Egyptian Hip Hop and the January 25th Revolution

Thesis

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By

Nicholas Rocco Mangialardi, B.A.

Graduate Program in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures

The Ohio State University

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Thesis Committee:

Sabra Webber, Ph.D., Advisor

Barry Shank, Ph.D.
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Abstract

In 2011, the world watched as a wave of popular uprisings rippled through North Africa and the Middle East. These “revolutions,” as they came to be known, were aimed at overthrowing the region’s dictatorial rulers and sought to address the growing social issues of police brutality, government corruption, and unemployment. During this time, Egypt took center stage with Cairo’s Tahrir Square serving as the emblematic public space of revolutionary activity.

Egypt’s long-time president Hosni Mubarak resigned in February 2011 following weeks of mass demonstrations driven, in large part, by a disconcerted youth demographic in the country’s urban centers. During this turbulent period, the voices of young Egyptians were amplified not only through megaphones and protest chants but also through art and music. In the past decade, hip hop music in particular has become one of the most visible outlets through which Egyptian youth are negotiating modern identities and engaging with local sociopolitical issues in their communities. Along with Egypt’s emerging revolution came a wave of media coverage focused on the youth generation’s “revolutionary” music and the growing hip hop scene. However, this media has frequently neglected to distinguish what it is about Egyptian hip hop that is, in fact, “revolutionary.”
This thesis interrogates such claims by closely examining Egyptian hip hop music since its emergence, following its development through the 2011 revolution, and looking at its continued transformation in 2013. Through this investigation, I seek to understand the cultural, political, and musical environment into which Egyptian hip hop was born and against what facets of society this music is “revolting.” As Egypt’s “revolution” began quite recently, there exists no in-depth research on this particular topic yet. My thesis hopes to fill a critical gap in academic knowledge about the intersection of music, youth culture, and politics in Egypt’s rapidly transforming society. Ultimately, this discussion reveals that, through hip hop, Egyptian rappers creatively engage with many of the same discourses that characterize Egyptian culture more broadly regarding modernity, authenticity, and Egyptian identity. Their revolution is not set against a specific genre or singer but rather, against a perceived lack of social engagement. Using a variety of song lyrics, music videos, and ethnographic interviews conducted in the summer of 2011, my examination also illustrates that the Egyptian hip hop community is not without its own internal tensions and contradictions that have remained overlooked in previous research on Egyptian hip hop.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mother and father.
Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to Sabra Webber, Ph.D., who has been an indispensable resource for my studies and has always directed me towards academic opportunities through which to develop my research. I am also indebted to my committee member, Barry Shank, Ph.D., for his time and help with my thesis.

My project would not have been possible without the help of the numerous rappers, breakdancers, graffiti artists, and DJs who I had the privilege of meeting during my last trip to Egypt. Their hospitality and openness during my time in the “underground” will always be remembered.
Vita

2003 .................................................. Normal Community High School
2007 ................................................... B.A. Linguistics, University of Illinois at
                                      Urbana-Champaign
Summer 2007 ................................. U.S. Department of State grant, Arabic
                                      studies at the Arabic Language Institute,
                                      Marrakesh, Morocco
2010 to 2011 ................................. Foreign Language and Area Studies
                                      Fellowship (Arabic), University of Illinois at
                                      Urbana-Champaign
2011 to present ............................... Graduate Teaching Associate, Department
                                      of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures,
                                      The Ohio State University

Fields of Study

Major Field: Near Eastern Languages and Cultures
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Note on Transliterations and Translations

This thesis uses the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* transliteration system for Arabic words. The “l” in the definite article “al-” is always used, however the “a” is removed when the definite article is preceded by the prepositions “bi-,” “fi,” “li-” and “ʿalā.” The “a” is also removed when preceded by “wa” (and).

Names and recurring Arabic words are only fully transliterated the first time they appear in the text. For Arabic names that are regularly used in English I have adopted the common spellings (for example, “Hosni Mubarak,” “Gamal Abdel Nasser”).

For Arabic song lyrics, the original transcription is shown with its English translation. The Arabic appears on the left with the translation immediately to the right. Translating lyrics of any kind, especially rap, is an inherently difficult process and would not have been possible without the help of native Arabic speakers. Naturally, any translation flaws and shortcomings are my own.
Introduction

During the final days of January 2011, thousands of Egyptians streamed into downtown Cairo heading for Tahrir Square, the public site that was soon to become emblematic of the numerous popular uprisings in Arab countries spanning from Morocco in North Africa to Bahrain in the Arabian Gulf (Dabashi 2010, 23). By January 24th, a single Facebook page recorded 85,000 people planning to “attend” a protest on the following day in solidarity against President Hosni Mubarak and the Egyptian government. As tens of thousands flooded into Tahrir Square on January 25th, their voices rose in a unified chant: al-sha’b yurīd isqāṭ al-nizām - the people want the fall of the regime. Days passed and more protestors filled the square to join their fellow Egyptians demanding the end of Hosni Mubarak’s nearly three decades rule as president. Cairo’s protestors soon numbered in the hundreds of thousands while other Egyptian cities began demonstrations of their own. By February 1st, the sum total of those gathered in Tahrir was estimated at one million. Ten days later, Egypt’s vice president Omar Suleiman announced the resignation of Hosni Mubarak on national television to the celebratory cheers of those in Tahrir Square and beyond (ibid., 18).

When analysts consider the trajectory of Egypt’s recent sociopolitical activity in this linear way, it becomes easy to frame revolution as a mere series of isolated events with a definitive beginning and end. A quick internet search will yield a variety of media
sources examining how Egypt’s “18 days of protest” succeeded in ousting Mubarak from office or how the crowds rejoiced after the “revolution was over” (Knell 2012). However, when those 18 days were “over” Egypt’s revolution did not simply end. Of course, January 2011 was a critical turning point in Egypt’s history, demonstrating how change was achieved when Egyptian citizens united for common goals that focused primarily on ending government corruption, police brutality, and the Mubarak regime. International media has not hesitated to capitalize on Egypt’s transforming society by churning out a seemingly endless stream of articles that flout catchy headlines like “Egypt’s Revolution Fuels Digital Boom” (Saleh 2013) or “Democracy and Islam Deteriorated after the Egyptian Revolution” (Nosseir 2013). Such articles continue to be published and frequently engage in a discourse that compartmentalizes and limits Egypt’s revolution so as to undermine the emerging nature of the Egyptian uprising and those like it across the Middle East more broadly.

Scholars have been quick to critique the use of such temporal boundaries when speaking about inherently ongoing processes. These boundaries represent one way of asserting a sense of control over events unfolding in the present. When the events are confined between a start and end point they become more accessible for analysis and understanding. Here, language becomes a crucial element in approaching processes like the Egyptian revolution and Elliott Colla asserts that it is language that “allows us to give an appearance of order to the mess of the open-ended present” (2012). Invoking Guy Debord’s 1967 manifesto, Colla discusses in his essay how the temporal positioning of
events can affect the ways in which speakers adopt stances when talking about the Egyptian revolution:

Ongoing processes are reframed as events that have already taken place. What is objectionable about this is that it transforms humans-as-agents into humans-as-spectators. Rather than acting in history, the spectator merely watches it as if it were a show. Rather than being something that is made by all humans all the time, history becomes a tableaux produced by some for the entertainment of others. (Colla 2012)

Discussing the emerging revolution(s) as completed events is a means by which individuals are able to introduce a sense of orderliness to the unpredictable nature of Egypt’s transformations. In broaching the issue of language, Colla draws attention to the pivotal, yet, often overlooked question of what meaning is given to the word “revolution” in a given context.

Within the last several years, “revolution” has been used so frequently in dialogues about the Middle East and Arab spring that attention is rarely given to the meaning of such a culturally embedded term. To speak of “revolution” in Egypt means that one necessarily invokes the historical synapses connected to this term. When “revolution” is used to describe the sociopolitical events that began in January 2011, the Tahrir Square uprising becomes situated on a timeline with past Egyptian revolutions, among them the 1952 revolution catalyzed by the Free Officers Movement, the 1919 revolution against the British occupation following the exile of Wafd party member Saad Zaghlul, and the 1879 Urabi revolt that was eventually crushed, leaving British presence in the country for the following seven decades (Perry 2004). How does the 2011 “revolution” conform to conceptions of revolution established within Egyptian history?
Does the term “revolution” describe what happened and is still happening in Egypt’s transforming society?

Considering “revolution” in this way, it follows that the oft-used adjective “revolutionary” would also be a necessary site of inquiry. What does it mean to be “revolutionary art” (Beach 2012) or for something to have a “revolutionary theme” (Fayed 2012)? Does a “revolutionary book” discuss the overthrow of a government or does it represent more broadly a new approach to ways of conceptualizing and understanding the world? Answers to these questions would vary widely from person to person. However, it has become clear in recent years that media frequently employs the term “revolutionary” to describe new styles of music and art produced in the Arab world, largely by the youth generation. While heavy metal, indie-rock, and electronic music have gained popularity in Egypt over the last decade (see artists like Origin, Mahmoud Refat, or Cairokee), hip hop has been at the forefront of the “revolutionary” arts scene (LeVine 2008).

Locating the intersection of hip hop music and revolution is not difficult. Academic literature on American hip hop has asserted the “revolutionary” nature of the genre since hip hop studies gained visibility with Tricia Rose’s text Black Noise (1994, 103). Hip hop’s ability to provide a discursive space for social and political critique has no doubt been a point of attraction for the youth demographic throughout the Arab world. Considering the sources of social frustration in Egypt’s 2011 revolution, one might think Rose was referring specifically to Egyptian hip hop when she wrote that “[t]he police, the
government, and the dominant media apparatuses are the primary points of institutional critique in rap” (*ibid.*, 105).

Academic studies on hip hop culture in the United States and abroad have also cited the resistant youth voice of hip hop, often referring to its “revolutionary” nature (Alim 2009; Baker 2005; Kahf 2007; Perry 2004; Terkourafi 2010). However, I would argue that the term “revolutionary” carries a unique meaning when introduced into discussions of Egyptian hip hop given that the country experienced an actual popular revolution beginning in 2011, which had profound effects on the development of hip hop culture in cities like Cairo and Alexandria. The term “revolution” in the Egyptian context brings to mind very different connotations than it would in an American context, especially considering Egypt’s history of revolutions in their myriad forms. Hip hop music, with its historically counter-hegemonic themes, would seem a natural medium through which Egypt’s discontented youth population could voice their frustrations about unemployment, rising food prices, and government corruption. While the link between hip hop and Egypt’s January 25th revolution might appear obvious, little work in the academic realm has examined how and why Egyptian hip hop music is, in fact, “revolutionary.” As the genre is still relatively new in Egypt, having gained prominence only since the early 2000s, scholars have been slow to investigate this aspect of Egyptian youth culture. To my knowledge, there exists no substantial work examining the intersection of hip hop and Egypt’s 2011 revolution (Abbas 2005; Rizk 2007; Williams 2010).
This thesis represents an effort to fill the critical gap in scholarly knowledge by exploring the interactions between hip hop music and Egypt’s ongoing revolutionary activity using hip hop texts, recorded artist interviews, and previous studies of global hip hop and Egyptian culture. In my discussion, I assert that hip hop culture in Egypt is inherently linked to the Arab spring uprisings centered in Cairo’s Tahrir Square. I demonstrate how, in Egypt specifically, hip hop reflects current political and social tensions that exist in the country. To better understand the relationship between rap and revolution in Egypt, I employ ethnographic approaches and textual analyses while framing Egypt’s modern youth music within the context of revolutionary events in the country. In discussing the heterogeneous nature of Egyptian rap, I also identify some of the tensions that exist among artists in the Egyptian hip hop community as these are frequently present and worth discussing to understand that this community is not always one cohesive group.

On a local level, this research intends to establish a greater understanding of the critical transformations unfolding in Egyptian society and its youth generation by approaching culture from the perspective of hip hop music. This study is significant for its wider implications as well. Examining Egyptian culture through the lens of hip hop can help scholars, educators, and students understand the underpinnings of larger processes like transnationalism, cultural flow, and identity construction (Alim 2009). Additionally, my study has the potential to motivate more participant-observation approaches to research on hip hop culture, which have often been absent in previous studies of Arabic-language hip hop and Egyptian hip hop more specifically.
This thesis opens with a chapter discussing hip hop as both a musical form and cultural movement. It provides an overview of hip hop’s origins, both in the Egyptian context and globally, while examining the hybrid nature of hip hop culture. I discuss the cultural and geographic environment into which Egyptian hip hop was born and by which it was necessarily affected as well as the increasingly connected hip hop community across the Arab world. Chapter two considers the inception of hip hop in Egypt, the genre’s first practitioners, and subsequent development, looking at the steady increase in rap concerts, artist interviews, song recordings, and media exposure. This section also sheds light on the diversity among artists and rap groups in the Egyptian hip hop scene, the notion of “realness,” as well as tensions, or what rappers refer to as “beefs” between artists. The third chapter further develops the discussion of “realness” by investigating the ways in which notions of “authenticity, authorship” and “identity” are played out within the Egyptian rap scene. I inspect hip hop’s cultural dialogue between the local and the global and how these spheres are negotiated by Egyptian rappers who invoke both pre-Islamic poets and Western rap figures in and through their music. This chapter also provides an appraisal of what it means to be “real Egyptian hip hop” in a post-2011 Egypt. While chapter three deals with an Egyptian rap song composed and released during the 18 days of protest in January 2011, the fourth chapter of this thesis analyzes a recent rap song and music video to understand how Egyptian hip hop has developed following Hosni Mubarak’s resignation and the subsequent sociopolitical transformations in the country. Specifically, I probe the issue of how Egyptian rap diverges from the ubiquitous pop ḥabībī music of the country and how some Egyptian rappers deliberately
rebel against the genre’s Western-inspired themes and composition in favor of more localized Egyptian elements. In joining these chapters together, I seek to portray a cultural movement that is at once attempting to establish itself in Egypt’s traditional society while also navigating the construction of its own complex and, sometimes, contradictory, identity in the process. This thesis also represents a larger endeavor to answer some of the initial questions posed in the introduction regarding the ways in which we conceive of words like “revolution” and “revolutionary” in the Egyptian context and how, perhaps, hip hop music is expanding some of these notions for a modern society frequently influenced by its youth demographic.
Chapter 1: Hip Hop – Music or Cultural Movement?

This chapter is an overview of hip hop on a global scale, eventually focusing its scope on Egypt. It begins by providing an overview of hip hop’s origins, both in the United States and abroad, while examining the hybrid nature hip hop culture. It looks at how rap music developed in the Maghreb (Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria) and the Levant (Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine) but had a relatively late start in Egypt. It discusses the cultural and geographic environment into which Egyptian hip hop was born and how the country’s unique position in the Arab world contributed to Egyptian rap. This chapter also examines the interconnectedness of Arab rappers across the Middle East facilitated by modern technology, communication, and social media.

