes Bek, started rapping in 1997 with his friend "Eben Foulen" in a hip hop group called Aks'ser, and continued solo with the album *3am behkeh bil sokout* in 2003. He was instrumental in the establishment of a liminal Arabic-speaking hip hop scene (even if he also sings in French, as in his 2010 bilingual album *Khartech 3a zaman/L'homme de gauche*).²³

Hussein Mao, also known as DJ Lethal Skillz, entered the musical scene in 1994, spinning hits on a pirate radio station and later becoming the leading force of the 961 Underground "family",²⁴ conceived as a platform to develop individual talents while elevating the hip hop genre and trying to reach a broader audience.

Defined by Allers as "a testament to the development of Lebanese hip hop", DJ Lethal Skillz's 2007 album *New World Disorder* is a collection of the state-of-the-art of local hip hop at that time, and an open window on the social problems this music stems from.²⁵

²³ <<http://rayessbek.com/blog/blog/biography-english/>>

²⁴ Allers, "We out to show the world...", *op. cit.*

²⁵ Allers, Jackson. "Arab Rap's Theoretical Unification". *Beats and Breath*, 1 August 2011. <<http://jacksonallers.wordpress.com/2011/08/01/arab-raps-theoretical-unification/>>

Woman rapper Lynn Fattouh (stage name Malikah),²⁶ as well as other rappers and MCs such as MC Moe, RGB, Siska, and Omarz, also emerge from this background.

Even if their album was released in June 2010, Fareeq el Atrash, with their distinctive groovy and funky bass variations, have been playing together since 2006, with MC Nasser “Chyno” Shorbaji joining the band and front singer Edd Abbas in 2008.²⁷

Katibe Khamse appear in the Palestinian refugee camp of Burj al-Barajneh in 2001 through the encounter between a DJ who was playing at wedding receptions (in- and outside refugee camps), and a former member of a Palestinian theater group. I-Voice also appear in Burj al-Barajneh before relocating shortly to the refugee camp of Nahr el-Bared, while the Palestinian collective Hawiya Zarqa is located in ‘Ain al-Helwe.²⁸

It would be erroneous to represent Lebanon’s hip hop scene as homogeneous. Actually, one could argue that it is far from being so. Katibe Khamse make clear that “we absolutely don’t put ourselves in the same basket as other Lebanese hip hop artists”, and add that “they are on one side, we are on the other”.²⁹

The band seems to imply a social and spatial gap between themselves, as a product of the harsh living conditions of the refugee camp, and the posher bands of downtown Beirut, which, despite their embrace of supposedly countercultural conventions and tropes, still originate from and live in more privileged contexts.

Not coincidentally maybe, this is reflected in the different approach to musical output and its reception from the public. While Fareeq el Atrash focus first and foremost on individual expressivity, pleasing their fans base, and showing their

²⁶ <<http://www.lebaneseunderground.com/music/artist.asp?aid=15>>

²⁷ Tobia, “Fareeq El Atrash...”, *op. cit.*

²⁸ Puig, “« Bienvenue dans le camps ! »...”, *op. cit.*

²⁹ See the documentary *Katibe 5 and the Soundscapes of Lebanese Hip Hop* by Philippe Tremblay. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZoFel40kapY>>

genuine love for the genre,³⁰ Katibe Khamse state that “rap is not the main goal, the goal is the cause for which we are singing.” They are adamant that “we are singing for people who don’t listen to rap.”³¹

While it is commonplace to mention marginality in relation to hip hop, encompassing different shades and forms of oppression, stigma or dispossession,³² it also makes sense to recognize the diversity of marginalities that are involved.

Rayyes Bek and Malikah, just like other Arab hip hop artists such as Omar Offendum and The Narcicyst,³³ refer heavily to the experience of emigration and exposure to different cultures and social costumes, with the resulting, difficult task of adapting, switching, choosing stances, and chasing stereotypes. Rayyes Bek’s *Schizophrenia* is a powerful description of a clash of cultural belongings, an identity “divided in two parts”, where it is not feasible to belong neither “here” nor “there”.

In this song, he ends up wondering if he has actually “understood anything of this country” (Lebanon).³⁴ Marginality appears here as the unlikelihood or impossibility to identify completely with one side or the other, both in terms of “Western” versus “Arab” identity, and in relation to the highly factionalized and segmented social and political landscape of Lebanon.

Marginality is also expressed through a generational gap, if not outright clash with established parental norms and traditions.

