



*Joseph Hill*  
*Jeanette S. Fouli*  
*Kendra Salois*  
*Wind Dell Woods*  
Participants

*Joshua Edelman*  
Editor

# Forum

## Religion, Renovation, Rap & Hip Hop

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### Introduction

*Performance, Religion and Spirituality's* second forum turns our focus to the ways in which rap and hip hop—as well as the hybrid musical and performance forms which draw on them— have, in recent decades, become important means of asserting, performing, and negotiating religious identity and practice. These forms have spread far beyond their origin in the African American community, and now are forces within the religious and cultural life of nations around the world. They represent both inroads of a globally recognized brand with commercial power and a critical assertion of local and individual identities. As well as simply being a great deal of fun, they can serve as a challenge to social structures, including those grounded in religion, and can offer up a form of personal and ironic form of critique that other forms cannot.

For this forum, we have brought together four scholars of global hip hop to discuss the critical, political and aesthetic potential the form holds for contemporary

religious life worldwide. I asked each scholar to begin with a short position statement on their own research and the relevance of hip hop for religion in the context of their particular research field (Senegal, Morocco, the UK, and the US). The five of us then read each other's contributions and met (via videoconferencing) to discuss and debate what we had read. The resulting conversation, lightly edited for clarity, is included here. All *PRS* forums are intended as an invitation for further dialogue, and here the subject matter makes that invitation all the more urgent. The editors welcome letters to the editor in response to this forum. Letters can be sent to [j.edelman@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:j.edelman@mmu.ac.uk).

### Participant biographies

**Joseph Hill** is an associate professor at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada. His research focuses on Islam—especially Sufi Islam—in West Africa and elsewhere, and explores the performance of religious authority, forms of knowledge and experience, gender, and religious expressive performance (such as chant and music). Hill's research has primarily focused on the *Fayḍa Tijāniyya*, a Sufi movement that originated in Senegal and has followers around the world. He is particularly interested in how new or adapted performances of religious authority succeed or fail in establishing themselves as embodying a timeless tradition. For example, his 2018 book *Wrapping Authority: Women Islamic Leaders in a Sufi Movement in Dakar, Senegal* shows how women have come to exercise religious leadership in new ways through quietly working conventionally feminine practices into performances of authority. His recent research looks at how hip hop/rap music has come to be accepted in Senegal as a legitimate form of religious expression, even while other performance genres have found less acceptance.

**Jeanette S. Jouili** is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. Her research and teaching interests include Islam in Europe, secularism, pluralism, popular culture, moral and aesthetic practices, and gender. She is author of *Pious Practice and Secular Constraints: Women in the Islamic Revival in Europe* (Stanford, 2015), has published articles in various peer-reviewed journals (such as *Feminist Review*, *Muslim World*, *French Culture*, *Politics and Society*, and *Anthropology Quarterly*). Currently, she is working on her second book project: *Islam on Stage: British Muslim Culture in the Age of Counterterrorism*.

**Kendra Salois** is an ethnomusicologist who specializes in the intersections of popular musics, transnational markets, and national belonging. Her research interests include Afro-diasporic popular musics in the Middle East and North Africa, North African popular musics, trans-Saharan musical connections, music and diplomacy, citizenship, labor, and neoliberalism. Her research has been funded by the International Institute for Education, the American Institute for Maghrebi Studies, and the West African Research Association. Her work appears in *Anthropological Quarterly*, the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, and the *Journal of World Popular Music*, and the edited volumes *Music and Diplomacy from the Early Modern Era to the Present* (2014) and *Islam and Popular Culture* (2016). Her book project, *Values That Pay*, asks how Moroccan hip hop communities perform their vision of an ethical nation while

simultaneously co-producing the authoritarian state. She is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Performing Arts at American University in Washington, DC.

**Wind Dell Woods** (MFA/PhD) is a playwright, scholar, and educator. He holds an MFA in Playwriting from Arizona State University. As an artist-scholar, his work explores the topics of race, gender, identity, community, and memory. He is influenced by hip hop music/culture, as well as ancient and modern mythology. Woods's dissertation, *Pleading the Fifth Element: Disaesthetics and Hip Hop as Black Study*, engages in a meta-critique of the critical and creative discourse in the fields of Hip Hop Studies and Hip Hop Theater. Woods disrupts the traditional tendency to freeze hip hop as an *object*. Rather, he reemploys Hip Hop as a *method* of study with the capacity to layer, sample, and (re)mix theories and analyses into a meta-critical cypher, a type of hip hop praxis. Woods's other research interests are in the fields of critical theory, narratology, Blackness and performance, and the Black radical tradition.

## Participant position statements

### Joseph Hill

I came to research hip hop relatively recently and in a roundabout way. My primary research area is contemporary Sufi Islam in West Africa. It took me a while to take seriously the connections between the Sufi movement I was studying in Senegal—the *Fayḍa Tijāniyya*—and hip hop. I started researching this Sufi movement in 2001, first in its birthplace of Senegal and then in Mauritania and in London. The most active members in the *Fayḍa Tijāniyya* are young people attracted to the movement by its promise of direct, experiential knowledge of God through its unique process of spiritual education (*tarbiya*). Although there is a strong charismatic side to this movement, it is led by classically educated Islamic scholars who instruct followers to uphold Islamic prescriptions carefully.

As I spoke with Senegalese young people about how they joined the *Fayḍa Tijāniyya*, a surprising number told me were attracted by listening to well-known rappers like Daddy Bibson, Maxi Krezy, and the group Bideew Bou Bess, whose lyrics about the deep mysteries of God both inspired and bewildered them. I was again surprised when I asked Islamic leaders what they thought of these Sufi rappers and almost all praised them. Islamic leaders often distance themselves from music, considering it anywhere from a distraction to something forbidden. However, most of the leaders I interviewed had key disciples who were rappers and fully supported them. In fact, several of these rappers themselves held formal appointments as spiritual guides. After interviewing nearly fifty Sufi rappers in Senegal between 2014 and 2017, I went to London, where I interviewed several British rappers who are leaders of the *Fayḍa Tijāniyya* community there. The first big question that I sought to answer was: Why has this particular Sufi community embraced rap music, while some other Sufi communities have rejected it, and this community has rejected certain other musical genres?

Of course, many others have discussed the relationships between hip hop and Islam. The Five Percent Nation, the Nation of Islam, and mainstream Sunni Islam have shaped American hip hop culture (Swedenburg 1997, Miyakawa 2005, Allah 2010, Khabeer 2007, Alim 2006), leading to widespread claims that “Islam is Hip Hop’s (un)official religion” (Allen 1991, Mohaiemen 2008). Of course, the relationship

between the two is complex and controversial. On the one hand, many Muslims perceive music as forbidden in Islam, and they may also view various aspects of hip hop culture itself as repugnant from an Islamic viewpoint. Numerous rappers and other musicians who have become Muslim have quit music either temporarily or permanently. On the other hand, hip hop has numerous profound connections to Islam. In addition to the influence of Islam-related movements on broader hip hop culture, both Islam and hip hop tend to be culturally coded in similar ways—as non-White, subversive, subaltern, knowledge-oriented, militant, etc. Su’ad Abdul Khabeer identifies “Muslim Cool” as “a way of being Muslim that draws on Blackness to contest two overlapping systems of racial norms: the hegemonic ethnoreligious norms of Arab and South Asian U.S. American Muslim communities on the one hand, and White American normativity on the other” (2016, 2). Beyond the American context, many Muslims around the world, Black or not, draw on “cool” American Blackness to contest various hegemonies, including certain ways of being Muslim, Western domination, and capitalistic middle-class values.

In addressing the question raised above as to why hip hop and this particular Sufi movement have come together (Hill 2016; Hill 2017), I have focused on two primary conceptual areas. The first is the notion of “performativity,” drawing on scholars like J.L. Austin (1962), Judith Butler (1990), and Victor Turner (1987). In short, I have asked: Under what conditions can some act be socially recognized as successfully—or “felicitously,” as Austin puts it—performing some kind of act? How does a performer uphold an authoritative persona? What kind of act is being performed when an Islamic-themed Muslim Senegalese rapper sermonizes on the importance of knowing God just before trash talking another rapper’s mother? Does the “frame” (Bateson 1972, Goffman 1974) of hip hop possess the social power to immunize the speaker from the social recriminations that such statements normally arouse? What counts as a “felicitous” performance is a dynamic process that depends on a rapper’s performance of self within a particular context, and it is always contestable.