Language has occupied a position of primary importance in the hip hop community since its inception, also serving as one of the most studied areas in hip hop research (Alim 2006; Alim 2009; Terkourafi 2010). Hip hop cultures around the world each have a unique vernacular equipped with an array of lexical items, grammatical rules, and intertextual references. To outsiders, many hip hop expressions can sound like a foreign language altogether. What does it mean to be “dope”? Is “spitting mad flow” good or bad? And how does one “rock a freestyle”? While previous research has granted much investigation to this in-group language, I would only like to delineate two terms in
the limited space and scope of this thesis since they will be used throughout. As hip hop scholar H. Samy Alim notes:

> Although the terms *rap* and *Hip Hop* are sometimes used interchangeably, *Hip Hop* is used by practitioners to refer to a vast array of cultural practices including MCing (rappin), DJing (spinnin), writing (graffiti art), breakdancing (and other forms of street dance), and cultural domains such as fashion, language, style, knowledge, and politics (Alim 2009, 2)

This thesis deals primarily with the lyrical elements of hip hop, which I refer to as “rap.” While I deal briefly with visual and musical features of Egyptian rap songs, these require further investigation and greater focus than I give them in this thesis. Where I employ the term “hip hop,” it also carries an analogous meaning to “rap.” So, in this thesis “rap” and “hip hop” are used interchangeably. When discussing the culture as a whole I use the term “hip hop culture” in order to make the distinction quite obvious.

Given that hip hop culture in the United States emerged around a set of interconnected elements (rap, dance, visual art, music production), it is often difficult to speak of one component without also invoking the others to some extent. The different art forms are, in fact, not as divided as language would make them seem. They all share certain features of oral and writerly culture and overlap in their ability to serve as outlets of creative and artistic expression. It is not uncommon to find rappers who also practice graffiti art or DJs who breakdance. We might note one Chicago MC known by the alias “AMS” who channeled his love of hip hop culture into rapping after a breakdancing injury rendered him incapable of dancing. Divisions among the respective elements of hip hop culture are frequently quite fluid which is why many academic studies have
addressed, for example, both rapping and DJing, or DJing and breakdancing. While scholars have appraised the myriad forms of hip hop culture in previous literature, rap has perhaps served as the most central point of discussion since lyrics provide an open space for the development of linguistic practices, themes, and gender ideologies which researchers can examine through textual analysis.

**Hip Hop Hybridity: Locating the Global Hip Hop Nation**

The emerging popularity of rap music among black American youth marked a period of social tensions in the United States following the Civil Rights and Black Nationalist movements during the 1960s (Keyes 2002, 38-40). To a large extent, it was the mixing of musical traditions from genres like blues, jazz, funk, along with societal transformations that set the stage for New York City’s blossoming hip hop movement that soon spread throughout America’s urban centers and beyond. Importantly, African Americans were not the sole proprietors of hip hop culture, nor were they its only practitioners. As Imani Perry notes, Jamaican and other Caribbean influences had a significant impact on hip hop’s humble beginnings, contributing DJ techniques, outlaw imagery, and reggae elements (2004, 14-15). Latino influences, primarily before the 1980s, were evident in rap’s adoption of certain rhythmic practices which were also significant in fashioning the hybrid nature of this music. In the culturally diverse environment of New York City, hip hop served as an ethnic melting pot bringing together minorities and marginalized communities from different parts of the world. Hip hop culture tends to attract a diverse group of immigrants as well as bilingual speakers whose
multiple cultural backgrounds mesh well with the hybrid composition of hip hop culture (Terkourafi 2010, 5). With these points in mind, to speak about hip hop’s history in the United States necessarily entails a discussion of the multiplicity of different cultures involved in its co-production rather than some exclusively U.S. lineage.

While rap music in the United States can be understood in relation to its multifaceted combination of African American traditions, jazz influences, and Caribbean toasting practices, hip hop culture on a broader spectrum represents a resistant voice that is fundamentally urban and oriented towards the youth generation (Morell and Duncan-Andrade 2002, 88). For precisely this reason, hip hop culture did not remain confined to New York City. Its youth practitioners spread hip hop to other large urban centers throughout the United States and it was not long before countries like France were boasting their own vibrant hip hop communities. In 2013, one would be hard pressed to find a major city where hip hop culture has not contributed to the urban lifestyle and identity of local youth. Hip hop scholar Jeff Chang attests to the global nature of rap’s influence:

Today, the message of hip hop is even transcending borders. From xi ha in China to “hip-life” in Ghana, hip-hop is a lingua franca that binds young people all around the world, all while giving them the chance to alter it with their own national flavor. It is the foundation for global dance competitions, the meeting ground for local progressive activism, even the subject of study at Harvard and the London School of Economics. (2007, 66)

One reason for hip hop’s global resonance with youth culture stems from the fact that the respective elements of hip hop are widely accessible. Hip hop has travelled well across borders and provides a source of creativity available to most urban youth, especially
those from lower economic classes. Composing a rap song, for example, requires little in the way of money, equipment, or resources. One simply needs a pen and pad to write lyrics and a voice to perform. Lyrics are also often composed on the spot and committed to memory, therefore requiring no written medium. In this way, rap has the potential to be more accessible than many art forms, a feature that has certainly contributed to its popularity in the third world countries of the Middle East.

**From the Bronx to Beirut: Hip Hop in the Arab World**

Egypt occupies a unique geographic space at the crux of different continents and cultures. As an African country, it makes up the North Eastern corner of the continent and is linked to Asia by a small land mass known as the Sinai Peninsula. Egypt is an Arab country by virtue of its official state language, Arabic and it is also considered part of the Middle East, a more politically charged term referring to the countries between Morocco in the West and Pakistan in the East. Culturally, Egypt’s southern region displays significant Sudanese influences while in the north the historic city of Alexandria enjoys a relaxed Mediterranean atmosphere, providing a refreshing getaway from the overcrowded streets of the country’s capital, Cairo.

While Egypt is the geographical epicenter of the Middle East, it has long been recognized as the cultural hub as well. In the domains of literature, music, cinema, and other arts Egypt has produced the overwhelming majority of the Arab world’s most prominent figures. To speak of influential Arab writers necessarily entails a discussion of Tāhā Ḥusayn(203,668),(297,715), Yūsuf Idrīs, and Egypt’s 1988 Nobel laureate, Najīb Maḥfūẓ. Arabic music
in the last one hundred years has been dominated by the likes of Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, Umm Kulthūm, and ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Ḥāfīz, all of Egyptian origin. Any book on modern Arabic poetry is likely to dedicate the bulk of its discussion to Egyptian names like Maḥmūd Sāmī al-Bārūdī, ʿAḥmad Shawqī, or the Dīwān Group. All of the aforementioned figures have been, in one way or another, connected to the politics of their time. Many artists also came to prominence during Egypt’s previous revolutions, while expressing, sometimes covertly, the messages of the Egyptian people (Allen 1995, 78-79; Khouri 1971, 9-16; Mahfouz 1972). One would think that with Egypt’s vibrant arts culture, Egyptian rap artists would have been among the first hip hop pioneers in the Arab world. However, according to rappers themselves, hip hop culture in Egypt has had a relatively late start compared to that of other North African countries and the Levant (Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan).

As hip hop’s American popularity continued to expand during the 1980s, other countries were also shaping their own local hip hop cultures, particularly in France where the growing rap community shelled out more than three hundred new albums between 1990 and 1999 (Hassa 2010, 44). France’s colonial past contributed significantly to the cultural flow of hip hop between countries in Africa and the Middle East since many immigrants from Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco travelled to France’s urban centers during the industrial upswing of the 1960s (Helenon 2006, 156). Media and internet communications would have certainly facilitated the promulgation of rap music between France and North Africa but the youth generation of immigrant parents also helped circulate this music as they visited or returned to their African countries of origin.
Rap was not the only element of hip hop culture to take root in North Africa. As Joshua Asen’s 2007 documentary on Moroccan hip hop attests, all aspects of the larger culture gained momentum including dance, art, music production, fashion, and language styles. Asen’s film also depicts the growing number of fans and live concerts in cities around Morocco where marginalized rap groups started gaining visibility and a greater degree of social acceptance. Within the last several years Algeria and, in particular, Tunisia have boasted hundreds of popular rap artists such as Intik and El Général respectively, both of whom engage with sociopolitical topics in their lyrics (Helenon 2006, 161). Basel Abbas’ study on Arabic hip hop alludes to the politically charged nature of Algerian rap indicating that, for Intik specifically, their music reflected Algeria’s youth rebellion of 1988 which is believed to have contributed to the disintegration of the Algerian government’s single-party system (2005, 18). El Général is a more recent addition to the Tunisian rap community but no less important than his predecessors. He has been hailed by many as a major catalyst for the 2011 Tunisian revolution after releasing his song “Rayyes Lebled” (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IeGlJ7OouR0) which exposed and criticized the country’s poverty, police brutality, and government corruption (Nouri 2011). Naturally, such a politically candid song was not well received by Tunisia’s president and leaders, which is what probably led to his swift arrest. However, the song had already become the revolutionary “anthem” of the country within a few days and El Général was released shortly after his detention.
Despite the growing presence of hip hop culture in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco during the 1990s, Egypt’s hip hop phenomenon was yet to arrive. Countries to the east of Egypt became home to numerous thriving hip hop communities while areas to the west of Egypt were also churning out gifted Arab MCs. Just as America’s early hip hop culture evolved in an atmosphere of political and racial tensions, so too did Palestinian hip hop emerge from an environment of significant social adversity. Jackie Salloum’s 2007 documentary *Slingshot Hip Hop* follows several up-and-coming Palestinian rap groups as they struggle to find outlets for creative expression under Israeli occupation. Among the young rap groups in Salloum’s film was the now popular trio DAM, formed in 1998 with front man Tāmir al-Naffār, the self-proclaimed first Arabic-language rapper. Whether he was, in fact, the first is debatable given that the underground (non-commercialized) nature of many rap groups poses certain difficulties in pinpointing when artists began rapping, releasing songs, or recording albums. Few would argue that DAM was one of the first and most popular rap groups in the Arab world, writing lyrics about the daily struggles of life in Palestine that local youth could relate to. DAM was also one of the early Arab rap groups engaging in discourses of authenticity and hybridity, both complex terms that I work to unpack in chapter three (for an in-depth discussion of DAM’s music, see Usama Kahf’s 2007 essay).

One scene of *Slingshot Hip Hop* follows Tamir al-Naffar into his bedroom where he guides a mini-tour of his rap CD collection that features most of American hip hop’s canonical artists such as Tupac, Mos Def, Nas, Mobb Deep, and Wu Tang Clan. His music repertoire clearly demonstrates a knowledge of hip hop’s early pioneers. He moves
across the room to a shelf on the wall scattered with books of different shapes and sizes. Al-Naffar rattles off a list of the book titles, all from prominent Arab writers like Edward Sa‘îd, Maḥmūd Darwīsh, Nizār Qabbānī, and Hanān al-Sheikh. Al-Naffar seems to sense the link he is making between rappers and writers and addresses the camera in Arabic explaining, “let me break down DAM for you. DAM is 30 percent hip hop music, 30 percent literature, and 40 percent this,” at which point he turns to the adjacent window and points to the city outside. Here, al-Naffar attempts to explain the mixture of both American and Arab/Palestinian culture that comes together in his music. As I discuss later, Egyptian hip hop music features this same negotiation of identity and authenticity in which rappers strive to acknowledge America’s early contributions to hip hop culture while also injecting their own local culture(s) and literary forms into the art.

Usama Kahf’s 2007 essay analyzes assertions of authenticity in Palestinian hip hop, arguing that artists claim legitimacy by rapping about social problems in their community, relating to a shared sense of suffering, and employing rap as a form of resistance (362). He touches on the idea that Palestinian rappers reconcile a multiplicity of cultures in order to, on one hand, illustrate their commitment to local Palestinian issues and cultural values while, on the other, assert connections between America’s original rappers and themselves. Kahf elaborates saying:

These indigenous hip hop artists recognize the origins of hip hop in African-American culture, but the common experience of being oppressed that they share with blacks in the west inspires them to break the musical norms of their societies and give birth to a new hybrid genre of music. (Kahf 2007, 359)
This hybrid genre is one that uses western beats as the musical foundation for many songs but then inserts layers of eastern instruments, languages, and themes to bring hip hop into the local sphere. While Kahf’s contributions to the study of Arabic hip hop are significant, his reliance on solely textual sources leads him to several suspect conclusions, among them his claim that Palestinian rappers reject commercial pop music as a part of Arab culture (ibid., 381). My own research suggests that many Arab rappers appreciate the music of certain popular and classical singers and rely heavily on their music for sampling, borrowing clips from artists like Umm Kulthum, whose patriotic songs were played frequently on the radio around the time of the 1952 revolution (Maḥallāwī 2001, 107-111). This intertextuality allows them to fashion a patchwork of different voices in their music while also paying homage to the leading Arab musicians of previous decades. Based on my own interviews with Egyptian rappers, it is not necessarily the pop singers themselves with whom rappers take issue but rather, the ubiquitous love themes of habibi (romance) music that disengage with social and cultural issues arising in the country. Kahf is, therefore, perhaps too severe in some of his assertions but his study represents an invaluable step towards more academic approaches to hip hop in the region.

Palestinian rap has continued to progress both musically and lyrically in recent years with new groups like Ramallah Underground and British-born rhymer Shadia Mansour. As these artists develop local Palestinian hip hop communities they also work to initiate relationships with other rappers in the Levant region. The late 1990s saw Lebanese rappers come to the forefront of hip hop activity with artists Eslam Jawwad,
Ebin Foulén, and Rayess Bek, the last of whom released a number of albums both independently and with the EMI label (Abbas 2005, 27). According to his personal website, Rayess Bek was particularly active during the last decade as he participated in a variety of educational workshops and musical collaborations with artists in Lebanon and around the world. Rayess Bek is, in some ways, representative of many Lebanese youth who grow up in the worlds of both French and Arab culture. As was the case in North Africa, the musical influences arriving via France likely spurred the growing hip hop movement in cities like Beirut where rap groups, concerts, and clubs now thrive in 2013. Rayess Bek’s collaborations with other artists in Palestine, Morocco, and France also clearly illustrate hip hop’s transnational flow throughout the Middle East.

