Mos Def and Lupe Fiasco: Resisting Cultural Hegemony through American Islamic Hip Hop

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I. Introduction

God is on your side, the devil is alive
The Empire holds all the gold and the guns
But when all is said and done there's only one
La ilaha ill'Allah

With these four lines from his 2009 song “Wahid”, American rap artist Mos Def places himself in the line of hip hop artists with an Islamic background. And while many people might frown at the idea of an interwoven relationship between Islamic traditions and hip hop culture and music, Mos Def is not actually a pariah within the *game*[1]: rather he is as Su’ad Abdul Khabeer described[2] “an example of a rapper drawing on an Islamic tradition in the reciprocal relationship between American Muslims and hip hop” (125). And while much has been written on hip hop culture and Islam in America in general, not much has been written about the influence Islam and Arab culture has had on American hip hop culture specifically, especially about the way in which it adds to hip hop’s status as a refusal of and a resistance to white cultural hegemony. The lines quoted above can be seen as a manifesto of the tension between America and Islam: America controls all the wealth and weapons, but while “their” religion may seem superior, Mos Def beliefs that when he dies and leaves this earth, he shall be reunited with his Islamic God, Allah. Moreover, it is a testament of the reciprocal relationship between Islam and hip hop music.

Due to its widespread commercialisation, hip hop nowadays is often seen as distant from its original function as a medium for black Americans to voice their protest against white hegemony. Instead it is seen as serving to reinforce white supremacist views by affirming black stereotypes of violence and male hegemony and as propelling consumerism by glamorizing *bling bling*. This sentiment is powerfully asserted by black feminist writer bell hooks in one of her researches on hip hop and masculinity[3]: "[N]ot only is hip hop packaged for mainstream consumption, many of its primary themes—the embrace of capitalism, the support of patriarchal violence, the conservative approach to gender roles, the

[1] The hip hop culture at large, and rap specifically, is often referred to as the *game*.
[2] Khabeer, Su’ad Abdul. "Rep that Islam: The Rhyme and Reason of American Islamic Hip Hop." *The Muslim World* 97.1 (2007): 125-141.
[3] hooks, bell. "The Coolness of Being Real." *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

call to liberal individualism—all reflect the ruling values of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, albeit in black face" (hooks 141-42).

However, given the visibility of African-American Muslim hip hop artists such as Mos Def, it is worth examining in what ways these artists still use hip hop in order to voice their black protest against white supremacy. In this thesis I will argue that through their music - especially through the use of language and translation - some African-American Muslim rappers have created a new space for African-American Muslims within the wider realm of African-American culture. In her dissertation on intra- and interlingual translation in Blackamerican Muslim hip hop[4], Sara Hakeem Grewal argued that Muslim hip hop simultaneously addresses "some of the broader issues facing the Blackamerican Muslim community, including Arab cultural supremacy and the normativity of immigrant Islam, the attendant perception of Sunni Islam as a form of black cultural apostasy, [as well as] the failure of Sunni Islam to speak to issues of poverty and disenfranchisement in the Blackamerican community" (37). Through hip hop, Islam retains its relevance to the African-American community as a mode of protest to white cultural hegemony. Additionally, it secures a space for African-American Muslims specifically within the context of a wider African-American culture. In order to lay bare the workings and mechanisms of this interaction I intend to explore the resident gazes of African-American Muslim rappers Mos Def and Lupe Fiasco by means of an analysis of song lyrics from both artists.

When approached as literature, the written work of rappers constitutes an intermedial performance that can function as a societal or ideological critique, as well as a personal artistic expression. According to Brillenburg Wurth and Rigney[5], both form and content of songs can be seen as a form of poetry, which is performed in an aesthetic sense (148-150. Moreover, they can hold meaning in both a cultural and ideological sense (370-373). By means of an analysis of the linguistic aspects of songs by both artists, I intend to answer the main question of this thesis: how do Mos Def and Lupe Fiasco deal with their experiences of racism, blackness, and their Islamic upbringing in relation to the white cultural hegemony in which they live, and how do they differ in the ways in which they express resistance to this

[4] Grewal, Sara Hakeem. "Intra-and Interlingual Translation in Blackamerican Muslim Hip Hop." *African American Review* 46.1 (2013): 37-54.
[5] Wurth, Kiene Brillenburg, and Ann Rigney, eds. *Het leven van teksten: een inleiding tot de literatuurwetenschap*. Amsterdam University Press, 2006.

hegemony through their music, once we compare and contrast the lyrics of songs from both artists?

In addition to a literary analysis of the song lyrics, I will also use Judith Butler's concept of performativity in order to answer this question fulfillingly. Though this concept originates from gender studies, I believe the core idea can be abstracted from its gender-oriented roots and be applied to the subject I intend to research in this thesis. In that case the concept of gender performativity shall be translated into a concept of racial performativity. The strand of racial performativity shall be explained thoroughly in the core chapters. However, in order to value Islamic hip hop in its full potential and to understand why Islam influenced yesterday's and today's hip hop so thoroughly, it is important to first delve deeper back in time in order to understand hip hop's historical context in regard to black American nationalist movements and Islam in general.

