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Framing the "Arab Spring": Hip Hop, Social Media, and the American News Media

Abstract: Despite an unprecedented level of interest in the popular culture associated with the Arab reform and revolutionary movements that began in December 2010, American news media have provided only a superficial, and at times misguided, depiction of the music performed during the protests, as well as its larger sociocultural use and function. This depiction has focused almost entirely on hip hop at the expense of nationalist, political, classical, and folk song repertories indigenous to Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria. In this article I argue that this misinformed, partial, and superficial depiction of the protests, centered around hip hop and social media, has strategically shaped the ways in which the uprisings have been framed within the American public imaginary, attempted to control the direction and outcome of the uprisings in the streets, and further served to impose a neo-Orientalist discourse of American hegemony over forces of reform and democratization in the Arab Middle East.

In the months following the reform and revolutionary movements of January 2011, American corporate news media took an unprecedented level of interest in Arab popular culture. Mainstream American news sources, both formal and casual, in print, on television, and online, ran daily stories on the street demonstrations. These stories were most often accompanied by graphic imagery and sound, featuring assemblages of pulsating waves of protesting crowds, marches, chants, grievous acts of violence, and beautiful acts of protection and tolerance. While many have investigated how these uprisings were

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seen around the world, in this article I address how the protests were heard. Or rather, in this article I am principally interested in critically analyzing the ways in which music and sound were strategically employed by American news media as a framing device of narration *and* interpretation. As a mechanism of sonic witnessing, sound provided valuable tools for narrating the protests, animating violent imagery with a sense of affect or lived experience. This narration predominantly took the form of ambient crowd noise, chants, and speeches in public demonstrations. But music also provided a powerful framing device capable of shaping and disseminating strategic "common sense" interpretations of the protests and their underlying politics. In music, sound, and imagery, American news media found a convenient handle for crafting a narrative of the protests congruent with their own modernist-capitalist ideals, and in the process reinforced neo-Orientalist schemata of representation. With this article, I offer some preliminary, and perhaps speculative, thoughts into this process, sketching out how music and internet communication technologies (ICTs) were deployed in the service of framing the so-called "Arab Spring." Finally, I theorize as to the larger cultural and political consequences such framing practices may have for future American engagement with the Arab world.[1]

Without question, music has been central to the ongoing revolutionary and reform movements taking place throughout the Arab world. As a means of capturing personal experience, shaping public opinion, and mobilizing the masses, musicians have played an essential role in propelling and shaping public demonstrations and policy initiatives. And yet, despite widespread interest, even fascination, in the sounds of the uprisings, American corporate news media provided only superficial, and at times misguided, depictions of the actual music performed on the streets of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria. In total, American media representations failed in at least three fundamental ways: first, by focusing on transnational popular musics; second, by privileging presentational fields of performance and sociality; and third, by superficially engaging with the diegetic soundscapes of the demonstrations.

From the outset of the uprisings on December 18, 2010, through the very public ouster of then Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on February 11, 2011, musicians were celebrated as the representatives, the collective voice, of a new generation of Arab youth rising up for democratic principles (Hoffman and Jamal 2012; Anderson 2011;

Al-Momani 2011). However, where music was employed, American news media focused almost entirely on hip hop at the expense of nationalist, classical, and folk repertories. Spending even a small amount of time watching the demonstrations unfold, participants and observers alike quickly discovered a much more diverse soundscape of protest music and performance. For example, in Egypt's Tahrir Square, where the majority of international attention was focused, crowds routinely sang the nationalist songs of Sayyid Darwish, the populist songs of Sheikh Imam Issa, the rock-infused chants of Ramy Essam, and an assortment of indigenous folk-song and dance genres (Saad 2012; Swedenburg 2013). A recent documentary entitled "Songs of the New Arab Revolutions" provides a fascinating counterpoint to the mainstream depiction of music in the protests (Frishkopf 2013).[2] In it, several prominent ethnomusicologists present ethnographic and archival evidence of an extremely diverse collection of musical responses to the demonstrations, drawn equally from historical, contemporary, local, and international sources.

And yet, simply focusing on hip hop at the expense of other musical repertories constitutes only a portion of the omission. For it is not merely the types of music performed that is at issue here, but rather the larger role and purpose of music and sound performance more generally. It's not a matter of what was performed, what was heard, but rather why and how. In this respect, American media representations focused almost entirely on presentational music videos stylishly made by young activists, circulated via YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, rather than exploring the diverse repertories of participatory music (chanting, poetry, song, and dance) and sound creation performed in the streets. In its widespread bias toward presentational music, American news media drastically misunderstood (and perhaps underestimated) music and sound's formative role in sustaining the demonstrations. Musicians did more than simply reflect upon popular sentiment and report on specific events from their studios. Rather, musicians shaped and generated popular sentiment by leading the demonstrations, bringing people out into the streets and keeping them there by utilizing fields of participatory music making, such as well-known nationalist songs, political songs, folk songs, popular call and response chants, and percussive sound making (Saad 2012, 64; Fahmy 2013, 305).