The intricate web of hip hop connections in the Levant has given birth to a passionate group of artists collaborating, often via internet, to support each other’s local hip hop activities and the broader Arab hip hop community. Consider one example of hip hop’s intertwining synapses. Lebanese rapper el-Rass recorded a 2012 song with Jordanian rapper el-Fara3i and el-Fara3i performed with Egypt’s Deeb at a concert in Cairo in 2011. Deeb recorded several tracks with Beirut native Edd, who is known to collaborate with DJ Lethal Skillz in Lebanon. Lethal Skillz produced a track for Iraqi rapper The Narcicyst who recorded songs with DAM from Palestine. This lineage could be traced to other Arab artists for days and days. With the accessibility of internet resources and recording equipment most Arab rappers do not have to meet in the same physical location to record a song together, a fact that has facilitated a multitude of collaboration projects.
Hip hop culture provides a creative outlet for youth to speak about issues that often plague cities such as poverty, drug abuse, gang violence, and youth unemployment. Lebanon’s brutal civil war and the Israeli occupation of Palestine provided, in some ways, the ideal environment for hip hop to flourish. In the West, Morocco, Libya, and Algeria faced similar issues but with the added French factor always playing a part in the cultural flow of hip hop between North Africa and its former colonial occupiers. As subsequent chapters will attest, Egyptian society has suffered its share of poverty, unemployment, and foreign occupation but it never experienced the same French influence or Israeli tyranny that countries in the Maghreb and Levant did, a fact which I suggest has led to the relatively late beginnings of hip hop culture in the country. The following chapter will explore the genesis of Egyptian hip hop culture and its development until the January 25th revolution of 2011.
Chapter 2: The Seeds of Egyptian Hip Hop

This chapter explores the evolution of rap music in Egypt following its spread throughout much of the Arab world during the 1990s. It examines previous scholarship on Egyptian hip hop and a number of key rap groups (Asfalt, Arabian Knightz, and Y-Crew) that pushed this genre forward in its initial years. This section outlines some of Egyptian rap’s growing visibility facilitated by television, album recordings, and concert performances. It also considers the frequently overlooked issue of inter-group tensions that exist between rappers and rap groups in Egypt’s hip hop community.

As the one of the first scholarly discussions of Egyptian rap, Angela William’s 2010 study was a pioneering step towards bringing this relatively unknown hip hop culture into the spotlight. Her work was even more influential when considering the time period and scholarly environment in which it was written. With most academic attention dedicated to rap in the United States, France, and other European countries, Egypt was little more than a blip on the radar of most hip hop scholars. Even discussions of hip hop in the Arab world more generally were rare in academic literature, mainly analyzing France’s musical influence on the Maghreb region (Hassa 2010; Helenon 2006; Osumare 2005). Importantly, William’s analysis of the linguistic practices in Egyptian rap was published in 2010 as a chapter in Marina Terkourafi’s book *The Languages of Global Hip Hop*, therefore predating Egypt’s 2011 revolution. This is significant given that Williams
did not have access to many rap songs, artist interviews, and live concerts that surfaced during the January 25th revolution. Her study would also not have been able to exploit the growing popularity that Egyptian hip hop received in the media. Her final remarks in the chapter were, in some ways, anticipatory of things to come in the Egyptian hip hop community when she asserted that Egyptian youth would continue to “shape the face of global hip hop” (Williams 2010, 93), a prediction that has been increasingly realized as these rappers undertake collaboration projects with artists in other cities, countries, and continents. The Arabian Knightz’s 2012 album, *Uknighted State of Arabia*, is a prime example of this collaborative element.

Basel Abbas’ 2005 analysis of Arabic hip hop briefly addresses Egypt’s music scene speaking mostly about the rap trio MTM, who were almost unanimously regarded as Egypt’s first rap group by all hip hop artists that I spoke with in the cities of Cairo, Alexandria, and Mansoura. Sherin Rizk’s study of Egyptian university students also cites MTM as a major influence on youth language practices in the early 2000s (Rizk 2007, 294). Compared with other “underground” Egyptian groups, MTM’s relatively high media exposure allowed their music to reach many young Egyptians who adopted some of the slang expressions used in the group’s rap songs. Despite their initial popularity, MTM faded out of the Egyptian rap scene, perhaps because most of their songs revolved around light-hearted party themes with titles like “My Mom is Traveling” and “My Phone is Ringing”, which were likely perceived as somewhat trite since rappers began to focus their lyrics more and more on larger sociopolitical messages. At least one member of MTM still seems to be active in 2013 participating in an ongoing collaboration project.
between rappers known as the Egyptian Hip Hop Union. This project notwithstanding, MTM essentially stopped producing music, rendering parts of Abbas’ and Williams’ discussion somewhat outdated, if perhaps only important for their historical record of a now defunct group.

Although William’s study marks the first in-depth academic approach to Egyptian rap, the elements of hip hop culture existed in the large urban centers of Cairo and Alexandria for the greater part of a decade. Rizk asserts that rap appeared in Egypt much later than it did in the United States, Europe, and African countries like Senegal and Algeria, indicating that a small hip hop movement began with the release of several popular MTM songs in 2002 and 2003 (Rizk 2007, 294). Both Abbas and Williams also point to 2003 as MTM’s breakthrough into the music industry with the latter noting that “hip hop in Egypt is a fairly recent cultural phenomenon that has been steadily on the rise for the past five years,” which would place the beginning of this period around 2005 (Williams 2010, 70). The Egyptian hip hop artists featured in my 2012 documentary entitled Egyptian Underground (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3dyWezTkSo) also suggest that rap music experienced its first major push in Egypt with MTM, as noted here by DJ Fat Sam, a prominent music producer based in Cairo:

العبة .. بدأت بقالها حوالي من أول الفين مثلأ أو الفين واثنين في مصر. فكان بدءها كان أول كلام أم تي أم الناس دي دخلت وعملت أول "موفيننت" لrab في مصر.
The “game” . . . began around 2000 or 2002 in Egypt. I’m just talking about Egypt. The first thing whatsoever was a group called MTM. These people came in and started the first movement for rap in Egypt. (Mangialardi 2012)

One rapper from the popular Egyptian rap duo known as Asfalt also maintains the possibility that, prior to MTM’s commercial success, many Egyptians were already rapping but remained unknown since they lacked the media visibility that MTM enjoyed during their heyday. My documentary builds on Williams’ textual analysis of Egyptian hip hop by providing in-depth interviews with the rap artists she discusses in her 2010 chapter, namely Asfalt, Arabian Knightz, and Y-Crew. Williams suggests that these three groups, along with MTM, are the pioneers of Egyptian rap music given their participation in live concerts and the genre’s relatively new status (Williams 2010, 71). It is undeniable that other rappers also contributed to the genesis and development of Egyptian rap music during the last decade however, Williams seems to consider these four groups to be the most influential musically and linguistically, an idea that my research generally supports.

When I spoke with Egyptian DJs, breakdancers, and lesser-known rappers, almost all alluded to one or more of these four groups when talking about the birth of hip hop culture in the country. Even some young Egyptians with no relation to the hip hop community had heard, or heard of, MTM and Asfalt which indicates that these groups are gaining notoriety even outside of the rap listenership. Additional artist profiles for MTM, Asfalt, Arabian Knightz, and Y-Crew can be found in the aforementioned studies on Egyptian hip hop.
Egyptian Hip Hop Spreads its Roots

Egypt’s hip hop scene, while steadily increasing in both fans and practitioners, has been a tight-knit community since its early days and in all branches of hip hop culture (rapping, DJing, breakdancing, graffiti). During my interview with rapper Omar Boflot, the winner of MTV Arabia’s Season 1 talent show, he stated that the elements of hip hop culture are often interconnected in Egypt. He cited several examples including concert collaborations between breakdancers and rappers as well as the presence of graffiti art featuring the names of Egyptian rap groups (O. Boflot, personal communication, June 25, 2011). As the rap community was usually a marginalized group in Egyptian society, artists banded together for support and collaborations in the beginning. However, as the number of rappers and other hip hop artists continued to grow over time the tactic of power in numbers was not as crucial as it once was in the early 2000s. A number of today’s most active and prominent Egyptian rap groups branched out from a single lineage of artists in the early 2000s. At that time, several friends formed a group called Maddskillz and wrote most of their lyrics in English due to the general lack of Arabic rap models at that time (Anderson 2013; Mangialardi 2012). Around 2004, Ibrahim split from the group to form Asfalt while another member Karim left Maddskillz to form his own project, Arabian Knightz. For a time, Asfalt was a four-man operation consisting of Ibrahim, Gad, Yasser, and Deeb before the latter two members left the group in 2007 due to artistic differences and formed their own rap duo known as Wight Nazar (Arabic for Point of View) (Fariborz 2011). Wight Nazar recorded a number of songs together but eventually the two artists parted ways to pursue solo careers. Almost all of the rappers
cited above continue to be active concert performers and recording artists in Egypt, also filming music videos and, in the case of Arabian Knightz, releasing albums through an independent label entitled Arab League Records. Asfalt was recently contracted by the Egyptian phone company Mobinil to perform a series of concerts in Cairo. The Arabian Knightz are currently touring Denmark putting on workshops and rapping at a number of shows. And Deeb just finished a concert with rappers Shadia Mansour and El Général at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York.

While the aforementioned artists were based in Cairo, another pioneering group of rappers was formed in Alexandria in 2001, later gaining much media spotlight due to front man Omar Boflot’s success as winner of MTV Arabia’s Season 1 talent competition (Williams 2010, 71). I met Boflot for an interview at his Cairo home in 2011 to talk about his early rap career and the growing hip hop culture in Egypt. Although Boflot is Egyptian, he lived in Ghana for a number of years after relocating for his father’s work. It was in Ghana that he began performing his favorite rap songs at local talent shows around 1995. When the family moved back to Egypt in 1998 after six years in Ghana, Boflot met the Algerian-Egyptian rapper Yassin Zahran from the group Alien X and formed Y-Crew. Originally, the two composed their lyrics in English and French but later switched to Arabic after hearing the popular group MTM (O. Boflot, personal communication, June 25, 2011). Y-Crew gained increasing respect within the Egyptian rap scene, especially following Omar Boflot’s triumph at the aforementioned MTV Arabia competition.
“Beefs”

According to Boflot, during his rap career he also became acquainted with members of Asfalt and the Arabian Knightz, which, together, represent three of Egypt’s most popular and influential hip hop acts (Mangialardi 2012). Having interviewed members of each group, I quickly learned that these three rap crews often did not get along. During our interviews, all three groups acknowledged the others as critical players in the formation of Egypt’s rap scene and lauded each others’ talents. However, this brief praise was usually followed by an allusion to some tensions between them. It was sometimes as little as “We don’t see eye to eye on things anymore” with no elaboration. While rappers broached this topic during our interviews, the inter-group issue was also obvious in a number of songs posted online in which rappers attempted to slander the reputation of other groups, competing in a kind of verbal one-upmanship. Omar Boflot and MC Amin offer some particularly colorful lyrical exchanges in songs they released on Youtube. Two of Egypt’s more “gangsta” rappers, Kordy and Khalifa, also produced a number of “beef” videos with views numbering in the tens of thousands. These online responses formed what many Egyptian artists referred to as “beefs,” which did not seem to have an Arabic term but maintained the same English meaning. “Beefs” in the American hip hop community refer to conflicts between different rappers or crews, one of the most famous “beefs” being the East Coast-West Coast rap rivalry of the 1990s (Perry 2004, 84).

These conflicts between artists may point to the diverse composition of Egypt’s rap community while it tries to establish an image and identity at this fairly early stage of
existence. I would suggest that these are the growing pains of a community still in its infancy. As rap and the other elements of hip hop culture continue to permeate Egyptian society, its youth practitioners must negotiate loyalty to the local culture while establishing positions relative to Western hip hop and the global hip hop community, an issue which has been discussed at length in numerous hip hop studies (Alim et al. 2009; Baker 2005; Chang 2007; Kahf 2007; Soloman 2005; Terkourafi et al. 2010). However, these “beefs” could also be understood as a sign of maturity. When only a handful of Egyptians were rapping in the early 2000s there was a greater incentive to unite and also less diversity among artists. As more Egyptians began rapping they split off into different groups, each with different conceptions of what it means to be “real” or “Egyptian hip hop.” Egypt is now home to several sub-genres of hip hop music: conscious rap, gangsta rap, and party rap, none of which is inherently better or worse than the other but simply different in terms of its audience and themes. Many of the “beefs” in Egyptian rap occur when the values of one artist diverge from those of another which, in turn, can produce the ubiquitous discourses of “realness.” This concept has been critical for rappers since the birth of hip hop culture in New York City and, in the case of Egypt, these discourses came to prominence around the time of the revolution as many rappers composed songs that supported revolutionary activity and criticized the Egyptian government and politics. Some artists consciously abstained from releasing songs about the revolution around the time of the revolution as they did not want to be accused of exploiting Egypt’s hardships for popularity or financial gain. Other artists chose to record and release songs during the revolution and were criticized by the rap community for allegedly leaching off of the
historical moment or for lying about their participation in protests and demonstrations. Much of these issues are bound in notions of “realness” which I explore further in the next chapter.
Chapter 3: Authenticity, Authorship, and Identity

This chapter examines hip hop music at the beginning of the January 25th revolution. Specifically, it looks at the ways in which identity is negotiated through specific discourses in the Egyptian hip hop community that frame authenticity in historical and cultural contexts. These discourses also revolve around sets of perceived binaries (East/West, past/present, local/global). Drawing on concepts of literary criticism and interviews with Egyptian artists I consider the incentives and implications of participating in such discourse for Egyptian rappers and how these artists engage with conceptions of authorship through hip hop. With the primary questions of my thesis in mind, this chapter shows how rap music reveals much about the ongoing transformations in Egypt and also depicts the ways in which Egyptian youth are reflecting on such critical changes in their country through music.

Digging up Roots

It was late afternoon by the time I arrived at Karim’s apartment in Cairo where we had agreed to meet for our interview. Having conducted interviews with a number of Egyptian hip hop artists in July, 2011 I was eventually put in contact with one of Egypt’s most prominent underground rappers who, upon my arrival, ushered me into his parents’ home. I was curious about Karim’s early hip hop years and asked how he first became
interested in rap music. His response: “As a kid I was reading a lot as well, so I kind of made sense that, you know, rap is rhythm and poetry and poetry is an Arab invention from pre-Islamic era” (Mangialardi 2012). Karim had offered two seemingly independent ideas but the overarching message was clear - namely, that rap was somehow linked to early Arab poets. While the “rhythm and poetry” concept was not unfamiliar, I was intrigued by the notion of a discourse that asserted hip hop’s (perceived) ancient Arabian origins. As if sensing my interest, Karim elaborated:

What we did is just bring poetry back to the Middle East in a form that’s been updated in America . . . now they do it to music and they call it rap. We brought it back to its original form and we’re doing it how the original poets used to do it back in the day. They used to be critical so we’re doing that. We’re being very critical. (ibid.)

Even more fascinating than Karim’s proposal of such ancestral links was the fact that similar sentiments were echoed in my subsequent interviews with Egyptian rappers throughout the summer of 2011. Notwithstanding the validity of such claims to rap music’s pre-Islamic heritage, the discourse itself signals the critical role that identity plays for artists who seek realness, an admittedly complex term, within the origins of their poetic tradition and its earliest practitioners.