II. Historical background

Ethnomusicologists have long acknowledged the influence of Islam and Arabic music on blues music[6], and historians have written extensively on the imprint Islam in general, and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community particularly, has left on the American jazz culture of the latter half of the twentieth century, especially in Chicago.[7] However, not much is written about the influence Islam and Arab culture have had on the hip hop culture that emerged in the early 1970s.[8] This subcultural art movement was formed primarily by African-American youths living in suburbs such as the South Bronx in New York City.[9] One of the main creative outlets of hip hop culture[10] is music. The songs are performed through rapping (or emceeing, MCing, spitting, or simply rhyming[11]), which the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language refers to as "spoken or chanted rhyming lyrics with a strong rhythmic

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[6] Charters, Samuel. *The Roots of the Blues: An African Search*. Boston: M. Boyars, 1981. p. 125. Print.
[7] Amina Beverly McCloud, *African-American Islam.* New York: Routledge, 1995. p. 20f. Print.
[8] Thompson, Robert. "Hip Hop 101". In Perkins, William Eric. *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. p. 213.
[9] Dyson, Michael Eric. *Know What I Mean? : Reflections on Hip-Hop*, Basic Civitas Books, 2007. p. 6., and: Chang, Jeff; DJ Kool Herc. *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*. Macmillan, 2005. p. 34
[10] Besides rapping, DJing, breakdance, graffiti art, and beatbox constitute the 'Five Elements' of hip hop culture. These five forms of creative outlet collectively make up hip hop's aesthetic.
[11] Edwards, Paul. *How to Rap: The Art & Science of the Hip-Hop MC*, Chicago Review Press, 2009. p. xii, p. 3, p. 81.

accompaniment".[12] It differentiates itself from spoken word poetry in that it is performed in time to the beat of the music. However, the main focus lies on the lyrical content, and because of this strong emphasis on language, rap songs have lent themselves as a fitting means for social commentary.

Since the emergence of hip hop culture and rap music, Islamic themes and Arabic terms have found their way into the colorful language of its songs. Especially the Nation of Islam (NOI), one of the most lauded Islamic movements in rap, and Louis Farrakhan, its current leader, have often been mentioned in rap songs. As early as 1988, in an era that is now described as the 'Old School'-era of rap, rapper Chuck D of the formation Public Enemy was cautioning that "Farrakhan's a prophet and I think you ought to listen to / what he can say to you, what you wanna do is follow for now".[13] This is a clear example of the rhetorical strength of rap songs: the directness of the words that are fitted in rhyme on the beat is especially prevalent, and it aims to move the listener into action. In order to better understand the emergence and relevancy of this type of hip hop music, which is commonly referred to as "Islamic hip hop", it is important to, firstly, find a workable definition of what Islamic hip hop is, and secondly, to understand the rise of Islam in American inner cities in the last three decades of the twentieth century as "the product of immigration and racial politics, deindustrialization and state withdrawal, and the interwoven cultural forces of black nationalism, Islamism and hip hop that appeal strongly to disenfranchised minority youths".[14] An understanding of this current will be of vital importance when analyzing and interpreting the lyrics of African-American Islamic hip hop artists Mos Def and Lupe Fiasco.

As laid out earlier, hip hop approached as literature can be seen as an intermedial performance, a merging of the form and content of music and poetry in which the linguistic content is foregrounded (Brillenburg, 148). In the cases of Mos Def and Lupe Fiasco however, their literature is further complicated because of the fact that they posit themselves in the *game* as Muslim rappers. So, drawing on the examples stated in the paragraph above, it is important to clarify the notion of Islamic hip hop.

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[12] "Rapping – definition". *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006. Print.

[13] Public Enemy. *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. Def Jam, 1988. CD.

[14] Aidi, Hisham. ""Verily, there is only one hip−hop Umma": Islam, cultural protest and Urban marginality." *Socialism and Democracy* 18.2 (2004): 107-126. p. 1.

A clear, workable definition of Islamic hip hop is given by Hisham Aidi in his dissertation on Islam, cultural protest, and urban marginality. He states that he uses the term Islamic hip hop "to describe rap lyrics and art forms that are influenced by or draw on Islamic and quasi-Islamic (e.g. Moorish Science Temple) traditions and cultures; the phrase "Islamic hip- hop" thus refers not only to the lyrics and cultural output of groups such as Native Deen that adhere to Islamic religious orthodoxy, but also to the Islam-inflected art of more heterodox and syncretic groups" (2). The second part of this definition of Islamic hip hop is especially useful in the case of Mos Def and Lupe Fiasco: both rappers draw on their Islamic beliefs in order to offer social protest through their lyrics. However, since not all of their lyrics adhere to Islamic religious orthodoxy, I will differentiate Def's and Fiasco's music from the performance of "pure" Islamic hip hop and use the term "Islamic hip hop" in the same vein as Aidi did. Moreover, since a substantial part of both rappers' works deals with topics that are not directly useful for this thesis, I will focus on selected works from both artists.

