



Rap, Hiphop, Kreuzberg: Scripts of/for Migrant Youth Culture in the WorldCity Berlin

Author(s): Levent Soysal

Source: *New German Critique*, No. 92, Multicultural Germany: Art, Performance and Media (Spring - Summer, 2004), pp. 62-81

Published by: Duke University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4150467>

Accessed: 12-12-2019 11:47 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Duke University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *New German Critique*

Rap, Hip-hop, Kreuzberg: Scripts of/for Migrant Youth Culture in the WorldCity Berlin¹

Levent Soysal

Grounding Hip-hop in Kreuzberg

Ulf Hannerz opens his *Transnational Connections* with an anecdotal note from his fieldwork in Nigeria in the 1970s.² He is staying at Rosy Guest Inn in Kafanchan, a small town benefitting from the riches of the Nigerian oil boom at the time. There, Hannerz meets Ben, a young electrician and Kung-Fu enthusiast, who then becomes his “field assistant.” Ben names his own first-born son Lenin, and when he opens a small shop, he calls it “Lenin’s Supermarket.” Hannerz tells the story in order to ask the following question: “In what kind of global interconnectedness does Kafanchan, a town built around a colonial-era railway junction, with inhabitants like Ben and his son Lenin, now have a place?” (5).

Hannerz derives from Alfred Kroeber’s work the term *ecumene*, “the entire inhabited world, [which today] encompasses more, and smaller, in the more metaphorical senses of connectedness and reachability” (7). In the “global ecumene,” the connections are trans-national and involve a variety of actors, such as individuals, groups, movements, and businesses, as well as nation-states. The interconnectedness is achieved primarily through “interactions [and] exchanges,” (7) and over “habitats of meaning, overlapping entirely, partially or just possibly not at all, [and] identified with either individuals or collectivities” (22-23). In using “habitats of meaning,” Hannerz follows Zygmunt Bauman’s lead to combine

1. In memory of Boe B. of Islamic Force.

2. Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places* (New York: Routledge, 1996). All subsequent references are provided in the text.

the notion of agency “with a flexible sense of habitat, in which agency operates and which it also produces, one where it finds its resources and goals as well as limitations” (22). In this global ecumene, a Kung-Fu enthusiast electrician Ben with a son named Lenin does not – should not – stand out as *exotica* but is constituted by, and is the agent of, connectedness. Ben, his son Lenin, and a shop named “Lenin’s Supermarket” in Kafanchan are all part of a (trans)nationally connected and explainable ecumene, as long as connections are situated and made transparent.

If Hannerz’s question were rephrased to reflect upon the migrant youth culture scene, it would read: What kind of connectedness does Kreuzberg, known as home to foreigners and alternatives, with a lively hiphop scene inhabited by immigrant rappers, writers, and breakdancers, represent in a globalizing world today? How do we make sense of the dispositions of migrant youths when they speak to us in rap and graffiti from the public stages of Berlin?

Like Ben and Lenin, it is in a global ecumene with tangible and metaphoric (trans)national connections, that Erci E., Boe B., Aziza A., and others like them get away from becoming exotic fragments of migrancy and emerge as part of a comprehensible normalcy. Their names become not signs of counterfeit Americana or an aberrant modernity manifest in Berlin but symptoms of connectedness and of sharing and participating in the discursive spaces of hiphop. They write on the walls in Berlin, leaving individual, aesthetic inscriptions for us to see. They rap in English, Turkish and German, inviting us to common projects of social justice, solidarity, and cultural resonance. And like every popular youth culture episode, their times come and go. Today they are hailed as the next “big” thing, tomorrow they disappear from the stages of cool.

In this essay my goal is to narrate and interpret stories of rap and hiphop from Kreuzberg, Berlin, relating their multiple connections to the markets and imaginary of global hiphop. Like Hannerz, I will identify transnational youth connections beyond territorial boundaries of nations and cultures. Unlike Hannerz, I will not be searching for creolizations and hybridizations. For creolization as a process assumes a change from “original” to “mixed” under external duress. That is to say, Turkish (youth) culture becomes creolized in order to lend itself to mixed cultural forms such as Turkish Rap in Germany under the pressures of foreignness. This only explains away migrant youths’ engagement with rap, confining their activity to second-hand adaptations and hybrid reproductions.

In this essay I will not be reducing the content of migrant hiphop to

singular diasporic connections, either. As a construct diaspora presumes attachments of desire, allegiance, and practicality to homelands elsewhere. However qualified, it is a narrative of a restless presence “here” and really being “there.” It compounds the essential Otherness ascribed to the migrant, the foreigner, negates their temporal and spatial presence “here,” and hides their connections to (non)national spaces and projects behind the binary dissonances of here-and-there, host-and-home, and loss-and-desire.³ As theoretical constructs creolization and diaspora are burdened by the old predicament of privileging the centers (the “West,” for instance) in the production of cultural significance. Contemporary hip-hop however is everywhere and available, all at once, with its form, aesthetics, proclamations, fashion, dreams, even with its origin story.⁴ It constitutes a shared space in the ecumene and provides a vernacular to common projects, joining youths from Los Angeles to Tokyo and Sao Paulo, as well as from Istanbul to Berlin. The productions of rappers and writers in such unlikely places, in turn, contribute to the global imaginary of hip-hop. Turkish and other immigrant rappers from the metropolitan centers of Europe interact with this imaginary of hip-hop and enact common projects of commercial, political, and artistic variety.⁵

3. On diaspora, see Stuart Hall, *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, eds. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996); Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997); and Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993). These works offer interpretive potentialities beyond my pointed critique. I nonetheless contend the entanglement of diaspora narrative, and the notion of hybridity, with the contemporary topography of ethnicity/nation unavoidably presents itself as an obstacle to a meaningful explication of affinities and differences.