As discussed in chapter two, Arabic hip hop first emerged during the late 1990s as many rappers across the Arab world began honing their skills in lyrical composition and music production (Kahf 2007). Uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa served as the inspiration for many Arab rappers to critique the local social, political, and cultural issues within their community. However, the localization of themes, instrumentation, and linguistic codes is in constant conversation with the global resonances of hip hop culture.
which serve to obscure geographical boundaries and create discourses where a multiplicity of identities collide.

(Re)defining Notions of Authorship

The transnational dialogue within hip hop culture is what grants rap music its colorful patchwork of voices. Imani Perry comments on the diverse nature of hip hop’s composition saying:

Hybridity in rap takes place on a cultural plane, and the terms on which it exists depend on that plane. The moments at which nonblack American cultural influences take root in hip hop often occur at the crossroads of sorts, at which the aesthetics of two cultures are in concert with one another . . . (Perry 2004, 14)

She builds upon this idea later stating:

[O]ne of the challenges resulting from the fact that hybridity emerges at points of aesthetic sympathy or compatibility is that it leads to some strange claims of ownership. (ibid., 15)

What Perry refers to as “ownership” resonates in many ways with the concept of authorship, a term which has developed a variety of meanings for literary critics over time. With the intermingling of multiple cultures and multiple identities how does a rapper, or any artist, negotiate conceptions of authorship? How do rappers, as authors of texts, communicate with their audiences, the “readers” of those texts? Where does the author’s task end and the audience’s task begin in the consumption of a text? Is the author anything more than a vessel for transmitting ideas and emotions to an audience? Can a given text exhibit multiple authors, multiple voices, or is authorship always limited to a
single entity? The hybrid composition of rap is, in fact, often regarded as a source of pride. Mixing numerous sounds, styles, and “authors” exhibits both complexity and skill.

Molly Nesbit elaborates on the variable definitions of authorship throughout French history, touching on the development of copyright laws aimed at protecting the work of writers, photographers, translators, architects, cinematographers, puppeteers, advertisers, and an array of other figures whose work “reflected personality” (1987, 249). Notably, the term “author” under French law was not endowed with connotations of artistic genius and was not limited to specific professions as long as the work exhibited certain human, rather than mechanical, qualities. French law transformed with the times or, rather, with the technology of the times to include progressively more cultural domains. With fields like cinema, audiovisual production, and software programming, the meaning of authorship became more complex as teams of laborers contribute varying degrees of input to a product. In such cases, the author participates in an intricate process of co-production with a network of individuals. As rap music demonstrates (and Egyptian rap in particular), technology has complicated the ways in which we conceptualize authorship/artist-ship with the increasingly interconnected degree of communication between rappers, sound engineers, video editors, and others who co-produce a single work through the internet.
Composing across Time and Space

The concept of authorship entails a temporal element in which authors engage in a dialogue with their predecessors. While exhibiting individuality through their work, authors simultaneously invoke those who preceded them and who necessarily leave their mark on them. This dialogue between past and present fashions something new. The author, or artist, as an individual cannot be understood without interpreting his/her identity in relation to those artists who came before him/her, with whose work the author will inevitably be compared. T.S. Eliot asserted that “[n]o poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead” (1995, 74).

Here, I adopt Eliot’s essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” as a point of departure for investigating concepts of authorship, identity, and discursive practices within the Egyptian hip hop community. The following analysis is concerned in the first place with the ways in which Egyptian rappers invoke their predecessors in fashioning identities. These predecessors may be American, Egyptian, pre-Islamic, revolutionary, and so on. This section is also concerned with the incentives and implications of participating in such a discourse. Through literature, or in this case, rap, I suggest that certain perceived binaries such as East and West, past and present, are forced to interact and through this process become blurred. Hip hop discourses produce a form of hybrid authorship, one forged from a multiplicity of authors who are at once Eastern and Western, past and present, local and global. By looking at the dialogue between cultures
we can see how the artist is not simply a one dimensional figure but rather, an amalgamation of different voices, motivations, and histories. I use Eliot’s text to consider identity, or personality, in the Egyptian hip hop context as it is constructed through an awareness of the past within the present. This analysis also employs Egyptian hip hop texts to dispute Eliot’s assertions regarding the impersonality of the author in poetry.

**Literature or Lack-thereof**

As Eliot discusses poetry and literature it may come as a surprise that rap music, and Egyptian rap music nonetheless, has entered the conversation. Yet, the intrinsic value of rap texts is no more or less than any other poem, novel, or play. Hip hop, from a lyrical and discursive standpoint, is capable of being analyzed and can also be used to scrutinize other texts. This poses several questions. Can we call rap texts literature? How do we define literature? And perhaps more significantly, who defines literature?

In her essay on Middle Eastern folk narrative, Sabra Webber indicates that folk literature is excluded from the institutional literary canon despite the fact that it merits just as much attention and analysis as works in the establishment. Folk literature, as Webber points out, is marginalized, “either because it is produced by people outside the institutions of literary study, or in an excluded language (colloquial Arabic, to use an Arab-world example), or in the wrong medium (e.g., oral as opposed to written)” among other criteria (1993, 36). I believe a similar point could be made for Arabic rap, which is produced predominantly by youth in the Egyptian Arabic dialect and performed orally among friends or in concerts (although home recording studios have become
Arabic rap lyrics, complete with their intricate rhyme patterns, metaphors, and rhythmic styles, share much in common with Arabic poetry but, compared with classical verse, teachers, scholars, and other institutional figures would likely view rap as significantly inferior. Especially where language is concerned, classical Arabic is highly favored in institutional literature, with many state prizes only offered to those works written in the prestigious classical variety (Badawi 1999, 21).

In his book on literary theory, Terry Eagleton explains in no uncertain terms that “[t]o speak of ‘literature and ideology’ as two separate phenomena which can be interrelated is. . . in one sense quite unnecessary. Literature, in the meaning of the word we have inherited, is an ideology. It has the most intimate relations to questions of social power” (1983, 19). What qualifies as literature is whatever successfully gains acceptability by the institution and is deemed worthy of critical examination. Eagleton notes the dilemma this poses for literary criticism which necessarily identifies certain texts as “literature” despite the fact that there is no incentive to limit analysis to such texts in the first place. A text may be adopted into the literary canon for any number of reasons but they are in no way accidental. Eagleton’s concluding remarks mirror his initial statements when he says:

Shakespeare was not great literature lying conveniently at hand, which the literary institution then happily discovered: he is great literature because the institution constitutes him as such. This does not mean that he is not ‘really’ great literature - that is just a matter of people’s opinions about him - because there is no such thing as literature which is ‘really’ great, or ‘really’ anything, independently of the ways in which that writing is treated within specific forms of social and institutional life” (Ibid., 176).
With this in mind, I believe hip hop to be a worthy site of investigation. What has separated hip hop from such literary conversations in the past is its lack of ideological support from the institution. However, these attitudes are changing with the rise of scholarly books, conferences, and journals dedicated to exploring the literary and poetic elements of hip hop music.

**Hip Hop and Hybridity**

Arguably the most important concept within the entirety of hip hop culture is that of authenticity (Terkourafi 2010, 6). Based on my experiences in the Arabic hip hop community, rappers tend to use the adjective ḥaqqīqī (real/truthful) and the noun al-ḥaqīqa (reality/truth) in ways that overlap with terms like “authentic/authenticity” in hip hop culture. These are chameleon terms that take on shades of meaning depending on when, where, and how they are used. More generally, notions of authenticity may shift throughout time so what was considered authentic in 1990 may have been redefined in 2013 based on transforming media, technologies, clothing styles, and especially internet communication. For this reason, “realness” requires constant unpacking within hip hop texts to understand how the term functions in a given context.

While establishing definitions for these terms may prove difficult, certain overarching distinctions can be gleaned from analysis of hip hop texts. Terkourafi asserts that authenticity in hip hop music is substantiated by foregrounding either a) the local or b) the global (2010, 10). Invoking the former involves concentrating on local issues, languages/registers, and styles to form identity and create multiple hip hop cultures.
Seeking authenticity through the global level means recognizing one international hip hop culture with worldly origins. Academic research on hip hop outside of the United States has begun to examine the latter approach more which interrogates the inherent links between hip hop and indigenous cultures (Alim 2009; Omoniyi 2009; Osumare 2005; Tauzin 2007; Tsujimura and Davis 2009; Williams 2010). Alastair Pennycook and Tony Mitchell, for example, discuss the ways in which some Australian hip hop artists incorporate elements from traditional Maori war dances to interweave indigenous elements into hip hop culture. In their 2009 essay, Pennycook and Mitchell state that:

[i]t is not so much the case that Hip Hop merely takes on local characteristics, but rather that *it has always been local*. . . U.S. Hip Hop is no longer the host culture, but Hip Hop is seen as having a direct link back to traditional ways of singing, dancing, and telling stories . . . [O]ral traditions of storytelling and poetry stretching back thousands of years have incorporated Hip Hop into their cultures rather than the other way around. (30)

Nostalgia in rap music can be used to summon the multiple histories of hip hop on both local and global planes. Egyptian rappers, as I demonstrate later, may posit the local nature of hip hop by citing their ancestral ties to pre-Islamic poets while also paying homage to the American founders of hip hop through language practices, clothing styles, and musical themes. Imani Perry elaborates on this idea writing:

The old school is consistently celebrated in hip hop . . . [a]s the commodification and commercialization that comes along with mainstream appeal threatens notions of community and authenticity in hip hop, nostalgia becomes an authenticating device. Good MCs and DJs not only make the history present but they also enmesh it in the new entity created by the
given song, to be enjoyed in a distinct way. Substandard hip hop songs, which have inundated the market, simply consist of rhymes over the music of other artists, but excellent ones take the flavor of an earlier song and add it to the stew, creating something new and special with the old. (2004, 55)

I am cautious about subscribing to Perry’s language regarding “substandard” hip hop songs, although it is, in some ways, uncanny how closely her discussion of past and present parallels the ideas of Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Consider his discussion of poetic predecessors when he says:

[tradition] involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past but of its presence: the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that . . . the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. (1983, 74)

While readers may strive to expose elements of the poet’s work which set him apart from all others, Eliot contends that the finest features of a poet’s work are often those in which his predecessors reveal themselves most visibly. The poet does not try to escape his ancestors or simply ignore them. They are, in a sense, his greatest asset. The hip hop artist functions under the same historical framework that necessarily juxtaposes him and his predecessors. His recognition of the past may emerge in a number of ways. For example, a rapper indexes the pastness of his art through lyrics, rhythms, rhyme structures, imagery, metaphor, intonation, and call-response tropes (Perry 2004, 54-55). Understanding the frequently subtle nature of a rapper’s references can require a
considerable amount of background knowledge on the part of the listener/audience. Having an acute appreciation of the elements involved in the production of such rap texts is necessary for analyzing the discursive practices of rappers, which I look at here using Egyptian hip hop music as a point of departure.

**Rebelling Through Rhymes in Egypt**

While the Egyptian revolution of 2011 is often regarded as “ending” after eighteen days of mass demonstrations, revolutionary activity in the country has unfolded more like an open-ended narrative with ongoing repercussions, especially given the resurgence of demonstrations against Egypt’s newly elected president Muhammad Morsi. The revolutionary mindset that blossomed in Cairo’s Tahrir Square had existed among Egyptians long before the eighteen days of protests ever began (Dabashi 2012, 17-18). Egyptian rappers were among the many engaged in revolutionary discourse during this time, even releasing political songs before the eruption of protests and police clashes (see Arabian Knightz, Deeb, MC Amin). The 1990s and early 2000s witnessed the emergence of Arabic rappers in a number of countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa (Abbas 2005). However, a new sub-genre of revolutionary rap has come to prominence during the Arab Spring uprisings that comments specifically on political and social issues in the region. Unemployment, police brutality, government corruption, and increased costs of living now occupy the major themes in Egyptian rap lyrics.

An Egyptian rap group by the name of Arabian Knightz recorded the song “Rebel” ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z696QHAbMIA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z696QHAbMIA)) during the first days of
demonstrations in January 2011 however, the track was not leaked online until after the Egyptian government cut off nearly all internet and telecommunication services in an attempt to immobilize protest plans (Arabianknightztv 2011). Arabian Knightz is composed of three rappers - Rush, Sphinx, and E-Money - who employ a mixture of English, Egyptian Arabic, and Modern Standard Arabic in their songs, a linguistic feature which, according to Angela Williams, allows the group to remain local while simultaneously addressing a potential English-speaking listenership (2010, 71). Using multilingualism, sampling techniques, and global co-production, their song “Rebel” is the quintessential example of hip hop’s hybrid nature. This song opens with a sound clip from another song, then proceeds with one verse in Arabic written by rapper Rush and a second verse in English by Sphinx.

The opening sample is borrowed from Lauryn Hill’s 2002 song “I Find it Hard to Say” from which the Arabian Knightz take several guitar and vocal clips and reassemble them to create the primary melodic motif of the song. Hill’s lyrics, “are you satisfied” and “rebel,” are repeated between rap verses. Lauryn Hill was successful in the American hip hop industry not only for her singing abilities but also for her rap skills in a prominent group known as the Fugees (Perry 2004, 107). The positioning of this sound clip in the Arabian Knightz song “Rebel” is indicative of the ways in which Egyptian rappers invoke their hip hop predecessors and, in this case, those of the United States. What is striking from a musical perspective is that this Egyptian rap song begins by referencing an American rap artist. Such an introduction serves to index America’s foundational
contributions within hip hop history while also prioritizing the mixed composition of hip hop culture.

In a 2012 interview, Arabian Knightz member Sphinx said that the beat for “Rebel” was given to him by a German music producer known as Iron Curtain eight months prior to the Egyptian revolution (Alofoq 2012). Germany has been influential for hip hop communities in other countries like Turkey and was, for many years, home to one of the largest breakdancing competitions in the world known as Battle of the Year (Lee 2008; Solomon 2005). That “Rebel” was composed as a joint production between both German and Egyptian artists demonstrates the cross-cultural potential of rap music which is further exemplified by the fact that the song draws significantly from the work of an American hip hop artist. Before the first lyrics of the song are heard, a complex network of global referencing is already taking place, much of which is probably unknown to the listenership. The Arabian Knightz (Egypt) provide the lyrics, Iron Curtain (Germany) constructs the instrumental, while Lauryn Hill (U.S.A.) supplies the melodic and thematic elements for “Rebel.”