I will use songs from Mos Def's 1998 collaborative album *Mos Def and Talib Kweli Are Black Star*, his 1999 solo debut *Black on Both Sides*, and his 2009 album *The Ecstatic*, as well as songs from Lupe Fiasco's first two albums *Food & Liquor* (2006) and *The Cool* (2007), plus his record single "Muhammad Walks" (2006), in order to examine the ways in which their hip hop offers social protest. Within this thesis I intend to provide insight into, firstly, the current African-American Islamic experience in the United States as lived by these rappers, and secondly, the ways in which they offer resistance to white cultural hegemony through the discursive violence of the different types of translation that their (de)constructive African-American Islamic voices have to go through. In order to do so, I will set my analysis in the context of the findings of Sara Hakeem Grewal's treatise on intra- and interlingual translation in African-American Islamic hip hop, in which she sets out the language that is used by rappers such as Mos Def and Lupe Fiasco as the intersection of White Mainstream English (WME), Hip Hop Nation Language (HHNL), Black Language (BL), and Arabic words and phrases.[15]

Since I am a comparative literature student, the main focus within this thesis will be on the lyrical content of the songs, guided by the lens of translation of these three languages

[15] Grewal, Sara Hakeem. "Intra-and Interlingual Translation in Blackamerican Muslim Hip Hop." *African American Review,* vol. 46, no. 1, 2013, p. 37-54.

as set out by Grewal. Additionally, since on the one hand both rappers draw their inspiration from Islam, in which oral traditions play an important role, and on the other hand rhyming plays a vital role in the verbal performance of hip hop, my focus will not lie solely on the contents of their lyrics, but also on the form. In an article on the rhyme and reason of American Islamic hip hop, Su'ad Abdul Khabeer develops a sense of the importance of orality in Islamic traditions by stating that "[m]any American Muslims who favor the religious sanctioning of hip hop draw analogies between hip hop and poetry within the Islamic tradition. Rhetorical eloquence was an index of prestige and a powerful tool in pre-Islamic Arabia. In fact, the Qur'an is generally considered textually compelling because of the level of Arabic eloquence it exhibits. Further, Prophet Muhammad was known to enjoy poetry and commission Muslim poets to respond to the verbal challenges to Islam of non-Muslim poets" (130).[16] In this context I intend to present a brief analysis of form as well, based primarily on the pronunciation both rappers employ.

In the following chapters I will offer separate analyses of the textual and musical elements of the selected songs. Subsequently I will compare the findings of these analyses, leading to the conclusion, in which I will try to show to what extent Mos Def and Lupe Fiasco make use of language in their songs in order to resist white hegemony and create new spaces for their own community, and in what way their approaches vary. In order to make this conclusion more intelligible, I will use the remainder of this chapter to build a greater understanding of the ways in which hip hop culture and Islam have offered ways to resist white hegemony in the first place. To do so, I will concern myself with analytically clarifying "the interwoven cultural forces of black nationalism, Islamism, and hip hop in American inner cities that appeals to disenfranchised minority youths so strongly", as outlined by Aidi, and shall discuss how both artists fit within this current: how do their selected songs represent (American) Islamic traditions on the one hand, while building on traditions of hip hop on the other.

According to Aidi, Muslim organizations appeared in American cities in the twentieth century in times where the state failed to provide basic services and security (2). In these cities, African-American youth commonly lived congregated in neighbourhoods such as Central Harlem, Brownsville and East New York - areas deprived of job opportunities.

[16] Khabeer, Su'ad Abdul. "Rep that Islam: The Rhyme and Reason of American Islamic Hip Hop." *The Muslim World*, vol. 97, no. 1, 2007, p. 125-141.

Neighbourhoods like these, where there was little evidence of the presence of a government, were the places where Islamic movements such as the Nation of Islam grew to provide basic public services. Until 1975 the NOI was under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad, who made an effort to bridge the differences between African-American Muslim authenticity and white middle-class American values. This changed after 1975 when with W.D. Mohammed a new leader rose to power. With Mohammed the majority of NOI members transitioned towards mainstream Sunni Islam. Grewal states that because of a lack of traditional Islamic learning within the community, combined with an increased presence of immigrant Muslims, two phenomena became important: "first, we have the larger African-American community's perception of African-American Muslims' cultural apostasy, wherein African-American Muslims were no longer perceived as "authentically black", and second, we have the lack of positive cultural values associated with Islam" (38). In other words, whereas the pre-1975 NOI offered a culturally authentic form of resistance to white hegemony with appropriation of (traditionally white) middle-class values, the organization's agenda shifted to a form of immigrant Muslim supremacy that could no longer speak to specifically African-American issues.

However, Aidi argues that Islam still offered an appealing ideological alternative for those who were repelled by America's consumerist culture. Many young African-Americans rejected Christianity, which they saw as the faith of a guilty and indifferent establishment (3). In their quest for a sense of community and identity, many of these "lost souls" found their cultural and spiritual escape in Islam; amongst them rappers Mos Def and Lupe Fiasco.

In an interview with Beliefnet, Mos Def described the way in which he sees his mission as a Muslim artist:

> It's about speaking out against oppression wherever you can. If that's gonna be in Bosnia or Kosovo or Chechnya or places where Muslims are being persecuted; or if it's gonna be in Sierra Leone or Colombia—you know, if people's basic human rights are being abused and violated, then Islam has an interest in speaking out against it, because we're charged to be the leaders of humanity.[17]

[17] Def, Mos. "You're Gonna Serve Somebody." *Beliefnet*, http://www.beliefnet.com/entertainment/music/2001/04/youre-gonna-serve-somebody.aspx

Method for research

In the next chapter I will analyse songs from several of Def's albums, as well as songs from Lupe Fiasco, in order to find out in what ways they speak out against oppression. I am most interested in focussing on the manner in which both rappers make use of their personal experiences and beliefs in order to build and articulate their identity: although they mostly overlap herein, there are also differences. I will argue that, while both rappers use their music in order to express resistance to white cultural hegemony, there seems to be a difference in the specific audiences they intend to reach: whereas Mos Def seems to use his music in order to create a space for the broader African-American community and for a nation- and worldwide Muslim community, Lupe Fiasco combines these two by asserting a (language) space for African-American Muslims specifically, and even more specifically, for an African-American Islamic *hip hop* community. Both rappers add to the assertion of an African-American Muslim *ummah*[18], yet the community that Lupe Fiasco addresses seems to be even more delimited and distinct than Mos Def's.