Rappers’ performances depend on a second central concept I have used, that of iconic resonances between domains, which can be mobilized to create implicit metaphors between things assumed to be separate. Rappers connect their forceful vocal style to the sometimes urgent tone of the Friday mosque sermon. They sanctify dissing by connecting it to jihad. They present hip hop and the Fayḍa Tijāniyya as analogous, both global movements of socially relevant knowledge. They implicitly identify hip hop’s complex linguistic practices—including “Signifying’,” backronyms, and various other forms of indirection and word play—with the cryptic Sufi poetry tradition. Through these various iconic connections, they present themselves as Islamic preachers and spiritual guides at the vanguard of a global movement. Yet they do so primarily not through argumentation but through fostering an aesthetic sense of congruity.

As de facto representatives of a clear-cut religious movement, these rappers are generally unambiguous about their religious commitments, in contrast to the often “messy” and “complex” religious allusions often found in rap music (Pinn 2003; Miller 2009; Miller, Pinn, and Freeman 2015). One part of my ongoing research is looking at a large corpus of Sufi poetry and literature alongside rap texts and interviews to see how rappers embed metaphors, phrases, and concepts from this literature. I would like to see more research that takes an interdisciplinary approach to studying the

relationships between rap lyrics, rappers' experiences, and the texts and traditions they're drawing from.

### **Jeanette S. Jouili**

#### *Hip hop and a Black British Muslim authenticity*

My research investigates the pious British Muslim music and performing arts scene that has been thriving and expanding especially since the new millennium. In terms of music, the scene, which had been in the past mainly limited to *nasheed* (devotional music) or traditional Sufi music traditions (e.g. Qawwali for South Asian Muslims), evolved by engaging in a variety of other genres, such as pop, rock, folk, hip hop and rap music. I was particularly intrigued by the raising prominence of hip hop in the circles I studied, which I witnessed especially in the years between 2007 and 2013.

One thing that I found particularly interesting in this regard relates to the efforts that specifically Black Muslim hip hop artists (who have spearheaded the phenomenon of religious Muslim hip hop) invested in turning hip hop into a legitimate Muslim music form, much more than musicians who engaged in other genres. This strong investment into legitimation discourses must be seen in the context of hip hop's reputation, among many pious Muslims in Britain (as elsewhere), as a secular music culture particularly at odds with an Islamic ethos, and that in spite of its large overall success among British Muslim youth. While, according to many hip-hop musicians themselves, this is especially due to hip hop culture's general notoriety (associated with sexual promiscuity, drugs, and violence), we must also and especially take into account what scholar Su'ad Abdul Khabeer (2016, 3) calls, for the case of US Muslims, the "ethnoreligious hegemonies of Arab and South Asian communities" which often render Black and Afro-diasporic art forms suspect. This certainly holds true for British Muslims, who are ethnically diverse but numerically and institutionally dominated by Muslims of South Asian background (more than two-thirds of the Muslim population). But this effort to authenticate their art form must be also related to the desire of these Black Muslim hip hop artists to build a Black Muslim (diasporic) cultural authenticity, for which, as they perceive it, does not yet exist a model.

In response to these various challenges, the British Muslim hip hop artists I worked with commonly tried to authenticate hip hop as a legitimate Islamic music genre by invoking two distinct but intertwined tropes, both linking hip hop back to presumed Muslim origins while also valorizing its Black elements. The first such trope connected African American music traditions to West African Muslim cultures by stressing the influence of West African (Muslim) griot music, which enslaved West African Muslims had brought with them to the Americas. The connection to griot music also allowed these artists to define hip hop as a spoken word art form that is primarily about transmitting social commentary and memory (as argued in Keyes 2002). For my interlocutors then, it was not so much the beats, but the spoken word art, that related hip hop to Islam's pronounced oral tradition. It is also for this reason that many artists often easily switched between more typical hip hop/rap on the one hand and spoken poetry pieces on the other. Interestingly, it is this focus on hip hop as a spoken word genre that has not only triggered a thriving spoken poetry scene among religious Muslim communities in Britain. In recent years, this development has even further marginalized the more conventional forms of hip hop within religious event spaces.

The second trope that my interlocutors employed to authenticate hip hop was related to their distinction between “authentic” hip hop and mainstream commercial hip hop, where authentic hip hop constituted primarily a tool to transmit social awareness, and more broadly ethical messages. More specifically, they explained this awareness with the fact that many among the hip hop pioneers were black activists who were either Muslims or inspired by Islam-derived philosophies (Khabeer 2016, Winters 2011, Perry 2004). It was through this return to hip hop’s “original” ethos then that my interlocutors were able to connect their own musical work more directly to Islamic ethical principles. Here, I am not so interested whether or not these established genealogies correspond to a historical reality or whether they capture fully the complexity of hip hop’s history. Rather, I am interested in the particular deployments of this genealogy through which the artists turned hip hop into a certain kind of ethical practice that also had specific aesthetic consequences.

Especially significant to stress here is to what extent this consciously ethical approach to hip hop has consequences for the process of writing, producing and performing. I want to address here briefly the question of performance, which has often been ignored in the discussions on Muslim hip hop. (Khabeer’s work [2016] is a notable exception.) The performance style of hip hop artists in the religious Muslim scene I studied was centrally connected to the ethical understanding they put forward and furthermore serves to exemplify the legitimacy of hip hop as commensurable with Islamic ethics.

What I found striking when observing these Muslim hip hop performers on stage is how they brought together, in their performances, a body politics reflective of conscious (that is, “authentic”) hip hop with one reflective of Islamic ethical traditions, in an apparently most natural way. These performers employed styles that simultaneously expressed an urban, cosmopolitan understanding of Black or African dignity, but also Muslim etiquette and piety. Performing conscious hip hop entailed, for my interlocutors, performing a black awareness rather than sexualized identities. And these performance styles seemed to cohere well with their understanding of Islamic etiquette, which demands a certain bodily restraint. Such an embodied restraint was furthermore facilitated by foregrounding hip hop as a spoken word art.

Key in the repertoire of the hip hop gestures I observed regularly were hand movements and basic bounce movements so characteristic for hip hop. The corporeality espoused on stage reminded me of the early political hip hop centered around narratives of emancipation and resistance. This is why, during Muslim hip hop performances, the raised fist was such a prominent gesture on stage (also invoked in many lyrics). The fist, interestingly, was frequently interchanged with another hand gesture, the right-hand single index finger hold up, which, within an Islamic context, signifies *tawhid* (the oneness of God).

My interlocutors’ performative mode, which enacted this specific fusion of Muslim and hip hop elements in order to embody an Afro-Islamic authenticity was, of course, most immediately apparent through the sartorial styles they enacted on stage through dress. During Islamic hip hop performances I usually noticed urban wear, sweat pants, hoodies, sneakers alternate or combine with thobes, African blouses (wax, or embroidery) and Moroccan slippers; popular were also T-shirts and baseball hats with self-designed themes or slogans that reflected a Muslim or Afro-Muslim identity. Skirts in various ethnic designs, whether African, Indian, Middle Eastern, were combined with various fashion items bought in London’s high streets, often worn in

layers. Accessories, in general, were key in these outfits. *Kufis* for the men and *hijab* for women, often (not always) made out of African textiles, along with chains of prayer beads (*tasbeih*) in the West African style (large wooden beads) wrapped around the wrist or worn as necklaces. Shawls, again out of African textiles but also Palestinian scarfs and those coming from Yemen are very popular among men and women alike. For the women, heavy bangles and chunky earrings peeking out of the hijabs, in wood or silver, and often with Afro-centric symbolism or those coming from different regions of Africa (very popular, too, is Tuareg silver craft) complete the wardrobe.<sup>1</sup>

To conclude, in order to appreciate how Black British Muslim hip hop artists have worked over the years to create an “authentic” Black British Muslim hip hop culture, one has to go beyond the discursive narratives, even if they are central in the artists’ own understandings, but also look at the particular aesthetic and performative styles, which appear to merge Islamic body politics with those of various Black diasporic and African traditions so seamlessly.

