



The Global Imaginary of Arab Hip Hop: a case study

Stefania Taviano

Abstract

Hip Hop is a complex cultural and musical phenomenon resulting from the interactions between globalization and localization processes. Hip Hop artists operating in different locations – and often moving between multiple localities – appropriate and (re)interpret the genre on the basis of local musical and cultural traditions while defining their identities as artists and more often than not as political activists. English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), combined with other languages, is the common code shared by Hip Hop artists throughout the world, while translation, both in its traditional function and in a broad sense, is intrinsic to Hip Hop as a political site allowing local expressions to connect at a global level. Drawing on translation and globalization studies, and applying the notion of prefigurative politics, I will show how Hip Hop music aims to create its own imaginary to give voice to people of all cultures beyond geopolitical boundaries. More specifically, diasporic Arab Hip Hop artists, such as the Syrian-American Omar Offendum and the Iraqi-Canadian Narcycist, among others, aim to subvert the representation of Arabs as terrorists codified in mainstream Western discourses. They construct their identities as global citizens and activists through songs and videos such as *Fear of an Arab Planet*, a play on the title of legendary Hip Hop group Public Enemy's *Fear of a Black Planet*, and a parody of Western images of Arab people.. Most important of all, they adopt a series of prefigurative strategies to create alternative imaginaries and to put into practice principles of peace and justice in the here and now rather than in an *ideal* future. An analysis of Hip Hop global imaginary from an interdisciplinary perspective can shed a new light on the role of art activism in challenging mainstream imaginaries and social and political practices.

Keywords

Arab Hip-Hop / English as Lingua Franca (ELF) / Politics of translation / Borders / Global Imaginary / Prefigurative Politics

Author

Stefania Taviano – staviano@unime.it
Dipartimento di Civiltà Antiche e Moderne (DICAM)
University of Messina



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Hip Hop is a form of music spread throughout the world resulting from the interactions between globalization and localization processes. Hip Hop artists from different countries appropriate and (re)interpret the genre on the basis of local musical and cultural traditions (see Mitchell, 2001; Alim, 2006; Pennycook 2007; Alim *et al.*, 2009) while defining their identities as artists and more often than not as political activists. Language plays a central role in the identity formation of these artists. More precisely, English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) (see Taviano, 2010) is a common language shared by Hip Hop artists at a global level, albeit always closely linked with other languages, to the point where the distinction between one and the other becomes irrelevant. While a translation perspective has been central in my analysis of Hip Hop so far (Taviano 2012, 2013), in this paper I would like to adopt an interdisciplinary approach, drawing also on globalization studies and sociological studies, to show how Hip Hop music creates a global imaginary to give voice to people of all cultures beyond geopolitical boundaries.

1. Borders and identities

According to Thomas Wilson and Hastings Donnan (2012), there are more international borders nowadays than ever before with a significant impact on the life of billions of people. This has generated a growing interest on the part of humanities and social studies scholars, first of all in the dynamics of specific borders, and their surrounding geopolitical contexts, including supranational regions. Borders and borderlands, however, are also being studied as sites where globalization processes, the formation of new identities and a series of social and political phenomena are more evident than elsewhere. Chiara Brambilla *et al.* (2015) put forward the concept of borderscape as a critical lens emphasizing the mobile and relational nature of borders. From such a perspective alternative imaginaries can be explored “beyond the line”, due to the dialogic nature of bordering processes and imaginaries. Thus, the relationship



between borderscapes and social imaginaries becomes central in so far as borders are “interesting places of investigation and a resource in terms of the construction of novel geopolitical imaginations, social and spatial imaginaries and cultural images.” (2015: 2)

The borders and bordering processes challenged by diasporic Hiphoppas are those defining a binary opposition between the West and the Middle East. They are obvious instances of political practices of inclusion-exclusion closely related to predominant social and cultural imaginaries outlined by Western countries - as well as by Europe as a whole. The metanarrative of Terrorism, among others, has a central role in defining such borders. The pervasiveness of such a metanarrative has recently been confirmed, for instance, after the recent Brussels bomb attacks. As soon as the first news was posted on Twitter by a witness, he was immediately forced to post a further note begging not to be asked over and over again whether he had heard the name of Allah being invoked right before the explosions.