4. In *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 1994), Tricia Rose provides a commanding account of hip-hop styles and technologies, as well as its origin story. On the style, aesthetics, and politics of hip-hop, see also Paul Gilroy, “It’s a Family Affair,” *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay, 1992). For accounts of world hip-hop, see *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the USA*, ed. Tony Mitchell (Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 2002).

5. This is not to argue “no more centers, no more peripheries” in the global ecumene. Not all individual, collective, and institutional actors have the same resources and authority in the ecumene—or within the rap scene. My point in placing the emphasis on common projects and accessibility of discursive spaces is to bring to fore the intensity and institutional mechanisms of transnational connectivity. See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996); Hannerz; Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage, 1992); Saskia Sassen, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (New York: New Press, 1998); and Yasemin Nuhoglu Soysal, *Limits of Citizenship: Migrants and Postnational Membership in Europe* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994).

Despite its commonplace presence, hiphop appears an eccentric commodity when encountered in the specificity of migrant settings. Its alleged *double inauthenticity* – foreigners in an alien culture reproducing the ultimately alien art (i.e., Turks in Germany or Beurs in France doing the Black Culture) – accentuates migrant hiphop as exotica. From behind this fascination with migrant hiphop and its exoticness springs the construct of the ghetto. As a popular and scholarly designator, the ghetto is an essential element of hiphop's semi-mystical origin story. In the urban ghetto, and as a consequence of poverty and segregation, it is argued, alienated (black) youths produce responses to their "condition" in the form of pounding noise broadcasted through "ghetto blasters," entangled epigrams sprayed on subway cars, and robotic animation displayed on asphalt stages.

This is indeed a story that dictates fascination – a fascination with the heroic unconventionality of hiphop's content and style, and with the implied narrative of creating spectacular culture in the midst of ghetto bleakness. This is at the same time a story that dictates angst – angst due to the disruptive, disorderly presence of rap, graffiti, and street-dancing in public spaces. In both hope- and fear-inspiring versions, the construct of the ghetto foregrounds and exoticizes hiphop.

Of course the ghetto narrative is not without its problems. Once imposed on Kreuzberg, it erases all meaningful empirical and metaphorical differences, say, between the Bronx and Kreuzberg and effortlessly concludes that migrant hiphop is a causal outcome of the (material) conditions in diaspora ghettos. Nonetheless, the narrative is commutable and appears natural. These qualities allow for its complaisant reproduction in anywhere that can be constituted as a ghetto with minimal effort – anywhere for instance one identifies the presence of poverty and minorities. In turn, it establishes hiphop as *the* youth culture and provides the grounds for its appropriation and reproduction by migrant youths and its promotion and celebration by policy makers and social workers.

Along with the ghetto narrative, *noise* and *confusion* are taken to be elemental to the constitution of hiphop as a genre. By noise and confusion I refer to more general categories of meaning than their immediate associations. Taking my lead from Jacques Attali's remarks on music, I contend that hiphop noise alerts us to life and "heralds [the] times to come," while at the same time, as "an immaterial pleasure turned commodity," it is "bought, sold, or prohibited." Hence, it is simultaneously "prophetic," commercial, and political.⁶ Its musical and visual vocabulary

6. Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1985) (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989) 2-5. On technologies of noise exploited in rap music, see Rose 62-96.

exhibits confusion, not so much as disorder but as a state of being blended in seemingly conflictual messages and incoherent signs. So, as a genre, it is stylistically tumultuous, discursively troubling, and politically contingent. In the noise disseminated through hip-hop, prudence escorts possessive desires, violence courts peaceful imaginations, and prejudice joins humanist utopias. As such, hip-hop noise confuses its audiences and reviewers, and thus “continues to draw a great deal of attention to itself.”⁷

It is in this theoretical framework I approach the hip-hop stories of immigrant youths in the WorldCity Berlin. Contrary to what is being customarily perpetuated in public, popular discourses, Turkish migrant youths are not relentless agents of revitalized Turkishness or Islam in the midst of European modernity. Neither are they agents of *de facto* resistance on the margins of the society within which they live. Their stories unfold in an institutional topography, which provides and legitimizes models for conduct, conditions strategies of action, and engenders “transposable dispositions.”⁸ And the stories they rap are constituted and compromised by ghetto narratives and the vocabulary of hip-hop noise. Said differently, the diversity of migrant youth hip-hop is facilitated and authorized by the discursive, legal, and organizational resources available to the youths in Berlin, the WorldCity in the making. As resources, they delimit the parameters of resistance and conformity and afford the conditions of forging global affinities and bonds through hip-hop.

The next section is a brief excursion through the institutional topography of Berlin via Kreuzberg, the home of the hip, the alternative, and the avant-garde. Against this topographic survey, I will provide a history of migrant hip-hop in Berlin, which has captivated and troubled its audiences throughout the 1990s. I will end my narration by introducing Cartel and Islamic Force, two of the most successful acts which crowned the hip-hop scenes in Berlin, underwriting spectacular prospects and abrupt finales.⁹

7. Rose 1.

8. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977) 82-83.