³⁰ Tobia, “Fareeq El Atrash...”, *op. cit.*

³¹ See the documentary *Cultures of Resistance: Katibe 5*.
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0zBe5IPfs3I>>

³² Osumare, “Beat Streets...”, *op. cit.*

³³ Allers, Jackson. “Middle East’s Lyrical Bomber: Author, Actor, Husband, MC – The Narcicyst on Beats and Breath”. *Beats and Breath*, 11 August 2011.
<<http://jacksonallers.wordpress.com/2011/08/11/middle-easts-lyrical-bomber-author-actor-husband-mc-the-narcicyst-on-beats-and-breath/>>

³⁴ <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DKXSZQ3Dqfw>>

Marginality can also have a gendered dimension: Malukah's *Ya Imra* is conceived as an anthem for underempowered women to reclaim their place in the world.³⁵

Most of all, however, it is the spatial dimension of marginality that is expressed in Lebanon's hip hop. As a musical genre and a form of art that relates specifically to urban and suburban public spaces (and their lack thereof) and to "the right to the city" (the right to assert one's own full right of citizenship and participation to decision-making processes),³⁶ hip hop resonates deeply in all contexts that relate to conflicts between center and periphery, and to the exclusion of social margins.

Rap and MC performances are also often intertwined with other ways to reclaim public urban space, mostly in the form of visual art, street art, and graffiti. Just like Arabic rappers have developed their own language and style distancing themselves from their English and French sources of inspiration, so Arabic graffiti writers have matured a unique blend that incorporates local aesthetic parameters (such as Arabic calligraphy), serving both aesthetical and performative functions.³⁷

In Lebanon's hip hop, vivid scenes of daily life are mixed with registers of social and political critique that are located in well delineated spaces. *Madinet Beirut* by Rayyes Bek and "Eben Foulen" is an act where homage to the city, affective bonds, and estrangement mingle together.³⁸

Probably nowhere as in hip hop from Palestinian refugee camps is the spatial dimension more relevant. Katibe Khamse are adamant that "we need our surroundings" and that their lyrics relate first and foremost to the environment of the refugee camp. *Ahla fik bil moukhayamat* is a musical painting of walls, rooftops, wires, a labyrinth of backstreets, mothers weeping and praying for the lives of their

³⁵ <<http://revolutionaryarabraptheindex.blogspot.com/2011/11/malukah-ya-imra2a-woman.html>>

³⁶ Harvey, David. "The Right To The City". *New Left Review* 53, 2008. 23-40.

³⁷ Vincenti, Antonio. *Beirut Street Art*. Beirut: Art Lounge Publishing, 2009.

³⁸ <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aSlyUCkDRYY>>

children, secret lovers, lost youth, an old woman feeding cats, an old man telling tales of his ancestral village, noise, sounds, scars, advertisements, and a sky too distant to be seen.³⁹ Through these lyrics, the refugee camp (which is said to resist even as it changes forms and colors) appears as a symbol of displacement, but also a space of belonging, a space of social interaction, and a space that claims its visibility, its existence, and its role into the wider cityscape.

As Katibe Khamse put it, “all places have stories to be recounted”,⁴⁰ mentioning Hay el-Salloum (a neighborhood in the outskirts of Beirut) and *dahiyeh* (the southern part of the city),⁴¹ as well as the peripheral regions of Lebanon.

In Katibe Khamse, the village of origine of al-Saffouriye in Palestine is seen as a lost homeland in contrast to the chaos of the city, somehow replicating the trope of the idealized village in an idyllic landscape that spans over a wide array of Lebanese songs and imagery, across denominational and ideological cleavages.⁴²

The countryside of Touffar, on the other hand, is anything but romanticized. Reclaiming for themselves the label of “brigands”, the band offer a gritty image of Baalbek and Hermel as areas of lawlessness (or, more precisely, as areas being outside the definition of “law” and “justice” crafted by the state and the political rulers), internecine gang violence, and daily strife to make ends meet.⁴³ It is a narration of cannabis crops, hashish smuggling, petrol smuggling, gun-running and

³⁹ <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BakFKHyhbGQ>>

⁴⁰ *Katibe 5 and the Soundscapes of Lebanese Hip Hop*, *op. cit.*

⁴¹ Deeb, Lara. “Deconstructing a Hezbollah Stronghold”. *The MIT Electronic Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 6, 2006. 115-125.

⁴² Harb, Mona. “Pious Entertainment: Al-Saha Traditional Village”. *ISIM Review* 17, 2006. 10-11.