To maintain enthusiasm among protesters, to garner courage in the face of state authorities, to increase the felt presence of their

numbers, and to stay awake through the night, barricaded protesters rhythmically beat metal objects on railings and pieces of scrap metal. In addition, protestors collectively whistled and chanted, creating a heterophonic soundscape of rebellion vital to the meaning and significance of the uprising. The participatory nature of this soundscape served to mobilize and shape popular sentiment, propelling the demonstrations, and creating spaces for diverse social groups to coalesce around a nexus of shared history and experience (McDonald 2009a). It was from within this percussive soundscape that a new catalog of protest song spontaneously emerged. Ramy Essam's "Irhal!" (Go!), largely considered to be the signature anthem of the Tahrir demonstrations, developed from setting participatory street chants to a pounding Egyptian folk-dance rhythm and pop-style harmonic guitar accompaniment. In songs such as this, protesters from diverse and at times conflicting social formations (class, region, age, and religion) walked side by side, united by a common cause articulated through the group-forming capacities of participatory sound and music. To essentialize the music of the demonstrations around presentational fields of performance, such as hip hop, loses sight of the active and reflexive means through which diverse social bodies came together in solidarity for regime change.

At the heart of this issue is an interpretive slippage, reinforced continually by American news media, between music as an act of protest and music performed in response to, and in support of, a given protest movement. This mistake is often overlooked and undertheorized within the ethnomusicological literature on protest song more generally, and is worthy of further scrutiny and discussion. Music very easily and routinely serves both purposes: acting as a direct form of confrontational social action, and as a performative reflection of such action. However, these two different activities should not be confused as deriving from the same social processes or having the same cognitive affect. Participatory music performed as an act of resistance, protest, or activism in the streets differs considerably from presentational music performed in support of a larger protest movement. The differences between these two forms of musical activism are best understood along an axis of participatory dynamics where direct face-to-face engagement, inclusive dense musical structures, repetition, and sociomusical solidarity provide the foundation for establishing deep emotional affect. Such musical elements are common in participatory aesthetics, and are the building blocks for creating feelings of

intense connection, solidarity, or *communitas* (Turino 2008, 18–20). Presentational arts created in response to political movements present a very different set of affective moves: reflective, contemplative, and interpretive (205–10).

What is particularly interesting are the ways in which a matrix of youth culture, hip hop, and ICTs very quickly became the primary means for framing the uprisings within the American mediascape. Hip hop and social networking applications like Facebook and Twitter were extolled as generative tools for, and products of, local political mobilization and community action. According to several mainstream news outlets, this was the "Hip-Hop Revolution," enabled by Facebook, and networked through Twitter (Aouragh and Alexander 2011; Huang 2011; Stepanova 2011).[3] Based in discourses of cosmopolitan youth culture and hip hop, ICTs became a crucial means of framing the newly coined "Arab Spring" for international consumption. In the process, diverse democratic social movements active throughout the Arab world were ignored, local histories and political dynamics were neglected, egregious acts of violence were sanitized, and Arab youth and the internet were fetishized in very problematic ways (Aouragh and Alexander 2011; Hoffman and Jamal 2012). Most importantly, this strategic framing left unchallenged (and perhaps strengthened) America's longstanding policies of colonialist intervention in the Arab world, deflecting attention away from the various forms of exploitation and oppression which rendered the uprisings necessary in the first place.

I argue that this narrow, partial, and superficial depiction of the sonic dimensions of the reform movement, centered on youth-based presentational hip hop, was more than just sloppy "armchair" journalism. Rather, it was a strategic attempt to shape the ways in which the uprisings were framed within the American imaginary. Additionally, these efforts signaled a discursive effort to control the direction and outcome of the uprisings, and to further a neo-Orientalist discourse of American cultural influence over forces of reform and democratization in the Arab Middle East.[4] A close examination of the constituent soundscapes of the January 2011 uprisings as well as the ways in which American news media represented the uprisings offers a unique vantage point for further investigating these claims. I believe that such an investigation will allow for greater insight into the various ways in which concepts of "reform" and "revolution" are imagined and experienced by actors in the streets, as well as how

they are circulated globally through transnational networks of media and political exchange. It is my hope that a critical investigation into how hip hop was strategically employed as a frame for narrating and interpreting the uprisings will provide greater insight into the myriad ways in which media participates in the production and regulation of meaning, including the intelligibility of social bodies and fundamental relationships of self and other. Furthermore, such an investigation allows for a better understanding of the objective forms of violence, the systemic and symbolic forms of exploitation and alienation that undergird American colonial intervention in the Arab Middle East.

Theorizing the Frame

Key to this argument is an understanding of the frame as a prime factor in the interpretation of experience. The concept of framing and frame analysis originates in the seminal work of Erving Goffman (1974) and Gregory Bateson (1972). They each independently developed the concept of the frame as "schemata of interpretation" that enable audiences to "locate, perceive, identify, and label" social phenomena. Bateson originally theorized the frame as a means to describe the contexts within which all social interaction takes place. For Goffman, frames provide schemata of interpretation from which audiences derive meaning, organize experiences, and postulate future action (1974, 21). No communicative utterance or interaction can be understood without reference to this interpretive schema, this metacommunicative message (or metamessage) (Bateson 1972). The frame is the vehicle of these meta-messages, delimiting the boundaries of perception and cueing possible interpretations.

Jim A. Kuypers has made significant contributions to our understanding of framing practices by proposing that frames act as powerful rhetorical devices that "induce [audiences] to filter perceptions of the world in particular ways" (2009, 181). For Kuypers, framing is the "process whereby communications act, consciously or not, to construct a point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be viewed in a particular manner" (2009, 182). However, inasmuch as the frame suggests, even compels, possible interpretations of phenomena, it rests upon existing discourses of reality and experience. It must resonate, in some way, with previous discursive schema of interpretation, giving the frame a kind of prescriptive momentum or

inertia: a compulsory valence pushing toward a given interpretation. Resisting the compulsory interpretation of the frame risks cognitive dissonance, social stigma, or taboo.

