“Mr. President, Your People are Dying”: Rap as the Genre of the Subaltern, from Harlem to the Arab Spring

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Inception
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I. Introduction

Both the 2015 release of Kendrick Lamar’s critically acclaimed album *To Pimp a Butterfly*—with its themes of racism and police brutality—and Beyoncé’s 2016 Super Bowl performance—which evoked the Black Panthers—surprised many viewers and listeners for their highly political content. Yet despite mainstream characterizations of rap and hip-hop culture as shallow and apolitical, politics are in fact at the heart of the genre. Its origins, as a form of protest against poverty in African-American communities in the 1980s and 1990s, have led to it being appropriated by disenfranchised youth globally to speak out against issues in their own communities. The Arab Spring, an eruption of youth-led protests against dictatorships in the Middle East, led to a proliferation of rap music productions. This music spread a message of democratic, non-violent revolution across the region. In this way, rap and hip-hop have been re-appropriated as a political art form.

The development of global subgenres of rap, particularly during the Arab Spring, is inextricably tied to conceptions of class and inter-class

relationships. In creating musical portraits of the downtrodden of society (the subaltern), rap artists are able to present an authentic vision of their lives to the wider world. Building on Gramscian conceptions of the subaltern class, Cornel West describes the role of rap artists as being that of the intellectual freedom fighter, whereby the epistemology of the marginalized are able to be communicated to the wider world.

I argue that hip-hop music, particularly rap, has become the voice of the subaltern globally, not only because of its historical legacy but also because of its ability to present an authentic portrait of the issues faced by youth in a localized area in a manner that is both popular and accessible. In becoming intellectual freedom fighters through their lyrics, rap artists are able to effectively articulate their political beliefs, thereby aiding emancipatory movements such as the Arab Spring.

In this paper, I first describe the subaltern class, as conceived by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Antonio Gramsci, and Cornel West. In the second section I describe the political origins of hip-hop culture. I then explore artists who rose to prominence during the Arab Spring, analyzing their protest music through the lens of the subaltern. Finally, I connect hip-hop culture and rap music, as evidenced by rappers in the Middle East, to West's intellectual freedom fighter.

II. The Subaltern

The subaltern, a prominent concept in postcolonial studies, is generally understood to consist broadly of the oppressed classes of society. As originally conceived by Antonio Gramsci, it is, as Marcus Green (2002) describes it, "a historically determined category that exists within particular historical, economic, political, social, and cultural contexts" (p. 8). In Gramsci's understanding of the term, the subaltern classes across history have included slaves, women, different races, and the proletariat, among others (Green, 2002, p. 2). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) defines the subaltern as "[the] men and women among

the illiterate peasantry, the tribals, the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat" (p. 283). Green (2002) argues that the distinction between the two definitions is that, for Spivak, the subaltern class is necessarily absent from political organization and representation (p. 18). Once the subaltern is able to organize politically, or represent itself textually or politically, it is no longer the subaltern. Gramsci, in contrast, saw subalternity as a spectrum of development, with some groups being more politically organized than others (Green, 2002, p. 10).

A subaltern class is created through subordination. For Gramsci, this process is the interaction of both "objective and subjective" factors, requiring oppression from the dominant class and acceptance of their subordination by the subaltern class (as cited in D'Souza, 2014, p. 15). Objective factors contributing to oppression include the ability to create knowledge about a place and its peoples: the power of knowledge production. Green (2002) discusses how, for Gramsci, "[c]ivil society … [is where] ruling or dominant social groups manufacture, organize, and maintain consent by promoting their hegemony—that is, their ideology, philosophy, ways of life, and so forth" (p. 7). Spivak (1988) situates this hegemonic power over knowledge within colonialism, arguing that the cultural products of the colonizers are fundamentally disconnected from the colonized (280). This is because colonizers, who saw Europe as the subject of history, considered themselves to be the knowledgeable authority on history. As such, "great care was taken to obliterate the textual ingredients with which such a subject could cathect, could occupy [the] itinerary" of the colonized Other (Spivak, 1988, p. 280). Thus, a hierarchy of knowledge production was established, with the colonizer engaging in "epistemic violence" on the colonized through the creation of knowledge and cultural artifacts that ignored not only the voice of the subaltern but also their reality within the context of colonialism and oppression (Spivak, 1988, p. 280).

This is not to say that the subaltern classes are completely without awareness or agency. Spivak (1988) argues that "the oppressed … can speak *and know their conditions* [emphasis in the original]" (p. 283).