It is precisely against such persistent borders, intended here not so much as lines of separation between different geopolitical areas, but as literal and metaphorical boundaries reinforced by imaginaries on the Middle East and Arab people, that Arab Hiphoppas aim to construct alternative identities and counter mappings through their music. This is the case of diasporic artists, in particular, such as the Syrian-American Omar Offendum, and the Iraqi-Canadian Yassin Alsalman, a.k.a. the Narcycist. Identity formation and subjectivity are central in the complex relationships between the Self and the Other, between the West and the Middle East in the diasporic spaces that these artists occupy. Indeed, diasporic Arab Hiphoppas’ identities are produced through performances of Hip Hop that offer an alternative mapping of such relationships from their own perspective, redefining the boundaries that Westerners have built to reinforce differences.

In the USA, for instance, the relationship between Hip Hop and the US government is rather contradictory. On the one hand mainstream Hip Hop is depicted as a cause of cultural degradation due to its rhetoric of violence, while on the other the State Department uses it as “a vehicle for American values abroad” (DeGhett, 2015: 96) and a tool to improve relationships with foreign countries. Such a contradictory relationship between Hip Hop, the US foreign policy in particular, as well as American society in general, is further complicated by media coverage. As Torie Rose DeGhett stresses (2015), Arab and North African Hiphoppas are often described in the US as westernized artists who are moving away from Islam.

One of the ways to challenge narratives based on binary oppositions between the West and the East is to question borders between languages and cultures as Omar Offendum does starting from his stage name. Offendum recalls both the English verb to



offend as well as the Arabic *Afandi*, from the Turkish title of respect used to refer to officials and people in positions of power. Combining a respectful appellative in one language with a disrespectful term in the other is a way to subvert common assumptions about Arab people. In Offendum's words (2011), it allows to convey the "representation of my people that I try to battle through my lyricism". It is precisely through the contrast between the English and Arabic terms that Offendum's stage name signifies the contradictions inherent in predominant Western imaginaries about the Other, particularly the Arab Other.

This name, and its intrinsic translational nature, also challenges traditional assumptions about rigid separations between languages and cultures, which are questioned in the experience of diasporic and displaced people such as Omar Offendum. Furthermore, as he has argued in a recent interview discussing his role as an Arab HipHoppa in the USA, apathy and a lack of personal commitment is a luxury that diasporic artists cannot afford: "Apathy is not an option. I think we have privilege here and I try and recognize that as a sense of responsibility." (available at <http://www.pri.org/stories/2015-05-04/hip-hop-artist-omar-offendum-apaty-toward-syria-not-option>, accessed on 10 March 2016).

The Narcicyst's music similarly revolves around issues of identity as an Iraqi-Canadian. He recently told Claire Loewen during a television interview that Hip Hop is for him "a home for the alienated and displaced" (Loewen, 2015). His very diverse political commitments include teaching a course called "Hip-Hop: Past, Present and Future" at Concordia University in Montreal, through which he aims to encourage free thought. As he argues, "my classes tend to revolve around critical thinking and challenging the students to step out of their comfort zone of not only learning patterns, but their existing environment." He does so by conducting open debates about a variety of issues, such as race in Hip Hop, and encouraging students to feel comfortable in participating and expressing their thoughts as well as calling into question their own prejudices.

