



Remixing Battle Rap and Arabic Poetic Battling

Felix Wiedemann

Abstract: This project examines particularities of Arabic battle rap in Lebanon. It discusses primarily the anchorage of battle rap in local and Arabic cultural traditions. To this end, interviews with rappers have been conducted. In conjunction with video recordings of battles, the rappers' statements comprise the core of the material used for this article. On that basis, references and similarities to written and oral cultural heritage are analyzed as well as language use. Altogether, this research shows links of Lebanese battle rap culture to global hip hop culture as well as to Lebanese and Arabic culture. Thus, Lebanese battle rap can be seen as a locally appropriated, “remixed”, cultural hybrid.

Keywords: Hip hop – Rap – Lebanon – Arabic – Sociolinguistics

Parole chiave: Hip hop – Rap – Libano – Arabo – Sociolinguistica

INTRODUCTION

In the last fifteen years, battle rap has grown into an increasingly popular sub-genre of hip hop (Mavima 2016: 87). It has also spread globally and made its way to North Africa and West Asia. There, Arab rappers are aware of battle rap's origins in Afro-American «oral, competitive, and communal traditions» (Mavima 2016: 86). However, Arab(ic) hip hop cultures do not only draw on Afro-American roots but also from local poetic traditions:

Muhandas: I think the Arab culture is a culture that should relate to hip hop most of the world, [...] we were known as Arabs for our poetry and Arab poets [...] what we know now as battling they used to do and literally they used to freestyle, what we today call freestyle battle rap, they used to do it so eloquently back in the day. And when I mean back in the day, I mean, you know, 1000 to 1500 years ago. [...] Hip hop culture [was] created in the US, I mean you have black people, slaves, in cotton fields, in the 19th century, just picking cotton every day and they would just fuck with each other, [...] and eventually, this culture of cotton field

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poetry grew up to be some crazy afterschool parties in the Bronx and New York and eventually, it created hip hop, the rap element in hip hop. And then you import this to countries like Lebanon, and people come and say you know what? What you're doing is fake! You're getting American culture and bringing it to Lebanese Arab society. [...] We didn't really import another culture and just put it here. We just got some elements in a really awesomely globalized world. We got some elements, adopted them and just reflected on them in our context and that's something beautiful to do (Safieddine 2016).

In the statement quoted above, the Lebanese rapper Muhandas draws a line from nowadays rap battles to Arabic traditions of poetic battling. Thus, battle rapping, which developed in the USA in the 1970s, is adopted in Lebanon, adapted to local culture, and appropriated as a new kind of Arabic poetry.

This article examines particularities of this kind of appropriation in Arabic battle rap in Arab countries, focusing exemplarily on Lebanon. It analyzes how Arab battle rappers make use of their local linguistic environment and situate battle rap as a hybrid between global hip hop and local poetic tradition. My research on this topic builds on reviewing literature, watching videos of Arabic and English rap battles, conducting interviews with Lebanese² (battle) rappers, and combing through social media sites. It will contribute to an ongoing PhD project on Arab(ic) hip hop culture.

Throughout the article, direct quotations of rappers are used in order not to *speak for them* but rather *let them themselves speak*. Arabic parts are translated into English and sometimes transliterated. Other Arabic words are only transliterated if there is no commonly used form of the word in English.

PRELIMINARY REMARKS ON (US AMERICAN) BATTLE RAP

Before diving into Arab(ic) battle rap, some remarks on US American battle rap are given. Several of hip hop's so-called "elements", which developed since the 1970s, incorporate competitive aspects: Graffiti artists cross each other's tags (Macdonald 2001: 211–13). DJs compete against each other (Mavima 2016: 90). Breakers face each other in ciphers (Chang 2007: 4). Last but not least, rappers lyrically fight each other.

The direct ancestor to these rap battles is seen by most scholars in a game called "the Dozens", which was and is still played, for example, among Afro-American youths. The Dozens in its prototypical embodiment is a verbal duel of alternating insults, often based on the "Yo mama is..." pattern. However, it can also be a joke or a comment and a part of a conversation or a song (Wald 2012: 75–76). The Dozens might be a well-known source of battle rap but battle rap is also deeply embedded in different kinds of Afro-American cultural traditions and

² I use the word "Lebanese" for describing rappers contributing to the rap scene in Lebanon. They do not necessarily have to have Lebanese nationality or be based exclusively in Lebanon.



draws from a heritage of West African griots, the blues, roasts and Afro-Caribbean rhythms (Mavima 2016: 89). Content-wise, it assembles elements of braggadocio, signifyin³ and storytelling (Mavima 2016: 96).