### **Kendra Salois**

In November 2016, the Washington, DC non-profit Words Beats and Life closed its annual Festival with a panel on the legacies of Muslim practices in hip hop culture. Panelists included organizer Christie Z-Pabon, curator and scholar Khalid el-Hakim, deejay and cultural producer Asad Jafri, DJ Kidragon, and at the last minute, Moroccan emcee Sultana. She was asked to fill in for Tanya Muneera Williams, one half of the UK duo Poetic Pilgrimage, a British citizen of Jamaican heritage who was not allowed to board her flight to DC.<sup>2</sup> The discussion was designed as both the capstone to the festival’s four days of lectures and workshops, and the launch of a new, multi-year initiative funded by the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art titled “From Sifrs to Ciphers: Hip Hop is Muslim.” Panelists fielded questions about the role of African-American Muslim leaders throughout hip hop history and asserted the continuing importance of Muslim worldviews, practices, and ethics in US hip hop to a receptive audience of educators, scholars, and artists.<sup>3</sup>

After the panel, Sultana confided to me that she was perturbed by its premise. Born and raised in a majority-Muslim nation where the government has historically used the protection or rejection of selected religious practices to control its citizens (cf. Wyrzten 2016, Spadola 2013), she interpreted the panel as staking a claim unwarranted by what she knew of hip hop’s origin story, and by what matters about hip hop culture today. Hip hop belongs to everyone, she told me. It’s about “Peace, Love, Unity, and Having Fun,” she reminded me, ticking off the Zulu Nation motto on her fingers, not whether you were a Muslim, a Christian, or anything else.

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<sup>1</sup> I develop these issues further in Jouili (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> According to Williams, she was flagged by US security at Heathrow because she had recently visited Sudan (pers. comm. November 3, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> The Sifrs to Ciphers project considers Muslim practice broadly defined, including the Nation of Islam, the Nation of Gods and Earths, and American- and foreign-born Sunni and Shia Muslims. (pers. comm. Mazi Mutafa, October 17, 2018). More commonly known as the Five Percenters, the impact of Gods and Earths’ doctrines on hip hop through the 1990s was documented by Felicia Miyakawa (2005).

To me, the layers of this anecdote crystallize the risks of studying hip hop and Muslim identity in terms of each other. On one hand, the North American panelists' concern to celebrate Muslims' positive contributions to hip hop culture—and therefore to American life and the globe—stems in part from the pervasive Islamophobia of the contemporary United States. The need for alternative narratives is real. Shared Islamophobia across North America and Europe allows the world's leading governments to collaborate on discriminating against Muslims, as well as immigrants and people of color, in the name of counterterrorism, as Williams's interaction with the US Transportation Security Administration in London demonstrated. On the other hand, Sultana's reaction reminds us that tactically re-centering Muslims and Islam can alienate hip hop practitioners outside the global North, precisely because hip hop culture's ideologies and translocal links have been one way practitioners imagine themselves beyond the politicization of religious identity in their home cultures. Finally, speaking about relationships between hip hop and Muslim religiosity can fuel audiences' desire to exoticize, regardless of why they are exoticizing. As my research into Moroccan artists' transnational invitations has shown, events that are effective at promoting local progressive politics around Muslims can also instrumentalize the artists brought in to serve that goal.

These intersecting challenges, and the resulting overdetermination of any narrative about Muslim hip hop communities, offer many pitfalls for the ethnographer. During research trips to Morocco as a graduate student, I witnessed fellow Americans—study-abroad students, Peace Corps volunteers, journalists—begin by asking young people they had just met about their faith and its requirements. Well-intentioned as they were, these eager interviewers came off as more interested in confirming their own beliefs about Islam than in the people who practice it. As Ted Swedenburg wrote in an early reply to the focus on hip hop's role in the Arab Spring, “Many Westerners, from all parts of the political spectrum, also seem to be cheered whenever Arabs adopt ‘our’ cultural forms and become more familiar, whenever they seem more like ‘us’” (Swedenburg 2012). From the perspective Swedenburg describes, every choice that doesn't conform to a certain understanding of Arabo-Muslim otherness is seen as resistant, and thus worth celebrating. Given this discourse, research that complicates or undermines discursive binaries between the resistant agent and the traditionalist lemming also undermines the emphasis on Muslim otherness in general. Hip hop studies can be an excellent location from which to do this undermining, in part because the genre's association with political and social resistance is so widely accepted.

In a move I have hoped is illuminating, my writing avoids doctrine as much as possible, foregrounding instead the impacts of locally specific Muslim enculturation on my interlocutors' ways of listening, socializing, and working on themselves. In part this is simply about accuracy: while Moroccan hip hop practitioners hold many beliefs, values, and practices in common, they can and do differ on how to define “Islam.”<sup>4</sup> It is

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<sup>4</sup> In 1986, Talal Asad noted, “The idea...that Islam is simply what Muslims everywhere say it is...will not do, if only because there are everywhere Muslims who say that what *other* people take to be Islam is not really Islam at all. [...] A Muslim's beliefs about the beliefs and practices of others *are* his own beliefs” (2009[1986], 3, italics in original). Later, in a useful parallel to the present day, he argues that medieval Christian curiosity about Islam was compelled by



also about avoiding instrumentalization to the extent possible. My work's focus on how musicians attempt to make a living, and how the context and outcomes of those struggles shape what they value and how they value themselves, is rooted in the motivations of my interlocutors. Muslim identity is certainly important to them, but it is not always a first or an explicit consideration. Occasionally, debates over proper Muslim conduct are even an evasion: as pioneering Casablancon emcee al-Kayssar once told me, "Ikhwan [Ar. brothers, i.e. Islamists] say music is haram. I don't know...*lying* is haram" (interview, 2 August 2010). Faced with the many ways Moroccan Muslims' faith is politicized both at home and abroad, focusing on issues which mattered as much or more to them became a way to practice respect for my research subjects.

To return to the panel with which I began, Sultana's response placed a high value on the universalist outlook she and many non-native hip hop practitioners have adopted. Hip hop origin and connection narratives, in which practitioners understand systemic racism against African Americans as materially resembling their own marginality or as a metaphor for their own struggles for recognition (eg., Alim 2009, Perry 2008, Osumare 2012, Kovač 2013, Rollefson 2017, and others), promote shared understandings of devotees as engaged in disparate but translocally connected work towards greater freedoms. These understandings align well with Moroccan Muslims' enculturated practices of self-improvement, the striving for greater integrity and self-control often included in "the greater *jihad*," practices also understood as translocal. But perhaps more importantly, they also align with Moroccan dreams of being perceived of as fundamentally equal to the citizens of the global North, and thereby coming to share in its economic resources and physical mobility. In our efforts to capture the significance of being Muslim for readers, we may overemphasize its importance to our interlocutors—or rather, depict it as important in ways our interlocutors do not recognize.

### Wind Dell Woods

My creative and scholarly work on (and in) hip hop moves in two distinct directions which often intersect in percussive encounters. On one track, I am interested in the aesthetics of hip hop and how they transfer/translate into other performance traditions, namely theatre. Here, I interrogate the myriad ways that hip hop is deployed in contemporary theatre and performance, and I analyze how hip hop compliments or disrupts theatrical conventions. An example of this is my work on Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* where I critique the ways Miranda takes "everything but the burden" (Tate 2003) of Blackness from hip hop, thus suppressing hip hop's radical potential by deploying its politics into a project that works against the interests and "freedom dreams" (Kelley 2002) of Black people. Though *Hamilton* is one of my most recent objects of critique, I am also interested in the politics surrounding hip hop's use in *reviving* established dramatic works, e.g., hip hop remixes of Shakespeare and Greek Tragedies.

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"structures of disciplinary practices that called for different kinds of systemic knowledge. ...What was regarded as worth recording about 'other' beliefs and customs? ...In which social project were the records used?" (6).

The other track of my research traces the ways in which hip hop's fifth element of street knowledge, knowledge of self, or what Afrika Bambaataa terms, "cultural overstanding" (Thomas 2009: 160, 190) is a form of theorizing.<sup>5</sup> More specifically, the Fifth Element is a form (and force) of Black study that has the potential to, creatively, "critique Western Civilization" (Morse 1999) by putting "established modes of knowledge" (Wynter 2003 and 2006) and embodiment profoundly into play. In this groove, I analyze the ways in which artists and dramatists use hip hop to theorize in, and through, their work. An example of this is my re-positioning of the playwright Suzan-Lori Parks as a hip hop dramatist. This repositioning sharpens the tools of analysis, allowing investigators to track Parks's radical use of layering and sampling as methods of *disrupting* the traditional "grammar" used to make legible the "ghosts" of Black suffering in her work (Wilderson 2009).