**Blurring Binaries**

In the introduction to this section I suggested that certain binaries are broken down through the process of identity negotiation and hip hop discourses. However, this idea is perhaps more accurately expressed by saying that such binaries blend together to form a single hybrid entity. “Rebel” is a case in which conceptions of East and West cannot be easily maintained. To assign authorship individually to the Arabian Knightz,
Iron Curtain, or Lauryn Hill would necessarily undermine the complexity of the artistic process, the interconnectedness of multiple cultures, and hip hop’s historic emergence in the United States. The idea of East and West as two separate spaces cannot sustain itself as different voices come into contact. The result is a blurring of the two entities. When Sphinx was asked about how Arabian Knightz dealt with accusations of becoming “too Westernized,” he contended that:

what [some people] forget is that there were people in Saudi Arabia 1,400 years ago beating on drums and battling each other with poetry even before Islam. That's hip-hop. Yes, it developed in America before it became hip-hop itself, but it's international . . . All cultures have already started to merge together by now; there's no single culture anymore in any one place. And I think that's how it should be, you know? There should be a give and take and we should be using culture to learn from each other. (Billet 2012)

In his discussion of East vs. West, Sphinx also alludes to the coalescence of another binary - that of the local versus the global in hip hop. He notes that the elements of hip hop culture have not been confined to a single location. Rapping, breakdancing, and graffiti art quickly spread to other countries after emerging in the Bronx and developed an international appeal. While acknowledging the global characteristic of hip hop, Sphinx also defends the local by mentioning that poets in the jāhiliyya (pre-Islamic) period were developing rhyme styles and advanced metrical rhythms over music long before the word “hip hop” even existed. In fact, certain elements of rap have long constituted a part of oral traditions throughout Africa. The improvised freestyle battles of rap closely parallel Berber poetry practices in Morocco which, as Jeanette Harries explains, are primarily an oral and performance-based art where there is always an element of opposition. In one
form of Berber poetry, two groups compose verse and alternate recitations between stanzas. Other poetry performances feature poets from rival tribes who trade insulting stanzas against the other in a battle of “ad hoc” poetry (Harries 1977, 176-177). Sphinx draws on such African oral traditions, specifically ancient Arabic poetry, and relates them to modern rap with the goal of creating something new; an art that incorporates both the traditional and the modern. Sphinx’s stance is not entirely global, nor is it altogether local. He is vying for both views in a unified sense by not rejecting the local or global in the construction of hip hop identity. But why take such a stance? What do artists gain by engaging in this kind of discourse?

In hip hop culture, authenticity is inherently tied to the construction of one’s identity. According to Marina Terkourafi “[e]stablishing the authenticity of the genre . . . amounts to a gesture of emancipation from these multiple lineages, and a declaration of one’s own unique identity and right to exist as an independent new entity” (2010, 7). Hip hop culture sprang from New York City’s urban environment and since its inception has been affiliated with “the streets,” a symbolic space tied to notions of realness. To be “real” can entail a number of things in the hip hop community. Often times the “real” is that which is not an imitation, an art form that explores new thematic territory or uses novel language forms. Something “real” expresses the honest emotions of the rapper or portrays his actual lived experiences. “Realness” is frequently contrasted with commercialism, pop music, or mass production, which many rappers deem fake and meaningless. This is especially true in Egypt where pop music and love songs have dominated the music scene since the days of Umm Kulthum in the 1930s (although she
was not only a singer of romance themes). Imani Perry notes that “[t]he ‘real’ is the location where an individual remains committed to his or her community, professes that allegiance, and remains honestly and organically rooted in his or her position in the world” (2004, 88). Egyptian rappers must navigate the task of remaining committed to their own local communities while also negotiating fidelity to the global hip hop culture. “Realness” becomes a hybrid product. To adopt only the customs, styles, and themes of American hip hop would result in a failure to inject one’s own culture into the work. To compose only with the local culture in mind means to reject hip hop’s diverse history within the United States and abroad.

For groups like the Arabian Knightz, Eliot would suggest that, to effectively operate within tradition, a rapper must develop the historical sense which entails “a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence” (1995, 77). Eliot alludes to the idea that an artist cannot simply conform to works of the past or inherit their legacy. He must, however, develop an awareness of the past through the conscious present in order to advance his own originality. The most unique features of an artist’s work are those in which his predecessors shine through most visibly.

The Arabian Knightz participate in a discourse that seeks to build connections between past and present or rather, to blur the boundaries between the two with the goal of creating a hybrid space for artistic production. In the process, other binaries also mesh together allowing the rappers to procure an individual identity that still recognizes the past and present, local and global, East and West in their hybrid forms. I have demonstrated how these dialogues operate within several interview scenarios where
artists themselves speak about constructing hip hop identities however, such discourses are also exemplified within song lyrics as well. My discussion of the song “Rebel” by Arabian Knightz explored the colorful patchwork of authorship found exclusively in the musical production of this piece. The two rap verses of this song also enter a discourse that seeks to establish the presence of the past. The critical nature of Egypt’s revolutionary rap genre mirrors a similar social commentary found in the pre-Islamic poets of ancient Arabia who composed verse lampooning other tribes, their leaders, and rival poets (Beeston 1983, 73-80). That some rappers are aware of this similarity is evidenced in my own interviews with Egyptian artists. One member of the Arabian Knightz known as Rush (Karim) commented on this aspect of rap saying, “we brought [rap] back to its original form and we’re doing it how the original poets used to do it back in the day. They used to be critical so we’re doing that. We’re being very critical” (Rush, personal communication, June 11, 2012). “Rebel” begins with Lauryn Hill repeating the words “Rebel” and “Are you satisfied?” A hip hop beat fades in during the first few seconds and Rush enters afterwards with his verse in Arabic:
Egypt is revolting against the shadows of darkness
The people want the downfall of the regime
They killed us, slaughtered us, imprisoned us, tortured us
Robbed us, scared us, terrorized us, ignored us
The Egyptian people will not die
The will of the people must prevail
My country is your country, my money is your money
We must end our slavery
We are the ones who heal our pains
Our dreams are peaceful and we must shout them out
With the spirit of Abdel Nasser and Salah al-Din
We are united demanding freedom
Egyptians are revolting and we’re strong in our conviction
Restrained from expression, we are armed soldiers
How could you oh Egyptian stand against your brother?
For your rights and mine, this is your Egypt and my Egypt

The revolutionary theme is clear from the lyrics but also from the time period and context in which these lyrics were written. Although the words do not explicitly call for the resignation of Hosni Mubarak per se, such messages are concealed within expressions like “the shadows of darkness” (ẓalām meaning both darkness and oppression/injustice in Arabic). With a name like “Rebel” and several lyrical references to “revolting” and “revolution” it would be difficult to overlook the anti-governmental motif throughout the song. “Rebel” is rooted in the local for several reasons. Rush refers specifically to “Egyptians” or “the Egyptian people” three times during his verse. Rush’s lyrics point to historic leaders in Egypt as sites of localization as well. He invokes Egypt’s second president Gamal Abdel Nasser saying “with the spirit of Abdel Nasser and Salah al-Din /
We are united demanding freedom.” “Rebel” is a song with heavy revolutionary connotations and Rush’s reference to Abdel Nasser conjures up notions of Egypt’s 1952 revolution in which Abdel Nasser, an officer at the time, led a military coup against the Egyptian monarchy, ultimately exiling King Farouk and bringing an end to the British occupation of Egypt (Rogan 2009, 282-289). Political tensions were at the heart of both the 1952 and 2011 revolutions in Egypt, although the former was a military coup and the latter an uprising led by the people themselves. By introducing Egypt’s revolutionary history within the song, Rush establishes a present that is at once conscious of its pastness. He does not blindly inherit that history but rather, formulates a unique and modern identity by recognizing his revolutionary predecessors and their contributions. Angela Williams’ 2010 study of Egyptian rap also cited the Arabian Knightz’s references to patriotism and local figures in Egyptian history however, her 2010 research was necessarily unable to account for the renewed sense of Egyptian patriotism following the 2011 revolution.

The second verse of “Rebel” by Sphinx adheres to analogous notions of political rebellion. Sphinx is a Los Angeles-born rapper of Egyptian descent who met the other members of Arabian Knightz when visiting Egypt in 2005 (Billet 2012). He composes lyrics primarily in English, mixing Arabic words and phrases sporadically. His lyrics in the second verse of “Rebel” are composed exclusively in English.
They say one man’s terrorist’s another man’s freedom fighter
Conquered and divided riding just to reunite us
Like Leonidas rather die than to live in blindness
Eyes wide as I see the violence
While you slumber, poverty and hunger break the silence
While the screams of a mother left childless
Echo like sirens as the media denies it
Masses just buy it cus they keep us all frightened – rebel!
For being whipped in oppression, these chains of procession
With the team our aggression pay attention
These politicians are all slaves for the opposition
And the truth is my ammunition, let it rain
Like grenades to the brain to regain our terrain
And be free from this cage – rebel!
Like Nasser and Che, Salah al-Din, the crusades
Serenade revolution to the lost and betrayed – rebel!

Sphinx explicitly uses the terms “rebel” and “revolution” a number of times throughout his verse and, like Rush, refers to former Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser. He invokes Che Guevara, a revolutionary figure in Cuba, and Salah al-Din, the first Sultan of Egypt and Syria who was considered a revolutionary unifier of Arab countries. There is also a reference to Leonidas, the Spartan hero of Greek history made popular by the 2006 history/fantasy film *300*, in which Leonidas leads a small army of soldiers into battle against a significantly larger Persian force. The Spartans are inevitably crushed but the
film portrays their last stand as nothing less than heroic. Sphinx says that, like Leonidas, he would rather accept the negative consequences of active revolution than passively endure injustice. Presumably, “blindness” here refers generally to oppression under the Mubarak regime or to the manipulation of knowledge and information. Leonidas is also a classic example of the underdog standing up to a large imposing oppressor, appropriate imagery during Egypt’s popular uprising. Asserting connections to these aforementioned leaders, Sphinx creates his own identity by acknowledging the presence of the past within his lyrics.

There is also a declaration of “realness” inherently grounded in Sphinx’s message when he says “the truth is my ammunition.” As previously mentioned, authenticity is paramount in the hip hop world. To be “real” in hip hop culture is to be true to one’s roots, one’s community, and oneself. Many socially conscious rappers in Egypt and abroad see themselves as messengers of the “truth” and feel a responsibility as artists to transmit this truth to their listenership. Portraying the “truth” in this sense could be exposing government corruption, rapping about media manipulation, or alluding to the more mundane day-to-day injustices that marginalized groups face. In Imani Perry’s analysis of the different sub-genres of rap music she talks about the “scholar/intellectual” rapper asserting that “[e]mccees with this persona cherish vocabulary and sophisticated rhyming, and they tout the life of the mind. They are not limited to the college-educated among the MCs, but they all (sometimes arrogantly) pursue a higher knowledge that will enable them to educate their listeners” (2004, 132). Sphinx uses his words to paint a picture of the battle between the Egyptian citizens and the Egyptian government,
politicians, and other oppressors. His words are his weapon, the tool that he uses to both attack and defend against the enemy using truth/reality as his “ammunition.” Sphinx suggests that there is, in fact, a very real battle underway between the two sides but his engagement with that battle exists on a semi-imaginary plane. The real conflict does not unfold on a battle field with armies and weaponry. Sphinx uses his truth as ammunition in a more conceptual battle aimed against political corruption and social oppression in which the dissemination of truth is not a violent response to an attack but rather, an attempt to defend and educate his own people. Alan Jones’ critical text on early Arabic poetry indicates that the poet in pre-Islamic Arabia was more than a mere wordsmith. His poetry defended his tribe’s reputation from the insults of enemy clans and the poet himself competed with those of other tribes in verbal duels that stood in lieu of real battles (1992, 1). The ways in which artists elect to express their frustrations through music instead of physical violence is not limited to hip hop, although the parallels between rap music and pre-Islamic poetry are distinct in this regard.

**Emotion and Impersonality**

The song “Rebel” is one text that represents a larger collection of emerging revolutionary rap music in Egypt. Principally, the above analysis of lyrics and ethnographic interviews demonstrates how the Arabian Knightz, and perhaps other rappers, strive to acquire and disseminate what is “real.” They draw on the historical sense and what Eliot terms “a perception of the presence of the past.” While Eliot’s conception of the poet and his predecessors harmonizes with the ways in which Egyptian
artists compose art and construct identity, his ideas concerning emotion and impersonality are problematic when applied to views on hip hop music.

Specifically, Eliot argues that a poet does not express “personality” but rather, a “specific medium” (1995, 78). He holds that the poet’s job is to use “ordinary emotions” to express feelings that are not linked to emotions in the first place, ordinary emotions that have not necessarily even been felt by the poet. What Eliot ultimately suggests is that “[p]oetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality” (ibid., 80). For Eliot, the history of the poet and the events in his life are not relevant to the composition of his poetry. He does not believe that poetry expresses the poet’s personality, and this is where Eliot’s propositions diverge from what Egyptian rappers themselves say about their art:

Hip hop is something that, you know, you can hear and listen to the expression of the artist. You can consider it as poetry. - Omar Boflot, Y-Crew

People use rap to deliver messages that cannot be delivered by other kind of music. People express themselves more than [in] any other kind of music. - Ibrahim Farouk, Asfalt

The freedom of expression. It’s an art where you can express yourself freely, you’re not restricted. – Rush (Karim), Arabian Knightz
These three Egyptian rappers clearly ideate rap music as a vessel through which the artist expresses his own emotions and his own personality. Hip hop inherently channels emotions into art and this is one reason why rap can have such profound effects on its listenership and why marginalized youth have adopted it as an outlet for expression. Many rap songs draw on the artist’s personal emotions to express a particular event or stage in the rapper’s life. As Perry notes, “[n]arratives are used to entertain and educate, but also to explicate the personality and lifestyle the MC projects” (2004, 80). Similarly, Egyptian rappers assert that hip hop music is a space where their emotions and personality are turned into art, not avoided.

Egyptian rappers demonstrate clearly defined notions regarding the uses of hip hop music for artistic expression. Their lyrics are not simply a flashy exhibition of linguistic skill. Many songs carry a specific message and that message is inspired by some emotion felt by the author. This is not to say that every rap song is a manifesto for positive social change. There are, of course, songs with romantic themes, songs that are comical/playful, and some that promote negative behavior as well. Rappers themselves see this music as a space in which their personality and emotions are transformed into an artistic product.

So, what is to be gained from a turning loose of emotions? Why does a rapper invoke his musical or revolutionary predecessors within his own modern music? What is the point of defending such claims of pre-Islamic connections to hip hop music? What would be lost if artists simply composed without thinking at all about authenticity, identity, or authorship? Answers to such questions are not simple and artists may give
any number of answers. I believe that rap, poetry, and other artistic forms of expression provide a space in which issues of identity and authenticity can be negotiated. Surrounding rap itself is a discourse in which artists work out their claims to originality and “realness” which puts them into conversation not only with other artists of their own generation but also the artists of past and future generations who face similar issues. Participation in hip hop culture connects artists not only with an immediate circle of fellow artists but also with the global hip hop community that is not confined to any singular time or place.