An analysis of song lyrics from both rappers in the next chapters will show in which different ways Mos Def and Lupe Fiasco express resistance to white cultural hegemony through the use of language and translation. Furthermore, the analysis will show the two different (language) spaces to which they help add, and the specific verbal devices they use in order to accomplish this effect. Roughly the analysis will be based on an exploration of two different aspects of the song lyrics; firstly the performative aspects, and secondly the role of translation between the different language fields both rappers draw from.

III. Analysis of song lyrics by Mos Def

Hip Hop as African-American Performance

Before Dante Terrell Smith began to make use of his hip hop alter ego Mos Def for solo projects, he was part of a rap group that consisted of him complemented by his brother and sister. As Urban Thermo Dynamics, they made one social commentary-driven album together, with the fitting title "Manifest Destiny"[19]. The title song is symptomatic for the development of hip hop culture and rap music as I have described earlier. Recorded in 1994,

[18] *Ummah* is the Arabic word for 'community', i.e. *ummah* in this thesis will mean the different (Islamic) communities both rappers address.
[19] 'Manifest destiny' was the idea that the American government held the right to imperialize every part of North America.

the song is about being black, and, moreover, black pride. In a way, this song seems to speak about performativity, a term first coined by J. L. Austin and further popularised by multiple theorists in philosophy and gender studies, most notably Judith Butler in her seminal work *Bodies That Matter*.[20] In her definition performativity is gender specific: in an anti-essentialist way she states that there are no longer concepts such as 'man' and 'woman', but that these gender roles are constructions. By means of stylized repetitions of performances, gender roles are imposed on subjects:

> Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed by a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that 'performance' is not a singular 'act' or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance (95).

The concept of performativity is a continuation of the idea of iterability, a term first coined by Jacques Derrida in his essay *Signature Event Context*.[21] In this essay he argued that a signature, of which the essential feature should be its recognizable and repeatable form, sinks its own well by setting up the possibility of an inauthentic copy. Butler's idea is that gender is essentially a performance; a citation so to say of all previous performances of that specific gender role, rather than a testimony of a subjects innate and natural character as masculine or feminine. Just like Derrida's signature, this makes it prone to inauthentic and parodic repetitions or quotations.

Although this concept was developed within the realm of gender studies, I think the core idea of performativity can be abstracted from Butler's definition, and be applied to the case of African-Americans in the late half of the twentieth century: *racial* performativity rather than gender performativity. For decades African-Americans have been a marginalized people in America, causing them to develop an archetype of 'blackness', formed within the context of white supremacy. It was in the latter half of the twentieth century that their voice really came to be heard, and rap music played an important role in this development. A

[20] Butler, Judith. *Bodies that matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. New York and London: Routledge, 1993. Print.

[21] Derrida, Jacques. *Limited Inc*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1988. Print.

resident account of African-Americans living in the metropolitan suburbs ("The deep Medina Green is where I reside / And it's about time that this Brooklynite / Took the mic and made the world get hype") is offered in Urban Thermo Dynamics' song "Manifest Destiny". Def opens his verse with a strong iteration of binary oppositions; from his point of view in society he sees the world as a game of *either/or*:

> Well if it ain't red, then it must be blue
> And if it ain't false, then it must be true
> And if it ain't day, then it must be night
> And if it ain't left, then it must be right
> And if it ain't whiff, then it must be hype
> And if it ain't loose, then it must be tight
> And if it ain't off, then it must be on
> If it ain't here, then it must be gone
> If the shit ain't proper, then it must be wrong
> Whatever don't fit does not belong

Def truly seems to experience Brooklyn as a place where dualities determine the demography; it's either false or true, either left or right, or, in other words, either black or white, and either Christian or Muslim. There doesn't seem to be an 'in-between' space for Def, so while it may not be a burden precisely, it can be deduced from these lines that Def defines his blackness as being an opposition to whiteness. More importantly for my line of argument, it shows that Def perceives his religious beliefs as being opposed to that of the establishment. The urgency with which he brings this is pungent: "It's game time, son, you better choose yo' side / Half-measure will no abide". He tries to activate his listeners in being their optimal (black) selves in the chorus: "Everybody self-actualize and realize, do what you got to do / If you can see it, you can be it / If your mind can go there, then why can't you?". Both his blackness and his religious beliefs are set out as being stylized performances of constructed roles, although Def seems to believe that the power of these performances remains in the hands of the 'performer': "If you can see it, you can be it".

A deeper sense of the performative aspects of African-American Islamic hip hop shall be presented in the next chapter based on song lyrics by Lupe Fiasco. Yet, first I will consider

the importance of translation Def's music in the establishment of the African-American Muslim *ummah*.