Battles can occur spontaneously in unorganized *ciphers* – circles of rappers in which improvising is practiced – for example, when one rapper occupies the microphone for too long or when rappers interrupt one another (Lee 2009: 585–86).

However, there are also organized battles that allow for more “writtens” that can be prepared more thoroughly and can aim more precisely at one individual opponent. These organized battles spread quickly due to video streaming platforms such as YouTube, on which battles can be watched shortly after they take place by fans all around the world (Mavima 2016: 92). This and the release of Eminem's semi-biographic movie *8 Mile* in 2002 (Mavima 2016: 92) led to the emergence and blossoming of organized rap battles and tournaments. Around the year 2000, the first rap battle leagues were founded in the USA. By now, also outside of the USA, many leagues have been founded.

HIP HOP AND BATTLE RAP IN LEBANON

For a long period of time, the civil war and other military conflicts had hampered the development of a Lebanese hip hop scene. It is not until the early 2000s that the first rap albums were published in Lebanon. That is why artists like Samzz say that even today, «the hip hop community in Lebanon is kinda small» (Ajaj 2016) and Mad Prophet thinks that «il doit y avoir 30 rappeurs au maximum» (al Ahmar 2015). So hip hop is quite young in Lebanon and battle rap in particular is an even more recent phenomenon. The earliest recordings of a Lebanese rap battle I could find date from the year 2013 (Rony Abu 2013; Lebitivity 2015). Nonetheless, some Lebanese rap artists see great potential in battle rap, as exemplarily shown in the following quotes:

Omar Kabbani (Ashekman): When you tell me about rap music, I don't think it will grow as much as battle rap. Because battle rap is explicit, [...] people like to see two people beefing. And even on social media when someone comments bad comments and you reply, people start to read the whole thread, you know, they want to see what they reply. And battle rap is the same thing. I think battle rap has a bigger, bigger, bigger opportunity to grow in the region, a lot, you know, a lot (Kabbani 2016).

Muhandas: I think battle rap is a good angle to start pulling people into the hip hop culture from, especially in Lebanon. Because you know, if you get Edd Abbas to perform a concert in Hamra festival, you gonna get fifty people, a hundred people. [...] But if you get Edd Abbas and another Lebanese guy battle rapping in

³ Signifyin is a «form of verbal play [...] wherein a speaker denigrates another through witty play on words and irony» (Mavima 2016: 90).



Hamra, people are gonna go crazy, because there is violence in it (Safieddine 2016).

Chyno: It [battle rap] might open doors for new listeners, you know, to hip hop culture. But as I see it in the American or Western battle rap scene, people who listen to battle rap are really an entity of their own. [...] People like to see a car accident. And in battle rap, that's usually the wanted outcome. One really destroying the other. It's much more an entertainment thing (Shorbaji 2016).

If Omar Kabbani and Muhandas are right, battle rap could have the potential to grow and draw people to hip hop culture in Lebanon. Thus, it seems to be appropriate to have a closer look at some of the battles and their peculiarities.

THE LANGUAGE(S) OF ARAB(IC) BATTLE RAP IN “THE ARENA”

“The Arena” is an ongoing series of organized rap battles that take place in different locations in Beirut. It was founded in 2015 when Dizaster, a well-known Los Angeles-based battle rapper with Lebanese origin, returned to Lebanon for a short-term visit. He got in touch with Omar Kabbani of Ashekman, who in turn contacted Edd Abbas, and together with Chyno, Johnny Headbusta and other local artists, the first battle in The Arena was organized. As of September 2018, there have been around twenty of these battles. The battles are announced as “The Middle East's First Official Rap Battle League” and their recordings are published on YouTube (see URLs in annex).

All the battles have been moderated by Beirut-based rapper Chyno. Besides a crowd of a couple dozen fans, some artists like Qarar, Johnny Headbusta, El Rass, Mad Prophet and Koos have also been present at some of the battles. The battles in The Arena are either Arabic or English language battles. Battle rapper Samzz explains his view on why there are no battles of one language against another language:

Samzz: You're not gonna have an English rapper against an Arabic rapper.

Author: Why not?