9. This paper draws upon my research on migrant youth culture in Berlin (1990 to present), and relies on ethnographic evidence collected through participant observation, formal interviews, and conversations over the years. For a more detailed explication of cultural productions and civic participation of migrant youths in Berlin, see Levent Soysal, “Projects of Culture: An Ethnographic Episode in the Life of Migrant Youth in Berlin” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard U., 1999) and “Diversity of Experience, Experience of Diversity: Turkish Migrant Youth Culture in Berlin,” *Cultural Dynamics* 13.1(2001): 5-28. Funding for this research was generously granted by the Program for the Study of Germany and Europe, Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies, Harvard University. Cora Du Bois Chari-

Kreuzberg is in Berlin

In the short time span between the emblematic fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the official unification of the two Berlins and the two Germanies in October 1990, more than the physical impediments that had divided the city disappeared. Also gone was the narrative of the Divided City that had organized the lives of Berliners for more than four decades. On October 3, Berlin was figuratively inaugurated as a WorldCity. As re-unified Berlin has adapted to the narrative of the metropolis and underwent reconstruction on an extraordinary scale, it has been re-mapped in the image of a *Hauptstadt* of the unified Germany, *Kulturstadt* in a unified Europe, and *Weltstadt* in a cosmopolitan world. New identifications have replaced the old idiosyncratic Berlin stories of a Divided City.¹⁰

In the new spatial and narrative configuration of the city, Kreuzberg was no longer a desolate margin next to the Wall – a *Gastarbeiter* quarter, where the (Western) City literally met its borders. It has suddenly moved to the center, neighboring the historic *Mitte* (the mid-City) and the Government and Business Centers, under construction along the axis of the new Potsdamer Platz and Reichstag. With this move, Kreuzberg has become the ceremonial ghetto for the metropolis.¹¹ In its ghetto guise, Kreuzberg is cast not as a zone of excessive criminality and utmost poverty but one of cultural pluralism and alternative lifestyles. The widely available youth guide, *Berlin for Young People*,¹² for instance, describes the district as a “multicultural mix of peoples, Turks [living] along with students, ‘alternatives,’ punks, and perfectly normal Berlin families,” and “off-movie houses and theaters, wonderfully dingy bars, affordable restaurants and second-hand shops.” This vision of Kreuzberg is extremely popular and quasi-official.

Parallel to the reconstruction of Berlin, Kreuzberg has also undergone gentrification and is now facing competition from the “newly” discovered alternative neighborhoods, such as Prenzlauer Berg of the “East.”

10. Surely, the narrative of the Divided City has not completely disappeared. The former East Berlin continues to be called *the East*, and the *Ossies* and *Wessies* still replicate the division of the City in their voting patterns.

11. Berlin’s current population is about 3.5 million, of which approximately 12 percent are foreigners. Migrants from Turkey comprise the largest and the most visible minority group, nearly 4 percent. Of the Turks in Berlin, 36 percent are between the ages of 10 and 20, a fairly young population, crowding schools, streets, youth centers, work places, as well as unemployment and drop-out statistics. While Turks live and work in other parts of Berlin almost in equal numbers, Kreuzberg is known as the “Turkish ghetto.”

12. Presse- und Informationsamt des Landes Berlin, 1992.

Nonetheless, Kreuzberg remains in the (self-)portrayal of the city as the locus of hip and diversity. What is significant – and consequential – for our purposes is that in the intervening years hipness and diversity have come to identify and edify not just Kreuzberg but all of Berlin. In the process, Kreuzberg – and the ghetto narrative – has lost its singular place in the imaginary of the city and become *normalized*.

It is in this Kreuzberg and Berlin that Turkish and other migrant youths have emerged and risen to prominence as *natural* homeboys and enacted the ghetto narrative. First, a brief *Gang Episode* was in play. Almost instantaneously in the Spring of 1990, youth “gangs” became the rage. Gang graffiti covered the walls and youth formations with “cool” names, *36 Boys*, *Red Cobs*, *Black Panthers*, *Fighters*, and *Die Barbaren*, proliferated amid enthusiastic media attention and serious debate on youth violence.¹³ The “gangs” were comprised mostly of boys and affirmed a masculine language of violence. The girl gangs followed the boys’ gangs. Some of these groupings got engaged in territorial skirmishes with other gangs in school yards and neighborhood borders, and patrolled the city streets, picking fights with skinheads. Some were involved in petty crimes. Mostly, though, they spectacularly posed for the cameras, in proper gang wear, baseball bats and caps, black hoods, and expensive bomber jackets. Then, toward the end of the summer of 1991, the gang story lost its media appeal and youth gangs disappeared from the urban agenda, almost as suddenly as they had appeared.¹⁴

The next episode in the enactment of the ghetto narrative, which I call the *Hiphop Episode*, came into play in the mid 1990s. During this period, anti-foreigner attacks perpetuated by neonazi youths escalated to a more violent level, starting with the attacks on asylum seekers in Rostock in 1992 and continuing with the fire-bombings of Turkish homes in Mölln in 1992 and Solingen in 1993. As a response to growing violence, various state institutions made concerted efforts to “educate” youths (of the migrant, anti-fascist, neonazi, and street persuasion) and

13. In his *Turkish Power Boys: Ethnographie einer Jugendbande* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), Hermann Tertilt also observes this rapid spread of youth gangs in 1990 in and around Kölln. See also Arnd-Michael Nohl, *Jugend in der Migration: Türkische Banden und Cliques in empirischer Analyse* (Baltmannsweiler: Schneider, 1996).

14. Tertilt reports that Turkish Power Boys, founded in August 1990, dissolved around 1992. Note that the appearance of gangs in Germany follows the climax of gang activity in the United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Similarly, the end of gang episode in Germany was not far apart from the gradual demise of gangs in the US after the 1993 Los Angeles riots.

promoted hiphop as a comprehensive solution to the “problem” of youth violence. Consequently, hiphop became the pedagogical tool of choice among social workers and governmental officials for channeling youth away from violence and into productive artistic endeavors. Almost all youth centers in Berlin attempted to include at least one hiphop-related activity in their itineraries. They regularly organized hiphop shows, graffiti workshops, and disco nights with local and out-of-town rappers billed as main acts. Rappers and breakdancers then took center stage of the metropolis and attracted media attention as the new marvels of the ghetto. They appropriated and cultivated hiphop styles and contributed to the incorporation of Berlin, and Germany, into the global hiphop scene.

