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BOOK REVIEWS

**REPRESENTING ISLAM: HIP-HOP OF THE SEPTEMBER
11 GENERATION, KAMALUDEEN MOHAMED NASIR (2020)**

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In *Representing Islam: Hip-Hop of the September 11 Generation*, sociologist Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir explores how Muslim hip-hoppers across the globe navigate the political and social climate of the Global War on Terror, while also negotiating their own relationship with Islam.

The premise of the book is interesting and ambitious. Beyond an American or Euro-centric approach to hip hop in general and to Muslim hip hop in particular, Mohamed Nasir wants to ‘provincialize’ (9) hip hop and examine hip hop’s ‘glocalization’ (33) within Muslim youth cultures beyond North America, whether they develop among migrant-descendants in the urban centres of Europe or Australia or among indigenous Muslim populations in Africa, the Middle East, Central or South East Asia. Thus, he aspires to explore how hip hop as an African American art form becomes gradually ‘interwoven with local flavors’ and reflective of local social and political realities (32).

Nonetheless, the author clearly acknowledges the primordial significance of African American hip hop, to which practitioners on the Asian, African and European continents continue to be indebted. In the first chapter especially, but also throughout the book, he evokes the role of the Five Percenters, the Nation of Islam and Sunni Islam in the emergence of African American hip hop and in inspiring Muslim hip-hoppers elsewhere. For the latter, negotiating the authenticity of their work happens often in conversation with Muslim (-inspired) African American hip hop artists. Yet, at least as important in terms of inspiration is what the author calls, building on Bourdieu’s concept of ‘homology’ (1984, 1988), the ‘homological imagination’ of Muslim artists globally: they construe their own lived experiences through those of

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African Americans, as mediated to them through hip hop. Muslims, whether descendants of migrants in the so-called West, or those inhabiting postcolonial urban peripheries, often live under strained economic conditions where urban poverty, gang violence, mass incarceration and drug consumption are also part of their social reality. Such experiences can be uniquely expressed, addressed and critiqued through the hip hop genre. Mohamed Nasir examines these connections or homologues more specifically in the post-9/11 era, which has caused an entire generation to grow up with a new level of stigmatization; directly or indirectly subjected to surveillance, securitization and hyper-scrutiny (1–2).

These conditions have induced certain writers, notably in Great Britain, to speak of Muslims as the ‘new blacks’ (27). Mohamed Nasir engages this trope briefly in the first chapter ‘Songs rather than screams’, without problematizing it. Later in the book, however, when discussing Muslim hip hop, he acknowledges some of the risks of conflating the African American condition with global Muslim realities. So, for instance, he concedes that the over-identification with Malcolm X in global Muslim hip hop risks to lose sight of the structural conditions in which his struggle was situated as well as their historical specificities (42). He also exposes, albeit briefly, some of the possible tensions between global Muslim hip hop activists for human rights and African American movements for racial justice such as BlackLivesMatter (80–83). Still, a more thorough investigation into the place of Blackness in global Muslim hip hop, as well as into the important but productive connections and complex tensions between Black liberation and other struggles against imperialism addressed in Muslim hip hop would have been desirable.

At the same time, the concept of the homological imagination enables the author to successfully trace the vast global connections between themes and styles elaborated in African American hip hop and Muslim-hip hop elsewhere, reworked to match local circumstances and sensibilities. Simultaneously, because of the momentous generational apprehension triggered by the impact of the Global War on Terror on Muslim communities worldwide, this homological imagination, while never completely severed from its African American inheritance, can also lessen. Hence, ‘the nodes of cultural influence in Muslim hip-hop are increasingly dispersed’ (31). This hip hop generation’s ‘status and identity’, the author argues convincingly, goes ‘beyond a nation-state narrative, allowing us to see the connectivity on a global platform’ (31).

While the ‘Islamic roots of hip hop’ are, as mentioned above, an important trope for a narrative of authenticity among Muslim hip hop artists worldwide, this does not fully assuage the artists’ anxieties around performing a genre that is not altogether accepted as a legitimate Muslim form of artistic expression. In the North American Muslim context, this has to do, argues Su’ad Abdul Khabeer (2016), with ‘ethno-religious hierarchies’. Mohamed Nasir does not explicitly consider the way these hierarchies might impact various Muslim musical sensibilities in their own appreciation of music. He gives more weight, in particular Chapter 2, ‘Something that is ours’, to the efforts the artists invest – in a context where music is already theologically contested within orthodox Islam – to ‘Islamize’ hip hop locutions and modes of conduct. He discusses how artists who identify as Muslim despite their widely varying modes of practice and conviction often seek to align the genre with some broader understandings of what counts as normatively Muslim; by according it with certain moral ideals, bodily conduct and clean language, enacting, as he puts it aptly, a ‘lyrical and bodily discipline’ (53). It might be regretted that the

author addresses questions of bodily discipline (with exception of the question of tattoos) only in passing, although he discusses the importance of hijab for many Muslim female hip-hoppers in Chapter 4. The elaborations around lyrical discipline are, however, well-traced; the author shows how hip hop expressions such as 'the street' are re-signified in order to speak about local social realities in critical, productive, even pedagogical ways. Certain rappers do deploy conventional da'wa messages of piety, which is especially popular in South East Asia where rappers collaborate with *nasheed* singers. Most artists, however, orient their lyrical discipline to engage in socially conscious and political, progressive messages, something which is further developed in Chapter 3, 'A problem of human rights'.