So, on one hand, I am interested interpreting how hip hop functions in theatre—a type of hip hop hermeneutics; and on the other hand, I am interested in developing hip hop as a *praxis* aimed at critically and creatively engaging with(in) the World.<sup>6</sup> At this intersection, certain questions emerge which fuel by research, namely, in what ways does hip hop theatre, or hip hop in general, provides a place for embodied practice with the capacity to turn "theory into flesh" (Wynter quoted in Thomas 2006, and John 1:14). It is at this meeting point where my work connects to the forum's topic of *Religion, Renovation, Rap and Hip-Hop*. Briefly, I want to move in reverse order through the four terms offered in the forum's title to elaborate on this connection. To this end, we begin with(in) the *Rap of Hip Hop*.

I appreciate the journal's choice to separate rap from hip hop. As KRS-One argues, rap is what you do (as an activity); hip hop is how you live (the culture). In other words, the doing of the five elements is part of being or becoming the culture. In terms of *Renovation*, all the five elements of hip hop are animated by the aesthetics of, what I term, the "critical dis," a citational and re-creational gesture of writing over and through an original.<sup>7</sup> We might ask: what does this type of radical renovation as praxis do for notions of identity, musical forms, and religious practices? Besides the ubiquitous

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<sup>5</sup> In groove with Barbara Christian, I "intentionally use the verb rather than the noun" to reference the ways Black theorizing, specifically in Hip Hop, is "often in narrative forms," revealed "in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language" (Christian 1987, 52).

<sup>6</sup> I capitalize the *W* in world to draw attention to its construction, the bios and the logos, the material and the myths that structure and sustain the World and the process of World making. It may need to be said that I mean the World that Western modernity has wrought. I am thinking here also of Suzan-Lori Parks "thuh worl usta be *roun* they put uh /d/ on thuh end of round makin it round. Thusly they set in motion thuh end" (Parks 1995, 102). It is this (*W*)orld that I am referencing by the capitalization; the world that modernity has set in motion the end of.

<sup>7</sup> I call this writing over the original *disaesthetics*, and I sample, rather "jack," the term *sous rature* from Heidegger byway of Derrida to describe the act of putting something "under erasure" (Derrida 1977, xiv). Here I mean that the dis of "going up over" another work of art, references and revises the original. New meaning is created and displayed by the layered dis. For me, *disaesthetics* acknowledges (and act-on-knowledge of) an original object without either over-privileging it or being limited by it. The dis is a citational and (re)creational gesture, an always more than double move(ment) that is both generative and deconstructive

references to religion in hip hop, ranging from Islam to Christianity, the topic of *Religion* is something I look forward to exploring.

In Hip-Hop, the weapons are lyrical. To be the best you challenge the best,  
then the blessings are spiritual.

–Nas

So, in pace with hip hop's affirmative practice of "yes, yes, ya'll," I make a *call* for continued conversation and exploration; and I, excitedly, await the *response*.

## Discussion

### Global patterns, local justifications, and critical loci

**Joshua:** I see a tension between the international brand of hip hop — the exported form tied to the black American experience, first and foremost — and the need for hip hop to speak to the local condition, perhaps more so than other musical forms. How do you navigate that tension between the global and the personal and the authentic? How do the people you work with do so?

**Kendra:** You're asking the question that motivates most hip hop scholars, or at least what motivated most writing about hip hop from outside the US from the late 1990s until very recently. Most of this writing came from scholars from the global north writing about places that were perceived somehow as fundamentally distinct from the cultures that created hip hop until hip hop came to them. There was this sort of assumption suffusing early global hip hop research that something fundamentally distinct had arrived, and so there was a break between the cultures that had preceded the indigenization or incorporation of hip hop and the culture afterwards. And I'm sure that in some places that is something you can demonstrate. I think you can describe my field site in Morocco in both ways. I think you could write it from the angle that hip hop was new and irruptive and caused cultural changes and a cultural shock. Certainly people within Morocco thought about it and discussed it that way in the first 10-15 years of hip hop culture there. Or you can write about it in terms of continuity, in the ways that Moroccan artists used hip hop in order to perpetuate things that they thought were essential to their own culture and their own sense of self, which were very rooted in where they were from. One thing I would say is that what you've identified is not necessarily a tension that my interlocutors bring to the subject. It's one that we bring to it as scholars.

**Joshua:** I found that interesting in your paper, Kendra, that this need to claim continuities and similarities was very much a scholarly, institutional need. It seemed like a kind of taming. And that gets to something that Wind talked about in his paper about the radical potential of hip hop. This scholarly tendency could be seen as an attempt to water that down, to blunt it. Is that a fair reading?

**Wind:** Yes, I think so. Hip hop, whether you think of it as a force or a form, a music culture or a movement, is probably one of the only places in this world where you have

a diverse range of people coming together to think, be, perform under a Black sensibility, whether you understand that as a diasporic sensibility or an African-American sensibility. I'm really more interested in it as diasporic. But a lot of the scholarship that comes out on hip hop isn't really aligned with the ethical demands of disenfranchised Black people globally, and it becomes more about self-stylization than about critiques of structural realities of racial antagonism. The performative gestures translate, but the fifth element, that critical knowledge, doesn't translate so well.

**Jeanette:** I think this is important. The question is, how do you make something authentic? How do you localise it where it's happening, and against whom do you position yourself? So I think when artists in Morocco want to justify their work, there is a very different context than the artists I looked at in the UK. The artists I examined here are mainly Black diasporic Muslims who are part of a broader Muslim community in the UK that is 80-90% South Asian, and they have to struggle with what Su'ad Abdul Khabeer calls ethno-religious hegemonies. So their project of justification of hip hop as a legitimate form of music in that community is very different and needs to engage with a whole different kind of genealogy of making sense. Blackness is in a sense taken for granted as being a part of the wider hip hop project, but in this context, the difficult labour is to legitimate it as a form and an equal part within a broader Islamic tradition. So what I think is interesting is in their way of arguing that they completely blur the boundaries between global north and global south, they bring genealogies together from West African griots to US Southern music traditions to hip hop. I call it the Islamic Black Atlantic – going back and forth, connecting the different regions. Their effort is to justify that they are working in an Islamic, not a non-Islamic, genre. In that sense, their authentication labour is very different than what Kendra described in her shocked interlocutor. I think her interlocutor did not quite understand against what forms of exclusion this effort was directed, of, on the one hand, black Muslims from a broader Muslim community but on the other hand, the exclusion of Islam from the Black American experience. So we really need to be very attentive to what is the project each artist wants to work on is, what kind of communities they want to construct and transform, and against what kind of hegemonies. And this is where we will differ in different contexts, depending on the particular community building project we are describing.

**Joseph:** In response to the tension between, as I might put it, universalism and particularism—these are not so much realities but tendencies in how we talk—I think hip hop is generally understood as something that combats hegemonies, that is authentic, that is connected to the roots, which makes it very local because it is always people in a grassroots environment who are doing it. And yet, to use Bakhtin's terms, it's always understood to be "refracting" (Bakhtin 1981) some global universal project through whatever struggles that you have in a particular context. So there's something universal, something particular. And as someone who is primarily a scholar of Sufism, more than a scholar of hip hop, I want to keep in mind that there are multiple different kinds of universalities that can be refracted through particular situations. So there's hip hop, which is its own kind of universality of global struggle, but then there's often in Senegal a debate amongst hip hoppers about how much can you emphasise Islam in hip hop. Probably 95% of rappers here are Muslim, but not 95% of them talk about Islam. And for many of them, Islam is the most universal thing, because it's about God,

which is the most universal reality. Do you transcend religious divides for some kind of political project or do you transcend political divides for a religious project? So I think “the authentic” really is at issue in hip hop—who is authentic, who has the right to represent authentically? I don’t think most scholars of hip hop think there is such a thing as authenticity, objectively, but it is an important trope.