Samzz: Because there'd be an advantage. If I listen to English hip hop more than I listen to Arabic hip hop, I'm gonna take this side automatically (Ajaj 2016).

Language choice seems to be more than just the choice for a means of expression. It is a conscious choice, since many of the rappers are proficient in more than one language. As reasons for their language choice, the artists I talked to mentioned, for example, authenticity, linguistic possibilities and the possibility to target a certain audience:

Omar Kabbani (Ashekman): Lebanese dialect, not *fushā* [Standard Arabic]. Because it's more authentic for me. [...] That's how I see it, but there's lots of rappers who do it in *fushā*. So they get a wider audience. I respect that. But for me,



it's more comfortable and more authentic for me, on a personal level to speak Lebanese, Lebanese dialect (Kabbani 2016).

Muhandas: It's like you're playing in a soccer field and you're just bouncing the ball back and forth, and if you're bouncing it, and then you realize that the Lebanese dialect is like you're sitting in a very small field and then you feel like you can't move much, and then you use *fushā* and then you have an infinite field to play in (Safieddine 2016).

Samzz: If you're rapping in Arabic, you're basically talking to the Lebanese people and maybe the people around, like the Middle East. If you're rapping in English, you're talking to the people abroad, to kinda see what you live. For me, personally. [...] I like to spit in English. I like to do that because... you know... the stereotypes outside... you're Lebanese, you're an Arab, you're a fucking terrorist (Ajaj 2016).

Different attitudes towards language use can sometimes clash in a battle. Linguistically, one of the most interesting battles in this regard was the battle of Muhandas against Dizaster. Muhandas, aka Najib Safieddine, is a Beirut-based rapper who released a couple of songs in 2011/12 with his crew, Illegitimate Minds. At that time, he rapped both in English and Arabic under the name “Menace”. He later changed his nom de plume to Muhandas and now focuses on Arabic lyrics. Dizaster, aka Bashir⁴, on the other hand, is a Los Angeles-based battle rapper who was born in Lebanon. He is one of the world's most famous, successful and controversial battle rappers, who competed in some of the most important international battle rap leagues like KOTD, GrindTime and URL. Following are some of Muhandas' verses he directed against Dizaster.

		rhyme	
1	I drop bombs through improvisation which cause permanent concussions	bi-l- irtigāl qaḍā'if irtigāğ wadā'im	انا اضرب بالارتجال قذائف بتسبب ارتجاج ودائم
2	Because it is normal for a member of the house [small pause] to resist the seizure by outsiders	istilā' ḥawāriğ	فطبيعي الفرد من اهل البيت [-] مقاومة استيلاء خوارج
3	The truth is that I am the reason of your existence, but it looks like there are differences in the capability of comprehension	isti'āb fawāriq	باتت حقيقة انني سبب وجودك بس الظاهر انو في بدرجات الاستيعاب فوارق

⁴ His last name is not known to the public.



4	Because everybody knows that the American needs the Arab as fuel to light disasters	l-išti‘āl kawāriṭ	لانو الكل بيعرف انو الامريكي بحاجة للعربي كوقود لاشتعال كوارث
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Muhandas compares his improvisation (*irtiḡāl*) skills to “dropping bombs”. Of course, rap battles include parts that are improvised either to a higher extent or even completely. However, in general, most of the verses in organized battles certainly are not improvised. Many battle rappers can draw from a set of thousands or tens of thousands of pre-written verses, which can be adapted to specific situations. Nonetheless, the illusion of improvisation is a motive that frequently occurs, even in organized events, in which all the participants have done research on their opponents' weak spots and have thoroughly prepared their verses. Though this is obvious to the two contenders and to the audience, everyone agrees silently on this staged simulation of improvisation. Rappers pretend to improvise and reproach their opponents of *spittin' writtens*.

In these bars, Muhandas portrays Dizaster in multiple ways as someone who does not belong to an in-group he himself is part of. He boasts with being a member of the *ahl al-bayt* – the family of the prophet Muḥammad – for whom it is “normal to resist outsiders”. Emphasis should be put on the use of plural nouns in this bar. Muhandas contrasts *ahl al-bayt* with *ḥawāriḡ* (outsiders), placing him in a group of religiously respected people, and Dizaster in a group of foreigners, ridding him of his name and making him one of many. In the next bar, he mocks Dizaster by saying that there are “differences in the capability of comprehension”, which could allude to Muhandas' superior command of the Arabic language. The fourth bar skillfully exploits the fact that Dizaster has lived most of his life in the USA and not in Lebanon. Muhandas contrasts “Americans” and “Arabs” by reproaching “Americans” with “need[ing] Arabs as fuel to light disasters”. Wittily, Muhandas uses the Arabic translation of “disasters”, “*kawāriṭ*”, to describe this chaos, drawing a connection between Dizaster and bad effects of US-American foreign policy in the region.