There is clearly a mandate among Muslim hip hop artists to engage in a 'sonic jihad' (77), that implies to speak out 'against oppression' and to promote social justice. The artists he surveys rap against the criminal justice system, police, prisons; since 9/11 against securitization, Islamophobia, wars and foreign interventions; and in support of Palestinian self-determination, the latter of which has, the author shows, a central place in the global Muslim hip hop imagination (101). The social justice commitment is the terrain, says Nasir, where many Muslim hip hop artists, across the religious spectrum, converge. Within diasporic Muslim hip hop, these themes also expose the thoroughly cosmopolitan and internationalist stance that corresponds to the artists' own 'hyphenated identities', which 'transcend national boundaries' (97). In Muslim majority contexts, by contrast, hip hop artists often use their social justice mandate specifically to address burning *local* issues such as poverty, class and fighting corruption (96–97). These differences are noteworthy but are glossed over too quickly. One would have loved here to gain a deeper understanding of the different appreciation of and connection to locality and mobility these diasporic and non-diasporic rappers display in their lyrics. The strong connection exhibited by North African rappers, for instance, to the neighbourhood (see, e.g., Barone 2019), must also be read in connection to how their own transnationalist endeavours – for instance, migration – are actively prevented through an entire transnational security apparatus.

That women are marginalized within the overall masculinist hip hop culture has been documented widely. In that Muslim hip hop is no exception. Chapter 4, 'She's reppin' Islam', discusses how, in a world obsessed with Muslim women's bodies, Muslim women's capacity to engage in hip hop is rendered even more intricate. The Muslim female body is a particular contested 'site of moral judgement', which makes Muslim women's hip hop object to critique, even demonization (109). Yet Muslim women do not hold back from expressing themselves through this genre, and the author traces the emergence of a 'hijab counter-culture' and a 'hijabster movement' in connection with Muslim hip hop culture, as he looks especially at the United States, United Kingdom and South East Asia. Examining the lyrics of female rappers from these regions, he finds that the hijab is a much-thematized topic. The language of choice is consistently deployed when it comes to hijab as well as a general ambition of 'defending and empowering female adherents'. This, he reads in connection with the fact that hijab-wearing Muslim women are the main victims of Islamophobic hate crimes in western countries (117). But the author also shows how male rappers occasionally take up this topic, celebrating hijab-wearing women (119), which can easily sound paternalizing, even misogynist.

Hip hop's 'potency [...] as a vehicle for social and political activism often puts it at odds with the establishment. Thus, it is not surprising that governments across the globe can serve as important gatekeepers of hip-hop' (135), as the author claims at the beginning of Chapter 5, 'Enemy of the state'. Due to the different political contexts across the globe and different commitments to 'free speech', this chapter is divided geographically. In the section 'Muslim hip-hop in the "free world"', the author acknowledges efforts to censor artists in western liberal states but concludes that these efforts are not very successful. The author sees the most important consequences for speaking out against the establishment to be commercial ones that artists have to negotiate: not getting distributed by major labels, not being played on TV or radio stations, or having one's YouTube clips deleted. His conclusion remains nonetheless optimistic: 'Muslim hip-hop can truly thrive in Western liberal states [...]; by reason of the West's encouragement of the rights of freedom of speech and expression' (142–43). Here, one would have hoped for a more critical analysis. While it is certainly true that in comparison with certain authoritarian regimes, these artists fare better in democratic states, it is questionable if one should reduce the various modes of suppressing the voices of politically outspoken Muslims to economic disadvantages. Considerations in this complex political landscape around the psychological impact of harassment by police or media lynching or around the complex question of self-censorship in order to circumvent these consequences would have been useful here.

The sub-section 'Arabian Knights' dresses a quick picture of North African and Middle Eastern rappers with a focus on the role of rap in the revolutionary struggles from 2011 onwards. It mentions the role of foreign funding and of hip hop diplomacy as efforts to streamline this potentially subversive art form with broader foreign policy directives stemming from western countries. Here, as well as in the previous chapter, one misses a discussion of North African female rappers that have become increasingly visible in the past fifteen years. Finally, a section entitled, 'Hip-Hop in the Muslim Archipelago' investigates the complex relation with governments in Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore.

In conclusion, the book offers the reader a real tour-de-force through the world of Muslim hip hop. It brings together countless rappers who belong to that 9/11 generation, confronts us with the struggles they face, the norms and constraints – political, economic, religious and social – they negotiate and the topics they engage with. Rarely does a book offer the opportunity to think about hip hop artists in Malaysia, Afghanistan, Palestine, France and the United States together, consider their connections and shared vocabularies, imaginaries and dreams, while also understanding some of the local specificities. Of course, the books' strength, that is its breadth, is also its weakness: the reader is sometimes left breathless in the quick transition from LA to Singapore to Paris. One would like to hear more about individual artists, their stories, their trajectories, some of their musical flavours, especially for those that are lesser-known to the readers, so to get an idea of who they are – photos would have also been helpful. Given that quick pace, the writing remains often more descriptive than analytical. And, while it is understandable that there are certain regions with which the author is more familiar – there is clearly a more in-depth engagement with North American and South East Asian Muslim hip hop – the often more cursory look at other regions does not always do justice to the project of provincializing the genre.

Nonetheless, the book, written in an engaging, accessible language, is a significant contribution to the field of Muslim popular culture and will be a

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very useful source for students of global hip hop, globalization, youth culture and contemporary Muslim cultural expressions.

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