Thinking about the ways in which violence may be framed for strategic affect, Judith Butler has recently extended this discussion in several important ways. For Butler, frames do more than simply suggest or compel possible interpretations, they regulate our understanding of the phenomenon itself: "The frame does not simply exhibit reality, but actively participates in a strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what will count as a reality" (2010, xiii). Framing practices are therefore rendered so as to operationalize a strategic reality. And in the process, they delimit what can and cannot be seen, what can and cannot be heard, and what does and does not count as *real*.

Although Butler focuses entirely on visual fields of interpretation, it is perhaps worthwhile to expand her argument to include a consideration of how musical or sonic frames participate in this process. Music and sound, as a kind of aural frame, constrict and regulate how we understand, interpret, and ultimately respond to acts of violence through elements of style, genre, and aesthetics. As several ethnomusicologists have shown, musically framing acts of violence compels a particular reading of the violence performed (McDonald 2009a, 2010; Ritter 2007). Current ethnomusicological research on violence has therefore begun to critically assess the contexts, the frames, and the performative pathways through which violence is rendered accessible to its intended audiences.

As Butler demonstrates, strategic framings of violence recruit audiences into a certain understanding of its reality (2010, xix). Such frames are both reflective of the destruction of war as well as reflexive in the shaping of its understanding. When American news media presents a narrative of violence, it does so with two interrelated effects: to document the violence enacted and to regulate its understanding. This act of regulation is itself, in some way, part of the violent act that, while inflicting no direct material damage, has great consequence in creating the conditions from which violence is made possible, even inevitable. This process is twofold: first, by shaping initial perceptions of violence; and second, by ensconcing the underlying objective relations from which violence occurs.

This assertion rests upon an understanding of violence in both its subjective and objective forms. Drawing from the work of Slavoj Žižek

and others, I believe it is essential to critically distinguish between subjective violence (the material, empirical, visible, and quantifiable effects of war, genocide, and terrorism) and objective violence (larger symbolic and systemic forms of exploitation and oppression operating throughout the world) (Žižek 2009, 1–5). Žižek rightly insists that media-based (and scholarly) attention to the spectacle of subjective violence masks our understanding of the more powerful forms of objective violence animating society. Here Žižek focuses his attention on the "violence of the status quo," the so-called natural order of things, which undergirds the conditions of possibility for subjective violence to occur (2009, 8). In its hypervisibility, the spectacle of subjective violence detracts our attention from the true locus of concern, masking other forms of violence and therefore actively sustaining them. The objective violence of the status quo, not only renders subjective violence intelligible, even inevitable, but structures relations of self and other wherein the symbolic and systematic forms of exploitation and oppression remain unchallenged.

Media frames such as music, imagery, and sound are a particularly subtle means of masking structures of objective violence, reinforcing a given reality wherein certain acts of violence are legitimate, necessary, even beautiful, while rendering others shocking, deplorable, and disgusting. Focusing only on the carnage of subjective violence at the expense of addressing the underlying conditions of its possibility has the potential to participate in its devastation and perhaps perpetuate its occurrence. As a key element in the construction of reality, media frames have the capacity to firmly ensconce the objective violence of the status quo. Based on this, violence cannot be fully understood within the subjective realm alone, nor in uncovering the objective conditions of its possibility. Rather, understanding violence requires attending to the framing practices, the strategic contexts, and the pathways through which acts of violence are rendered intelligible for various audiences (McDonald 2009a).

Framing the "Arab Spring," Hip Hop and Social Media

Tunisian up-and-coming rap star El-General (Hamada Ben Amor), was the first "star" of the American media's so-called "hip-hop revolution." Inspired by Mohammad Bouazizi's self-immolation in protest of police corruption and ill treatment, and the wave of protests that followed in Tunisia on December 18, 2010, El-General composed and

released his antigovernment anthem, "Raʾīs al-Balād" (Head of state) as an angry tirade against despotic injustice and the lack of civil freedoms. The original video features El-General performing alone in a makeshift studio, shouting angrily into a microphone.

> Mr. President, here, today, I speak with you
> in my name and the name of all people who live in misery.
> It's 2011 and there's still a man who's dying of hunger.
> He wants to work to survive, but his voice is not heard!
> Go out into the street and see [how] people have become animals.
> Look at the police with batons. Thwack-thwack-thwack! They don't care!
> There is still no one to tell them the word "stop."
>
> Mr. President, your people are dead. So many people are eating garbage.
> There, you see what's happening in this country!
> Miseries are everywhere and people haven't found anywhere to sleep.
> I speak here in the name of the people who were wronged and crushed beneath the feet [of the powerful].[5]

Very soon after the song's release, El-General was arrested for incitement. Perhaps because of his arrest, or perhaps because of widespread interest in the protests by international media, "Raʾīs al-Balād" went viral, spreading quickly across various social media websites. As a political prisoner, El-General rapidly rose to international acclaim, animating the narrative of the so-called "Arab Spring" as a youth-powered hip-hop movement for democratic change. After intense international pressure from famous artists and politicians alike, El-General was soon released from prison. And following the ousting of longtime President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011, "Raʾīs al-Balād" was adopted and promoted by the new Tunisian regime as an informal national anthem.[6]

The story of El-General quickly became the template for narrating the uprisings in American media. His cause, including clips of the "Raʾīs al-Balād" video, were broadcast across the United States as part of the mainstream nightly news. In these news stories, images of the protests were set to hip-hop beats, giving the impression that El-General's "Raʾīs al-Balād" had a causal connection to the uprisings. Within a matter of weeks, several other Arab rappers released songs in support of the uprisings. Notable among these were Arabian Knightz's (Egypt) "Rebel," Ibn Thabit's (Libya) "Benghazi II," Omar Offendum's (Syrian-American) collaboration with The Narcicyst (Iraqi-Canadian) "#Jan25 Egypt," and Khaled M.'s (Libya) collaboration with LowKey