The content of Muhandas' verses is underlined by elaborate rhyming patterns. He boasts with eloquence and good command of the Arabic language. While some of his words (e.g. *bas*, *innū*) and the verb conjugation (prefix *b-*) are markers of Lebanese dialect, he draws heavily from Standard Arabic (*fushḥā*). This becomes clear, especially when focusing on the rhymes. Muhandas makes use of Arabic morphology to construct an impressive rhyming pattern. In these four verses, Muhandas uses five times the pattern “*istifāl + fa‘ā’il*”. By employing words of the same grammatical category, which share the same morphological structure, as well as short and long vowels, Muhandas assures that the words rhyme perfectly. This results in a multi-syllable assonance, i.e. a multi-syllabic vowel sound rhyme, (Edwards 2009: 84) on “i-i-ā a-ā-i” like *irtiḡāl qadā’if* and *irtiḡāḡ wadā’im*.



Muhandas uses this pattern four times as an end rhyme and one time (in line 1) as an internal rhyme. Multi-syllable rhymes are regarded as a way to measure a rapper's technical skills, as Muhandas himself explains:

Muhandas: It's very catchy for a hip hop person when he listens to a lot of inner rhymes, or a lot of multi-syllable rhyming, because we don't only hear one rhythm or one rhyme, we hear multiple and this gives us the... 'Holy shit! You know this guy is crazy!' See, if I rhyme 'car' with 'bar' it's different than if I rhyme it with... I don't know, 'crazy bar' and 'shady car'. It's different, when I hear 'shady bar' and 'crazy car', I'm like 'Oh my God, he rhymed two words!' And then I rhyme three words and this is catchy for them (Safieddine 2016).

His good command of the Arabic language is a repeated theme, which is woven into several of Muhandas' verses. In another bar, Muhandas directly advises Dizaster to "learn (proper) Arabic"; "*biddak tat'allam 'arabi'*".

This thread is taken up by Dizaster, who focuses in his rebuttal – amongst other things – on Muhandas' use of *fushā*.

	<i>fushā highlighted in grey</i>	rhyme	<i>fushā highlighted in grey</i>
1	His heart is getting fucked, a <i>fushā</i> guy coming to fuck with us. Listen to how he talks,		عم ينتاك قلبو و جاي واحد فصحي هون يتمنيك علينا يتمرن. اسمع كيف يحكي
2	I told him to come and play soccer,		قتلنو تعال نلعب football
3	He said, "I will kick the ball towards the goal. I will kick the ball towards the goal."		قلي سوف اسدد الكرة نحو المرمي. سوف أسدد الكرة نحو المرمي
4	Why bro, just <i>shoot</i> the damn ball		لي يا اخي shoot للطابة وخلصنا بقى
5	Look how he talks to a girl. He sees a woman like this and says to her,		كيف بيحكي مع البنات اطلعوا بشوفوا للمرأة هيك بقلها
6	"We are going to fall in love"		سوف نغرم ببعضنا
7	You scared her, you scared the woman, what kind of talk is this	ha-l- ḥakī hēh	ليك خوفتها للمرأة خوفتها للمرأة يعني شو هالحكي هيه
8	I am a real Lebanese, I slap my dick on the table and tell her to suck it	maṣīlī yēh	انا لبناني حقيقي بحط ايري عالطاولة بقلها مصيلي اياه



9	“I will touch your genitals”		سوف المسك على اعضاءك التناسلية
10	What kind of shit is this man; I hope he burns in fire	bi-n-nār	ان شاء يحترق بالنار
11	I am battling against a guy standing like the “Al-Nahar” newspaper	an-nahār	عم بعملولي واحد واقف مثل جريدة النهار

Dizaster uses a strategy that differs completely from Muhandas'. He does not even try to compete with Muhandas when it comes to mastery of the Standard Arabic language. In the excerpt above, only two bars rhyme with their predecessor. These two rhymes are one multi-syllabic assonance on “a-ī-(ī)-ē” and one perfect rhyme on “ār” (Edwards 2009: 82–89). Instead of focusing on language mastery, Dizaster opts for painting the picture of Muhandas as a “*fushā-guy*” (“*wāhid fushā*”), i.e. someone over-using Standard Arabic. He gives examples of how he imagines Muhandas talking *fushā* in two everyday situations: at the soccer field (lines 2-4) and talking to women (05-9). All of Muhandas’ *fushā* phrases are contrasted with Dizaster, who portrays himself as a “real Lebanese” (“*lubnānī haqīqī*”) speaking Lebanese Arabic.