⁴³ *Nashid al-touffar* <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nswKDau4J6Q>>

Baalbek <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ez27ZvOcOR8>>

clan vendettas in a frontier where people have to resort to weapons to protect themselves and their meager livelihood.⁴⁴

Touffar also offer a no-nonsense, powerful description of the feeling of exclusion of Lebanon's marginalized social strata and geographical regions from the glitzy, neo-liberal development schemes of Downtown Beirut.⁴⁵

Al-wasat al-tijari ("the commercial center") becomes *al-wasakh al-tijari* ("the commercial filth") in a frontal attack against capitalist interests, Western interventionism, cooperation with Israel, "palaces built upon the blood of slaves", hotel and brothels, ending with a wish to overthrow the "kings of the palace" and "destroy Solidere" (the privately-owned company that actually owns and runs most of Central Beirut District).

The "son of Baalbek" "doesn't enter and doesn't die" there, or succumb to that "commercial filth", claiming "all rights of the people" in front of "the owners of the land".⁴⁶

With variegated levels of ideological commitment, harshness, and frustration, Lebanon's hip hop artists paint a grim image of the country and express how they variously have got issues with the government and the political elites; corruption; unequal and unfair distribution of wealth and access to resources; Israel and the West. Object of witty sarcasm are also journalists, academicians, and researchers (possibly

⁴⁴ *Min al sharq ila al-jord* <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LjwqYoCBmRE>>

⁴⁵ Wood, Josh. "Fight the Power". *Esquire*, February 2010. 64-67.

⁴⁶ *Al-wasakh al-tijari* <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SIRWpi-lmSo>>

S.hab al-ard <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wcqUvWriZK4>>

See also this clip aired on New Tv:

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DtP26Hzuuco>>

including the author of this paper, if they only knew), for they capitalize on the misfortunes of others for their own purpose of visibility.⁴⁷

Benevolent associations, charities, and NGOs (especially foreign and international ones) are also targeted for their alleged non-transparent selective choices and non-transparent systems of financing, as well as for cases of corruption, as in Katibe Khamse's *Jam'iyyat*.⁴⁸

Support for the Palestinian cause also plays a very significant role, in particular among Palestinian groups. Issues such as the status of the refugees, living conditions in the camps, the stigmatization of Palestinians from several segments of Lebanon's society, also appear as quite regular features.

Most, if not all, of Lebanon's hip hop artists claim that they want to spread awareness about social problems,⁴⁹ express personal things that may trigger something bigger,⁵⁰ or challenge the system altogether.⁵¹ And yet, also in this case, it would be inaccurate to assume that they adhere to a unique ideological or political trend.

Not only it is problematic, bizarre, and probably useless to try to categorize them on a left-right political spectrum; they may have very different views on Lebanese and Palestinian main political actors and issues, or on recent developments in domestic and regional politics.

The idea of Arab hip hop as a unique, unified "revolutionary" phenomenon is contradicted by several examples of artists and groups who have been defending the status quo or successfully co-opted to work for the system. Syrian Eslam Jawaad's

⁴⁷ Katibe 5 and the Soundscapes of Lebanese Hip Hop, *op. cit.*

⁴⁸ <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DMdpxHpuEM>>

⁴⁹ Puig, "« Bienvenue dans le camps ! »...", *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ Tobia, "Fareeq El Atrash...", *op. cit.*

⁵¹ Wood, Josh. "Fight the Power", *op. cit.*

Dudd al-Nizam is in fact a call to rally in support of the regime of Bashar al-Assad against the so-called imperialist-Zionist conspiracy.⁵²

In Morocco, popular rapper Don Bigg and smash hit *Ma tqish bladi* were coopted by the monarchy for its “national unity” campaign, while, under Ben Ali’s regime, the Tunisian government promoted hip hop as a form of modernity in alternative to the diffusion of the Islamist ideology. The standing of hip hop as a possible instrument of *soft power* used by the USA in the context of the Middle East has also been raised, following a statement by Hillary Clinton on “hip-hop diplomacy”.⁵³

The reaction of many Lebanese hip hop artists to the 2009 parliamentary election is indicative of a certain vagueness, as they seem more keen to express their frustration, hopelessness, and skepticism (generalized and even generic, even though quite understandable)⁵⁴ than to advocate some sort of political platform.