(Iraqi-English) "Can't Take our Freedom." Many of these initial attempts to capture the spirit of the demonstrations in hip hop were products of transnational collaborations between established artists in Europe and North America and local artists in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia. In these songs, English- and Arabic-speaking rappers traded verses in a sign of solidarity. Or, in instances where such collaborations were not possible, local rappers would liberally sample beats, rhythms, bass lines, and mixes from well-known international artists. For example, Arabian Knightz's single "Rebel" sampled Lauryn Hill's well-known hit "I Find it Hard to Say." In this remake, Lauryn Hill's familiar voice and acoustic guitar were sonically and discursively emplaced into the context of the Egyptian demonstrations. Arabian Knightz rappers, A-Rush (Karim Adel), Sphinx (Hisham Abed), and E-Money (Ehab Adel) interspersed Hill's popular chorus with verses of hip hop performed in Arabic and English. These verses drew from and expanded upon the various protest chants heard in the streets of Tahrir Square. Unofficial videos of "Rebel" posted on YouTube and various other sites displayed imagery of the protests and the often-violent response by government forces.

[Lauryn Hill]
Rebel, rebel, rebel
Are you satisfied?
Rebel, rebel, rebel, rebel …

[A-Rush]

misr taqūl ʿarabī nūr al-thalam	Egypt says we are proud to be Arab
al-shʿab yurīd asqāt al-naẓām	The People want the fall of the government[7]
qatilūnā khaufūnā sijanūnā hathabūnā	They killed us, scared us, imprisoned us, tortured us
nahabūnā lahanū inhār al-abūnā	Took everything from us, and made our lives miserable
al-shʿab al-miṣr lanyā maūṭ	The Egyptian people will not die

[Sphinx]
They say one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter
Conquered and divided fighting just to reunite us
Like reunite us, rather die than to live in blindness,
Eyes wide as I see the violence

> While you slumber, poverty and hunger break the silence,
> While the screams of a mother left child-less
> Echo like sirens and the media denies it
> Masses just quiet 'cause they keep us frightened. Rebel!

In sampling Lauryn Hill's chorus from "I Find It Hard to Say," and in appropriating the popular chants of the streets into their lyrics, Arabian Knightz strategically framed their work as one of aesthetic and political collaboration. In its affective drive, this song captured the immediate sounds of the protests and situated them within a larger discourse of hip hop, protest, and African-American popular music. Lauryn Hill's chorus and vocal stylings further this framing through an asserted iconicity of style, politics, and affect. The intermingling of style, voice, and sound reinforced an aesthetic of collaboration between Arab protestors and African-American artists; an imagined connection and coherence between activists based in hip-hop aesthetics and transnational media. The image of collaboration at the heart of these early recordings was instrumental in espousing a perceived connection between the uprisings and the hip-hop community.

Soon after these initial collaborations, local Arab rappers began releasing original songs in support of the demonstrations. In the two years between January 2011 and 2013 Facebook pages and informal bloggers documented the release of well over one hundred hip-hop songs dedicated to the Arab reform movements.[8] Within the larger field of hip hop in the Arab world, such an outpouring of musical activity is by no means anomalous. Hip hop has made significant contributions to Arab popular music and protest movements for more than a decade (McDonald 2009b). In that time Arab rappers have achieved substantial levels of international acclaim, created necessary infrastructure, and developed wide markets for distribution and consumption of their work. Nevertheless, this outpouring of musical activity surrounding the uprisings should not be discounted. For these new songs testify to the pervasive cultural importance of the uprisings throughout the Arab world. Moreover, they reflect widespread feelings of oppression, exploitation, and alienation, and give voice to marginalized communities seeking spaces for the imagining of new social realities.

Once released, these new hip-hop songs were widely disseminated via ICTs. The artists themselves, or networks of fans, would

create music videos using amateur video footage of the demonstrations. For many online communities and international audiences, these amateur hip-hop videos became the primary way of documenting and reporting the demonstrations. Hip-hop songs provided the ready-made soundtrack for amateur video footage of the violence in the streets, despite never actually being performed live or listened to by those depicted in the videos themselves. In the juxtaposition and co-occurrence of sound and imagery, these videos reinforced the indexical linkages between hip hop and the demonstrations, giving the impression that the music and the scenes depicted were mutually constitutive. Based on their widespread availability, immediacy, relevance, and proximity to pop culture, presentational hip-hop videos became the most visible and widely accessible representation of the protests.

However, it is important to point out that these tracks were created *in response to* the uprisings, and not *in the process of* the uprisings. Hip-Hop videos featuring footage of the violence in the streets circulated freely as a sonic and visual image of the demonstrations. The production and dissemination of these musical videos were largely in support of, and in response to, the violence in the streets. But by all accounts they were not generative of the acts of protest themselves. These hip-hop songs were music *about* the demonstrations not music *of* the demonstrations. This distinction is key.

Building upon this wave of musical activity American news media began cultivating the narrative of the "Arab Spring" as a "Hip-Hop Revolution." While sociopolitical analyses of the origins of the uprisings were common, music and sound served as an important framing device for narrating the "on the ground" activities of demonstrators. Video footage, commercial leads, and teasers broadcast on CNN in January and February 2011 employed a confluence of ambient crowd noise and percussive sound with stylized hip-hop beats and dramatic musical interludes. Sounds of the protests evolved into hip-hop songs about the protests, and both became powerful framing devices in American mainstream news media.