Each artist seeks to establish individuality among his peers and hip hop provides a domain in which presupposed binaries dissolve to form unique hybrid wholes. The artist himself may form part of a larger patchwork of authorship in which many artistic voices combine towards a common product. In the case of Egyptian hip hop, groups like the Arabian Knightz are constantly configuring identities that go beyond geographic and temporal boundaries and reject restricting definitions of East and West, local and global, past and present. Whether or not a rapper convinces his audience that hip hop is based on pre-Islamic Arabic poetry will not necessarily change the fact that he subscribes to this view. In some ways, the quest for “realness” is almost as important as actually achieving it. What ultimately seems most critical to these rappers is the existence of such a discourse in the first place, signaling the critical role that identity plays as artists navigate these trajectories of authorship.
Chapter 4: The Revolution Continues

While chapter three focused on hip hop during the initial days of Egypt’s January 25th revolution, looking specifically at the Arabian Knightz song “Rebel,” chapter four discusses rap’s ongoing development in the country approximately two years after Hosni Mubarak stepped down as president. Critically, Mubarak’s resignation did not mark the end of the revolution and some have even suggested that the revolution has yet to begin (Beinin 2013). This chapter provides a detailed analysis of a recent Egyptian rap song and music video by the previously mentioned artist Deeb to illustrate how some rappers are grappling with the ongoing revolution. It seeks to understand what elements of Egyptian rap might actually be considered “revolutionary,” an issue that this thesis has sought to address since the introduction. In contrasting Deeb’s music video with clips from Egyptian pop music, this chapter also recognizes the rich lyrical and visual intertextuality of Egyptian rap songs that often rely on an artist’s developed sense of cultural, political, and historical knowledge.

The energy in Tahrir Square was electric after Egypt’s former Vice President Omar Suleiman announced on February 11th that Hosni Mubarak had resigned as president of the Republic. The power and persistence of the Egyptian people succeeded in yielding real results for the country in flux. Mubarak’s resignation was a victory for Egyptians but also an encouraging nudge for the broader Arab Spring movements
unfolding throughout the Arab world at that time. But how would the nation deal with upcoming transitions? Who would lead the country? What would become of the people’s demands to address violence, inequality, and corruption? In the aftermath of the popular uprising the question still lingered in the air: “What now?”

One evening in early July of 2011, heading towards Tahrir Square, I found myself surrounded by a stampede of Egyptians running towards Tahrir near the Qasr al-Nil intersection. I glanced toward the direction of the oncoming Egyptians to find a group of men huddled together near the Egyptian Museum and making their way down Meret Basha Street toward the square. I asked a pedestrian about the approaching group of men and he told me that they had apprehended a suspected undercover government officer. At that point, I could see in the center of the mob a man in his late thirties being held by his shirt collar and roughly pushed towards the square by a dozen Egyptians, some carrying long pieces of wood and one wielding a ten-inch kitchen knife. Another mob member wore an Egyptian flag on his back as a cape. The mob’s captive had lost a considerable amount of blood and the group of men sporadically kicked him while they walked or beat him with pieces of wood. Shortly after, several ambulances rushed past towards Tahrir Square. That evening I wondered what the revolution had achieved if this kind of violence still plagued the streets in broad daylight, a thought that perhaps other onlookers had entertained at that moment as well.
Rhyming More than Romance

Egyptian rapper Muhammad al-Deeb assures the country’s people in one revolution-inspired rap song saying, “stand up Egyptians, no revolution ends in a day and a night” (ʿūm yā maṣrī māfish sawra tikhlaṣ fī yūm wa līla). Deeb’s music career began before the 2011 revolution but his outspoken and witty lyrics have long drawn on current events and popular culture when talking about Egyptian society. He is an active concert performer both in and outside of Egypt where he often shares the stage with underground hip hop acts like the Arabian Knightz, Asfalt, or former band member Afreet al-Kalaam (Arabic for “the Word Demon”). In a 2011 interview with German television station ARD, Deeb noted that he picked up the pen and pad at an early age, recalling a homework assignment in his high school French class for which he composed and recorded his first rap song. His passion for poetry and rap continued to grow and put him at the forefront of revolution-inspired hip hop music in Egypt, also earning him numerous television interviews, performance opportunities, and international travel.

Deeb’s socially and politically charged songs are, in many ways, a reaction against Egypt’s pop music genre that perpetuates romantic themes and repetitive lyrics. This genre is often referred to by rappers as “habibi music” (literally: the music of my beloved). Egyptian hip hop artists are not opposed to romantic songs per se, given that a number of them have even recorded rap songs with romantic themes however, rappers take issue with habibi music’s general lack of attention towards social and political issues within their community. This criticism is not limited to habibi music either. Artists like Deeb even condemned early Egyptian rap groups that spoke about frivolous topics and
portrayed hip hop as an immature and mindless music. In a 2011 interview with Simba Russeau, Deeb talked about rap’s development in Egyptian culture and the social responsibility of rappers saying:

The way rap was introduced in the Arab world was void of a message and gave a bad image of this genre of music so it’s important to continue to transform that image. As a rapper there’s a lot of responsibility to introduce this music in the proper way. A lot of people don’t understand hip-hop culture or how and why it started in the Arab world. At the end of the day it depends on the consciousness of the rapper. I did this to change the shallow love music. We experience more than love. We experience identity issues, oppression and unemployment.

Deeb’s music reveals an attempt to bring hip hop culture into conversation with local Egyptian traditions, like poetry, so that this genre is not perceived as a product aimed at one specific audience but rather, an art to which Egyptians of all ages and backgrounds can relate. A number of Deeb’s songs borrow clips from classical Egyptian music or traditional Arabic instruments such as the nāy (flute) or ṭabla (drum), exemplified in his song “My Country” (bilādi). Using these quintessentially Egyptian musical elements is a way to both localize hip hop within an Egyptian context and also bridge the gap between the younger generation of rappers and a potential older generation of listeners who are already familiar with the sounds of these traditional instruments. In interviews, Deeb often refers to himself as a “poet” and notes the similarities between Arabic poetry and hip hop, both of which often discuss social issues and have historically been linked to politics, especially in the case of Egyptian poetry (Khoury 1971). In Russeau’s interview, Deeb elaborates on this relationship saying:
[In] Egypt, famous poets like Salah Jaheen and Cheikh Imam had a style of writing that’s similar to a rap song but it’s played with the Oud or Arabic music. There’s a punch line, there’s imagery and there’s [sic] elements of the streets. My grandfather is very fond of poetry and I remember when I was young he used to sit down with his friends and recite poetry. I never understood it at the time but what they were doing is a cipher, which is when rappers gather and trade rhymes.

The notion that hip hop music represents an art form with Egyptian roots was discussed in chapter three but must be stressed again here as this characteristic sets the rap genre apart from other forms of modern Egyptian music and especially pop, which is an overwhelmingly Western inspired commercial product. While it is not uncommon for pop songs to employ Arabic instruments, the European influence on Egyptian pop music and pop stars is particularly striking within the domain of music videos where the visual aspect compounds the prevalence of Western sounds. As chapter three demonstrated, Egyptian rappers frequently acknowledge Western hip hop as a critical force in the genre’s global development but they use it only as a starting point from which they construct their own Egyptian variety of rap. While Egyptian rappers comment on specific local issues, Egyptian pop artists sing in the most general way about the agony of love, being separated from one’s darling, quarreling with one’s darling, and resolving the original problem with one’s darling. Hypothetically, the lyrics could be translated into English, sung by Justin Timberlake, paired with a romantic music video, and the effect would be more or less the same. There is little to distinguish the lyrics of an Egyptian pop singer like Tāmir Ḥusnī from his Western counterparts. It is this type of music that many Egyptian rappers rebel against. They perceive it as a superficial sex-driven product.
concerned only with financial gain and, perhaps more important, tied to those Egyptian political figures with power such as the Mubarak regime. In his chapter on Arabic music videos, Walter Armbrust discusses the predominant European influence on Egyptian pop music stating:

The salience of actresses and models who sport a carefully cultivated European look is so marked that one cannot help noticing those who do not fit the pattern. Roughly the same is true of men. Of course roles in film or television often call for much more localized imagery . . . But almost without exception, the persona of stars elaborated through secondary media (magazines, television interviews, public appearances), as opposed to roles in films or television serials, is European. The convention of favoring European looks - in clothes, hair style, and to some extent skin color - extends seamlessly into the video clip. (Armbrust 2005, 20)

Egyptian pop icons often came under harsh criticism from rappers for several reasons. As mentioned, some hip hop artists deemed *habibi* music as a copy-cat version of Western pop music. For these rappers who value strong Egyptian identity and individuality, pop music is viewed as “inauthentic” in that it simply reproduces Western songs and implants Arabic lyrics.

**Habibi Music and Egyptian Politics**

Rappers also disliked the hypocrisy of pop artists, or at least what they perceived as hypocrisy. Members of the rap duo Asfalt mentioned that, prior to the revolution, many pop singers and movie stars were friendly with Hosni Mubarak and his family. However, following his resignation, these pop figures sided with the Egyptian pro-
revolutionaries and rallied against the Mubarak regime (Asfalt, personal communication, June 7, 2011). The popular Egyptian singer Tamir Husni outwardly endorsed Mubarak and, at the request of the government, went to Tahrir Square during one protest and requested demonstrators to leave the square. Protesters responded by forcing him out of Tahrir, at which point he was filmed weeping about how the people misunderstood him (Gilman 2011). In another instance, Tamir Husni apparently believed state law did not apply to him when he forged his military documents in order to avoid mandatory army service, a falsification that resulted in his temporary incarceration. Afterwards, the singer went on to release a 14-track album under the Mazzika label in 2011 entitled The Best is Yet to Come (illī gāy ’aḥlā) praising the Egyptian people in an attempt to resuscitate his tattered image. However, considering his ties to the Mubarak regime and previous draft-dodging attempt, there are some palpable inconsistencies between Tamer Husni’s actions and his lyrics in a song like “I am Egyptian” (ānā maṣrī) ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpQNI-pypjI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpQNI-pypjI)) in which he flaunts his Egyptian pride and claims he would sacrifice his life for the country.

Anyone is honored to be an Egyptian
This is not an exaggeration
I'm an Egyptian holding his country above his head
I would sacrifice my life for it
And any hardship becomes easy
Who is equal to me, its Nile is in my blood
Its letters are a light on my name
It is the most precious thing in the universe
If you ask what “Egyptian” means, it means heart
And soul and principle
With Egyptian pop music’s central focus on producing music for commercial and financial gain, Tamir Husni tried to rebuild credibility among his listenership so they would buy his music and so companies would continue to play his videos on television. His quick fix was to release an album shortly after his public humiliation emphasizing his Egyptian pride and support of the revolution. The rapid production of Husni’s album led Egyptian TV figure Ahmed Abdel Aziz to accuse the singer of stealing music and lyrics for several songs on his album from other Egyptian and Western songs (Saudi Gazette 2013). While Husni’s public image suffered in the last several years, it is likely that many of his fans will continue listening to his music regardless of his political involvement or lack-thereof. His romantic songs are still catchy and appealing to those who liked his music before. Egyptians will likely concern themselves with more pressing political issues than the actions of a pop singer from months ago. They might even assume he was simply caught up in the chaos of the moment and made poor choices. Egyptian rappers, however, may not be so forgiving since their artistic values revolve around the notion of being “real” and being “true” to oneself. This is manifested explicitly in rap lyrics such as Asfalt’s song “I Will Change” (hātghayyar) where one rapper urges listeners to “think about being real and don’t just be a copy” (fakkar tikūn ḥaqīqī wa la tikūn nuskha). Rappers discuss their disapproval of certain pop stars outside of their hip hop lyrics as well. During my interview with Asfalt, habibi music was frequently mentioned with regard to its dominant status in the Egyptian music sphere:
The *habibi* music before the Revolution... all the singers were famous, all had money, all were rich, all were friends with the president’s kids. Not all of them but most of them. No one believed that this could happen, that change could happen. So each of them was making love songs and stuff that put the people to sleep . . . and this is what’s easy for the people to understand . . . it’s the music that’s easy for people. In contrast you’ve got the people doing rap. All of them are underground, all of them are unknown. For example, if someone releases a [rap] song on a website there will be a *habibi* song on 5,000 sites. So even on the internet the underground rappers are oppressed. The people in the streets listen to *habibi* music. It’s like they’re living in another world.

(My translation)

This rapper went on to talk about how many pop singers of *habibi* music quickly altered their pro-Mubarak stance following his resignation on February 11th whereas underground rappers never faltered in their opposition to the corrupt president. While pop icons scrambled to take sides with whomever had power, hip hop artists, in a way, had no incentive to support the regime leaders as Egyptian rappers do not rely on commercial
success and social visibility in the way that singers like Tamir Husni clearly did. Considering that Egyptian pop has long been the dominant music genre in the country, hip hop can be understood as a revolutionary music for its rejection of the European influences that have dominated the Egyptian music scene for decades. Egyptian rappers advocate the return to an Egyptian identity and, to some extent, a pan-Arab identity in their music.

It seems that some Egyptian rappers linked pop music to the politics of the Mubarak regime while viewing themselves as a representative voice for the Egyptian people more broadly. This notion is not without support. Both pop artists and the regime have sought to maintain power through corrupt means at the expense of the Egyptian people. Pop music has largely succeeded in producing an industry contingent upon the mass production of European inspired sex symbols and lyrics that, according to one member of Asfalt, “put the people to sleep” or, in another sense, hypnotized them through repetition of the same lyrics and themes.

The Mubarak regime was greatly influenced by Western, and specifically, American, politics as Egypt and the U.S. were linked through American aid, the “war on terrorism,” and the invasion of Iraq (Perry 2004, 141-145). Mubarak strived to keep Egypt’s rich minority in control while stifling the voices of those who posed even the mildest threat. The concept of “freedom of expression” under Mubarak’s rule was a farce. The Egyptian government fundamentally presided over radio, television, and newspapers throughout the country. Journalists who alluded to government corruption in an article were likely to be detained. The confiscation of books, pamphlets, and other literature
became the commonplace. And, perhaps most importantly, emergency law was instated at the beginning of Mubarak’s office. Under this law, a gathering of more than five people without a permit was considered a crime. A person could be detained for one to six months without charges. Those people who the government considered “fugitives” could expect to have their family members taken, beaten, or raped and instances of torture, sometimes resulting in death, were commonly cited by human rights organizations (ibid., 134-135).