Malikah’s *Intikhabet* is a call against corrupted politicians,⁵⁵ while Rayyes Bek’s *Intikhabet 09* focusses on the criticism of Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing formula, supporting secularism and the introduction of civil marriage as the basis of a new notion of citizenship that is not grounded on confessional affiliations.⁵⁶ Touffar shun altogether the electoral process, and the concept itself of state, seen mostly as an institutionalized machinery for the rich to keep the poor oppressed.⁵⁷

⁵² Abouzeid, Rania. “Syrian Rappers Urge... Restraint? Protesters Find Little Support in Popular Music”. *Time World*, 4 July 2011.

<<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2080548,00.html>>

⁵³ Aidi, Hishaam. “The Grand (Hip-Hop) Chessboard: Race, Rap and Raison d’État”. *Middle East Report* 260, 2011. 25-39.

⁵⁴ See for instance *La min?* by Rayyes Bek.

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8uMluJj-lb8>>

⁵⁵ <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SxcccPfRwjWc>>

⁵⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tBg_NnlVX-A>

⁵⁷ “Touffar. Thawra mustad’afin fi uslub ghanna’i”. *Baladiyat News*, 22 November 2011.

<<http://www.baladiyatnews.com/index.php?itemid=298>>

The hip hop scene maintains an uneasy scene with the political environment at large. Katibe Khamse criticize the political leaders of the refugee camp at the risk of being ostracized,⁵⁸ while Touffar, despite praising the plight of Baalbek and talking about resistance (which, in the Lebanese context, is assumed as resistance against Israel, and often related to Hezbollah), are in a very uneasy relation with the Party of God,⁵⁹ which might despise Touffar's apparent praise of lawlessness, bravado, and rural anarchy (a praise that in fact might be an attempt to challenge the stigma from within).

Most hip hop artists in Lebanon are aware of the trade-off between popularity and "compromising with the system" through the association with corporate labels and/or mainstream media.⁶⁰ While they all welcome new opportunities of marketing, networking, stage performances, and fundraising (even with evident degrees of enthusiasm between more "commercial" bands such as Fareeq el Atrash and more uncompromising ones such as Katibe Khamse or Touffar), the hip hop scene of Lebanon wonders about the precarious balance between means and mission, and ponders over the future.⁶¹

In the wake of the Arab Spring, it has been discussed if the Arab hip hop scene, with its still largely uncommodified and subcultural/countercultural characteristics

⁵⁸ Puig, "« Bienvenue dans le camps ! »...", *op. cit.*

⁵⁹ Wood, Josh. "Fight the Power", *op. cit.*

⁶⁰ Allers, *Rhymes and Revolution: Soundtrack to the Arab Spring*, *op. cit.*

⁶¹ Anderson, Sulome. "Tales from Beirut's hip-hop trenches". The Daily Star, 27 January 2012. <<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Culture/Music/2012/Jan-27/161197-ales-from-beirut-hip-hop-trenches.ashx>>

that retain “an aura of gracious art”,⁶² can evolve into a unified (even if pluralistic) site of countercultural opposition to the existing political and social status quo.⁶³

I would argue that, on the one hand, it is problematic to talk about the Arab Spring as a unified phenomenon, or as a “pan-Arab revolution”, and it is therefore problematic to construct the scene of Arab hip hop artists as a milieu or circle of “organic intellectuals” of that revolution.

On the other hand, I would argue that counterculture might be necessary but not sufficient for a revolution, for the latter is perhaps a political process that relates to the seizure of power, the articulation of a political doctrine or program, and the formation of a political leadership.

All such things are minimized in the present hip hop scene. And, maybe, this is precisely its flaw from a political point of view, and its significance from a cultural and social point of view, in its maieutic function of creating a broader consciousness of social grievances and challenging the existing forms of cultural hegemony.

Rather than framing it too much (more than I have done here) or putting it into the boxes of rigid categories, Lebanon’s hip hop might be described, if not the driving force behind a revolution, at least as the expression “here and now” of a disenfranchised youth, with all its internal differentiations; its selective appropriation of “Western”, global, and “local” (Arabic) models, languages, styles and tropes through a powerful hybridization; its superposed layers of belonging and behaving, which construct new forms of cultural and social identity; its very postmodern sense of having lost credible and legitimate references, the frequent emphasis on the

⁶² LeVine, Mark. “The New Hybridities of Arab Musical Intifadas”. *Jadaliyya*, 29 October 2011. <<http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/3008/the-new-hybridities-of-arab-musical-intifadas>>

⁶³ Allers, “Arab Rap’s Theoretical Unification”, *op. cit.*

individual rather than the collective, and nearly absent long-term visions or projects; and, most of all, its legitimate frustrations, expectations, and anger.