For example, writing for Latitude News, Michael May exclaimed that "the Arab Spring has a Dope Beat." In his analysis he freely asserts that "[the] Arab Spring's anthems draw on American Rap." In July of 2011 *PBS Newshour* presented an open conversation with American foreign-affairs journalist Robin Wright, who proudly proclaimed that "Hip-Hop has been the rhythm of [the] Arab Spring." More detailed

analyses explored the cultural and historical origins of the uprisings through manufactured lineages to Tupac Shakur and other politically relevant American rappers. Popular News professed "How Tupac and Hip-Hop Inspired the Arab Spring." Amber Leon focused her reporting on the ways in which the "Arab Spring draws inspiration from American hip-hop." Likewise, Alex Rittman, writing for *The National*, made great efforts to "connect the Arab Spring and Hip-Hop." The popular music blog *Soundcheck*, a production of WNYC Radio, labeled the uprisings "A Modern Revolution," explicating how "Hip-Hop shines over the Arab Spring." More than simply correlation, these many analyses asserted a *causal* role of hip-hop music and culture. Through hip hop, America could claim a kind of responsibility for inspiring the demonstrations, seeding the awakening of the masses, and providing the musical and technological means of democratic reform.

The conflagration of causality, modernity, and urban slang in these depictions should not be discounted, but rather should be seen as a strategic attempt to discursively situate the protests within a frame of American pop-cultural influence. As a kind of frame analysis I created an informal word cloud to better understand how the demonstrations were depicted in American media. Assembling approximately fifty internet-based news stories which mention music or musical activity in the "Arab Spring," my analysis revealed an overabundance of hip-hop slang, where words like "dope," "beats," and "rhythm," were used to describe the actions of protesters. Likewise, "modern," "freedom," and "revolution," were used to describe the underlying values of protesters. Finally, verbs like "fueled," inspired," "shined over," and "impacted," were employed to connect locally produced protest song with the American music industry.

Our Weekly went above and beyond all others in its analysis of the role of hip hop in the revolutionary movements. Its June 28, 2012, cover story was dedicated to the uprisings under the title "Arab Spring: Let Freedom Rhyme." What is particularly fascinating about this article is its featured cover image (see Figure 1). In it, two young Arab-looking rappers are positioned standing in an Orientalist landscape replete with desert sand, rock formations, and a lounging camel. Upon this Orientalist landscape, the rappers are accompanied by equally cliché trappings of "modern" hip-hop culture: boom boxes, low-hanging baggy jeans, sleeveless T-shirts, and sunglasses. However, the intent of the image is not merely one of juxtaposition, superimposing the

"traditional" oriental desert with the "modern" progressive rappers. Rather, the frame of this image is one of transformation. In as much as these rappers are occupying this desert landscape, they are transforming it into their own image. So, for example, the accompanying boom boxes index a sonic reclamation of the native desert soundscape. Upon the background rock formations is a work of illegible graffiti spray-painted in Arabic (the linguistic meaning of the graffiti is, of course, irrelevant to its intended audience, so long as it looks exotic). This graffiti alludes to urban American practices of "tagging" contested geographies and the resignification of space and place. Planted into the ground at the feet of the featured rapper is a protest sign with the words "Facebook" written in both English and Arabic. Underneath this is the popular Twitter hashtag "#Jan25." Finally, the bottom of the sign reads, "The Egyptian Social Network." The protest sign is iconic of the demonstrations, but given that it is firmly planted into the sand, it also indexes a transformation of the desert landscape in the name of social media technology. And most egregiously, the camel's open grin features a gleaming bejeweled tooth, intended to mimic the appearance of hip-hop *grillz*. In this instance even the camel has been transformed, modernized, and adorned in hip-hop jewelry.

Each of these semiotic maneuvers becomes a tool for indexing the transformation of the traditional Arab cultural landscape into a progressive site of transformation, whereby local Arab youth have begun to "awaken" and act upon their political marginalization. As a visual frame the image strategically regulates possible interpretations of its content, and its cover story, prior to the reader ever turning the page. It delimits alternative interpretations, and recruits the reader to participate in a strategic rendering of the "Arab Spring" that leaves in place Orientalist understandings of Arab cultural landscapes and progressive-modernist delusions of the American presence and colonial influence in the Middle East.

There is only one problem. Much like the neo-Orientalist reality it compels, the entire image on the magazine cover is a fabrication. Of course certain aspects of the image are framed as imaginary. The camel's gold tooth, the graffiti, and the accompanying boom boxes are certainly rhematic indices of possible, but not actual, phenomena, juxtaposed for dramatic effect. But so too are the rappers themselves a fabrication of imaginary life worlds. Interestingly, the two rappers featured in this photo, Mohammad El-Farrah and Mutaz

FIGURE 1
"Let Freedom Rhyme" Cover, *Our Weekly*, June 28–July 4, 2012.

Al-Hewayhi are well-known *Palestinian* hip-hop artists. Their likeness for this magazine cover was cut and pasted from their 2005 publicity photos for the acclaimed documentary, *Slingshot Hip-Hop* (see Figure 2). Not only were these two rappers not associated with the uprisings of 2011, they were not even citizens of any of the countries involved. Mohammad El-Farrah was at the time living in the United States, while Mutaz Al-Hewayhi was living in Gaza. Rather than being legitimately linked to the reform movement, the images of these two rappers "fit" with the frame, the prescribed interpretation. Much like the bejeweled camel, they were strategically emplaced within the

FIGURE 2
Publicity Photo Palestinian Rapperz (PR), *Slingshot Hip-Hop*, 2005. Photo by Mohammad El-Farrah, Instagram: @alfarra

desert landscape for dramatic affect, a means of framing and regulating a prescribed interpretation of an extremely important geopolitical event.