In Kreuzberg, NaunynRitze, a youth center operating under auspices of Kreuzberg’s municipal government, was (and still is) the headquarters for hiphop. Between 1992 and 1994, NaunynRitze was home to one of the most successful and long-lasting hiphop posses, *To Stay Here is My Right*. Under the approving supervision of NaunynRitze’s social-work team, the Posse flourished into a successful “hiphop community” and attracted the prospective stars and hiphop hopefuls to NaunynRitze. Graffiti writing sessions, breakdance practices, rap courses, and hiphop parties promptly dominated the cultural agenda of the “ghetto” youth attending NaunynRitze. By 1993, the hiphop scene in Kreuzberg had its prominent names, MC Gio, writers Neco and Sony, DJ Derezon, dancer Storm, and rapper Boe B. Their pictures and words were eminently featured in the stylish pages of cosmopolitan Berlin bi-weeklies. Their stories and art were interpreted, and amplified, as the necessary condition of social harmony and the multicultural unison of Berlin.

When it came to addressing the youths as cultural producers or consumers of hiphop, NuanyynRitze was not alone. During the Hiphop Episode every other state and private agency resorted to hiphop in order to reach out to the youth. There was, for instance, a state-subsidized Hiphop Café in Schöneberg for rappers and writers, a Berlin-wide annual rap competition for young women, initiated by non-profit organizations, and, a two-day dance and music show, called *Istanbul*, organized by *Tempodrom*, one of the major music venues in Berlin. *Dschungel Info 95*, published by a state-sponsored agency responsible for the cultural education of the youth, listed the addresses of music and dance studios, Rock and HipHop mobiles, music schools, graffiti workshops, and alternative cafés and clubs, spread throughout the city.

Gangway, a Berlin-wide organization funded by various state agencies to deliver social work to “street kids,” arranged trips to hiphop festivals in various European countries.

It should be noted that the emphasis on diversity in Berlin’s hiphop stages was in line with the discursive practices of Berlin’s government, promoting a city of tolerance and plurality over the course of 1990s. Berlin’s Foreigners’ Office, for instance, embarked a diversity campaign in 1992 and a poster published by the Office covered the billboards of the city, pronouncing “Wir sind Berlin” [We are Berlin]. The Berlin in the poster comprised the portrait photos of persons of diverse professions, ages, colors, and genders. The ethnicities of the persons in the poster were not identifiable but only suggested.¹⁵ Since then the Office has been involved in other campaigns, some successful, some utterly misguided (posters of love between a migrant black girl and a neonazi youth, for instance), all in the service of achieving a cosmopolitan Berlin, tolerant and diverse. In addition to its public education campaigns, the Foreigners’ Office has taken part in establishing the Mete Ekşi Prize, given in memory of a 19-year-old Turkish youth killed in a street fight in Kreuzberg in the November of 1991. The prize is awarded to youth projects that promote diversity and tolerance and endorse dialogue against violence.

Returning to my periodization of the youth scene, the Hiphop episode was a period of intense interest in ghetto styles and aesthetics, and the consequent enactments of the hiphop stories by migrant youths were effective in establishing Berlin in the image of tolerance and diversity. The third episode in Berlin’s youth scene, *World Culture Episode*, was marked by the decline of ghetto narrative and hence hiphop. By 1995, the narrative of the metropolis was firmly in place, and Berlin was being projected as a Global City proper – already a cultural center, a soon-to-be a corporate citadel under the shadow of the Sony and Mercedes empires, and adapting to the role of a capital city, as one by one the centers of governing had revealed themselves to the public as architectural wonders.

In 1996, Berlin was the stage to global events, such as the Carnival of the Cultures and Love Parade. The youths of Berlin were the primary actors and audiences on this metropolitan stage. In line with the world-wide trends in youth scenes, hiphop was relinquishing its place to retro fashions, club

15. Berlin’s Foreigners’ Office is a consultative body but it is highly effective in shaping public opinion. The popular motto of the Office, “*Miteinander Leben*” [Living Together] marks every public or private project, making a claim to Berlin’s diversity.

cultures, and techno. The Love Parade, the three-day non-stop techno show that took over the city, unquestionably showed that the orange-green-brown color code of techno attire had deposed the black baggy jeans and hoods of hip-hop. Rap as a genre, on the other hand, had attained a dominating position in popular music venues and migrant rappers were turning their attention to reach larger audiences and markets. Following Cartel, the first migrant rap group to achieve commercial success in Germany and Turkey, migrant rap groups were beginning to search their fortunes beyond the limits of their presumed ghettos. Like their counterparts elsewhere in the world, they were aspiring to become stars, singing “ghetto” songs on global stages. In a metropolitan center contending to be a WorldCity, the globalist possibilities of hip-hop seemed as *habitual* as the obvious *naturalness* of hip-hop.