Acknowledgments

Much respect to: Emma Shaw Crane, Jackson Allers, Jana Nakhal, Imane Barmaki.

References

Dedicated websites, blogs, and user pages

<<http://jacksonallers.wordpress.com/>>

<<http://revolutionaryarabrap.blogspot.com/>>

<<http://www.lebaneseunderground.com/music/index.asp>>

<<http://www.rayessbek.com/>>

<<http://www.worldhiphopmarket.com/>>

<<http://www.youtube.com/user/osloob20>>

<<http://www.youtube.com/user/touffar>>

<<http://www.youtube.com/user/touffar2>>

Documentaries

Allers, Jackson. *Rhymes and Revolution: Soundtrack to the Arab Spring*.

<<http://soundcloud.com/spotus/rhymes-and-revolution>>

Cultures of Resistance: Katibe 5.

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0zBe5IPfs3I>>

Tremblay, Philippe. *Katibe 5 and the Soundscapes of Lebanese Hip Hop.*

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZoFel40kapY>>

Video with an interview to Touffar, aired on New TV.

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DtP26Hzuuco>>

Books and articles

Abouzeid, Rania. “Syrian Rappers Urge... Restraint? Protesters Find Little Support in Popular Music”. *Time World*, 4 July 2011.

Aidi, Hishaam. “The Grand (Hip-Hop) Chessboard: Race, Rap and Raison d’État”. *Middle East Report* 260, 2011. 25-39.

Allers, Jackson. “Middle East’s Lyrical Bomber: Author, Actor, Husband, MC – The Narcicyst on Beats and Breath”. *Beats and Breath*, 11 August 2011.

Allers, Jackson. “Arab Rap’s Theoretical Unification”. *Beats and Breath*, 1 August 2011.

Allers, Jackson. “Live from Beirut... Lazy Lung the Arab alt-rock Olympians!”. *U Men*, December 2010. 74-75.

Allers, Jackson. “We out to show the world that we not a bunch of terrorists!”. *Menassat*, 25 December 2007.

Anderson, Sulome. “Tales from Beirut’s hip-hop trenches”. *The Daily Star*, 27 January 2012.

Burkhalter, Thomas. "Mapping Out the Sound Memory of Beirut: A Survey of the Music of a War Generation". In *Itinéraires esthétiques et scènes culturelles au Proche-Orient*, Nicolas Puig & Franck Mermier (eds.), Beyrouth: IFPO, 2007. 103-125.

Deeb, Lara. "Deconstructing a Hezbollah Stronghold". *The MIT Electronic Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 6, 2006. 115-125.

Dmitry, Holiday. "Hip Hop's Responses to the Arab Awakening". *Movements.org*, 12 June 2011.

Harb, Mona. "Pious Entertainment: Al-Saha Traditional Village". *ISIM Review* 17, 2006. 10-11.

Harvey, David. "The Right To The City". *New Left Review* 53, 2008. 23-40.

Khoury, Sanaa & Bashir Sfeir. "Rebel Rap from the Outlaws of Hermel". *Al-Akhbar English*, 16 November 2011.

LeVine, Mark. "The New Hybridities of Arab Musical Intifadas". *Jadaliyya*, 29 October 2011.

Osumare, Halifu. "Beat Streets in the Global Hood: Connective Marginalities of the Hip Hop Globe". *Journal of American and Comparative Culture* 24: 1-2, 2001. 171-181.

Puig, Nicolas. "« Bienvenue dans le camps ! ». L'émergence d'un rap palestinien au Liban : une nouvelle chanson sociale et politique." In *Itinéraires esthétiques et scènes culturelles au Proche-Orient*, Nicolas Puig & Franck Mermier (eds.). Beyrouth: IFPO, 2007. 148-165.

Rahn, Janice. *Painting Without Permission: Hip-Hop Graffiti Subculture*. Westport: Bergin & Gavey, 2002.

Tobia, Micheline. "The Big Brother of Arabic Hip Hop". *Mashallah News*, 23 June 2011.

Tobia, Micheline. "Fareeq El Atrash. Modern Time Poetry". *Mashallah News*, 16 April 2011.

"Touffar. Thawra mustad'afin fi uslub ghanna'i". *Baladiyat News*, 22 November 2011.

Vincenti, Antonio. *Beirut Street Art*. Beirut: Art Lounge Publishing, 2009.

Wood, Josh. "Fight the Power". *Esquire*, February 2010. 64-67.