Why Hip Hop?

But why hip hop? Why youth? Why social media? When hundreds of thousands filled the streets of Cairo, Damascus, Tunis, Manama, and Sanaʿ, collectively chanting, dancing, and singing a diverse array of nationalist, political, and folk songs, why did Americans see and hear only young rappers? Moreover, why was the majority of attention on music and other expressive arts dedicated specifically toward presentational music, produced in studios and disseminated via the Internet, rather than the actual participatory songs, poems, chants, and dances filling the streets? Why were the percussive soundscapes of the protests merely window dressing for American news-media analysis, and never subjected to critical analysis?

First, it is entirely possible that American news media picked up on the efforts of young hip-hop artists simply because their work was so easily accessible via YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and

other networks of media exchange. Journalists did not necessarily need to embed themselves in the protests to find musical or performance-based signs of local popular sentiment. The angle they needed could be easily found with some basic online searches. What is more, these songs required less linguistic, cultural, and poetic translation, and therefore, could be very easily repackaged and repurposed for international consumption. Hip-hop beats, rhythms, vocal timbre, gesture, fashion, and other performative signs seemingly required little interpretive analysis to be rendered meaningful for American audiences. Cultural nuance, affect, and meaning, the hallmarks of good ethnomusicological analysis and the result of intense ethnographic inquiry, could be very quickly distilled down to simple lyric translation and basic subtitles. In this way, presentational hip hop lent itself to a form of armchair (Google) journalism that did not require long-term, sustained, in-depth, face-to-face interactions with stakeholders, demonstrators, their representatives, or their adversaries.

Second, it is possible that by focusing their initial data collection on these hip-hop laden amateur videos journalists and other interested parties inserted an uncritically recognized bias into their data sets. Simply put, online research often leads to online communities linked through their specifically online presence and practices. Such online communities, geographically dispersed and culturally diverse, naturally present a bias toward transnational popular musics like hip hop. Factor in the demographics of online communities in the Arab world, which research has shown in limited contexts to be largely under the age of thirty-five, educated, and cosmopolitan in its engagement with transnational media (Aouragh and Alexander 2011; Ghannam 2011), and we find a social formation wherein hip hop is an established primary mode of cultural communication. For these online communities, hip hop provided familiar space for articulating collective sentiment and reaching out to international audiences. Hip hop was the most appropriate means of communicating deep-seated feelings of anger and alienation across cultural, linguistic, and ethnic boundaries (McDonald 2009b).

Moreover, it is also worth considering why online communities would respond to violence in the streets through online practices. For the millions of empathetic online observers unable to participate in the demonstrations themselves, presentational music videos, such as these, were a productive means through which the powers of the

internet could be marshaled in support of the uprisings. It became a means of participating in the demonstrations from afar without subjecting oneself to the dangers of marching in the streets. For mainstream American news media, these online communities offered an accessible cohort of collaborators. Given that the majority of media sources focusing on hip hop were smaller, commercial, online news organizations, it seems entirely appropriate that journalists unable to embed themselves in the protests would seek out collaboration from online sources. Online sources did not offer direct exposure to the participatory and percussive soundscapes of the protests themselves, preventing journalists from being able to fully investigate and analyze the connections between sound and politics. News organizations that were able to embed journalists within the protests often presented far more nuanced depictions and analyses (see below). A determining factor in the production of superficial or nuanced analyses seems to be, therefore, directly attributed to the resources of the news organization and the face-to-face exposure of journalists to demonstrators.

Third, more than simply narrating the violent imagery of the demonstrations, as an interpretive frame, hip hop regulated the processes through which American publics developed common sense understandings of the uprisings and their underlying politics. It made a diverse set of local demonstrations accessible to an American audience seeking a compelling means to identify with those risking their lives in the streets. It added a dimension of cultural familiarity, drawing upon a shared repertory of indexical meanings associated with hip hop: youth culture, community action, political commentary, and racialized subaltern empowerment. Yet more than simply making the music familiar in American ears, hip hop created an entry point for thinking about the protests wherein America had a role in shaping the Arab world's so-called awakening on its long "march" toward democracy.

While hip hop and ICTs provided a useful frame within which American news media could explain the uprising, they also became a tool for engendering a strategic response *to* the uprising. This response was not an altruistic identification with an Arab society beleaguered by generations of despotism, structural neglect, colonial domination, and mass corruption, but rather, the self-aggrandizing notion that "we Americans" had in fact seeded the uprising through our popular culture and technology. The emphasis on hip-hop collaborations made

for an easy sell that, through an African-American popular music, the United States somehow played a role in inspiring young Egyptian revolutionaries to take to the streets. In a strange sleight of hand, the often-denigrated forces of global capitalism and transnational media could then be repackaged as a rallying cry for freedom and democracy. Based on this logic, the spread of American popular culture could somehow be credited with the overthrow of one of the longest-standing and brutally-enforced dictatorships, all in a mere eighteen days. It suggested that all that was needed was the necessary combination of American-provided infrastructure (in the form of Facebook and Twitter) and American-provided cultural content (in the form of hip hop), each readily and generously delivered by the forces of globalization to inspire a social movement for political change.