The story of migrant rappers I will narrate in the next section reads against this condensed, episodic history of youth culture in Berlin. In this contingent history, Cartel and Islamic Force represent the apex of the Hip-hop Episode, the point at which the ghetto narrative encounters media and markets, and enters into policy and scholarly discourses. Migrant rap is in effect ghetto narrative in action and through its enactment migrant youths speak to the narratives about them, formulate universal dispositions in the language of rap, and display their inventiveness. In their songs, they invoke the contemporary discourses of migrancy, plurality, human rights, and equality, which (en)gender their presence in the public spaces of Berlin and complicate ‘national’ configurations of belonging and conventional conceptions of Otherhood.¹⁶

16. The analysis I advance here differs in theoretical perspective and interpretive emphasis from various other explications of migrant rap in Berlin, and Cartel’s rap in particular – among them, Ayhan Kaya, “*Sicher in Kreuzberg*”: *Constructing Diasporas. Turkish Hip-Hop Youth in Berlin* (Berlin: Transcript, 2001); Çağlar, “Popular Culture, Marginality and Institutional Incorporation: German-Turkish Rap and Turkish Pop in Berlin,” *Cultural Dynamics* 10.3: 243-61; Tom Cheesman, “Polyglot Politics: Hip Hop in Germany,” *Debatte* 6.2 (1998): 191-214; and Kevin Robins and David Morley, “*Almanci, Yabancı*,” *Cultural Studies* 10.2 (1996): 248-54. Kaya identifies Turkish rappers as a blend of Gramscian “organic intellectuals” and “contemporary” Turkish minstrels who are engaged in diasporic cultural politics from the position of marginality. Against Kaya’s argument of “radical opposition from the margins,” Çağlar asserts that Turkish rap might be placed at the “center” and contribute to the “commodification and reification” of cultural differences, depending on the institutions and the structures into which rap is “incorporated.” Cheesman’s article is an extensive narration of Cartel’s story as an instance of “polyglot pop politics.” Finally, Robins and Morley takes the Cartel controversy as an act of “bringing back home” and ventures into a questionable analysis of crisis of identity and democracy in Turkey. Leaving out my disagreements on various matters of theoretical framework and empirical detail, I should emphasize that my reading remains outside of frameworks in which centers and margins occupy analytical poles or migrant rap’s oppositional or reifying role is evidently apparent.

Ghetto Narrative in Action

Cartel's sensational entry to the world of hiphop began in a small but professional-looking and well-equipped studio called *Ypsilon* on a back street in Berlin in 1994. The founders of the studio, Ünal Yüksel, Ozan Sinan, and Yüksel Mutlu, were sure then that they were on the verge of a breakthrough, a new record that would rock the market like a "bomb." What was in the making was a project bringing together Turkish rappers from all over Germany.

A year later the migrant rappers of Cartel – Karakan from Nürnberg, Erci E. from Berlin, and Da Crime Posse from Kiel – were on the cover of *Spex*, the prime music journal of Germany. Their CD, *Cartel*, was out and selling big. They were on tour in Germany and Turkey, performing to sold-out crowds. The end of Cartel however came as quickly as its claim to fame. Cartel's second concert in Berlin that year, with highly popular rap groups Advanced Chemistry and No Remorz, was canceled amid rumors of a fall-out between the band and their producers.

Cartel's sensational excursion into the popular music scene immediately reignited the debates on the prospects of integration, or rather, its demise, since, it was argued, those who were to integrate were showing undeniable signs of isolationism and segregation. The proof was in the refrain of the seventh song on the CD, "You Are a Turk." Combined with Cartel's excessive reference to solidarity, blood brotherhood, and violence, the refrain was read and presented as an aggressive manifesto, and a nationalist one at that.¹⁷ In no time, this interpretive enterprise, along with expressions of grave concern for the future of "the second generation," dominated the public debate.

The writing on Cartel has not been much concerned with the arts of rap, the musical content of Cartel's debut album, or its commercial packaging. Even in articles in music magazines, Cartel's success was never measured by its accomplishments within the norms of a particular musical genre. Playful samples of Turkish tunes frame the bullet-fast rhymes, melodic couplets skillfully cut the running beat of bass and drums, familiar Turkish tunes seamlessly highlight the rhymes verbalized in the foreignness of Spanish (or rhyming in the familiar sound of

17. The presence of the far-right youths of Ülkücü Gençlik (also known as Gray Wolves) in Cartel's concerts in Turkey was taken as the further proof of Cartel's nationalism. Coincidentally, their hand-sign, signifying a "wolf," was similar to the B-Boy salute of the rappers. Despite Cartel's renunciation of any association with the far right, this coincidence remained as an integral component of the Cartel story.

German against the foreignness of Turkish melodies), mischievous allusions cover the vast terrain of popular culture, and voice-overs imitate the melancholic yearnings in Turkish B movies. None of this mattered insofar as it explained Cartel's success. Also excluded from analysis were Cartel's mastery in creating dance music with the necessary catchy tunes and inviting rhythms, their efficient appropriation of the genre particularisms in terms of stage and media presentation, and the ferocity of the music industry and the media in promoting "new" icons of popular culture and consumption.¹⁸

Why, then, the analysis of Cartel remained sequestered in the space of a refrain? Why, then, did "You Are a Turk" become the defining message in a CD of twelve songs, delivered in four languages (Turkish, English, German, Spanish) by three separate bands whose members comprise Turkish, German, and Spanish youths? Why was ethnic identification a more serious offense than implicit violence against women in an album ridden with male sexual commentary in every other song?

The answer properly lies in the ghetto narrative, which, as I have argued, assigns *authenticity* to the voices of rappers. As a caption in *Spex* reads, "here stands for the first time a band on stage [in Istanbul], which represents the really existing Turkish youths and articulates their feelings and thoughts in a form as it has never been seen in Turkish pop music up until now."¹⁹ It is never clear why pop music does not represent "the feelings of youths" but rap music does, unless one assumes the authenticity of the latter over the former. More importantly, though, the authenticity credited to the voice of Cartel derives from Turkishness. Only from the grounds of Turkishness, Istanbul that is, can Cartel legitimately speak. This move collapses all meaningful distances (and affinities) between Cartel and Turkish youths, and between the youths in Berlin and Istanbul, and disregards the proficiency of rappers and their audiences in the arts of hiphop and rap. In the conditions of migrancy, ghetto narrative requires Turkishness and thus emerges the refrain "You're a Turk" as the defining trope of their artistic and political expression.