**Kendra:** You mentioned that there are different universalities at play. And one of the things I was thinking is that one of the reasons that we find ourselves answering the question in the way you originally phrased it, Joshua, is that hip hop is seen as universal but not universalist. It doesn’t necessarily have a presumption within it that everyone sees things in its way, or that there is one way to see things. And that lack of universal doctrine within it is what can make it so malleable and representational and yet still have a whole world of people in different countries, in different life positions and origins, still identifying what they do as hip hop. I can think of other musical genres where people would have pretty passionate disagreements about whether the inclusion of this sound or this passage or this singing style would render something generically appropriate or not, inclusive or not. Hip hop has an inclusivity—maybe that’s a better word—that other genres might not. But we are talking about the universal and not the universalist.

**Joseph:** I think you’re right. I think people see it as a universal language or idiom or set of practices. I’m using H. Samy Alim’s (2006) notion of “Hip Hop Nation Language” here, which is not a lexicon or a grammar but a set of generative strategies. What makes something into hip hop is not its lexicon but the fact that its lexicon changes. To use Bakhtin’s terminology again, it’s an inherently “hybrid” practice, that intrinsically evolves and changes. Without evolution, it’s not hip hop. If you just get up here and go, “Yo, yo, yo” and do a rhyme and try to do what people were doing back in the 80s, and they’ll say, that’s not hip hop, that’s copying.

### Hip hop aesthetics

**Joshua:** Joseph, you used the term “iconic resonance” in your contribution, which I found helpful. It’s useful because it is so clearly an aesthetic one. You’re pointing to an aesthetic pattern that hip hop offers that is an exportable form of critique. It’s not claiming universalism in the way that, say, Islam or some other religions sometimes claim a universalism. But it is a form of critical engagement—though I’m not sure if critical is quite the word—that seems to be useful in different contexts, perhaps because of its hybridity. In some of the reading I’ve done about hip hop—and I’m far from an expert—I was struck by how little there was about aesthetics compared to any other musical form you can think of. I found works that simply studied rap lyrics as if they were studying rap music, and I have never seen that in any other musical form. Why do we pay so little attention to the aesthetics of this genre?

**Jeanette:** I tried to address this in the second part of my paper. This is what I thought was really fascinating when looking at the effort of these artists to authenticate their practice as Islamic. It was largely through the aesthetics. Much more than the lyrics; it was really what kind of bodily comportment they adopt, what kind of dress style they bring together, what kind of clothes and accessories they wear, and so on. I thought

this was extremely interesting how they tried to blend. They tried different elements—what would work, what wouldn't work, what matches together—to develop their Muslim hip hop style through trial and error. And also the bodily movements: how do you use a hip hop body language, but make it more modest, in a way? And they were really thinking about that, reflecting on which gesture do you include, which gesture do you not include. I think you cannot get at the roots of localising a hip hop project without thinking about the aesthetics, the ways in which artists negotiate US American hip hop styles to make them local, make them their own, make them reflective of their identity and the particular project they are engaged in. There is no way we can skip the embodied aesthetics and just look at lyrics. And this is where things can become most contentious. Because interestingly, I think it's often not the lyrics but their comportment that hip hop artists have to justify or argue for.

**Joseph:** It reminds me of a term I've used in some of my papers: performative apologetics. This is the idea that you make the case for something not through going out and arguing for it, but through demonstrating a certain kind of practice that then gets taken up, to use J.L. Austin's terms, as "felicitous" (1962). It's all in the performance, and it has to do with the iconic resonances with things that people are already familiar with. If you directly go against what people know, then they are going to reject what you're doing, but if they can say, "Ah! The rapper is actually an Islamic preacher and he's shaking his fist like the Friday sermoniser shaking his fist about the corruption of society," then they get it. If you can actually manage to make those resonances aesthetically, then people say yeah, hip hop is essentially a bricolage of things we already know in its own kind of way. I think that's why rappers have succeeded so much here in Senegal in establishing themselves as Islamic authorities, because they're able to present it as a pastiche of things people already know.

**Joshua:** That idea of performative apologetics gets to something Wind was talking about in terms of the idea of hip hop as a means of being critical. There is something about the way that hip hop operates which is a way of doing critique which is different than the way, say, academics do critique.

**Wind:** I just want to add that I do see a lot research looking at the aesthetics of hip hop. We have Jeff Chang's (2007) phenomenal book, but I think they don't take seriously the radical implications of those aesthetics: what does it mean to have a disposition in the world that works through fragmentation, that embraces contradictions, that works through a non-linearity, especially when we think about it in terms of identity? What does it mean to make an identity out of fragmentation? What does it mean to rupture the narrative of logic through non-linearity? Often it seems scholars will mention it, but don't meditate on the serious implications of what that does, when we talk about the idea of the universal, or pushing back against normalcy and standardised ways of being in the world.

Joseph had this phrase—"sanctified dissing"—that he connected to jihad. And there's something about a "sanctified dis" that I was really caught up with. I'm interested in this notion of a dis as writing over something, as an act of referencing and revising it. That you have to be in the conversation to be dissed. So to be dissed is to be *dis*respected, but you have to be good enough for that *dis*honour. I think that speaks to this

constantly moving forward, rebuilding, questioning of hip hop aesthetics, an aesthetics of always becoming, and not a stationary one.

**Kendra:** I love the tensions that you're bringing up there Wind, I think you put it so beautifully. That it's moving forward through fragmentation and consolidation, but in order to move forward, you're breaking up and reconfiguring parts of the past. There's this real attentiveness and respect for history, and often ways of telling history and local versions of history that don't get told elsewhere or narrativized anywhere else, but in the service of a different future. And, at the same time, that contrast between making an identity out of fragments. I think this goes back to what Jeanette was saying about the tension between global and local, that what that means is often different from place to place, that what you think of as the global is very different, as well as what your local is. And those are relational and refractive. So this tension between making an identity out of fragments and what we are identifying as universally connecting values within the genre—that's a really productive tension. It's not resolvable, and I don't think anyone is interested in resolving it. But that might go some way to describing this gap across the different academic disciplines that hip hop scholarship comes from. It might not be that we're not discussing aesthetics, but none of us are discussing them in the same way.

**Jeanette:** There's something really fascinating about what you are all saying about the fragmentary—bricolage, pastiche, and so on—and disrupting continuities while also having these continuities and being part of traditions, so artists all see themselves as part of hip hop traditions. Genealogy is very important for hip hop artists, even while they disrupt and play with them. For the particular hip hop artists I study, at least those who want to make Muslim hip hop, they then also inscribe themselves in longstanding Islamic traditions and redescribe hip hop onto that. And I think that's fascinating. This is a kind of very unapologetic way of inscribing yourself in genealogies and longstanding traditions while also having this space to disrupt certain things without necessarily "dissing" the traditions that you adhere to, but you use them in a different way. I'm wondering if that's what makes hip hop so exciting. Sometimes as scholars we like to emphasise rupture, bricolage, or hybridity as this kind of new thing but this simultaneous overlaying of rupture, continuity, genealogy, tradition is the way hip hop has always worked. That's fascinating, and everyone sees a different result of how these different aspects are mapped over and relate to each other.

**Joseph:** In terms of iconic resonances, actually, everything you said just now about bricolage and genealogy could be applied to the Sufi tradition. I think the nature of mysticism is that it embraces opposition. People have a particular spiritual genealogy, but then some supernatural figure will come in and disrupt that genealogy. In my most recent paper (Hill 2017), I was discussing the consonances between mysticism and hip hop. I'm sure you could talk about how it's localised in many other traditions, but in my case, it's so successful amongst this particular genre of Sufis because it's doing exactly what Sufi poets have been doing for over a thousand years.

**Jeanette:** Exactly. That's so true. And I'm wondering if that's why, a lot of the artists I work with, who are hip hop artists, they are Muslim, they are Sufi.

**Joseph:** So you've probably talked to Poetic Pilgrimage?

**Jeanette:** Of course. Poetic Pilgrimage, Mohammed Yahya, Rakin Niass, Mecca2Medina. These are the old guards, right? Now there are newer artists who go in different directions. But these are some of the pioneers of Muslim hip hop in the UK.

**Joshua:** It's not just Sufism. A lot of what we've said about hip hop and its ability to develop a bricolage but also to celebrate continuity is something that a lot of scholars have said about religion as such. I wonder, do you think there is something about religious life or spiritual life which is particularly resonant for hip hop? Is that a natural link, in a way?