The oppressed have the ability to both recognize and act to emancipate themselves from their position at the bottom of society. The subaltern classes therefore have a certain degree of autonomy and freedom from the European colonial narrative of knowledge production. Thus, they are able to create their own epistemologies (processes of knowledge creation) and cultural projects. Gramsci describes how whenever groups find themselves in a place of subordination, they employ an "organic intellectual" to act as a liaison between them and the wider society (as cited in D'Souza, 2014, p. 16). West further refines this image of a communicator, describing an "intellectual freedom fighter" who engages in "a strengthening and nurturing endeavour that can forge more solid alliances and coalitions" (as cited in D'Souza, 2014, p. 17). He situates this freedom fighter within what he describes as the "New Cultural Politics of Difference," which consists of "distinct articulations of talented contributors who desire to align themselves with demoralized, demobilized, depoliticized, and disorganized people in order to empower and enable social action" (as cited in Boyd, 1994, p. 326). Within this context, the intellectual freedom fighter is responsible for communicating the epistemologies of the oppressed group from within, as opposed to the narrative being formed by an outsider.

But what is contained in this knowledge from the lower classes of society? How is it communicated? Rap music and hip-hop culture, from their very beginning, have consisted of a medium through which struggle has been communicated to the wider world.

III. Rap and Hip-Hop – Origins

The origins of "breakin', graffiti, DJ'in' and MC'in'" (Malone & Martinez, 2010, p. 536), the four original elements of hip-hop culture, can be traced to the late 1960s and 1970s in New York City. On 19 May 1968, the Last Poets came together to celebrate Malcolm X's birthday in Harlem, New York, using lyrical vocals over a strong beat—much like rap music today (Malone & Martinez, 2010, p. 537). Five years later, in

a community centre at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in the Bronx, DJ Kool Herc (Clive Campbell) is credited with introducing the two-turntable style synonymous with hip-hop culture today (Malone & Martinez, 2010, p. 537). It was through similar community events such as these throughout New York City that the genre was developed and popularized. At the heart of much late twentieth century hip-hop from New York City is a critique of poverty, the political system, and mainstream culture. These critiques, delivered through rap and other media, emerged as a result of the political and socio-economic reality for African-American youth at the time, as well as broader historical legacies and cultural shifts within the African-American community itself, such as the place of music within the community and the shift away from churches as centers of community activism.

Clarence Lusane (1993) attributes the creation and politicization of rap music to institutional racism brought on by the Reagan/Bush era of the late 1980s (as cited in Lusane, 1993, p. 18). Due to budget cuts to schools and music programs in poor urban neighbourhoods, turntables were often the most accessible instruments available to young urban youth (Lusane, 1993, p. 42). The loss of music programming was accompanied by a rise in poverty in African-American communities, particularly among youth. In 1992, African-American youth unemployment stood at 42.5% (Marable, as cited in Lusane, 1993, p. 44). Manning Marable discusses this in a 1982 essay, describing the "the growing dependency of broad segments of the [B]lack community upon public assistance programmes … [as] the beginning of a new and profound crisis for [B]lack labor in America" (as cited in Lusane, 1993, p. 43). As geographer Andrew Kaufman[1] eloquently describes it, "hip-hop was a musical story-telling system that created job prospects for participants in a post-industrial city" (n.d., 3). This impoverished reality

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and frustration with the political and social mainstream is reflected in Ice Cube's song "A Bird in the Hand" from his 1991 album *Death Certificate*. The rapper asks whether he should turn to drug dealing in order to support himself, as opposed to relying on politicians or community activists (as cited in Lusane, 1993, p. 43).

While undoubtedly tied to the political reality of the time, hip-hop culture is also the product of wider historical legacies within the African-American community. Song and music have long been a tool of resistance in that community. Hip-hop should be seen accordingly as a continuation and evolution of this resistance in the African-American struggle for equality (Aldridge, as cited in Malone & Martinez, 2010, p. 534). Kaufman describes a distinct "Black epistemology" (2013, p. 2), a legacy of enduring traditions that originated in Africa, survived the Antebellum South which has evolved with the community. Angela Davis (1998) describes music as "central to the meaning of a culture of resistance during slavery" as illustrated by songs such as "Follow the Drinking Gourd," which contain secret messages about how to escape North (p. 120). Dyson (2004) discusses Blues music as being a source of power for the African-American community, as it allowed for a distinctive voice and articulation of struggle (as cited in Kaufman, 2013, p. 3). Beyond music, Lusane (1993) situates rap's origins within oral traditions within the African-American community, as exemplified by Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X among others (p. 41).
As such, hip-hop owes much not only to the DJs of Harlem but also to African-American cultural legacies writ large. However, it was a cultural shift within the African-American community that created space for hip-hop to become a political voice. Other intellectual institutions that had traditionally been hubs for social change, such as the church, or civil rights organizations such as Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference, simply did not have the ability to speak for the community in the same way as they had previously (D'Souza, 2014, p. 18). Artists such as Public Enemy were better able to articulate the issues faced by African-American youth to the wider community. Indeed, Chuck D, frontman of Public Enemy, once dubbed rap music