With the government’s control of news, media, and literature, the dissemination of knowledge was basically determined by what those in power permitted to pass along to the Egyptian people. This manipulation of knowledge mirrors, on some levels, the ways in which pop music in Egypt seeks to revert attention away from the social and political issues emerging in local communities and focus on the love themes of habibi music. Contrastingly, rap music attempts to break out of this trance-like state by bringing into the public domain discussions about the oftentimes difficult realities of injustice and oppression that Egyptian people encounter in a rapidly transforming society. The Egyptian rapper, as a minority artist himself, speaks for the underdogs of society while disparaging the corrupt and powerful leaders who prevent knowledge from reaching the poor and disenfranchised. In the case of Egypt, the problem that Mubarak’s regime inevitably faced was the fact that so much of the country’s population consisted of those poor and disenfranchised citizens that the regime had tried to suppress. Central to his book on the Arab Spring, Hamid Dabashi regularly refers back to the idea of knowledge production or, perhaps more specifically, the manipulation of knowledge.
When Egyptians in Cairo or Syrians in Hama chant *al-Sha‘b Yurid Isqat al-Nizam*, ‘People Demand the Overthrow of the Regime,’ the word *Nizam* means not just the ruling regime but also the *régime du savoir*, the regime of knowledge production that is, *ipso facto*, in the absence of conspiracy, in the business of distorting reality by way of making it understandable in the form of tired and old clichés - a mode of knowledge that is conducive to domination, namely ‘the West over the East,’ the ruling regime over the defiant population.

(2011, 26)

Here, Dabashi is again drawing connections between the Mubarak regime and the West. To this I would assert the links that pop music artists share with both the Mubarak regime and Western/European culture as well. The Western component of pop music and Egypt’s former president diverges sharply from rap groups like Arabian Knightz, Asfalt, Y-Crew, and Deeb who emphasize the Eastern component of their music by using traditional Arabic instruments, rapping in the Egyptian vernacular, and discussing local themes while also aligning themselves with the Egyptian “everyman” rather than the elite upper echelon of society. These dichotomies are, of course, not so defined and looking at Egyptian society in this way necessarily reduces the tremendous diversity of people, politics, and music.

Many of the divisions I have cited here are best exemplified in the lyrics and music videos of Egyptian rappers themselves, especially when juxtaposed with those of pop singers. Among the Arab world’s most eminent pop artists is Haifa Wehbe, whose music videos are often aired on Egyptian television programs like Mazzika, Rotana, and Melody. Haifa would be classified by Egyptian rappers as a *habibi* singer (romance genre singer) based on the lyrical, thematic, and musical elements of her songs. Haifa’s popular
track “I Can’t Wait Another Day” (mish ʿadra astanā yūm kamān) (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SEtPEuDM1tQ) is not unlike the multitude of habibi songs being produced by other Arab singers, and I employ her music video to help illuminate some of the lyrical and thematic tropes of habibi music. For the sake of time and space, I adopt this clip as a representative example of the broader Egyptian pop genre. Using this music video, one can see that Egyptian hip hop music constitutes a radical deviation from Egyptian pop and could be seen as “revolutionizing” the ways in which music functions in Egyptian society.

**Egyptian Pop and Haifa Wehbe’s “I Can’t Wait Another Day”**

“I Can’t Wait Another Day” was originally released as a single but later featured on Haifa’s 2008 album *My Love* (ḥabībī ānā). The lyrics are sung in the Egyptian dialect (the singer is of Lebanese-Egyptian decent) and, not surprisingly, they describe a case of romantic misery during a period of separation from one’s beloved, which has become the staple narrative line for many Arabic pop songs. The video opens with a close-angle shot of Haifa emerging from a swimming pool. As she pulls herself upward and out of the pool in slow-motion, the camera stays fixed on a single spot, thereby passing over her breasts, stomach, upper thighs, and so on down to her toes. It is night time as she walks towards the camera near the edge of the roof-top swimming pool. The camera flashes back and forth between the pool scene and a shot of Haifa lying down on a fancy white futon with one knee raised revealing her black stockings and high heels. She caresses her neck and chest with, what is ostensibly, a nail file and slowly eats a cherry.
The camera cuts to the singer walking slowly outside of an old building, possibly a mansion, and wearing a lavish coat and sunglasses. It is still night time. Out of nowhere come two sinister looking men wearing black jackets and sunglasses, both riding the same motorcycle. The pair whiz past Haifa over and over again as the man riding on the rear flashes pictures of her with his camera. The offending paparazzi cause the singer to flail and twist her body in awkward sexualized maneuvers. As Haifa tries to shield her face and body from the camera using her arms she ends up in a number of suggestive poses pinned against the wall of the mansion. After thirty seconds of defending herself in this way, two young women arrive at the scene in a car to rescue Haifa, calling out her name with small comic-strip speech bubbles near their mouths that spell out “Haifa” in English. The camera moves from a close head-shot of the blue-eyed Haifa to a wide view of the singer oscillating and caressing her hips.

We are then transported to a large red room with a chandelier where Haifa and four semi-nude Western looking women march in sync towards a blond-haired man sitting at the opposite end of the room. Haifa arrives at the other side where the man sits in front of what is either a highly stylized table made out of white bricks or a 4’ × 4’ pile of drugs. Haifa and the blond fellow lean over the table until their faces nearly touch, then she asks in English, “so, is the show still on?” The man responds in a matter-of-fact British accent, “Haifa, darling, you are the show” and Haifa lets out a tiny squeak of laughter. The music video credits roll.

It is difficult to link the narrative line of this music video to Haifa’s song lyrics but, whether related or not, the words are as follows (repeated lyrics have been removed):

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I can’t wait another day  
Come back, I’m longing for you  
My darling, my life’s dream is a moment with you  
You’ve deprived me for a long time  
My darling, the time has come to be together here  
You’ve been away from me for long enough  
During those years I haven’t had comfort and security  
My life is yours, you own it  
I wait for you and it’s hard to live without you  
Since the day my eyes met yours  
I wanted to be with you

The lyrics themselves are not unlike those of other songs in the pop habibi genre. They make no reference to Egypt or any other Arab country for that matter. To read the English translation one would have little indication that this song was not, in fact, a pop hit by an American pop artist. That this song speaks almost nothing to sociopolitical issues or even, presumably, the singer’s personal experience would disconcert many of the Egyptian rappers that I spoke with whose music seeks to engage listeners with real events, stories, triumphs, losses, and so on. When a young Egyptian rapper composes a song about, for example, the struggles of finding employment after graduating from the university, he connects with the growing number of young Egyptians who deal with the same local issue. I am not proposing that Egyptian youth do not relate to heartbreak and love songs. However, anyone who makes a trip to one of the “people’s” areas of Cairo (i.e. not the foreigner/elite neighborhoods of al-Zamālik, al-Muhandisīn, al-Duqqī, or al-Maʿādī) will be hard pressed to find an Egyptian girl who has ever taken a dip in her private swimming pool, slipped on some black stockings, and been chased by malevolent
paparazzi prior to her concert. For the consumers of such pop videos, the fact remains that these Western inspired fantasies will remain just that: fantasies. Most Egyptians will never own a swimming pool, live in a mansion, or be pursued by paparazzi. Hip hop artists rebel against this fantasy world by bringing into public discourse topics to which Egyptians from a variety of social and economic backgrounds can relate. At this point, a discussion of Egyptian rap videos can demonstrate the extent to which hip hoppers are exploring new musical, as well as visual, territory within their songs.

“No to the ruling of monkeys, the time of lions has come”

The Egyptian rapper Deeb is a prime example of revolution-inspired hip hop blossoming after the subsequent social transformations of January, 2011. Although Deeb began rapping long before the Arab Spring movements, his musical works since the revolution earned him a place in the public spotlight performing at live national and international concerts, interviewing with news and television programs, and speaking on educational hip hop panels. In June of 2012, Deeb released an 11-track album entitled *The Cold Peace* (*al-salām al-bārid*), available for free download at his personal page ([http://deeb.bandcamp.com/](http://deeb.bandcamp.com/)). The Egyptian film studio Axeer produced a music video for Deeb’s song “Promised” (*mawʿūd*), which was posted on Youtube June 6th ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_QTg9s7o9vo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_QTg9s7o9vo)) and has since racked up over 68,000 views as of March, 2013. This song resembles other tracks Deeb has produced in that it samples Egyptian instruments and then layers and loops different segments of the instrument clip onto a hip hop beat (see his songs *bilādī, masraḥ dīb, ʿūm yā*
maṣrī, ʿālamnā marfūḥ). Through this mixture of Egyptian and Western sounds, Deeb (or sometimes his DJ) gives a musical nod to American hip hop music but also injects a local flare. In “Promised,” the sample that Deeb employs throughout the song is quickly identifiable by most Egyptians. The original clip comes from the song “Promised,” made popular by one of Egypt’s most prominent singers, Abd al-Halim Hafez (1929-1977). For Westerners, Hafez is somewhat like an Egyptian Frank Sinatra, in that both figures were dapper young stars of the music and cinema industries in their respective countries. Although the words of the original “Promised” were composed by poet Muḥammad Hamza and set to music by Balīgh Ḥamdī, it was Abdel Halim Hafez’s performances that brought this song widespread fame, which was also the case for a number of other songs and poems that came to be associated with Hafez’s performances (see “Letter From under the Water” or “The Coffee Reader” by Palestinian poet Nizar Qabbani).

By using a sample from this well-known song, Deeb’s music is at once accessible to a broad Egyptian, and Arab, listenership. The clips that he borrows from the original song’s string section, reed flute, synthesizer, and vocals are interlaced seamlessly with the new beat in a way that retains the characteristically Egyptian feel while still locking into the hip hop groove. Deeb’s remix starts with an extended clip from the original song, namely Abdel Halim Hafez singing “my heart, it is promised that you suffer with me” (mawʿūd maʿayā bil-ʿazāb mawʿūd yāʾalbī).

Abdel Halim Hafez’s original version serves as the introduction for Deeb’s remix. The music video begins and the camera slowly zooms in on an empty chair rocking back and forth in a dilapidated bedroom with a few nondescript boxes covered by sheets.
Behind the chair sits an old victrola machine spinning a record, perhaps playing the original song “Promised.” The camera gives a close-up of the record rotating beneath the needle and passes over a nearby black-and-white framed photograph. The glass frame and record are covered in grime and soot but both look as though some effort was made to wipe the dust off their surfaces where certain patches are dirt-free. Whether this imagery was intentional or not, many of Deeb’s songs are, in a sense, “blowing the dust off” of Egyptian history and recontextualizing it in modern music.

A hip hop beat kicks in after the vocal introduction and Deeb appears sitting on the previously empty rocking chair and rapping his first lyrics. While Deeb raps, the camera flashes to a slow-motion shot of him walking down the railroad tracks in Cairo wearing a pendant around his neck with the golden eagle of Salah al-Din, an emblem that was introduced to the Egyptian flag following the country’s 1952 revolution. He carries a mysterious white sack which seems to be concealing a long rolled up stick. Deeb is then shown rapping at a new location, in front of a stone wall riddled with revolution-inspired graffiti. One spray-painted slogan reads in Arabic “oh government, fear us” (khāfī minnā yā ḥukūma), another wall portrays a caricature of a disgruntled Hosni Mubarak. Next, Deeb is shown rapping his lyrics in Tahrir Square where he stands among a group of Egyptian men, some patriotically donning the red, white, and black colors of the country’s flag. An aged man in traditional Egyptian turban and galābiyya (a long robe) embraces Deeb with a hug and plants a kiss on the rapper’s cheek.
The chorus features Deeb performing in a new cluttered room. It resembles a kind of storage space scattered with various flotsam and jetsam. There is, what appears to be, a water dispenser, some metallic hoops, and an old radio.

Deeb begins rapping the second verse in the back of a worn down Egyptian cargo truck cruising through the streets of Cairo. When Deeb’s lyrics assert that he is “not an amateur” but rather “a musician like Sayed Mekkawi” the rapper holds up an Egyptian lute sitting in the back of the truck. The camera flashes to a shot of the truck driver who, by all indications, is a pretty ordinary man given the humble set of prayer beads hanging from his rear-view mirror and the tasseled fabric spread across his dashboard, characteristic of many taxis and public transportation vehicles in Cairo. As the truck chugs along, Deeb continues rapping and we see nothing exhilaratingly unique about the surrounding environment. A number of high rises pass by in the background along with street signs and traffic. The camera moves back and forth between shots of Deeb rapping at the different locations - in the decrepit rooms, on the truck bed, in front of the graffiti wall, and also riding a traditional Egyptian felucca, a type of Nile sailboat.

The chorus begins once more and Deeb is back on the train tracks walking in slow-mo. This time he begins to unsheathe the mysterious pole from its white sack, eventually revealing a rolled up Egyptian flag which opens and billows in the wind. The camera returns to Deeb in Tahrir Square surrounded by an even larger crowd, some old, some young, some in business attire, others in turban and beard. Many of them are now chanting part of the chorus in unison with Deeb: “no to the ruling of monkeys, the time of lions has come.” The Camera zooms in on Deeb who has wrapped his arm amiably
around an older man wearing the Egyptian turban and robe. The man and Deeb rap the lyrics together along with others around them. As the video ends, the credits role and Deeb walks down the train tracks in excruciatingly slow-motion, the billowing Egyptian flag planted in his fist as the sun sets. The following are Deeb’s lyrics for this song (my translation):
I'm an amateur, I'm a musician like Sayed Mekkawi
Sayed Met'al told us a lot but you weren't paying attention
You turned your gaze away, your conscience is empty in the middle like a ruined bridge
They're playing us like Atari
My tongue is my horse, it protects me, I've lived a quarter century
I'll sing until the day I die (lit. until God returns my heart to me)
I want to return my country, a year and a half after Mubarak
And my people still aren't satisfied
Don't blame the revolution for the unfortunate events
The regime was working as a system
Remember the withdrawal of security, the slowing down of trials
Even the illiterate understood a long time ago
Come out and show yourself Brotherhood and media
Which still haven't changed since the days of Suzanne Mubarak
I'm speechless when I see the parliament members
Burying their heads under the ground like ostriches
Intertextuality and Cultural Referencing

The lyrics in Deeb’s first verse specifically call out to “any Islamist, liberal, womanizer, and judge.” The rapper talks about the injustices that Egyptians faced before the revolution at a time when speaking about sensitive political issues could warrant beatings and jail time from police. The music video shows Deeb with fellow Egyptians in Tahrir Square rapping “we’ve become the majority and you’re the minority,” asserting that the underdogs of Egyptian society are actually the power holders in the country. This notion would certainly have been fortified by the resignation of Hosni Mubarak which many protesters in Tahrir Square perceived as a tremendous victory. In the first verse, Deeb also alludes to the sexual harassment taking place “every day” against women. This widespread issue has developed to the extent that most women, whether Egyptian or foreign, veiled or scantily clad, are likely to receive some form of cat-calling while passing Egyptian men in the streets of Cairo and particularly outside of cafes (Rizzo 2012, 460). Deeb’s commentary about harassment is directed more toward his fellow Egyptians than the regime, as the citizens themselves are the ones who must work to reform this aspect of Egyptian society. In this way, the rapper calls not only for positive political transformation from the country’s leaders but he also urges change from Egyptian citizens themselves who can contribute to the elimination of issues like sexual harassment. There is, then, a request for political leaders to change but also an assertion of responsibility for the average citizen to do his part in improving conditions of the country. Deeb does not simply make demands of Egypt’s elite ruling class and then prescribe nothing for the middle/lower class citizen. Rather, he targets issues at the local
level as well, thus avoiding potential accusations that he is only blaming Egypt’s political leaders and not acknowledging the ways in which other Egyptians can take part in the betterment of society.