Appreciating the historical and political nuances of the situation would require American publics to confront the inconvenient truth of their own complicity in the establishment and maintenance of the despotic regimes that had foreclosed democracy for millions of Arabs over the last sixty years. I submit, however, that the drive to render the uprisings accessible to an American audience was not primarily a response to this American lack (or avoidance) of understanding. More likely, focusing their attention on hip hop provided a convenient means of framing the uprisings, congruent with the larger politico-capitalist interests of the corporate news mediascape itself: a corporatist worldview wherein the status quo of American economic and cultural hegemony remains unquestioned (even celebrated) while the Arab world "awakens" and seeks entry into the "modern world."

Finally, the use of hip hop and ICTs might be seen as a strategic attempt to shape the direction, goals, and ultimate outcome of the protest movements themselves. More than shaping interpretation at home, these framing tactics could be seen to provide structural models for the uprisings to follow. American solidarity with the protests, cultivated through popular culture and mainstream news media, would seemingly provide incentives for local stakeholders to modify their goals and aspirations. For many years, the tragedies of the Arab world have been denied access to the American public sphere (Shaheen 2012). In this rare instance, Arab demonstrators were profoundly and unexpectedly humanized in the American mediascape (Russell 2011). Instead of speaking with only key power brokers and elites, well-resourced American journalists from well-respected news organizations began working with non-elite collaborators (Hermida

Lewis, and Smith 2014). Rather than being seen as angry hordes, protestors were shown peacefully demonstrating in the streets, protecting each other from government thuggery, and clearly articulating their democratic goals. Most importantly, in a complete reversal of approach, small pockets of American news media began, in limited quantities, to actually speak with demonstrators, openly inquiring to their thoughts and ideas (Harlow and Johnson 2011). Nuanced depictions and analyses of the demonstrations were provided by well-respected and well-resourced news organizations willing and able to embed their correspondents within the protests themselves. This dramatic change in approach might be considered an important step by covering the political life in the Middle East. However, given that such democratic practices have been commonplace, especially in Egypt, for at least the last sixty years, but have been rarely if ever shown in American news media, it is peculiar that in this particular moment American audiences were given access to local ideas of democratic reform.

The wide coverage and humanization of the protests offered unprecedented opportunities to local stakeholders and change makers to access international audiences. Given that protest movements ignored by American news media in Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain were quickly thwarted, it would seem logical to assume that international news media attention (and specifically American news media attention) had a significant effect on the outcome of the reform movement, and that the need to sustain international attention might drastically shape the scope and direction of the demonstrations. By this logic, American interest in the protests, nested within a shared discourse of youth culture, technology, and social protest, would seemingly motivate demonstrators to eschew religious extremism and instead seek out the creation of an American-friendly (i.e., capitalist, liberal, secular) new government alternative (Massad 2012).

The Discourse of the "Arab Spring"

While the emphasis on hip hop and ICTs allowed for a quick and easy identification between American audiences and select protesting constituencies, it did so at great consequence. As a form of neo-Orientalism, framing the Arab spring within a rhetoric of hip hop and social media initiated yet another project of discursively

creating the Other in the West's image. Both in the sense of framing relations of self and other, and assessing American foreign policy in the Middle East, this neo-Orientalist agenda has had far-reaching implications.

First and foremost, by collapsing each of the many uprisings taking place under drastically different historical and political contexts, circumstances, and consequences into one superficial "Arab Spring," American news media essentialized uniquely situated social movements within an uncompromising frame: that this was an Arab youth movement determined to overthrow the older generation of traditional, backward, and puritanical tyrants in order to ascend into a new US-led modernity of tolerant, secular, technology-oriented global capitalism. This presents an image of the uprisings wherein its primary agents are young hipster *kuffiya*-wearing bloggers, and pays little to no attention to the roles of women, marginalized laborers, Islamists, the impoverished, and other reform-minded political constituencies (Hoffman and Jamal 2012; Duboc 2013; Winegar 2012; Hafez 2012). In the process, Arab youth became fetishized in the American mediascape: imagined to possess capacities and characteristics beyond their social relations and an object of fascination for international consumption.

Furthermore, this essentializing frame paid little attention to deep-seated historical processes, local dynamics, and well-entrenched social movements that have been active throughout the Middle East for generations. As several researchers have shown, in many of the affected countries (especially in Tunisia, Egypt, and Bahrain), labor unions and mobilized class-based constituencies provided the most formidable and well-organized resistance to government corruption (Anderson 2011; Swedenburg 2012). In Egypt, for example labor unions have actively sought democratic reform for over twenty years. Their well-organized infrastructure was integral to sustaining the demonstrations in Silwan and Tahrir (Duboc 2013). Likewise, in Bahrain labor constituencies were the initial driving force of the protests in the Pearl roundabout (Matthiesen 2013). The importance of labor unions, mosques, and universities as sites of mobilization and the dissemination of protest media was also largely ignored, as were rural villages and the impoverished (Agrama 2012).

The omission of class-based coalitions, women, labor syndicates, minorities, rural villages, and the impoverished eliminated

constituencies critical of neoliberal economic practices from public view (Massad 2012). Moreover, it removed from public view the long history of strikes, work stoppages, and confrontations with police by workers and the unemployed throughout the region. Instead, the discourse of the "Arab Spring" presumed that peaceful demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience were an entirely new phenomenon in Egypt, inspired by a new generation of internet activists coming of age under despotism. This lack of social and historical understanding displaces and limits any discussion of local political dynamics unique to each protest movement. Although it may be possible to conceptualize the uprisings of January 2011 as part of a larger wave of political change, mutually inspired, and based in similar anxieties and experiences, the careful analysis of this movement requires being attentive to local political dynamics, taking into account how larger political reforms are interpreted and articulated locally within unique fields of consequence and experience.