“Black CNN” for its ability to communicate the struggle outside of their community (D’Souza, 2014, p. 19). Their 1989 song “Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos” tells the story of a young African-American man escaping from prison. The prison escape is prompted by a letter from the government asking him to enlist in the army. The prisoner reacts angrily, saying that an African-American man could never fight for the state, due to the country’s history of racism (Public Enemy, 2011). Thus, rap music bridges centuries of traditions with political and social issues faced by African-American youth in the 1980s and 1990s.

However, the mid-1990s saw a decline in the political nature of mainstream American rap music. Todd Boyd (1994) mourns the gradual loss of politically meaningful discourse in rap music, arguing that “what was once thought of as a radical critique of repressive state apparatuses … has been transformed into a series of unapologetic narratives that celebrate violence, humiliate women, and indulge marijuana use to excess” (p. 327). What was once a conduit for social change became appropriated for profit. As rap was increasingly commodified, it lost its political message. The legacy of politicization still remains, however, and has proliferated elsewhere in recent years. Christopher Malone and George Martinez Jr. (2010) note that the genre has been re-appropriated elsewhere for use in protest and counter-cultural movements. Rap, they argued, underwent an “organic reversal” from the “cultural caricature of hip-hop” that may have initially been consumed by communities abroad to a return to its political roots (p. 535). There are a number of examples of rap music being used as a tool of social and political activism globally. In Winnipeg, for instance, a number of Indigenous artists, such as Winnipeg’s Most, have used rap and tropes present throughout hip-hop culture to comment on racism, colonization, and police harassment (Patriquin, 2010). However, nowhere has this re-appropriation of the genre for political gains been more apparent than during the Arab Spring, from 2010 to 2012.

IV. The Rappers of the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring was a period of youth-led protest movements across the Middle East, including Libya, Yemen, Egypt, Syria, and Tunisia, some of which are still experiencing ongoing conflict. The wave of revolution was triggered by the self-immolation of Mohamed Boazizi, a Tunisian fruit seller who had been harassed by police (Abdel-Khalek, 2014, p. 1). The proliferation of rappers across the Middle East during this time of revolution led the French media to dub it "*le printemps des rappeurs*" or "the spring of the rappers" (Aidi, 2011). The influence of rap artists on the revolution is particularly evident in Tunisia and Egypt.

Even before the Tunisian revolution began in December of 2010, El Général, born Hamada Ben Amor, was writing songs about injustice and corruption in Tunisia. Heavily influenced by Tupac Shakur, he says in an interview with *TIME Magazine*, "[W]hen I became a rapper I wasn't looking for love. I was looking to rap for the good of the people" (Walt, 2011). His 2008 song "*Sidi Rais*" or "Mr. President" was a call for Tunisian dictator Ben Ali to act against corruption. His most well known work, however, is the song "*Rais Lebled*" or "Head of State". Released December 2010, it is an address to the dictator. He implores Ali to see the death and injustice in his country, despite the personal risk to him in saying so (as cited in Walt, 2011). The song was played widely both in Tunis, the capital of Tunisia, and in Cairo's Tahrir Square, the central organizing place of the Egyptian revolution, and it is considered to be one of the most influential songs of the Arab Spring (Aidi, 2011).

El Général had his American debut in March 2013. One of the artists performing alongside him was Egypt's Deeb (Mohamed el Deeb). Deeb's music touches on many of the same themes: corruption, political mobilization, and revolution. In "Stand Up Egyptian," Deeb calls individuals to action in support of the revolution (Parales, 2013). He later stated in an interview with sociologist Sujatha Fernandes that "shallow pop music and love songs got heavy airplay on the radio, but when the revolution broke out, people woke up and refused to accept

shallow music with no substance" (Fernandes, 2012). This refusal to accept the romantic pop music that had previously been the mainstay of the Egyptian music industry spurred the popularity of an entire subgenre of rap known as "*mahraganat*," or "festivals" (Hubbard, 2013). Ben Hubbard (2013), writing for *The New York Times*, describes the music as "youth-driven, socially conscious music[;] … a rowdy blend of traditional Egyptian wedding music, American hip-hop and whatever else its creators can download for free online." Sadat Abdel-Aziz's "The People and the Government," released in January 2011, speaks of the revolution in its early stages. He raps about the government shooting at protestors, and the factions that formed, namely the Chaldean Christians and the Muslim Brotherhood (as cited in Hubbard, 2013). This song became publicized, along with the work of other *mahraganat* artists such as Okka (Muhammad Salah) and Ortega (Ahmed Mustafa) amid the turmoil of Tahrir Square (Hubbard, 2013).