Hip Hop as African-American Islamic Discourse

In the light of translation from standard English to hip hop vernacular, the song "Hip Hop" from Def's first solo album *Black on Both Sides* offers a useful reference to his view on language:

> Used to speak the king's Eng-a-lish
> But caught a rash on my lips
> So now my chat just like dis

Here Def hauls the problem of translation in a collision of opposites: the "King's English" and black *patois*. As Def professes fluency in both, this metaphor is symptomatic for his style of intellectual hip hop. In this, he marries sophisticated references and language games on the one hand with African-American culture on the other. In her groundbreaking work *Prophets of the Hood*, Imani Perry discusses aspects essential to authority within hip hop, and one of these is fluency in what she calls Black English, "our language" (51); the language that African-American rappers use to express their resistance to white cultural supremacy, which resists translation by this dominant group. This ties in with the notion of Islam as a resistance to white cultural supremacy, with Islam being an ideological alternative to the religion of the establishment: Christianity. This notion is further amplified by Spivak's theory of world literature[22], in which she problematizes language by stating that peripheral literatures (from marginalized peoples such as the suburban African-American rap artist) may leave the reader with pieces of "non-understanding". She embraces these parts by arguing that it is unavoidable to convey the full meaning of a work of literature to readers that do not share the same racial, political, and/or cultural background: "Let literature teach us that there are no certainties, that the process is open, and that it may be altogether salutary that it is so" (26). So when Def states that he "used to speak the king's Eng-a-lish" but that his chat is now "just like dis", he creates a space for the African-Americans that do understand him, consequently excluding those who only speak "the king's Eng-a-lish". Another example of

[22] Spivak, Gayatri C. "Crossing borders." *Death of a Discipline* (2003): 1-23.

untranslatability is found in the previously discussed Urban Thermo Dynamics song "Manifest Destiny", in which he raps "I got the will of an ox, I will not be stopped / I gotta manifest des', what *ock*, you think not?". The nickname *ock* is an Americanized version of the Arab word *yakhi*, which translates to "my brother". By using this word Def not only creates a space for African-Americans in his songs, but for African-American Muslims in specific.

The power and violence of translation from standard English to hip hop vernacular is represented by one of the opening lines of the song, in which Def compares his language to a hammer with which he can fashion his reality:

> Speech is my hammer
> Bang the world into shape, then let it fall (hungh!)

The concept of Def's speech being his hammer is a reference to the 1949 Pete Seeger song "If I Had a Hammer"; a protest song, speaking out support for the progressive movement and specifically for the working man and labor unions. The hammer is a strong metaphor because it is a tool of creation and construction, yet also a tool of destruction. "If I Had a Hammer" was so popular amongst working people that it actually became an official freedom song for the American Civil Rights Movement. This adds to the hypothesis that Def uses his songs to build an African American-specific place in which Islam is one of its cultural bearers. Furthermore it foregrounds a creative deconstruction of translation, which is symbolized by his use of English on the one hand, and his movement to the untranslatable and nonlinguistic character of the "hungh!" *ad-lib*[23]: the hammer of his speech is not useful for everyone. He further places the song in the context of a collective history/memory of African-Americans when he delineates the progression of iconic images of African-American history: "We went from picking cotton / To chain gang line chopping / To Be-Bopping, to Hip-Hopping". With these images Def further adds to the creation of a space for the wider African-American community.

Hip Hop as African-American Arabic Discourse

By appropriating Arabic, Def resists white cultural supremacy as expressed through the hegemony of standard English by performing a "foreignizing translation" of Islamic

[23] Ad-libs are those lyrical song elements that represent single words or short phrases that are being said in the background of a rapper/singer performance.

values into English[24]. In doing so, he plays further on the status of Qur'anic Arabic as the untranslatable word of Allah, and by using (Qur'anic) Arabic he delimits his audience to those listeners who are willing to accept his refusal to translate. This audience is, not coincidentally, the same African-American community that already accepted the cultural untranslatability of other aspects of their collective history. An example hereof is slavery, which is a crucial part of African-American history; yet attempts to adequately relate its significance and impact to those who do not share this history often fail.

To turn to the most noticeable example of this "foreignizing translation", I want to look at Def's opening line on all four of his solo albums: *Bismillah Ar-Rahman Ar-Rahim*. By whispering this Qur'anic verse, which is most commonly translated with 'In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful', Mos Def places himself in a tradition in which Muslims recite this sentence in order to purify their actions and intentions. By consistently reciting this sentence throughout his musical career, Def asserts his authenticity as an African-American Muslim. More subtle use of Arabic is found in his reworking of Slick Rick's 1988 song "Children's Story". In this bedtime story to his nephews, Def addresses the problems that plague African-American community, and during the narration he uses the Qur'anic Arabic term for Satan: *shaytan*. Regarding this replacement rather than translation of Islamic terms, Su'ad Abdul Khabeer argues[25] that African-American Muslims often infuse Arabic in their speech:

> The authority imbued in Arabic allows for more than the simple substitution of Arabic words for English equivalents but the effective *replacement* of certain English words and phrases in the speech of African-American Muslims. Despite the fact that English is the native language of African-American Muslims, in certain contexts, English becomes inadequate - unable to meaningfully describe social realities. (168)

However, not all usage of Arabic adds to building a broader Islamic authenticity, as portrayed with Def's usage of the word *umi* in his song "Umi Says". Whereas the Arabic word means "my mother", *umi* in African-American Islamic speech means just "mother". So when Def uses "my umi", he distances himself from the Qur'anic meaning of the word, and instead establishes a certain cultural legitimacy within the African-American sphere, as

[24] Venuti, Lawrence. *The translator's invisibility: A history of translation*. Routledge, 2008.
[25] Abdul Khabeer, Su'ad. "Black Arabic: Some Notes on African American Muslims and the Arabic Language." *Black Routes to Islam.* New York, Palgrave MacMillan (2009).

pointed out by Abdul Khabeer: “there is a distinctive adoption of the Arabic language in a way that is not tied to the norms of Arab culture” (174). In using the word, Def places himself within the Islamic culture in a broader sense, and in the African-American community in specific. This last sentiment is most clearly represented at the end of the song, where Def is heard singing “I want black people to be free, to be free, to be free / All my people to be free, to be free, to be free / That’s all that matters to me”. The creation of a African-American Muslim-specific space is also foregrounded with the use of the word *ock* on the previously discussed song “Manifest Destiny”, although there he offered an extra translation that falls somewhat between the fields of Arabic and standard English; and again even more within both the Islamic and the African-American community.