If Cartel's songs are to be read as manifestos, they are first and foremost *rap* manifestos. They diligently follow hegemonic scripts of rap

18. The following is a representative sample of the press coverage of Cartel and migrant hiphop: "Cartel: Wir sind die Deutschen von Morgen," *Spex* (Nov. 1995): 32-37; "Die neue türkische Musik-szene: 'Im Zeichen des Halbmonds,'" *WOM Journal* (1996): 44-48; and, "Türksun=Du bist Türke," *Die Zeit* (12 Jan. 1996).

19. *Spex*, "Cartel."

woven through narratives of migrancy. Let me sample Cartel's oeuvre to bring this point home. In one song, Cartel reaches out to a fifteen-year-old drug-addict and orders him to shake off the habit: "listen to this, stupid. . . in your life you're the only thing."²⁰ In another, it is party time but before checking out the girls, one should see if the music is hiphop; if, "yes, then, arms to the left, arms to the right, . . . it's too funky, isn't it?" Then comes popular social criticism: "Television is a dead vision, don't surf channels, choose your life" and "money is in everybody's mind, even the life itself has turned into a black-market."

Rap is about talking and teaching the truth, but what is rap without competitive adolescent male posturing and sexual bravado? Everything starts in a discotheque: "a brown chick came to me, timberland shoes, fancy jacket, a little talk, don't you see, it's done! Your place or mine? . . . in a one night-stand, twenty-five positions, one, two, three, four, then the chick is finished, I'm nothing but a bomb." Although posturing and partying is necessarily part of the story, it does not preclude Cartel from lecturing the youths on becoming productive persons: "you have capacity for many things, don't be passive, don't ask me what to do, just do something, language, music, sports, anything, . . . choose your life." The list is necessarily limited, but the message is clear: as an able person, one should lead a resourceful life, a life accomplished through the fulfillment of mind, senses, and the body. As a person, one should choose life.

But, in Cartel's rap, as expected of rap, "it's war every day. The streets are in blood! But the blood is not red. It is *kara kan* [black blood]!" And, migrants who came to work for nothing, have suffered too much heartache and adversity as a community: "Isn't that enough? we were oppressed, defiled, we worked like donkeys, our brothers died, we're said to be *Almançı* in our country and foreigners here, isn't this enough?" For Cartel, this tragic plight could only be overcome by forming a community built on fraternal relations and self-reliance: "Let's work again, hand-in hand, let's see what happens when we lean on each other, use your head and show you're a Turk, so many jobs available in the market, just prove yourself, let go of foreign brands, nike, puma, adidas, . . . let's live together again, let's build a new life, together." Achieving a new life, however, is premised on unity and solidarity within the community; because "the future is so dark, leave the divisions aside, and unite, Turk and Kurd are brothers, those who divide them are just crooks."

20. All translations of the lyrics are mine.

Only within this lyrical design of hiphop noise “you’re a Turk” allows for meaningful interpretation. Theirs is not the call of banal nationalism – though it anticipates the controversy: “*Biz Türküz deyince, faşist bilindik* [when we said we’re Turkish, we’re branded as fascists].” The discrimination invoked is not a frivolous complaint but an attempt to make an important distinction as to where one stands. In the political discourse of Germany and Turkey, the term fascist denotes, without reservation, the proponents of “nationalism.” Moreover, in the civic spaces in Germany and Turkey, any unqualified reference to Turkishness (or Germanness) carries the burden of being identified as an unreformed nationalist — hence, a fascist. So, contrary to the naïvete attributed to them, the rappers of Cartel were, at least, aware of the political ramifications of their message. On these grounds, and in the generic vocabulary of hiphop, Cartel makes its plea to blood brothers to unite the “three corners of Germany” as does Cartel the rap crew: “Turk, Kurd, Circassian, Laz, if we divide, we’re going to lose, we’ll unite and break the chains, blood, blood, blood brothers, united they can’t defeat us.”

Cartel’s message is obviously “confused.” Ghetto stories, bad streets, adolescent dreams, raw sexuality, moral indignation, and defiant politics are incoherently intertwined. Recklessness and heroic gestures go hand in hand with prudence and cool manners. Violence is tempered with calls for civic responsibility. Despite attempts to the contrary (including my own in this essay), narrating Cartel does not lend itself to cohesive stories and self-evident branding. We do not simply have diasporic revivalism (or resistance, if you prefer) or Turkishness in action. What we have is a contentious enactment of ghetto narrative, which derives its potency and confusion from the conventions of rap as a genre. In this sense, Cartel — the act and the posse — was nothing but an accomplished rap performance in the order of its counterparts in other places (e.g., in Istanbul, Paris, and Los Angeles). It had a short but “prophetic” presence on the stages and imaginary of Berlin, Germany, and Turkey.

While Cartel the band was a true success story (albeit temporarily), Cartel the movement was a fading hiphop gesture. When Cartel was attracting large audiences and selling upwards of 300,000 records, the hiphop episode had already been relegated to the background of youth culture. It was an untenable project, reminiscing on a long gone episode.

Cartel, of course, was not the only hiphop saga on Berlin’s hiphop stages. Before Cartel, there was Islamic Force. On posters from early

1990s the names of Boe B. (after his high school nickname, Bobby of Dallas fame) and his DJ and producer Derezon (short for “there is only one”) frequently appear. Islamic Force is their creation, with the addition of Killa Hakan, a nickname from his gang days with 36 Boys, with a real rap sheet, and Nellie, an aspiring soul singer from Kosova, married to Derezon.