2. Prefigurative politics and social imaginary

As I have argued elsewhere (Taviano, forthcoming), prefigurative politics (Sitrin, 2016, Maeckelbergh, 2011, Baker, 2016) is a form of political engagement aimed to construct an alternative world in the here and now, as opposed to in an undefined future. Prefiguration represents a strategic tool to enact social and political change in a variety of protest movements, going from Occupy Wall Street to art activism. Similarly, Hip Hop as a form of artistic resistance plays a prefigurative role in



counteracting mainstream narratives. In this sense, it can be compared to travel and migrant writing, which according to Polezzi and Di Piazza (2012: 2), tend to disrupt “existing maps as well as acquired knowledge” by “dramatically re-shaping how we see ourselves as well as others.” Hip Hop in fact functions as a political site through which alternative mappings and conceptualizations of the world are put together.

The politics of doing, of performing a change in the present, and of subversive re-mappings are all key issues that provide invaluable perspectives to explore the significance of Hip Hop in creating alternative political and social spaces. This is why sociological debates focusing on the role of social imaginaries, together with globalization studies, are helpful when addressing the dynamics of Hip Hop politics. As Manfred Steger argues,

Social imaginaries are deep-seated modes of understanding that provide the most general parameters within which people imagine their communal existence. The social imaginary offers explanations of how ‘we’- the members of a particular community - fit together, how things go on between us, the expectations we have of each other, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie those expectations. (2009: 13)

In Charles Taylor’s view (2004), social imaginaries affect our understanding of everyday practices and are almost implicit for members of a given society since they are embedded in images, myths and narratives conveyed by the media and popular culture. In this sense, the concept of social imaginary is parallel to Pierre Bourdieu’s well-known notion of habitus (1986), a combination of deeply engrained habits, dispositions and tastes on the basis of which we relate to others in society and the contexts in which we find ourselves. Most important of all, social imaginaries are far from being fixed and permanent (Castoriadis, 1987; Steger, 2009). Discussing the relationship between the political discourse of an individual that underpins a project he/she wants to carry out and social imaginaries, Cornelius Castoriadis argues that these two levels of discourse “create and institute new forms of social-historical doing”. (1987, 8) Steger also claims that, although social imaginaries are reinforced “through the (re)construction of social space and the repetitive performance of certain communal qualities and characteristics”, they are subject to change and transformation. (2009: 13) Since it is through a social imaginary that individuals and communities understand their identities and their place in society (Taylor 2004), it is by modifying their social imaginary that they can attempt to change their social status.

It is this way of conceiving social imaginaries as a form of social-historical doing, as individual and collective forces capable of enacting a change in the current mappings of



the world, that is relevant in trying to understand the prefigurative politics of Arab Hip Hop. Arjun Appadurai's analysis (1996) of how a social imaginary affects the construction of subjectivities in a globalized world marked by the diffusion of electronic media and mass migration is also particularly helpful here. Images of reality and narratives of people's lives, produced by means of electronic devices, are so pervasive that people live in the "imagined worlds" created by such image-centred narratives. Following on from Anderson's notion of imagined communities (1991), Appadurai goes a step further by arguing that it is precisely because people live in these imagined worlds that they can become agents of change and subvert predominant imagined worlds.

Gradual transformations as well as radical changes in fact occur as a result of the differences between the individual and collective imaginaries (see also Marzo e Meo, 2010) determining social dynamics. It is precisely through such dynamics that the imaginary constructed by Arab Hip Hop develops. Starting from the subjectivity and identity of single artists, Hip Hop lays the basis for the second and most significant level of collective, or better, global imaginary to subvert social and political imaginaries that are based on problematic oppositions between the West and the Middle East. As previously shown, such imaginaries about who we are, for instance, as Europeans and North Americans, belonging to what is identified as the West, constantly produce narratives informed by ideological binaries between Us and the Others.