In this way, Tunisian and Egyptian artists re-appropriated hip-hop, taking it back to its political roots in order to fuel revolution. But why hip-hop? What is distinct about this genre of music that renders it useful to subaltern artists?

V. Rappers and the Subaltern Class

The creation and popularity of rap music by artists in the Arab Spring demonstrates how closely linked the subaltern and hip-hop culture have become. With its emphasis on local authenticity, hip-hop culture allows artists to create their own local epistemologies and act as Gramscian freedom fighters to mobilize the oppressed against their oppressor.

Rap artists are the intellectual freedom fighters of the communities that they represent. Andrew Kaufman discusses a series of epistemologies that grew out of the African-American experience, such as the blues. Out of this was born a distinct hip-hop epistemology, which he describes as "dependent upon lived-experience and authenticity;

talking about where you're from, and the spaces and places one inhabits" (Kaufman, 2013, p. 1). This need for focus on localized issues, Kaufman argues, is due to the importance of authenticity within the genre. Authenticity, within this context, refers to "the idea that you honestly represent your own experience by acknowledging the place and spaces you inhabit" (Kaufman, 2013, p. 4). Thus, the artist who can effectively communicate their localized experiences as the subaltern to the wider community fulfills the role of the organic intellectual, or West's freedom fighter. The main impetus behind hip-hop culture being re-appropriated in the context of other localized conflicts, such as the Arab Spring, lies in this emphasis on local authenticity and its ability to distil lived experience and local cultural artefacts into new creative products (Malone & Martinez Jr., 2010, p. 535; Kaufman, 2013, p. 7)

Rappers worldwide speak of this focus on authenticity. As discussed, Deeb attributes the popularity of *mahraganat* to its honest portrayal of Egyptian society and revolution. Rappers, according to the Senegalese rapper Keyti, "are closer to the streets and can bring into their music the general feeling of frustration among people" (Fernandes, 2012). Morocco's El Haqed, known as The Enraged One (2014), writes in an essay for Al Jazeera of the power of rap music to reach young people: how, "despite the media blackout and closing every door in our face and censoring us, we still felt its incredible power, its words of freedom in the face of authoritarian systems" (para. 8). Being close to the place and issues that you reference in your music, however, is not simply a matter of lyrical allusion. The lived experiences of many rap artists are a testament to their status as intellectual freedom fighters and to the legitimacy of the genre as a form of resistance. For instance, El Général was imprisoned during the Tunisian revolution due to the popularity of his music (Walt, 2011). El Haqed (2014) goes so far to describe his politically charged lyrics as "prison rap," due not only to his numerous arrests and time in custody but also to the other rappers he encountered there (para. 15). The Moroccan and Tunisian governments see the rappers and their art as a legitimate threat yet in

their arrests have only strengthened the message being communicated by those that they seek to oppress.

Thus, it is the combination of authenticity, lived experience, and popularity that makes rap a legitimate and effective form of resistance. Particularly in the context of the youth-driven revolutions of the Middle East, rap music was a natural choice for artists looking to spread politically charged verses. As Winnipeg-based rapper and Indigenous activist Wab Kinew points out, “the younger generation that has listened to hip-hop their whole lives is coming up … [and the] street scene found its voice” (Patriquin, 2010). Like the African-American youth who no longer found churches to be the best voice for their community, activists around the world are using hip hop to resist in a unique and effective way by using their artistic talents and experiences.

VI. Conclusion

Rap music and hip-hop culture originated as a means through which the impoverished youth of New York City could communicate their daily struggles. Using rapid lyrics and programmed beats, artists such as Public Enemy and Ice Cube were able to articulate their frustrations with unemployment and poverty while developing their own aesthetic and genre of music. However, hip-hop became less associated with politics and more focused on materialism and wealth. Winnipeg’s Most, Keyti, El Haqed, and many others have successfully re-appropriated the genre as a political tool to communicate their distinct struggles. Youth globally are using hip-hop to communicate local epistemologies of the oppressed to the wider community. Within the context of the Arab Spring, El Général, Deeb, and many others used rap as a way to galvanize support for democracy in the face of dictatorships. When rappers use their art to transform themselves into intellectual freedom fighters, they exercise a privilege long denied to the subaltern. Their music makes them the voice of entire revolutions.

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