As the story goes, Boe B. starts rapping while in high school. From the beginning, Boe B. makes “original,” “*harbi*” [true] rap his trademark – that is staying faithful to the authentic sound and language of rap, as prophesied by its creators in the beginning, in particular by his idol, Afrika Bambaataa. Original rap is at the same time Boe B.’s response to sensational, popular rap (of Cartel, for instance). Accordingly, he has a history of “troubles,” so he can affirmatively tell the ghetto youths his message of “no-trouble” (Boe B. never made clear what his troubles were). He improves his English, listening to rap records, and writes and raps primarily in English, so he can advance a claim to mastery of rap’s original vernacular. In his rap, he plainly speaks of a typical ghetto, tormented by drugs, violence, and intolerance. As such, he derives his authenticity from the streets of Kreuzberg (as ghetto), knowing its problems and teaching its youth, and from the world of hiphop, knowing its techniques and speaking its vernacular. Thus, he claims to be, and he becomes, a *harbi* rapper.

From Boe B.’s collaboration with Derezon comes the first Islamic Force record *My Melody* in double-eight-format. 1993 marks Islamic Force’s debut EP, *The Whole World is Your Home*. The world Boe B. imagines in this record is a world inhabited by a great family, without ethnic and racial differences and without hierarchies. It is a world of one nation of brothers and sisters and is in contrast with the real world of “madness and badness.” Boe B., the messenger, presents us a choice and pleads with us to espouse the “reality of love” over the “reality of badness.” This utopic humanism is a crucial ingredient of Islamic Force’s rap, as well as the imaginary of the hiphop world I have been depicting throughout this essay. Even the defensive, inward-looking brotherhood of Cartel, with its emphasis on confrontation, relies on a fantasy of achieving a better world-albeit after too much suffering and the necessary battles with “badness.”

This emphatic engagement of migrant rap with an affirmative vision of world harmony and the expressed desire of rappers for such a world are impossible to miss or misread. Even a quick glance at album covers

and inserts, or a quick reading of the numerous answers they have given in interviews, is enough to recognize the salience of this universalist thread in their voice. This connection to an imagined world-at-large, however, is remarkably absent from popular and academic cultural analysis.²¹ It is deemed insignificant, or perhaps inauthentic, as compared to the “reality” of ghetto and foreignness. As I have argued, their “truth” is commonly relegated to conditions of rootlessness (for their home is elsewhere), destitution (for their habitat is the ghetto), and reactive mobilization (for their only recourse to action is resistance).

In 1995, encouraged by Cartel’s success, Islamic Force was contemplating a venture into Turkish music markets. To achieve this they changed their name to Ka.Nak. In the words of Boe B., Islamic Force was meant to be provocative and arouse curiosity in Germany. They simply “wanted to attract the attention of those who were showing interest.” Given the political configuration of Turkey in the 1990s, however, Islamic Force was more than provocative. It was a liability for a band entering the music scene and they were aware how Cartel was associated with right-wing politics. They could have been labeled “Islamist” and that would not go well with a band some of whose members belong to a Sufi cultural-religious branch, Alevi, known for their strong secular standing. So they chose Ka.Nak: “‘Ka’ originally means *insan* [human]. In Polynesian, it means human. In Turkish, it may mean ‘*Kan Ak,*’ like blood is flowing. For instance, for the Germans, you know they call us *Kanake* here.” As explained by Boe B., this multi-referential name suited the crew of Islamic Force well. Its emphasis was on being human [*ka*], a trademark of Boe B.’s rap. It included the definitive rap metaphor, blood [*kan*], unmistakably alluding to ghetto conditions. It incorporated the derogatory *kanak*, just in the same way Black rappers were deploying *nigger*.

The planned single of the CD that would come under the new name was to be a “cover version” of celebrated pop singer Sezen Aksu’s hit song, “Hadi Bakalım” [Come on, Take it Easy] with lyrics adapted from renowned Turkish poet Tevfik Fikret’s *Han-ı Yağma* [At the Table of Plunder]. Engineered with the assistance of their manager in Germany and their producer in Turkey, this seemed a right choice for entering the

21. Kaya is an exception in this respect. In the typology he develops, he brands Islamic Force as “universalist political rap” in opposition to Cartel’s “cultural nationalist rap.” See Kaya, “Sicher in Kreuzberg.”

Turkish music market. Sampling a pop song and emphasizing melody, Boe B. was aware of the compromise he was making: “In this CD, rap is not at the forefront. We thought pop is big in Turkey. In order to familiarize people with rap, we stayed close to pop.” Considering the raging poetic flow and indignant morality of Fikret’s poem, written at the opening of the twentieth century and condemning corruption, the message however was becoming: “Eat Masters, do eat, This table of plunder is yours, Eat Masters, do eat, Eat till you explode, till you burst, Eat Masters, do eat, Now, it is your turn.” What would have been a better choice than a rap denouncing corruption to the popular tunes of “come on, have it easy,” when public agenda was saturated by corruption at high places?

Islamic Force’s *Mesaj* [Message] came out however not as they projected in 1996 in Turkey, but a year later in Germany. Moreover, Boe B. and his crew were not able to use their carefully crafted new name, Ka.Nak, apparently because of copyright problems. Instead, the group’s name was listed on the CD as *\$lamic Force*, a possible reference to the power of money and power of their rap. In the meantime, in the Turkey of 1997, political corruption had become less of an issue, and had rather assumed the guise of a taken-for-granted nuisance in the background. In the end, the swift, episodic procession of politics and popular culture, market and copyright complications, and the unfortunate and untimely death of Boe B. later in 1999 deprived Islamic Force of their much anticipated Cartel-like moment of glory.