3. Hip Hop global imaginary

Starting from a definition of globalization as "the expansion and intensification of social relations and consciousness across world-time and world space" (2009, 10), Steger claims that the global imaginary is growing, as in the case of al-Qaeda. More precisely, al-Qaeda appeals to both local and global values while exploiting "the Manichean dualism of a 'clash of civilizations'". In Steger's words, "its desire for the restoration of a transnational umma attests to the globalisation and Westernization of the Muslim world just as much as it reflects the Islamization of the West. (2009, 23)

While completely different in ideological terms, the imaginary created by activist Arab Hiphoppas, such as Offendum and The Narcycist, is another global imaginary based on principles of solidarity, peace and justice, equally stretched across world time and world space. It is an imaginary that gives priority to universal human values over conflicts or *clashes of civilization*, whereby everyone can acquire agency and voice. As The Narcycist argues: "We became politicized after September 11 because of where we are from, hip-hop is a movement of empowerment in society, this is a life style, people say we eat hip-hop, we drink hip-hop." (Alsalman, 2014). Hip Hop is



empowering precisely because it gives activist Hiphoppas the opportunity, and thus the responsibility, to show how common human needs and suffering are hidden by the politics of war and terror. In Omar Offendum's words: Hip Hop's focus is to "remind people that beneath all the political posturing and all the conspiracy theories and all the proxy wars that are taking place, there's very real human suffering." (Omar Offendum, 2015)

The Narcicyst makes it clear how initially activist Arab Hiphoppas like himself initially tried to resist dominant narratives before moving on to a more active position to construct their narrative of who they are as Arab musicians:

After September 11 in the beginning we took a very defensive stance with our music, saying we are not terrorist, but now in the last 5 years, whether you are a musician, or visual artist, or any form of creative artist, we have decided to create our own narrative, instead of being defensive, we are proactive, this is who we are, we don't say this is not we who are. I think this is more important than anything, it's this shift in the narrative of ourselves, media is in our hands, we've got take it in our own grasp and do it ourselves. (Alsalman, 2014)

4. The Fear of An Arab Planet and Hamdulillah

As I have argued elsewhere (Taviano 2012, 2013), narrative theory (Baker, 2006) is a valuable tool to understand how these artists negotiate their belonging to the global community of Hip Hop. The Narcicyst, among others, claims that the key role of Hip Hop is precisely its prefigurative function in allowing Hiphoppas to become agents of their own identity and being proactive, rather than simply resisting predominant narratives.

Omar Offendum and The Narcicyst do so through their music by creating a global imaginary that aims to reverse the relationship between the West and the Middle East as the original and its translation. This is what The Narcicyst and the Hip Hop group Arab Summit have done with the album *The Fear of An Arab Planet*, which as the title implies is against discrimination. The title of this album, including 15 singles, is a play on the title of legendary hip-hop group Public Enemy's *Fear of a Black Planet*. In his book *The Diatribes of a Dying Tribe* (2011), The Narcicyst claims that Iraq has been subject to a continuous state of destruction for most of his life. All four members of the Arab Summit were in fact forced to leave their home countries because of the systematic bullying from the West. This is why *The Fear of An Arab Planet* is "an examination of the heightened anxiety towards Islam, the Oriental gaze towards the Arab face and the



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ever-growing paranoia of the ‘other’”, (Alsaman, 2011) documenting the making of the album itself through writings and interviews to the four artists.

A parody of Western representations of Arab people, which diasporic artists have experienced since early childhood, emerges throughout the entire album, particularly in the single (*Quasi-Islamic*) *The Guide*:

How you do it as Jamal Abdul
The Seasonal guide to being Arab, and Muslim in the West
Volume One, Buy Now
Ever felt your beard stank
Have you ever felt like your hijab was frumpy
Bet you never felt this Arab
Subscribe now

By ironically guiding their listeners, like in any traditional manual, on how to be an Arab and Muslim in the West, these artists question mainstream images and identities. The videos accompanying each song show the following still image of the title - signifying the stagnant nature of prejudices and preconceptions about Arabs – with the invitation to subscribe. The central metaphor of the Arab planet is thus reinforced together with a reference to the Anglo-Iraqi Hiphoppa Lowkey, well known for his criticism of US foreign policy.