Deeb’s second verse declares his status as a musician multiple times. He holds up the lute while riding in the truck bed and says he is not “an amateur,” comparing his music to that of Sayed Mekkawi, one of Egypt’s most revered composers and singers of the twentieth century who played the lute. Here, Deeb’s lyrics assert the artistry of his rap but also demonstrate his familiarity with the predecessors of Egypt’s music scene. This reference to Sayed Mekkawi does not seem arbitrary. Mekkawi, like Deeb, was extremely outspoken in his songs and addressed local sociopolitical issues of the lower classes of Egyptian society. His lyrics were also inherently tied to a sense of Egyptian pride which Deeb seems to channel in this video laden with patriotic lyrics and symbols. In maintaining his image as a true artist Deeb says, “I’ve lived a quarter century and I’ll sing until the day I die.” The second verse of “Promised” also concerns itself with the ways in which the Mubarak regime repeatedly mistreated the Egyptian people through various means. Deeb talks about how the corrupt leaders “are playing us like Atari” and how the media “still ha[s]n’t changed since the days of Suzanne Mubarak.” Despite these efforts to manipulate the Egyptian people, Deeb claims that even an illiterate or uneducated person could comprehend the blatant injustices transpiring under Mubarak’s rule.
The use of local and frequently patriotic imagery in “Promised” infuses the song with a uniquely Egyptian quality. Other than brief allusions to Robocop, Atari, and Gaza, the lyrics are overwhelmingly dedicated to a discourse that empowers Egypt’s revolutionaries while denigrating the Mubarak regime, Muslim Brotherhood, corrupt political leaders, and media. With so many references to Egyptian figures and society, Deeb’s song pivots around a specific time and place. His lyrics are at once a historical account of Egypt during a particular period and a call for continued transformative efforts at the hand of both Egyptian elite and average citizens.

“Promised” is also riddled with Egyptian cultural references, which Deeb takes pride in packing into his lyrics. A number of these references were not apparent during my first analysis and were only revealed after examining the song with native Egyptians who quickly perceived the references to local phrases, films, and figures. For example, when Deeb says, “let me speak my mind, let’s not talk about the past,” he triggers an allusion to the 1992 song released by Egyptian pop singer Amr Diab entitled “Let’s Not Talk About the Past” (balāsh nitkallim fil-mādī). In the second verse, Deeb draws on a culturally embedded idiom when he says, “my tongue is my horse, it protects me.” The line is an altered form of the original Arabic proverb “your tongue is your horse, protect it and it will protect you, betray it and it will betray you,” meaning roughly that each person is responsible for his words, both the good and bad. It carries a “reap what you sow” connotation. Similarly, the tongue acts as a kind of double-sided sword capable of both praise and slander, an idea that was especially true of Arabic poetry since pre-Islamic times when a poet composed both praise poetry known as madḥ and lampoon
Deeb’s reference to this expression clearly draws on certain culturally specific knowledge and enriches the semantic dimension of his lyrics. Finally, the chorus of “Promised” exploits a song from the 1974 Egyptian film entitled My Love’s Princess (amīrat ḥubī ānā). In one of the musical interludes of this film, the female star Suʿād Ḥusnī sings that “the color of life has become pink, when I’m next to you and you’re next to me, the color of life has become pink” (al-ḥayā baʿā lūnhā bambī, wānā gambak winta gambī, al-ḥayā baʿā lūnhā bambī). Deeb extracts these lines and fundamentally negates the words saying, “promised a better life because the one we’re living isn’t rosy” (literally: “promised, and the color of life isn’t pink, there are no roses”). Here, Deeb may be positioning himself against Egypt’s pop singers and film icons by portraying the reality of Egyptian society and its myriad problems which are frequently overshadowed by romance themes in Egyptian cinema. Looking at the numerous lyrical allusions within Deeb’s music, we can see that the historical and cultural elements cannot be separated from the song’s message or its music video, which hinge primarily on a mixture of intertextual references, national pride, and social issues.

Regarding the visual aspect of “Promised,” a final note is necessary about Deeb’s appearance throughout the music video. Deeb wears three different outfits in his video, none of which are fancy compared to the gold watches and freshly ironed dress shirts of pop stars like Tamir Husni and Amr Diab. Deeb’s first ensemble consists of a plain black T-shirt, blue jeans, tennis shoes, black watch, and a necklace with the golden eagle of Egypt’s flag dangling at the bottom. At different points in the video, with this same outfit, he also introduces a pair of black sunglasses and a fedora hat. His second outfit is more or
less the same as the one just described but with a blue T-shirt, complementing the light blue felucca on top of which he stands. Outfit three is nearly the same as the previous two but swaps the T-shirt for a long-sleeve red flannel. Deeb’s image throughout the video is nothing short of modest. There are no flashy cars, no gold chains or expensive jewelry, no beautiful European women. With his basic wardrobe, Deeb looks like an average Egyptian, or even an average American for that matter. His relatively simple appearance throughout the video is one way of performing the Egyptian everyman role, which he also achieves by installing himself in quintessentially Egyptian locations like Tahrir Square, an Egyptian sailboat, a wall covered with revolution graffiti, or train tracks, the last of which really exude a sense of modernity and urban geography. In this way, Deeb shows that he is essentially one of “them,” the vast majority of Egyptians who do not belong to the small elite class entrenched in the latest fashion and Western influences.
Conclusion

This thesis has raised and attempted to answer several vital questions about Egypt’s rapidly transforming society. Namely, how and why has hip hop in Egypt developed in coordination with the January 25th revolution and larger Arab Spring movements? In what ways can rap music be viewed as an artistic manifestation of current sociopolitical trends and tensions within the country? As listeners, educators, and global citizens, how can we use hip hop as a critical lens through which to understand larger processes like cultural flow, transnationalism, and identity construction which put Egypt into a global dialogue with other countries and cultures? Of considerable importance in a country like Egypt, how are young men and women shaping identities through hip hop culture and prioritizing new conceptions of what it means to be Egyptian in a culture that has, for decades, been victim to the political and musical hegemony of Western influence?

In exploring these topics my thesis, and first chapter in particular, has endeavored to establish a more concise understanding of hip hop music’s general development and trajectory in Egypt while also positioning its evolution on the historical timeline of rap in North Africa and the Levantine regions. Considering Egypt’s reputation as cultural and musical hub of the Arab world, it is surprising that hip hop culture in this country developed relatively late compared to other countries in North Africa and the neighboring
Levant, a fact that previous studies have neglected to discuss. I have argued that the January 25th revolution served as a catalyst for the preexisting hip hop scene to expand, both in its number of fans and practitioners. As technology and communication networks continue to develop, Egyptian rappers and other artists throughout the Arab world are finding themselves more connected than ever. Hip hop songs and entire albums can now be recorded and produced by rappers who are technologically linked while being geographically dispersed throughout the globe (e.g. Arabian Knightz album “Uknighted State of Arabia”).

My examination of song lyrics and artist interviews demonstrated that, in contrast with the early MTM years of Egyptian hip hop, many rappers have gravitated away from the “party rap” genre and towards more socially and politically conscious lyrical themes, especially following the revolution. While most Egyptian rappers remain “underground,” enjoying little commercial limelight, there is a growing visibility for these artists as they participate in more live concerts, television interviews, album recordings, and community panel discussions. As I write this conclusion, the Arabian Knightz are currently touring in Denmark, Deeb wrapped up a hip hop show in the United States, Omar Boflot just released a new single with former MTM member Takki, and Asfalt signed a contract with the Egyptian phone company Mobinil to perform six live shows in Cairo.

The growing hip hop scene in Egypt’s urban centers necessarily facilitated diversity among rappers in their song themes, target audiences, and language choices. The Egyptian hip hop community has expanded to the extent that an umbrella term like “Egyptian hip hop” may not describe this diversity as well as “Egyptian hip hops.”
Different varieties such as “gangster” rap, “party” rap, and “socially conscious” rap now boast extensive networks of fans and artists alike. While my thesis does not devote considerable discussion to these multiple hip hop derivatives, this topic certainly warrants future academic examination and would enrich the field of global hip hop studies more broadly. Looking at this variation in Egyptian hip hop music, chapters two and three explored the divergent conceptions of “realness” among artists which lead to “beefs.” While some hip hop communities may not experience these same artistic disagreements, researchers must account for the heterogeneous mixture of people and personalities found in hip hop, else we run the risk of flattening these communities just to render their culture one neat, uniform group, which is rarely the case in hip hop. This also means addressing the role that other features like gender and class play in such communities, neither of which do I discuss here but plan to explore in my future research.

In chapter three, an analysis of the Arabian Knightz song “Rebel” suggested that some Egyptian rappers are particularly concerned with identity construction as hip hop requires these artists to straddle multiple cultures, borrowing elements from both Western and Eastern musical traditions and thus developing hybrid identities. In interviews, Egyptian rappers often acknowledged America’s critical role in the development of hip hop culture but also sought to establish an Egyptian hip hop culture that connected, first and foremost, with local Egyptian rhythms, instrumentation, languages, and themes. This chapter showed that, by invoking local figures and historical events in their rap lyrics, Egyptian artists attempt to establish a sense of “realness” through a musical dialogue with their predecessors. Importantly, my interviews with Egyptian rappers also demonstrated
that some artists shaped identity by comparing themselves to the linguistically skilled, socially conscious pre-Islamic poets of ancient Arabia. This chapter evidenced the importance of establishing a unique identity in Egyptian hip hop culture and Egyptian youth culture more broadly.

While the third chapter explored a rich hip hop text produced during the first days of the 2011 revolution, chapter four attested to the emerging nature of revolutionary activity in the country and, likewise, the continuous and unfolding trajectory of Egyptian rap. By investigating a relatively recent 2012 song from Egyptian rapper Deeb, it was obvious that his music, and music video, diverged radically from Egypt’s pop genre not only musically but also lyrically, thematically, and visually. Interviews with rappers themselves clearly showed a rebellious attitude against the (perceived) frivolity of habibi music. My analysis established that some Egyptian pop singers exhibited a quintessentially Western image in their music and shared close ties with the Mubarak regime. Egyptian rappers, on the other hand, often depicted themselves as socially conscious artists who strive to maintain an Egyptian identity within their music, also remaining connected to the streets, the “average” Egyptians, and those against Mubarak’s ruling elite. This is, of course, not to overgeneralize an entire youth demographic but rather, to identify how some rappers are deliberately aligning themselves with a certain sociopolitical stance and to understand what is at stake in assuming such a position.

Importantly, this chapter sought to address some of the initial questions posed within the introductory section. Namely, what does “revolution” mean in Egypt? What is “revolutionary” music? And is the outspoken music being created by Egyptian youth in
the last few years actually “revolutionary hip hop” or are journalists simply employing catchy phrases like this to attract readers? Keeping in mind the analyses and interviews introduced in this thesis, we can begin to assess such questions by adopting a couple basic definitions. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines “revolution” as:

a.) a sudden, radical, or complete change

b.) a fundamental change in political organization; especially: the overthrow or renunciation of one government or ruler and the substitution of another by the governed

In the first instance, hip hop music was certainly a “sudden” phenomenon in its growth during the revolution. Although it had existed silently for some years prior to 2011, the upsurge of rap concerts, recordings, and fan sites was most clearly witnessed following the January 25th revolution. In less than a decade, this music that was mainly confined to the homes of a few young Egyptian hip hop aficionados is now being performed at upscale venues like the Cairo Opera House for thousands of fans, broadcasted on Egyptian television stations like Melody, and giving artists the chance to take part in educational hip hop panels in other countries. Within the last two years, the television program ʿazz al-shabāb, which airs on Rotana Egypt, has hosted nearly twenty Egyptian rap groups for interviews and live performances. Asfalt has done particularly well as of late with a featured article in Rolling Stone during March of 2013. This exposé reports that two years after Mubarak’s resignation Asfalt’s annual bookings and income increased threefold. Over the course of five years, one of the group’s older songs entitled “Asfalt Remix” received 50,000 views online. Compare this with Asfalt’s 2012 video for
their song “I am Two Lines” (ānā saṭrayn) which has already racked up almost 450,000 hits on Youtube. Additionally, instead of performing at the same handful of cultural centers repeatedly, Asfalt now plays venues like the American University in Cairo and the Alexandria Citadel (Andersen 2013).

The radical element of hip hop is especially clear when juxtaposing a pop music text like Haifa Wehbe’s “I Can’t Wait Another Day” with Deeb’s 2012 release “Promised.” Haifa’s variety of habibi music has developed into the status quo for much Arabic pop and one does not have to watch more than thirty seconds of Deeb’s music video to see how drastically his approach to music and politics diverges from the European-inspired imagery that has become the orthodoxy of Haifa’s and many other singers’ music. Music and especially poetry in the Middle East has long been connected to politics, whether overly or covertly. What Deeb and other Egyptian rappers provide is a radically different way of conceptualizing music’s relationship to society. Instead of the repetitive love lyrics characteristic of much habibi music, more and more young Egyptian rappers are seeking to compose lyrics that express their real lived experiences. They are broaching topics in their songs which have been, and continue to be, socially sensitive, ranging anywhere from political corruption to drug abuse to sexual harassment to religious discrimination. By so do, Egyptian rappers bring these taboo issues to the surface in hopes of engaging with them in a more open dialogue.

However, hip hop music, even during ongoing revolutionary activity, still comprises only a small fraction of the larger music scene in Egypt and has certainly not supplanted commercialized pop music, nor is this hip hop’s primary goal. Hip hop is not
inherently “against” pop music or the singers of this genre. In fact, during my interviews some rappers even noted that not all pop artists sing about love and not all supported Mubarak. Several rappers also reported to have composed romance hip hop songs at certain points. What these rappers rebel from are the artists who demonstrate a total lack of concern for local social issues and who only follow the leaders that will benefit their careers. Thus, our question should not be whether or not hip hop music in Egypt will ever displace pop music which, at this point, seems unlikely. Rather, more worthy of future investigation is in what ways might Egyptian hip hop follow the cultural trajectory of its American counterpart, where rap transformed from the voice of a disenfranchised community to a multimillion dollar industry sweeping television, radio, and cinema across the nation. At this point, hip hop in Egypt does not represent the music of the masses in the way that shaʿabī (popular) music does. However, the last several years have also witnessed the integration of more shaabi musical elements into Egyptian hip hop songs by groups like the Arabian Knightz. Exploring how rap and other genres like shaabi interact over the coming years will undoubtedly broaden the ways in which we understand how definitions of “hip hop” expand to include new hybrid elements of culture while hip hop, at the same time, has the potential to shape and recontextualize local cultures.
Bibliography


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