**Joseph:** I think hip hop sits quite poorly with certain religious traditions that are more dogmatic. Some scholars of hip hop talk about how it tends to have a much more non-linear and complex relationship to religion. So someone who gets up and "Jesus, Jesus, Evangelical teaching" is not going to get very far in the hip hop world. I think they have to have a much more complex orientation.

**Kendra:** As an artist, if you were to just reproduce doctrine you would, aesthetically and philosophically, be a really boring artist, regardless of which religious tradition you're talking about.

Joseph, your term "iconic resonance" is so helpful because I'm thinking about the ways Moroccan hip hop artists in my context think holistically. The most trenchant critical hip hop tends to see no difference between political, social and economic issues. So it critiques these as a complex, and forces people to look at the connections between them or how one problem causes an effect in another domain. So it's really the scholars in the conversation, people who are *not* committed to healing injustices, who tend to see those as separate. And it's hip hop artists, at least in my context, who are the most forthright and the most explicit about bringing them back together in order to convince people to act about them. There's a correspondence thinking or holism in hip hop, so even though my artists don't necessarily spend a lot of time talking explicitly about religion, I heard the approach that Joseph laid out as particularly resonant. For those who don't know, it's worth adding that different Sufi *turuq* are really important to Moroccan culture.

### **Celebration, the self, and the performance of excess**

**Joshua:** To play devil's advocate for a moment, when I presented on this at a recent conference for an audience of people who knew very little about hip hop, their image of the style didn't resemble what you're talking about. They thought it was all about sex and money. Another way to put it is that they saw it as a very celebratory style, whether self-celebratory or group celebratory. Without saying they were entirely right, I do see what they were getting at. A lot of the rappers I listen to seem to be enjoying themselves and are not shy about it. Now that celebration can be critical as well, but I'm thinking about the tension between celebration and critique in some of the places we're talking about.



**Jeanette:** I'm not sure if I see a tension between celebration and critique, but I see a tension between emphasising the message and therefore critique or emphasising one's self. I think with my artists, that's very important. What is your intention, why are you doing this, and what are your ethics? At the end of the day, are you still coming from a Muslim ethics, are you making yourself bigger, or is it for the sake of the message? Interestingly, for the artists I work with, when they use the hip hop genealogy, they always refer to old school hip hop. And of course that's nothing new. There's this trope of division between the old school, critical hip hop, on the one hand, and corrupted, commercialised commodified hip hop on the other. My artists don't see too much potential in the commercialised, commodified one. So they see their genealogy as leading back to old-school, political hip hop. I think hip hop is about celebrating life and resistance and that you're still there and still around, so I don't think there is a tension between critique and celebration, but it is a question of what kind of celebration and who are you celebrating.

**Joseph:** The trouble is celebrating things as they are, the status quo. Celebrating life is one thing, celebrating things as they are is another. There's still a certain amount of suggestion of dissociation from the hegemonies out there.

**Joshua:** Jeanette, do you think the sort of self-celebratory hip hop that the people you work with would identify with that more commercial hip hop that they find less useful?

**Jeanette:** Yes, but the problem is not just in commercialised hip hop. It's a potential that is in everyone. Everyone says, I'm performing, I like being on stage, I love it, but I need to resist that, I need to discipline myself, this kind of disciplining of the soul. We all have that potential, we need to keep it in check so it's not getting unhealthy. Hence it's a constant recognition that this self-regard is a part of performers who enjoy being on stage have, but it should not take over. So this is why, for example, my artists will do an invocation before going on stage, they will use some terminology on stage that reminds that it's not about them, it's about something much bigger. They have their techniques that keep their ego in check. That's their key critique about what many hip hop artists but also other performers don't do.

**Kendra:** But it's also important to remember that, in some contexts, celebrating yourself in the way that I think you're referring to, Joshua, can be a form of critique. You remember Jay-Z and Kanye's song 'Otis.' I used to use it in my classes a lot, because if you were not attuned to the potential for critique inside even the most commercial of hip hop, then you would see it as just crass materialism, a complete celebration of wealth. But then you have to think about what they're sampling, and how that changes how you have to read the lyrics, and you have to think about the history of systematic dispossession of black Americans, to recognize that what Jay-Z and Kanye are doing is saying, 'In your face! We did this. We made it to this point that no one could imagine for us, including ourselves, in spite of you.' And that's a really powerful critique, even if we don't necessarily personally agree that anyone should have that much money. That's a really powerful form of critique. But one of the counter-arguments here is this claim, implicitly or explicitly, that it can't be possible to maintain a critique once you have that kind of wealth. And within that claim I think is this assumption that we hold hip hop artists as individuals, as musicians

of colour, or as musicians dedicated to an Afro-diasporic form, to a higher ethical standard than we hold others. That we get to critique them in turn if they've reached a point where they embody a rebuke to our system, which is just racist and unfair.

**Joshua:** At some level, focusing on the self and the ego instead of the message is a kind of occupational hazard for all performative arts. And yet, I do think the presentation of the rapper as hero—whether done ironically, critically, or however—is an important hip hop trope. And good artists use that, the way any good artist uses a trope and plays with it. But I can see that as standing in tension with standards of what might be seen as acceptable in some forms of Islam.

**Joseph:** Can I give a counterexample? Because I think what you would expect of a Sufi-oriented Muslim is to show this incredible humility, and pray to God beforehand, to erase the self. The extinction of the self is the central point of Sufism, to the point where you're not even aware of your own existence. And yet, here's a contradiction—speaking about rap's embracing contradictions—many of the rappers I study get out there on stage and they yell insults at their opponents and say “I'm the best.” I ask them, “As a Sufi whose self has been extinguished why is it important for you to do this?” There are all kinds of explanations for it. Some of it is this jihad talk, that they're standing up for the truth and they're dissing someone who is against the truth. Some of it is just the genre: hip hoppers insult each other, it's just braggadocio, it's just what we do. So I think there are many ways that people can embrace this kind of contradiction, and they embrace it, and they *use* it. They use the opposition between the absolute annihilation of the self and the fact that I'm up here saying, “I'm the best, I'm the best.”

**Wind:** I also want to think about this “non-serious seriousness,” as I call it, the hyperbolic. To claim that you're the best is always to know that status is always in question. And it's always a little tongue in cheek to be the best. But there's something really interesting in the connection to hip hop and religion. I think Kendra says something about this as a movement towards a greater freedom. There is something about hip hop's aesthetics that is always trying to think about the contradictions or even the possibility of an ego. There's always this gesture towards gratuitous freedom that will never be allowed. And that comes in the hyper-consumerism, all this stuff we can consume, or what we might call the hyper-sexuality, and it draws out this tension and makes the general population uncomfortable. It's interesting. When I listen to young hip hop, my puritanical values start going “Aaaa! You can't do that!” And then I have to stop and question. These artists are reaching for a type of freedom, maybe even a transcendence, and I'm locked into a social construct that's in their way. So their gratuitous freedom is a challenge to my parameters or blocked off freedom. There's always this hyperbolic, this non-serious seriousness. And that's what upsets us, because it's kind of like, “We are radical revolutionaries. Wink, wink. Just kidding. We are.” Well, are you, or are you not?

**Kendra:** That's awesome.

**Wind:** I'm thinking of Jay-Z's lyric: “I'm like Che Guevera with bling on. I'm complex.” How do you situate yourself into that contradiction? How do you study that? With that? By the time you track where it is, it's someplace else.

**Joshua:** I love that ludic excessiveness. It's so much that it calls everything into question, by being excessive, by being way over the top. And if it's moderate, you lose the whole point of it.

**Wind:** I think the worst thing Jay-Z said was, "I stopped buying jewellery, and now I'm buying million-dollar artwork". I thought, "No, that's back into this Western idea that this actually means something, that there is value in a Monet and not in 20-inch rims". I thought, "No, stick to the 20-inch rims, because that's the absurdism of what we're doing. The questioning of the assumption that there is wealth, that there is worth, that there is this sense of propriety and property."

**Joshua:** What you do is you paint the Monet on your 20-inch rims.

**Wind:** *(laughs)* There you go.

**Jeanette:** You can perform something without being completely possessed by it. You can perform the hip hop performance styles without buying into them fully. This non-serious seriousness: you take your art seriously, but at the same time, you know that you need to keep some kind of distance to it, and not let it become your personal spiritual reality.