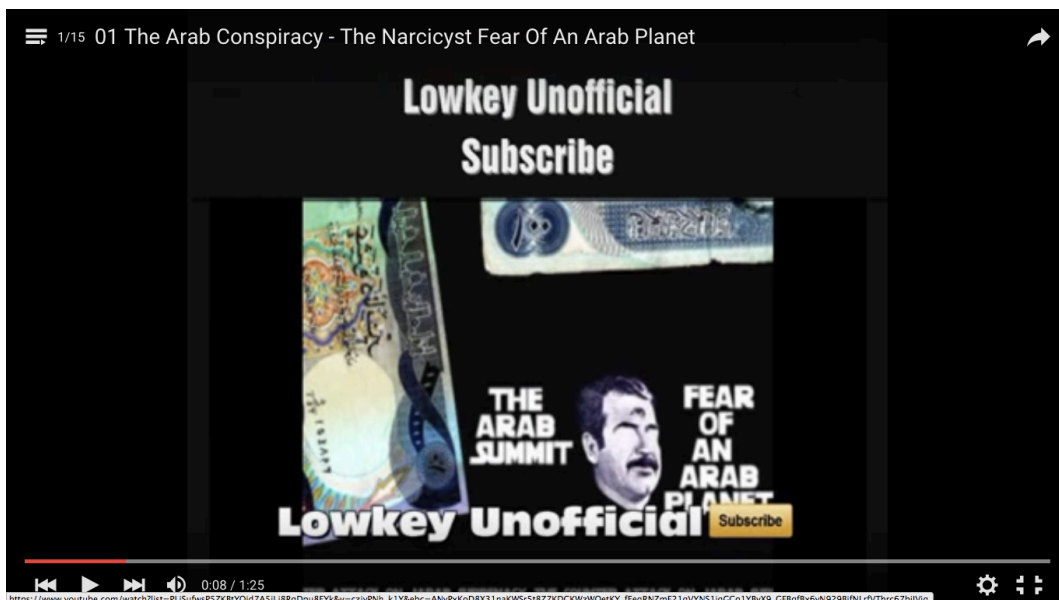




Figure 1. The Arab Conspiracy. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czjvPNh_k1Y, posted by Lowkey & People's Army, accessed on 15 March 2016.

The first song, with the telling title *The Arab Conspiracy*, contradicts listeners' expectations by urging in actual fact for the solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A man's voice encouraging a "new global, social, political contract" delivers the following message: "I call for a direct dialogue with Israel so that we can create a Palestinian State" and ends his speech by asking: "How do you kill a dream? The dream, yes, the dreamer never."

Creating a global imaginary based on universal values is by far one of the most significant ways to overcome Western prejudices and predominant imaginaries, as occurs in the song *Hamdulillah*. The Official Music Video by The Narcicyst, featuring Shadia Mansour, shows a fast and mesmerizing sequence of faces of people from all over the world, from cities such as Abu Dhabi, Cairo, Montreal, Chicago, New York, and Sydney, including the two singers. The sheer diversity of images of people of all skin colours and races, combined with their direct gaze, is visually powerful in signifying the common nature of all human beings regardless of their cultural origins, religious and political affiliations. The visual code of the video thus reinforces the central message of the song repeated in the refrain:

Hamdulilah lil a7hbabeena al'li daloona
Thank God for the people we love that guide us
Far'u kalum ila ali'maa biyasma3oona
Spread the word to people that aren't hearing us
Lee ajlii al insaan
For humanity's sake
Lee ajlik ya Gaza
For your sake, Gaza

According to a multimodal approach (Baldry and Thibault 2006, 2009, Kress 2010) the full significance of Hip Hop songs can be explored by taking into account how all semiotic resources, including the music as well as the visual and verbal codes, participate in the overall meaning making process. The prefigurative politics of Hip Hop, as a movement giving voice to those who want to put an end to all violence, is conveyed through a powerful combination of a rhythm instilling feelings of peace and harmony, visually expressed through reassuring gazes and smiling faces, with the following lyrics:



Bismillah, means to will in God's name
Without the ball and chain
A slave falling to claim
Bismillah, will forever hold inner peace
Wicked streets
Cripple little beings
Rippling through the "Middle East"
Hamdulillah, may God bless the dead and gone, forever strong
Sing a better song, breaking bitter bonds
Hamdulillah, for this world
In this spot to this song
With these words for hip-hop say
Hamdulillah, stay humble in rhymes
For eyes that hate your hunger
It's like a jungle sometimes
It makes you wonder (<http://genius.com/The-narcicyst-hamdulillah-lyrics>,
accessed on 22 March 2016)

The above lines, and their transcription in a Western alphabet in the so-called Arabizi (see Taviano 2013) available online, show the coexistence of Arabic and English. The languages alternate throughout the lyrics testifying to the central role of translation as intrinsic in this and many other Hip Hop songs. Translation, intended here in its broad sense and much more than a transfer from one language to another, reinforces the close and constant relationship between these two languages, whether implicit or apparent - as in the case of the first line of the third verse shown above. The title *Hamdulillah* means being grateful to God and is combined with the expression *Bismillah*, the first in the song, usually preceding any action by those who entrust their life to God. The Arabic *Hamdulillah*, repeated throughout the song, with its universal message encouraging all people to be thankful, comes full circle at the end of the song in English: "Give Thanks".

Translation is even more visible in another video available on youtube, entitled Gaza Remix, which replaces the images of the official video with the transcription of the Arabic lines in Arabizi and their English translation. This makes the relationship between the two languages even more apparent and visually central, as shown in figures 2 and 3 (available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6igE_bifNs, posted by londonsfynest, accessed on 15 March 2016):



The fact that lyrics are often posted online by fans testifies to the key role that computer-mediated communication via online magazines, personal websites and social networks has in the relationship between artists and their audiences and in the collective meaning making process of music itself. Jannis Androutsopoulos sees Hip Hop as “a system of three interrelated ‘spheres’ of discourse” (2009: 44), following on from Fiske’s notion of vertical intertextuality (1987). These spheres go from the primary discourse level, referring to the artist and his/her creative expression, to media coverage, corresponding to a secondary discourse level, and tertiary discourses



carried out by music fans. The third level is particularly significant when it comes to the consumption of music today and, more specifically, fans' participation in the construction of Hip Hop global imaginary.

By posting the lyrics and their translations online, fans contribute to signifying the political role of translation in two ways. Firstly, by making lyrics accessible and secondly, and most important of all, by allowing activists, and local revolutions, to connect throughout the world. It is thanks to and through translation and all related forms of mediation in fact that the common values informing Hip Hop global imaginary manage to travel and acquire universal significance across geopolitical borders (Taviano, forthcoming). As Tymozcko (2000, 2010) and Baker (2016, forthcoming) claim, translation has been central to revolutionary projects throughout history and it is embedded in protest movements and activism across the world today. However, the role of translation continues to be under-researched and taken for granted despite its significance not only as a communication tool, but above all as a vital element of the politics of revolution. This is why the centrality of translation needs to be recognized to fully understand the political and social impact of these same movements.

5. *Arab Winter* and humanitarian projects

Hip Hop global imaginary manifests and translates itself in many different ways and contexts. As previously shown, The Narcicyst has been raising awareness and encouraged creative thinking through a Hip Hop course at Concordia University. Furthermore, between December 2011 and January 2012, in Montreal where he lives, he designed and musically curated the multimedia project *Arab Winter* consisting of installations, paintings, collage, photography and calligraphy. The project was a collaboration with Iraqi-Canadian artists, Sundus Abdul Hadi, Tamara Abdul Hai and Sawsan Alsaraf, and Tunisian eL Seed and Karim Jabbari, with music by Omar Offendum and other guest artists. As Megan Beneat Donald (2012) argues in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue,