The comical effect Dizaster’s lines produce, comes from *fushā* breaking the non-written rules of diglossic functional separation of language use domains. In a ‘diglossic’ linguistic situation, at least two language varieties (or languages) are used by one community. Which language variety is used depends on the social context. In everyday situations like a soccer game or in conversations, the non-marked language would be Lebanese Arabic and not *fushā*. Dizaster portrays Muhandas as someone not familiar with linguistic conventions using formal *fushā* in situations in which it is not appropriate.

His own bars, on the other hand, feature translanguaging (García 2009; Canagarajah 2013) including dialectal expressions, sociolect in the form of swear words, as well as some English loan words. Dialect is visible through words as *sū* (“what”), *zalamē* (“man”), *lēh* (“why”) and many others. On several occasions he uses words like *yantāk* (“get fucked”), *ērī* (“my dick”), and *harā* (“shit”). He goes for the originally English words “football” and “shoot” instead of choosing their Arabic equivalents.

Another striking aspect is the sexism inherent in Dizaster's bars. On the one hand, one could share Muhandas' interpretation, which sees Dizaster's bars as an impersonation of a stereotypical, ignorant Lebanese citizen:

Muhandas: He adopted this persona of the Lebanese citizen, that guy who doesn’t give a fuck (Safieddine 2016).

Such an interpretation could see Dizaster's bars as a hyperbolic satire on sexism in Lebanese society. However, one could also perceive them as a simple



reproduction of this sexism and of hypermasculine boasting, which is frequent in battling cultures from rap over the Dozens, to the poetry of al-Farazdaq and Jarir (Jorgensen 2012; Oware 2015). In any case, these bars are intended to shock the audience and make them laugh.

By ridiculing Muhandas as a “*fushā-guy*” and by using “street language” himself, Dizaster paints a picture of himself as being more authentic, more *real* than Muhandas. The authenticity inherent in Dizaster's language is based on its emphasis on locality. This concept of *keepin it real* is frequent in hip hop and can be understood «as a discursively and culturally mediated mode of representing and producing the local» (Pennycook 2007: 112).

Another way to focus on locality besides language use is to link battle rap to similar cultural phenomena predating the rise of battle rap.

ARAB(IC) BATTLE RAP AND ITS CONNECTION TO ARABIC POETIC BATTLING

Some rappers in Lebanon see similarities between Arabic *zağal* poetry and rap battles. Edd Abbas, who raps in the Lebanese crew *Fareeq el Atrash*, points out: «Hip hop is modern time poetry. Before, there was classical poetry like *zağal*» (Tobia 2011). Omar of Ashekman says

Omar/Ashekman: Funkmaster Flex or like the really old school DJs or rappers, they started in the seventies, eighties. *zağal* was in the 1940s [sic], and *zağal* [...] it's improvised, and they use instruments, and it's like improvised dissing each other. [...] There's something that came from the Middle East, and we have to shed the light on it. [...] So yeah, in a way it started there [in the USA], if you want facts, it started there. But since the Middle East or Lebanon don't have the media, or we're not the United States, we don't have the exposure and everything. That's why we couldn't export this culture outside, you know? But we're being sarcastic; we know that hip hop started in the States. (Kabbani 2016)

This connection between battle rap and *zağal* is also seen by journalist and hip hop activist Jackson Allers, who says that «*zağal* was really the first, Arab incarnation of battle rap, if you want to call it that» (Eyre und Allers 2013).