The cases above have shown that Def’s songs mostly add to create a space for the African-American community. However, Islamic traditions and values seem to play an important role in his song lyrics. A last interesting song that supports this hypothesis plays with Islamic norms in a completely different way. In his song “Quiet Dog”, Def raps over a beat that consists solely of drums. This consolidates with certain Islamic laws by which a number of music instruments are considered *haram* (sinful). In her article *Rep that Islam: The Rhyme and Reason of American Islamic Hip Hop* Su’ad Abdul Khabeer suggests that by limiting the instruments used in a song a larger audience can be reached: “both Muslims who listen to all music and those who adhere to the more stringent opinion“ (128). So not only does Def address an African-American Islamic audience through his lyrics, he also makes use of the form of his songs in order to address this specific audience.

In the following chapter I will analyse songs by Lupe Fiasco in the same light, to show that, while they draw on the same religious traditions to make their music, their focus differs considerably. While I have shown that Mos Def mostly uses his songs in order to create a space for the broader African-American community and for a nation- and worldwide Muslim community, I will show that Lupe Fiasco uses his songs as a medium to assert a (language) space for African-American Muslims specifically, and even more specifically, for an African-American Islamic *hip hop* community.

IV. Analysis of song lyrics by Lupe Fiasco

Hip Hop as African-American Performance

In the previous chapter I have laid out the theory of gender performativity as set up by Judith Butler. Subsequently, I have tried to use her work to think about performativity in a racialized context; performativity as a theoretical framework in which to understand racialized subjects such as the African-American Muslim rap artists I have chosen to analyse. In her seminal book *Gender Trouble*, Butler wrote the following:

> Gender proves to be performative - that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed .... There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender ... gender is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' which are said to be its results (Butler, 24-25).

In a paper for the Institute of Development Studies Bridget Byrne made an interesting play on this particular quote, by swapping the instances of the word gender for race, resulting in the following:

> *Race* proves to be performative - that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, *race* is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed .... There is no *racial* identity behind the expressions of race ... *race* is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' which are said to be its results.

I have shown how this racialization of the concept of performativity is found in Def's work, for example in the song *Manifest Destiny*, performed by Def and his brother and sister in the group Urban Thermo Dynamics. In his verse on the song, he quite literally affirms the necessity of his own racial performance; a performance that makes him *black* by being opposed to *white*, and, moreover, being a Muslim as opposed to being a Christian: "It's game time, son, you better choose yo' side".

On the song *Hurt Me Soul* from his 2005 debut album *Food & Liquor*, Chicago-based rapper Lupe Fiasco narrates his conflicting feelings towards hip hop music; he feels torn liking a musical genre that glamorizes misogyny and materialism, since such corrupt influences hurt "he" soul. The use of black *patois* ('me' rather than 'my') in the title and chorus of the song is reminiscent of the manner in which Def described his conflicting feelings towards language in general in the song *Hip Hop*: from "the king's Eng-a-lish" to a

"chat just like dis". A deeper look into the first verse of *Hurt Me Soul* shows us that the similarities between both songs don't stop there:

> Now I ain't trying to be the greatest
> I used to hate hip-hop, yup, because the women degraded
> But Too $hort made me laugh, like a hypocrite I played it
> A hypocrite, I stated, though I only recited half
> Omitting the word "bitch", cursing - I wouldn't say it
> Me and dog couldn't relate, till a bitch I dated
> Forgive my favorite word for hers and hers alike
> But I learned it from a song I heard and sort of liked
> Yeah, further ice and glamorized drug dealing was appealing
> But the block club kept it from in front of our building
> Gangsta rap-based filmings became the building blocks
> For children with leaking ceilings catching drippings with pots
> Coupled with compositions from Pac, Nas's "It Was Written"
> Intermixed with my realities and feelings
> Living conditions, religion, ignorant wisdom and artistic vision
> I began to jot, tap the world and listen, it drop

The fact that Lupe calls himself a hypocrite due to his changing attitude towards using the word "bitch" to signify women with adds to the hypothesis that being an African-American rap artist is at least partially subject to an act of performativity. He states that he was first "omitting the word "bitch", cursing - I wouldn't say it" when rapping along with a song by colleague rapper Too $hort. It is striking that just two lines further he states that "bitch" became his "favorite word for hers and hers alike". Even though he admits to being a hypocrite for liking music that holds a degrading attitude towards women, it seems merely impossible for Lupe to participate in a musical culture such as hip hop without also participating in the performances that are known by him to co-define it. He explains his shift towards this misogynic culture in the light of a song he heard by Too $hort[26]; even though the song is extremely misogynistic, Lupe nonetheless fell for its lyrical brilliance. Already from his attitude towards the performativity of hip hop, it is clear that Lupe posits himself more

[26] $hort, Too. *Blow the Whistle*. Too $hort. Lil' Jon, 2006. MP3.

within the African-American Islamic *hip hop*-specific community, in contrast to Def's broader focus on the African-American community at large.