Arab Winter is a satirical comment on the derogatory tagline 'Arab Spring'; a term coined during the first wave of uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. The heavily-mediated revolts unfolding in North Africa, the Levant, and the Arabian Gulf were in fact all very different in context – most not flourishing into a 'summer of democracy'. Inspired by the misinformation and caricatures clouding the realities of the 'Arab Spring', each artist treats problematic issues linked to the romanticized concepts of freedom, revolution, and democracy, by weaving past, present and future. (available at



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[https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B5I39pyFNcEVVFI3UjvSGI0Rmc/edit?pref=2&pli=I#_ =](https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B5I39pyFNcEVVFI3UjvSGI0Rmc/edit?pref=2&pli=I#_=), accessed on 21 March 2016)

By focusing on the significance of key definitions, such as the “Arab Spring”, and the “summer of democracy”, Beneat Donald shows how Western discourses about the Arab revolutions revolve around rigid and misleading umbrella terms. These terms tend to deny the diversity and complexity of the contexts in which each revolution took place, as well as the diversity of Arab people in general.

Against such oversimplification, we might consider the painting *Arabesque*, for instance; as implied by the title, itself indicating sinuous and undulating lines, the work shows how the two parts of the world conceived as binary oppositions have always been interconnected. It expresses how “the ‘East’ and the ‘West’ are inextricably linked for better or for worse, and have always been influenced by one another”, as argued in the catalogue. More broadly, the exhibit problematizes Western imaginaries about the Arab Spring as well as romanticized values of freedom, revolution and democracy. The true essence of such values is placed instead at the centre of the artistic and human experience. The exhibit in fact was advertised as an experience stressing the humanity of revolution:

A multi-media experience that will touch on the humanity of revolution, the power of dreams, and the changing seasons around the world. You are invited to a world where your freedom is in question, your countries are in limbo and your identity is in flux, and your dreams are put on ice. (<http://thearabwinter.tumblr.com/Press-release>, accessed on 21 March 2016)

In other words, *Arab Winter*, together with many other events created by these artists, testifies to the true nature of Arab Hip Hop global imaginary. It is an imaginary that results and benefits from multiple imaginaries, and which belongs to different cultures and histories, yet it manages to go beyond each of them to recognize and put in place a *humanity of revolution*. In other words, it envisages a world where borders are questioned, identities are fluid and dreams can become a reality.

Yet another level of The Narcicyst’s political commitment relates to specific humanitarian projects. This is the case of fundraising carried out during the recording of an album with other diasporic Arab Hiphoppas for Iraqi children with congenital diseases to allow them to undergo surgery. A further fundraising initiative aimed to support the production of limbs with 3d technology for 100 children subject to limb amputation. As The Narcicyst (2014) puts it: “It is important for us to use our arts to be able to channel that power that we developed making music into direct change as opposed to general fundraising or throwing out money, I’d rather see that it affects



directly somebody in need.” This is a clear example of the prefigurative nature of his music which seeks to have an immediate and direct impact on children’s lives.

6. Conclusions

These are only some key instances of political commitment of the two Arab Hiphoppas examined here, making the present analysis inevitably limited, yet it nevertheless constitutes a starting point for future research. Art activism, of which Hip Hop is only one among different expressions, represents a fascinating and rich way of exploring the formation of alternative local as well as global mappings and imaginaries. According to the Islamophobia Documentation and Research Project, Islamophobic imaginary predominant in the USA and Western media is similar to a studio where precise scripts and characters are created (see their video available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZCpeIdXSig>, accessed on 6 April 2016). Such scripts follow a singular negative frame, that is terrorism, excluding Muslims from participating in these constructions. Art activists, such as diasporic Arab Hiphoppas, actively disrupt such imaginaries by becoming agents/actors of new alternative performances. In these performances the single rigid frame of terrorism is replaced by sinuous lines, such as those of the *Arabesque* painting, signifying the coexistence of people of different cultures, religions and languages. In such performances Arabs are diverse human beings, exactly like all other people, of different skin colours and features, as portrayed in the *Hamdulillah* video.



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