The term *zağal* was originally used for «a genre of vernacular poetry written in a local dialect, which spread in Muslim Spain during the 12th century» (Hazran 2013: 170). It nowadays describes a variety of different sorts of vernacular Arabic poetry (Hazran 2013: 171). In Lebanon, the birth of *zağal* is dated to the 15th century, when Maronite priests started composing poems in this new genre (Hazran 2013: 171). Today, *zağal* is either sung or recited, (Hazran 2013: 172) and verbal duels between different singing groups (*ğauqāt*) or individual poets (*qawwāl*) are held (Hazran 2013: 172–73). “*Al-zağal*, recited or song poetry” was even inscribed on UNESCO's *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity*. It justified this decision stating that *zağal* «plays an important role in



promoting social cohesion and inclusion and provides Lebanese people with a sense of cultural identity and continuity» (UNESCO 2014).

When one compares Lebanese *zağal*, as described by Haydar (Haydar 1989) with rap battles, one observes resemblances like the poetic dueling itself and the importance of originality and improvisation. On the other hand, *zağal* seems to be more structured, prescribing meter and rhyming patterns and banning plagiarism. In battle rap, rhythm takes the place of meter, rhyming patterns are not prescribed, and commonly known verses can also work as an homage or a citation, instead of being condemned as plagiarism. These verses can be used for connecting to the audience through shared knowledge and sometimes initiates call-and-response.

Rapper Edd Abbas not only draws a connection between *zağal* and battle rap in theory, but also emphasizes on it in his battle against Dizaster as the following lines show:

01	Ouf, Ouf, Ouf - Ouf		أوف، أوف وأوف - أوف
02	Let me repeat it		خليني إرجع عيدا
03	Ouf, Ouf, Ouf - Ouf		أوف، أوف وأوف - أوف
04	Yo Bashir, since you have	sung	يا باشير كونك جيتنا
05	come to us		تتمرجل على أراضينا
06	acting all manly on our land		ببيقا علينا نرحب فيك
07	We have to welcome you and		ونرجع نتذكرك بتقاليدنا
08	remind you of our traditions		لأن شكلك نسيتنا
09	Because it looks like you forgot them		أمثالك بينحطو بمراحيننا
10	Your likes are put in our toilets		هون إلي بيتمرجل منوقفو عل أربعة مثل
11	Here, those who act all manly are		الطرابيزة
12	stood on fours like a stool		بلقي إجري عليك أنا وعم بلعب
	I put my leg on you at home while playing PlayStation		Station بالبيت
	I kick you when I get angry instead of throwing the Play Station at the wall		بسفكك لبطة كل ما عصب بدال ما أضرب ال Play Station بالحيط



Edd Abbas introduces his part with a traditional beginning, oftentimes used in Lebanese *zağal* “Ouf ouf ouf”, to which the audience responds “Ouf”. This interchange gets repeated once even more loudly than the first time. At this point, Edd Abbas has already succeeded in involving the audience and connecting with them through call-and-response. He also placed his battle verses in a wider context of Arabic poetic tradition. After this setup, the next verses are sung, not spoken. Edd Abbas sings, Dizaster has come to “act all manly on our land” and “we have to welcome you and remind you of our traditions”. He adds in spoken words (not sung) that it seems Dizaster has forgotten these traditions. The singing is a reference to *zağal* poetry, which is often sung.

Besides this, the use of pronouns is particularly striking. By using the first person plural suffix (-nā) and the second person singular suffix (-k), Edd Abbas creates a dichotomy between the “outsider” Dizaster and an in-group containing himself and the rest of the people who are present.

He continues that “your likes are put in our toilets”. After this, he says that “those who act all manly are stood on fours like a stool” [line 10] and that he would put his leg on him when playing PlayStation and kick him when getting angry. Line 10 can be seen as a transition between *zağal* and battle rap, containing both the expression for “acting all manly” (*tatamarğğal*), which was used in the lines before, and the “PlayStation”, which can be seen as representing nowadays Lebanese youths' pop-cultural surroundings.

While Edd Abbas focuses in rhymes on the connection between Lebanese *zağal* and battle rap, *zağal* is not the only Arabic form of poetry that resembles battle rap, as Muhandas clarifies:

Muhandas: But then again, isn't that what Mutanabbi was doing 2000 years ago [sic]? [...] It's in our culture, and I think this is why it appeals to people, and this is why it's rooted in our culture. Because the poetry that we study now in universities and schools is basically two very prestigious poets fucking each other up in a very profound and interesting way [...] *Zağal* is this Lebanese version of battle rap. But it's very old, you know, it's what Mutanabbi was doing 2000 years ago [sic] but in a Lebanese dialect, where you have a poet sitting and a poet facing him, and the poet would say four lines of humiliation and then the other poet would reply with four lines and back and so on and so forth, and you have judges who judge based on what? Based on the use of language, based on wittiness, and based on intelligence. I mean isn't that what battle rap is judged by? It is the same. It is the exact same. So it's natural that people would appeal to battle rap [sic] and I think battle rap is a good angle to start pulling people into the hip hop culture from, especially in Lebanon (Safieddine 2016).