The travails of Boe B. and his crew, from Islamic Force, to Ka.Nak, and then to *\$lamic Force*, alternatively from original rap to oriental rap, is a *tour de force* in ghetto narrative. The “troubles” and dire ghetto conditions take them to the world of rap. There they stand for authenticity of rap — no melody and lyrics in English — until the opportunity strikes to make it. Then they give in to market forces and do the accepted thing, not the right thing: they change their name and sing to catchy tunes. However, it is wrong to read this as a fall from grace, from high-minded, sincere universalism to cynical at best cooptation. Not unlike Cartel, this is again “confusion” of rap — “*prophetic*,” commercial, and political, all at once and resistant to cohesive narration.

Rap is Dead, Es lebe Kanak

Rap is obviously not dead. Cartel and Islamic Force do not exist as hiphop crews anymore, but Erci E., Derezon, Killa Hakan continue their

careers as rappers. Killa Hakan, with his new CD release, claims a place in the rapidly changing world of hip-hop. Aziza A., who entered the hip-hop scene as the first female rapper with a pointedly titled *Es ist Zeit* [It is Time], takes the stage as the elder states-woman of rap. She has a new CD out in Turkey. Karakan's name makes a guest appearance on the CD by the Turkish rap group Nefret from Istanbul. Erci E. has his solo CDs. The new commercial success story is critically acclaimed Kool Savas.

The rap of Hip-hop Episode, the raw art of ghetto boys and girls, however, no longer exists — not in that scale, in any case. Many youth centers in Berlin still have hip-hop on their activity lists. Newspapers carry occasional articles on hip-hop and graffiti. The glory days, however, seem to be over. Now it is time for *Kanak Attak*, a stylized, intellectual “ghetto” movement, comprising a loose collective of young artists, writers, musicians, including rappers old and new, and filmmakers. Instead of speaking in rebellious ghetto languages their words and images rebel against the discursive installations of the ghetto. As their website manifesto states, they “reject the Kanakization of certain groups of people” and refuse “all sorts of identity politics based on ethnologic ascriptions.”²² In other words, they are Kanak so as to invert Kanak and this new Kanak is a sign of the times, when the emphasis is on world culture and cosmopolitanism.

In this essay, I did not aim to explain the totality of hip-hop “hyperactivity” in Berlin because “[t]here is simply too much of it to be assimilated.”²³ Indeed, the burden of imagining, let alone accounting for, that totality overshadows the efforts to appraise an expressive genre that crosses analytical boundaries with seeming effortlessness — e.g., culture, ethnicity, class, political orientation, identity—and manages to create moral, cultural, commercial, and political tremors of varying degrees. Yet, most analysis indifferently proceeds from one artist (Cartel), one instance (Cartel's ascent to fame), or one pronouncement (Cartel's refrain, “You're a Turk”). Then, inundated with an origin story that mechanically frames every analytic engagement as one of a marginality-ethnicity-race problematic, rap operates as a convenient but fractious trope in doing, or undoing, identity (politics). Understanding (Turkish) hip-hop becomes an undemanding (and largely uninteresting) exercise in deconstructing

22. <http://www.kanak-attak.de/ka/about.html>. The translation is mine.

23. Gilroy, “Family Affair” 309.

authenticity claims, assigning resistances, or discovering submissions.

Moreover, the temporal and spatial coordinates of analytical frames employed devote no consideration to the episodic shifts in politics and popular culture and the connections that transgress the territorial bounds of the nation(-state). The various readings of the Cartel “affair,” for instance, relies on a single moment in the personal histories of actors involved and in the micro history of hip-hop in Berlin. Once the moment is over, the analysis stands without its own empirical foundation. Even the extension of temporal frame, say, about a decade, may elevate the shortsightedness of the assertions advanced and typologies produced, revealing not only contiguities, but also shifts and variations.

As for the spatial coordinates, the tendency, as I have indicated, is to study the cultural products of migrant youths within host-home country configurations of the predominant migration narrative. The story of Turkish/Oriental rap takes place in Kreuzberg, the tropical Turkish ghetto of Germany—as the popular saying goes, the “biggest Turkish city outside Turkey.” Its source of authentication is located in Turkey—as in Turkish culture, Turkish identity, and Turkish politics. Its links to Germany and German politics are understood via Turkishness, as mere enactments of reaction to racism against foreigners.

What one does do, then, with the hip-hop articulation of a claim, which simply states “To Stay Is My Right”? Where does one locate that Posse of youths from Kreuzberg who deem it appropriate to leave unanswered even the basic questions of where and why they wish to stay? What happens to projects that desire shared worlds and appeal to commonalities instead of maps and borders? Are we to dismiss them as youthful digressions, inconsequential aspirations, and shallow universalisms?

I have argued for the possibility of a perceptive frame of interpretation of hyperactivity of migrant hip-hop if we take a moment from our unquestioning search for diaspora sensibilities, unblemished rebellions, and inevitable conformities, and allow for multi-referentiality, confusion, and connectedness. This we can achieve by locating the makers and consumers of hip-hop simultaneously within the bounds of the organized noise of hip-hop and within discursive terrains that extend beyond the cognitive maps of ethnicity and nation. Our analytical frames then recognize that the message of migrant hip-hop is predicated on the constraints and possibilities of hip-hop as a world-level, performative genre with an elaborate idiomatic vernacular, as well as on the confines of the

available institutional resources and discourses that foster cultural particularisms and diversities.

It is in these terms that Turkish rappers, old and new, cherish their presence on Berlin's public stages and instantiate hiphop effects in the cultural spaces of Kreuzberg. From the stages of Berlin, they speak to us in angry street talk and preach about utopian worlds of unity and solidarity. Their music resonates with sounds and verses written elsewhere in the world – for instance, by NTM in Paris, N.W.A in Los Angeles, Fun'da'mental in London – realizing tangible commonalities and shared sensibilities with their brothers in rap, the “prophets of rage” and “bad sistas”²⁴ of the global ecumene. Although their performative moment is over, their noise remains with us.

24. Rose.