In the lines that follow, Lupe adds to his ambivalent relationship with the destructive themes he finds in hip hop by talking about the appealing character of (racialized) performances such as wanting "ice" (hip hop slang for diamonds and jewelries) and dealing drugs to get that "ice". However, he feels that his "block club" - the local association formed by inner-city residents for surveillance, crime-prevention, and community outreach - kept him from doing so in front of his own building. From these lines it seems that, even though hip hop culture dictates certain performances, his own community - his "block club", his *ummah* - condemns such performances since they do not add to a positive reality. The reality that many hip hop songs describe may actually represent what is happening within the African-American community, but in Lupe's view it above all adds to the performative nature of their racialized selves; a vacuum is created, the naming of such performances sets boundaries, and is simultaneously "the repeated inculcation of a norm" (Butler, 8). Lupe lays out this inculcation of a norm beautifully with the lines "Gangsta rap-based filmings became the building blocks / For children with leaking ceilings catching drippings with pots": the divide between reality and what is seen on television becomes huge when hip hop music videos become the imaginary building blocks for children growing up in such poverty that they don't even have a rainproof roof to live under. The ambitions they develop based on hip hop imagery does not stroke with the reality they live in.

The verse is concluded by Lupe referencing Nas's[27] music, which he describes as being intermixed with his own "realities and feelings / living conditions, religion, ignorant wisdom and artistic vision", placing himself further in the tradition of African-American hip hop music, as well as the community of African-American Muslims.

Hip Hop as African-American Islamic Discourse

In addition to the examples of instances of so-called "non-understanding" in Def's music, there is one song in Lupe's oeuvre that stands out amongst the rest when it comes to problematizing language and translation in order to resist white cultural hegemony. As discussed earlier, Def appropriates Arabic words and sentences in his songs through the

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[27] Nas, who is seen as one of the most influential rappers, is said to be a member of the Nation of Gods and Earths, making him at least partly inclined to Islam.

performance of a "foreignizing translation" of Islamic values into English, by which means he plays on the untranslatable status of Qur'anic Arabic. I have argued that even by moderately doing so he delimits his audience to those who speak his language; his own African-American community. The most noticeable example hereof was found at the very beginning of all four of his solo albums with the sentence *Bismillah Ar-Rahman Ar-Rahim*. Not coincidentally, on Lupe's song "Muhammad Walks" the very same sentence is heard. However, Lupe takes his performance to another level in the remainder of the song, a song that is dedicated to a worldwide *ummah* of Muslim civilians subject to prejudice and racial violence: "This is one's for all my brothers and sisters who died in Iraq, Israel, Afghanistan and right here in America".

The instances of Islamic Arabic phrases and terminology in "Muhammad Walks"[28] are well-nigh innumerable, which already poses a dissimilarity with the way in which Def uses Arabic in his songs. Whereas Def confines himself to using just a few Arabic words in some of his songs, Lupe uses a lot of those words in this song in a simultaneously foreignizing act of English and a domestication of Arabic. In the last verse of the song for example, Lupe rhymes:

> And to my *Akh's* tryin' to stay on their *deen*
> It gets mean especially when you stay on the scene
> And at the same try to stay out of trouble
> But don't forget the blessin' is in the struggle
> The Most Forgiving will forgive it if you stay repentant
> And hustle
> You gotta stay on your *salats*, your *zakats*, your Qur'an
> To my homies and miskeen
> *Astagfirullah*

Lupe's use of the word *akh* here reminds one of the word *ock* that Def rapped in "Manifest Destiny", yet with an important difference: whereas Def made somewhat of an 'in-between' translation of the Arabic *yakhi*, Lupe seems to choose for a full-on appropriation of the Arabic word, albeit in an abbreviated form. The difference between these two versions of the word is heard distinctly in the different pronunciations.

[28] "Muhammad Walks" was inspired by and a response to Kanye West's great song "Jesus Walks".

Moreover, the manner in which Lupe appropriates the word is reminiscent of Def's use of the word *umi*. Whereas the Arabic *umi* means 'my mother', Def's usage means just 'mother'; and whereas *yakhi* means 'my brother', Lupe's term comes to mean any Muslim brother (or sister). As Grewal stated, this close juxtaposition of Arabic, Black Arabic, and Black English in Lupe's verse suggests these dialects mingle actively, characteristic of hip hop language, and again suggests a larger "Hip Hop *ummah*" (50).

However, the excessive usage of Arabic in the song does drive a different audience towards Lupe than towards Def. Whilst for example Def's "Umi Says" was made for a broader African-American community, Lupe seems to address a primarily Muslim listening audience with "Muhammad Walks". Rather than moving towards his audience, he moves his listeners towards himself by appropriating this many Arabic terms (Venuti, 19-20)[29], even more so than Def. Herein lies a risk according to Abdul-Khabeer: "To use Arabic excessively is the performance of 'cultural apostasy'; to use Arabic too sparingly is the rejection of the 'true Islamic ideology'" (183). Both Mos Def and Lupe Fiasco walk this thin line of translation in their songs, although whereas Def made sure not to fall into that performance Abdul-Khabeer called "cultural apostasy", Lupe seems not to worry too much about this; it is precisely this demarcation of his audience that he wanted to achieve with this song.