As Muhandas explains, there are not only similarities between battle rap and Lebanese *zağal* but also between battle rap and ancient Arabic poetry, represented here by al-Mutanabbi (d. 965).



CONCLUSION

This article highlighted processes of cultural remixing in the Lebanese battle rap scene. To do so, it initially introduced its reader to the US-American battle rap culture and its roots in different African American cultural traditions. It then briefly sketched the Lebanese battle rap scene before diving deeper into its linguistic particularities: Lebanese battle rappers use different registers of Arabic to either portray themselves as stylistically and rhetorically superior (*fushā*-approach) or as more authentic and closer to the people (dialect-approach). By playing with similarities between battle rap and other forms of Arabic, rappers appropriate and locally anchor battle rap culture in Lebanon.

Thus, Lebanese rappers have succeeded in creating a distinctively local battle rap culture. They do so through negotiations of local languages' roles and references to different oral cultural traditions. The latter range from hip hop over ancient Arabic poetry to Lebanese *zağal*.

As a result, battle rapping, which developed in the USA in the 1970s, is adopted in Lebanon, adapted to local culture and appropriated as a new kind of Arabic poetry, a sort of «Lebanized-battle-rap» or «hip-hopified-Arabic-poetry». Hip hop, with its focus on remixing, is an ideal tool for this kind of «hybrid hyphenation» (Bhabha 2004: 219). It is not a fixed form of culture imposing itself on people but a rather fluid one, allowing its reconfiguration by everyone. This process of reconfiguration and remixing is also described by Muhandas:

Muhandas: The way we understand classical music here is that it's very rich white music. Okay, that's how people understand it here. So when you get music that is understood in this context, and then you mix it with some very grimy and disgusting drums from a 1970's record by James Brown and you get magic (Safieddine 2016).

A particularly interesting point Muhandas mentions here is the notion of «whiteness» getting transformed into «magic». He self-identifies as non-white and thereby places himself in the lines of the transregional non-white majority. This community dominates hip hop cultures all around the globe. It uses remixing as a tool to strengthen a sense of identity, which emerges out of a shared impression of marginalization and oppression by «white» euro/US-American racism and imperialism (Osumare 2001; Lipsitz 1997).

This article focused on remixes of Arab(ic) hip hop with other forms of Arab(ic) culture. Another form of remixes are linguistic remixes many (Arab) rappers employ when they code-switch from Arabic to French, English or other languages (Hassa 2010). By using such a multi-lingual *mélange*, they create connections to rappers and listeners of different linguistic backgrounds and capabilities, and thus boost the transnational hip hop community.

It can be added to this effect that hip hop's hybridization is not a one-way street but rather an ongoing process of mutual impact. This comes to light not only in the Arab(ic) battle rap scene but also, for example, through Muslim hip



hop cultures in the USA and in what H. Samy Alim calls the “transglobal hip hop *umma*” (Alim 2005). Just like US-American hip hop influences Arab(ic) hip hop cultures, US-American hip hop cultures are influenced by different Muslim denominations in the USA and elsewhere, and their respective approaches to hip hop.

Here, I primarily zoomed in on a part of the Lebanese battle rap scene represented by The Arena. On a broader scale, the Arab(ic) battle rap scene is a subcultural field that has been growing in the past couple of years. There are videos of battles that took place in Algeria as early as in 2013 (Bilel smitcha 2013). Other Arab hip hop scenes, for example, in Morocco, Egypt (Raeph 2016) and Jordan (Gurus Productions 2016) have also organized rap battles. This article aims at contributing to a better understanding of some aspects in this hip hop subculture. Hopefully, it also revealed that battle culture has a lot more to offer than the expected “beefing” and “violence”.

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THE AUTHOR

Felix Wiedemann is a PhD student in Arabic Studies at the University of Bamberg and works at the Bavarian State Library in Munich.

Email: felixwiedemann@posteo.de ORCID: 0000-0001-9563-8207