**Wind:** There's a certain kind of bad faith to seriousness that hip hop is sceptical of.

**Joseph:** I know the artists you're referring to, and they're very sincere, and they make a big deal about being sincere. They're not going to throw bling in your face and say I'm the best of the best and let you believe it. But there's always this ambiguity where some of these guys who are grandstanding, people come away from that thinking, yeah, he's grandstanding. They don't think he's putting on an act. Because they leave it a little bit ambiguous and really emphasise the fact that this person over here is really nothing and I hate him. There's a whole spectrum between play acting and yes, I really hate that guy. And there's a whole ambiguity in between, and that's what hip hop plays on.

**Joshua:** My sense is that the general public finds seeing that in hip hop particularly difficult. Lots of artists play characters. Somebody like Lady Gaga is so clearly in role in her performance. Why is it that it seems so difficult for the general public—at least in the US and the UK—to see that rappers are doing that same thing?

**Wind:** That's a great question. I think part of it might be the subversiveness of it. Civil society is on guard for that critical, subversive play. In the States at least, there is the idea that hip hop lyrics can be used as evidence in court. And that's ludicrous. That someone's poetic expression is actually their criminal record sheet. I think that's crazy.

**Joshua:** In Morocco, do you see this lack of recognition that hip hop artists can be stage personae?

**Kendra:** Yes and no. I think this goes back to a couple of things you all have said. On one hand, there's this idea of presenting with sincerity, and there's this idea of making sure that your celebration of yourself and your own ego doesn't overshadow your message and the critique you're trying to make. For as long as I've been watching Moroccan hip hop, disappointments with leading hip hop figures usually come down to their detractors saying that their ego has gotten the better of them and they made a bad choice in this situation. Whether it's not liking the lyrics to a song, or not liking how much they wanted to get paid for a concert. Their defenders say either a) the artists deserve all of that stuff because their work is so great and b) that shouldn't overshadow their essential critique. But there are also figures who have made some quite sophisticated expressions of playing with personae. I think there's more room for those to be accepted and appreciated in a Moroccan context because of the tradition of listening for ambiguity and appreciating ambiguity across Moroccan dramatic arts and genres. It's a question of listening to things and knowing they are opaque out of necessity — because one has to protect one's speech in order to protect oneself in an authoritarian climate — and still hearing what you want to hear, to be sincere in your listening intention as well as sincere in your performance. So there are ways that people have played with it very successfully, such as the emcee Mobydick, who has had a long history of having the visual signatures of the superhero. His emblem that he sells on his own T-shirts is an upside-down Superman logo. And he had a whole album where he played these different characters that were caricatures of different figures in Moroccan society. He was very actively addressing this notion that you are putting on a persona when you tell a story through hip hop. Whereas in the US, Erik Nielsen and Charis Kubrin have talked about what Wind was pointing to, this idea that rap lyrics are self-evidently the internal person, the interiority of the person on trial. Many different domains of US culture are invested in the idea that certain people aren't allowed to have a distinction between their public and private self.

**Joshua:** And that gets racialised pretty quickly.

**Kendra:** Yes.

### **Negotiating religious hip hop under the War on Terror**

**Jeanette:** I think what Kendra and Wind just said is important to place into a context. It happens that certain lyrics are being policed or criminalised, when you work under an authoritarian regime. In the British context, we have had over ten years now of "Preventing Violent Extremism," usually called just "Prevent," part of Britain's counter-terrorism programmes since around 2006. It has kind of criminalised non-violent extremism, meaning certain political opinions that are not very welcome. It's been very difficult to track down the impact of this on artists. Often the artists might not even realise to themselves to what extent these broader discourses have shaped them. So, for example, one thing I'm really asking myself—and I'd be interested perhaps to hear from Joseph a little bit about what he thinks—is that Preventing Violent Extremism policies have pushed for a de-politicised Islam, and they have at one time hyped Sufi spirituality as this kind of "good Islam." I've seen a certain number of artists becoming closer to Sufi traditions, and partially, though it's ambivalent, becoming a bit less political. But you don't really know, can you really say that it's the policy that triggered

this or is there is a different logic at work? But certainly, being very political and saying certain things comes at a price. It's interesting for me to see who's doing that right now and who's not, and who has done it in the past and who's not doing it anymore. In interviews, you cannot really get to that. But, some scholars have talked about how hip hop has become kind of a tool in the global war on terror, cultural diplomacy. Hisam Aidi (2014) and Su'ad Abdul Khabeer (2016) talked about this here and there, but it's not clear to what extent this global environment and discursive framework is impacting artists, reshaping their priorities. I can't come up with a clear answer. I have just a lot of question marks.

**Joseph:** There has certainly been a shift. Among some of the British Muslim rappers that you have mentioned, there has been a shift a bit towards spoken word poetry, which I think is also a move towards a more pious self-presentation, one that doesn't rely so much on rhythm and dancing. And all of them have done rap and spoken word things that are quite political, but they're political both in critiquing the Western states and their violent impact around the world and in critiquing strands of Islam that are extreme and the like.

Yes, I think there has been a general shift, and but it's a very good question about the causal relationship. Artists have been critical about the war on terror, but they've also positioned themselves very clearly against the Salafi trends in Islam, partially because they're part of the Sufi group that is being slaughtered by the Salafis. I'm sure they would themselves insist that their interest in Sufism, like their opposition to Salafism, has everything to do with their personal spiritual quest and has nothing to do with politics.

**Kendra:** I feel like there's a lot of room for someone—including both of you—to help the rest of us understand more what it is like for artists who feel trapped in the middle of that, where they both sincerely reject religious fundamentalism and have sincere critiques against authoritarianisms and fundamentalisms of the states under which they live. That feels very resonant with my own research context as well. And yet, it's difficult making art in a context that's so politicised that standing in the middle will be read as supporting one or the other by the opposite camp. That seems like an extraordinary position to navigate.

**Jeanette:** It's so difficult, and as I said, I can't yet tell how it is being navigated. For me, in my research, there is a new generation of younger artists who grew up and came of age under the War on Terror and Prevent. The older generation remembers the pre-9/11 context. But the younger ones, who are now 20 or 23, they don't remember anything else, and they have been completely traumatised by surveillance regimes that go into schools. There is now the Prevent programme in the UK where teachers and health professionals and everyone else has to check on you, to see if you're radicalising or not. These artists have a very different perspective on things. Having looked at the scene for 10 years, it's interesting to see newer generations coming in. (Now, I'm blending spoken poetry into the broader hip hop genre here because spoken poetry really grew out of that, and of course it is much less controversial in the Muslim community. If British Muslim hip hop has been spearheaded by Afro-Caribbean Muslims, you see now a lot of Afro-Caribbean Muslims doing spoken poetry themselves but also Somalis and South Asian and so on.)

And the thing is the global war on terror language kind of traps you. It says you have to take a position where nuances are difficult. What Joseph said: On the one hand, using an anti-Salafi language does seem to fit the Prevent/“good Muslim” narrative but at the same time as a Sufi, you are actually endangered by the Salafis in certain contexts. So how do you navigate these things? How can you escape the trap of the war on terror language and refuse its interpellation of you as a certain kind of Muslim subject?

I think one of the most interesting pieces I saw recently was by Pakistani-British poet Suhaiymah Manzoor-Kahn, “This Is Not a Humanizing Poem” (2017). It’s really amazing because she says, “Love us when we’re lazy, love us when we’re poor... when we’re wretched, suicidal, naked and contributing nothing. Love us then.” I thought this was a really interesting piece, and I was thinking about in my chapter, where I’m talking about how Prevent’s language frames artists. What happens if you completely refuse the terms, despite the difficulty of doing that? As Joseph said, when you are a pious Muslim in a pious context you take certain normative positions about what “right Islam” is, and that can easily be trapped in the language of Prevent. I don’t think the artists have really figured out how to escape that. Because this interpellation is powerful and the desire to represent, to show a good image of Islam, to show that we are different, is so important for being able to live in society. It’s a trap, and how do you break out of this trap? I’m working on these issues in my latest article (Joili 2019).