The power of pronunciation

An additional example of Islamic Arabic in "Muhammad Walks" occurs when Lupe asks God's forgiveness with the Arabic phrase *Astagfirullah*, a phrase that also occurs at the very beginning of "Hurt Me Soul". Once again the similarities with Def's *Bismillah Ar-Rahman Ar-Rahim* are obvious, with both artists using these Islamic intertextualities to build a community of African-American Muslims. However, there is one difference of great importance: unlike Def, Lupe adopts a nonstandard pronunciation of the Arabic phrases he uses. According to Grewal, this further represents domesticating/anthropophagic translation from Arabic into what she calls "Hip Hop Nation Language". On "Muhammad Walks", Lupe states that his songs "[lean] on the lines from the *surahs*[30]", but he does not go so far as to

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[29] This quote comes from a historical overview of translation studies by Venuti, in which he quoted a 1813 lecture by Schleiermacher on the different methods of translation: "there are only two. Either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him; or he
leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him" (Lefevere 1977:74). (Venuti used Lefevere's 1977 translation of the lecture.)

[30] The different chapters from the Qur'an are called *surahs*.

imperil his commitment to a specifically African-American Islam. As Grewal observed, Lupe's *Qur'an* phonetically sounds more like "Kran", and the final syllable of *bismillah* sounds more like "illay" than the drawn out vowel in standard Arabic:

> This pronunciation emphasizes the distance between Blackamerican Muslims and immigrant Muslims in the United States, tying into Abdul-Khabeer's argument about various constructions of Blackamerican Muslim identity via Arabic usage and pronunciation: Blackamerican Muslims who frequantly use Arabic and emphasize "correct" pronunciation want to be seen as "authentic" Muslims in an "Arabiyya ideology" that operates under the "normative gaze" of Arab immigrant Muslims; in contrast, Blackamerican Muslims who use Arabic less frequently and with less regard for pronunciation exhibit "an attempt to confront double consciousness with the possibility of blending their triple selves: black, American, and Muslim" (Abdul-Khabeer, 180)" (Grewal, 51)

Fiasco's pronunciation may not be as "authentic" as Def's or immigrant Muslim's, but it serves in highlighting in different ways the African-American as well as the Islamic aspects of his identity. Def does so as well, but seems to operate under the "immigrant normative gaze". Grewal's quotation of Abdul-Khabeer's statement seems to point towards a linguistic solution to the identity issue of a double (or triple) consciousness.

All of the examples above contribute to the establishment of a "Hip Hop *ummah*", "a network of believers united by the cause of challenging linguistic and cultural hegemony" (Alim, 21). Moreover, by translating Arabic directly into hip hop vernacular, Lupe subverts standard English at the same time, resulting in a more grounded rejection of white cultural hegemony. Ultimately, this results in the creation of a more rigid space than Def did through his music. He addresses not just the African-American community, not even just the African-American Muslim community; Lupe goes as far as addressing the African-American Islamic *hip hop* community specifically.

V. Conclusion and suggestions for further research

The previous chapters have shown the different ways in which Mos Def and Lupe Fiasco express resistance to white cultural hegemony through their music. Both rappers appropriate standard English as well as Qur'anic Arabic in their songs, creating a (language) space "in-between" these two cultural sovereignties in which retranslation back into these colloquial languages is resisted. Through different levels of translation, and non-translation, they restrict their listening audiences primarily to the African-American community in general, and the African-American Muslim community specifically. By simultaneously foreignizing English and domesticating Arabic through the power of hip hop, Mos Def and Lupe Fiasco expose and subsequently transgress the hegemony of standard language (Grewal, 52).

However, the focus of both rappers differs: whereas Mos Def defends a (language) space for both the broader African-American community on the one hand, and for a nationwide - as well as global - Muslim community on the other, Lupe Fiasco combines these two by asserting a (language) space for African-American Muslims specifically, and even more specifically, for an African-American Islamic *hip hop* community. Not only does he make Arabic a more essential aspect of the language he uses in his songs, he does so in a less 'authentic' way. By means of his pronunciation, Lupe creates a whole new space, one in which he exhibits "an attempt to confront double consciousness with the possibility of blending [his] triple self: black, American, and Muslim" (Abdul-Khabeer, 180). He does not adhere to the normative gaze of Arab Islam, but actually establishes an *ummah* for a community of people that are just like him: black, American, and Muslim. To the triple self that Abdul-Khabeer addresses I would like to add that there even seems to be a fourth self in play for Lupe, namely the rapper in him. So in conclusion it can be said that the space that Lupe creates concerns an even more specific *ummah*, namely people that are black, American, Muslim, and members of the hip hop community.

I think it will be interesting to see which element will become more prominent in Islamic hip hop in the (near) future: the "in-between" space Mos Def places himself in by touching upon elements of both African-American culture and Islam, or the more stringent space Lupe Fiasco created with his full-on appropriation of Islamic values, incorporated in a identity in which these aspects of both African-American culture and Islam are merged fluently. A factor that has to be taken into account when further researching this question

about Islamic hip hop, as well as adherent themes such as the performativity of race, hip hop, and Islam in general, is Islamic hip hop practice outside the U.S. Although in this article the focus has exclusively been on African-American Muslim hip hop artists, there are many (English speaking) Muslims around the entire globe who also embrace hip hop as a means of self-expression, social critique, and (political) resistance, and in their own powers add to the transglobal "Hip Hop *ummah*".

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