### **Representation and locating the self**

**Joseph:** As far as I know, I don’t think it’s been hard for the artists I study them to come up with a position and articulate one that is intelligent and consistent. The problem is with the uptake. The problem is that people are going to map that onto their pre-existing categories. I think it was Kendra who mentioned her paper how artists didn’t want to be pigeonholed as Muslim rappers—they just wanted to be rappers. I think the same goes for Poetic Pilgrimage, for example, who are tired of just being reduced to the hip hop hijabis. They’re rappers who wear headscarves because they’re pious Muslims, but they want to say they can rap about Islam, and they can rap about other things too. They just become a symbol of whatever people want them to symbolize. And the idea that they’re resisting patriarchy by rapping while wearing a headscarf—they told me, “No! We’re not about resisting patriarchy, or defending it for that matter.” The kinds of things they’re interested in resisting have nothing to do with the kinds of things you would like them to resist.

**Joshua:** But part of your job as a rapper is to represent your community, and to represent it in a way that’s authentic and honest but also not negative. That seems like a thread that goes through hip hop across the world, not just in the context of the Prevent agenda in Britain or in Islam. The idea that I am the rapper who comes from this place and I am here to represent that place seems to be a real trope, the way that conflict seems to be a trope as well.

**Jeanette:** That’s for every minority, right? If you’re a majority you don’t have to. That’s the burden of representation. It comes up, even for Kendra’s artists, who have to think very differently when they’re in or outside their country. Of course, African-American artists have thought about this question for a hundred years.

**Joshua:** But how does that work with what we were saying before about hip hop as something that is universal but not universalist? That everyone can share it in a way, or Wind, your idea that it is diasporic, that it travels *between* places as a minoritarian voice, as a critical voice, and as a voice that *always* needs to assert its identity, because that's one of the few things it has in common: it's *not* the dominant.

**Wind:** I want to point out something that you mentioned, Joshua, about representing where you come from. It relates to the poem that Jeanette mentioned. So in that notion of recognition, it's not recognising us at the level that you consider proper human Western embodiment. It's we are gritty, we are this, we are that, so it's this lack of desire to be recognized and enfolded into a dominant narrative.

I had a question. I know a lot of you are engaged in ethnographic interviews. It's a type of approach I don't really do, and so I was interested in the idea that some of the artists you interview discuss this tension between singularity and plurality with respect to their own identity. Because I know in a lot of Western hip hop, there's this tendency to speak from an individual perspective but also a collective one. I am thinking of something Fred Moten says, I think by way of Edouard Glissant, "consent not to be a single being." That's why you can have Sean Carter as Jay-Z, but also rappers who invent a second persona because their politics explode the first one. So you have Shock G who needs Humpdy Hump for his more comedic style. This is a way of questioning the idea that there can be a singular being, because so much violence has been created from this idea that there can be this identity that can own things, that can have property, that can be recognised in a legal context. Do you see that same pattern when the artists you interview talk about a community? Or when their raps go from a singular to a plural position as they construct and articulate their realities?

**Kendra:** That's a really provocative question. My initial unrehearsed thought is that many of my interlocutors claim to speak for a group, so there's a plurality there. But they also don't necessarily always want to be seen in terms of the groups that they may be identified as part of, or the norms that they may already be held to. There's that burden of representation again. The chapter that I'm working on right now focuses on the Moroccan emcee Soultana, by far the most famous female emcee in Morocco. She's been around a long time and she gets invited to international performances and her way of comporting herself has to be very different onstage and off, inside and outside of Morocco, in part because she's invited to represent a counternarrative to narratives about Muslim women's subjugation for the benefit of the audiences. She always has to navigate that sense of understanding what is happening in those contexts, understanding that people think this is a real concern. She certainly wouldn't argue that there isn't subjugation going on, but doesn't want to contribute to its sensationalising. And yet, she has a real desire to perform internationally, has a desire to share her music, and has financial needs. So there's lots of push and pull factors about how you're being perceived and instrumentalised and still having to decide how you're going to cope.

**Jeanette:** I think you really hit the nail on top, Kendra. No one wants to just be seen as part of a group in terms of an overt label like "hip hop hijabi" such that that's all we expect from them. So there is a desire to be taken seriously as individual artists doing

their individual personal art, and yet at the same time, my artists are very clear that ontologically, they refuse the notion of the autonomous self. Their work, their ethics, their ontology is really about the “we”. We are not autonomous selves. We are all connected through interrelationality. And some of the poems are very powerful in deconstructing the autonomous self and showing this trans-ontology, this kind of connection on the basis of being, rather than being as individual beings. I think the way you’ve said that is very helpful. Because I’ve stressed that point of relationality, but as the same time as artists, they don’t want to be seen as this kind of predictable pattern as a member of the group. That’s very difficult to navigate as well.

**Kendra:** That’s so fascinating because a lot of what I see in my field site is not the opposite, quite, but at least a contrast to that. There’s a sense amongst hip hop artists, at least the artists who have pioneered the art form in Morocco, who are now in their early 30s, that they didn’t have any other domain in which they could be seen as individuals. Rhetorically, even the most common way of referring to targets of your critique is simply referring to them as “they.” So they’re turning this longstanding enculturated notion of grouping together the thing that is your target of critique back on itself by saying “I am the individual standing here.” And yet in performance practice, of course, like in many other kinds of live performance, it’s really integral that people feel that there’s a “we.” And there is a potential for, if not a doctrinal Sufi erasure of self, then at least a form of feeling physically connected or embodying a potential for connection that is really linked and enculturated in. That tension’s still there, but it’s expressed in a different way.

**Joshua:** How is it in your field, Joseph?

**Joseph:** It’s a good question. It’s something I’ll have to think about a bit. I think the fact that artists’ personae onstage is sometimes radically different from their personae offstage or that it’s very highly contrived does suggest a certain disjuncture between one’s social identity and one’s personal rapper identity, which can call into question the idea of identity all together. Personally, I don’t find the idea of identity to be that useful a construct, because the people I’m working with don’t necessarily believe you have a stable personal identity, as Jeanette and Wind were saying. But there’s not really such a stable thing as group identity either. So it’s not a question of if you represent the individual or the group. It’s more a question that maybe there’s no individual or group to represent. Instead, they suggest, I’m representing concepts and ideas. But concepts and ideas tend to focus on the discursive. I’m representing *ḥaqā’iq*—deeper realities that are too contradictory and paradoxical to put into straightforward language, that’s why I’m using poetry in the first place, to disrupt interpretative options. My concern is that the idea of identity suggests there is something there to be spoken of.

### Closing words on method

**Kendra:** Wind, the last question you asked, you were talking a bit about ethnography. Can you tell us about the way that you approach your work?

**Wind:** It might be a hole in my kind of scholarship, but I don’t really interact with artists face to face. Not to say I haven’t, I do have friends who are artists – but I don’t usually



bring in a lot of interviews. As someone who writes plays and writes poetry, I'm always suspicious about the way I talk about my own work. I feel like there's something that takes over in an interview. And I find it limiting. I'm trying to control what my work is saying, and the work is doing one labour, and my consciousness is trying do a different labour to represent that work. That's maybe always why I'm moving away from that work. But I think it's helpful to bring in the artists. My whole theory is to study hip hop, you should study with the people theorising through the method of hip hop. I'm always envious of people who sit down with artists and think with them.

**Joseph:** I use interviews a lot, and I agree with you that they ought to be taken more as a performance of self and of a counter-self and less as a transparent account of the facts. I'm more interested in how interviews function as a performance than as a source of data.

**Jeanette:** But even the lyrics. I showed Muneera Williams, one part of the hip hop duo Poetic Pilgrimage, a piece that I wrote recently in which I discuss Poetic Pilgrimage's poetry, and she said, "This is so amazing what you're doing with my lyrics. I think it's great, but I didn't think about it like that." She didn't contradict me, but she said she didn't see so much in it when she wrote it. It's really interesting to see what we as scholars do and what we project into the work, even their lyrics, which is what they've put out there for judgement. What you do as an artist in your own consciousness and the result for which you're being judged or how you are received is not always the same. I think that's the exciting thing with the arts. The audience's reading can take place again and again, and those readings are never saturated.

**Wind:** I find, especially for hip hop dramatists and playwrights, their work is so radical and revolutionary, but when they talk about it, they become very conservative. "Oh, I wouldn't say that," they might claim, but that's what the play is saying.

**Joshua:** When we do our job right, we're bringing out things that are genuinely there, whether or not the artist put them there, or knew they did.

Many thanks to all of you for being part of the discussion. It has been fascinating, and I hope that the discussion continues in the pages of *PRS* in the months and years to come.

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