Even the notion that this was an "Arab Spring" reveals some of the quiet Orientalism at work. Calling this an "Arab Spring" sanitizes the severity, intensity, and courage displayed by the thousands of men and women daring to confront a brutal, well-armed, US-funded and trained national security apparatus. The popularity of the term "Arab Spring" throughout American news media quietly lumped together as a single mass, diverse social movements operating under drastically different circumstances and historical contexts while simultaneously reinforcing a modernist "awakening" of sorts, a rebirth into the modern, civilized world. This so-called "Spring" masks the underlying forms of objective violence, the systemic and symbolic violence of the status quo, that have enabled state violence in the Arab world and rendered the ensuing uprisings inevitable. Even in the most metaphoric interpretation this was not a "Spring." It was, and continues to be, a deadly revolution, where thousands of innocent lives have been lost or imprisoned in an attempt to reform a series of corrupt state apparatuses. Framing the "Arab Spring" in hip hop and social media prevented international audiences from fully appreciating the violence of the demonstrations, the precarity of life in Tahrir, Tunis, Tripoli, and Sanaʿ, and the great sacrifices made by hundreds of thousands of protestors.

Looking critically into the ways in which hip hop and ICTs have been used to frame American understanding of the January 2011

uprisings is a powerful reminder of how seemingly innocent forms of cultural description and representation can strategically frame interpretation and intelligibility (Allagui and Kuebler 2011). As a framing practice, hip hop has served to structure a reality wherein neo-Orientalist understandings of the Arab world remain coherent and American neoliberal economics go unchallenged. This framing produces and reinforces imperialist relationships and agendas. The result is a neo-Orientalist representation of the Arab world where the January 2011 uprisings serve as a benchmark against which to measure American progress as well as a neutral terrain upon which to impose imperialist schemes and strategies for development, progress, and reform.

Most importantly, this framing foreclosed opportunities for sincere engagement between American publics and Arab demonstrators. With great fascination, American audiences followed the demonstrations in Tahrir. Protesters were celebrated and admired for their great sacrifices. Their cause was validated, and worthy of recognition. And in ways not seen before, Arabs were humanized in the American mediascape. This created a moment of possibility where American audiences might productively engage with the Arab world, to recognize local lifeways and experiences, to accommodate difference, and to assess critically American interventionist policy in the Middle East. Perhaps such a moment could have inspired a larger discussion on American culpability in the installation and maintenance of the tyrannical and corrupt regimes being overthrown. For well over a century Western powers have assumed that they can shape and control most aspects of power and policy in the Arab world. Whether due to imperial self-interest, energy resources, economic policy, or pro-Israeli bias, this interventionist posture has rendered coherent the installation of despotic state regimes tasked with protecting the conduits of economic exploitation and quieting the local population. As Arab citizens throughout the Middle East threaten to take control of their political lives and work toward creating a direct democracy, it remains to be seen if American audiences will stand with them in solidarity or passively watch from afar. My guess is that ultimately it will depend on how the struggle is framed.

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Notes

1. "Arab Spring" here refers to the wave of uprisings, demonstrations, and protests that began on December 18, 2010, and continued until mid-2012 in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Libya, and Syria. Marc Lynch claims to have coined the term in his January 6, 2011, article in *Foreign Policy*. While adopted in mainstream media, many have criticized this term as highly problematic. I place the "Arab Spring" in quotes throughout this article as a means of emphasizing the need to deconstruct and better understand its many valences.

2. This documentary may be accessed via the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9u4v7R9yF0o.

3. Carol Huang's empirical research on the use of social networking tools during the first three months of the uprisings shows that Facebook usage swelled, nearly doubling, in some areas (2011). However, while Huang has demonstrated a dramatic increase in usage, Ekaterina Stepanova cautions against making generative claims on the importance of internet-communication technologies (ICTs) in the uprisings. "No direct regional correlation can be traced between, on the one hand, levels of Internet penetration and other IT indicators and on the other, proclivity for and intensity of social protest" (2011, 3). To date, there remains little to no data to support the claim that ICT usage instigated or shaped the direction or goals of the protests. Rather, such technologies were demonstrably effective in their organizational and communication aspects only.

4. Writing for *Al-Jazeera*, Joseph Massad made a similar argument in 2012. In his op-ed, Massad deconstructs how the US media has focused on the elements of the protests that support neoliberal economics at the expense of larger labor constituencies, class coalitions, and the impoverished. The labeling of the uprisings as an "Arab Spring" is further analyzed as a strategic means of focusing attention away from anti-neoliberal factions, giving audiences a skewed understanding of demands, goals, and aspirations of protestors.

5. Translation by the author. For a complete transcription and translation of the entire piece see: http://revolutionaryarabraptheindex.blogspot.com/2011/08/el-general-rais-lebled.html.

6. The original music video for "Raīs al-Balād" may be accessed at the following link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=JupZw4SOwVQ#.

7. This phrase was the most popular chant of the Tahrir protests. Subsequent lyrics in this verse were also commonly chanted throughout the demonstrations. The appropriation of street-based sounds of the protests was incredibly common among these hip-hop songs as a means of articulating solidarity and connection with the protests.

8. University of Arkansas student Sean O'Keefe should be recognized as compiling one of the most authoritative lists of Arabic-language hip-hop songs inspired by the Arab uprisings. His various blog sites have served as an extremely useful tool for artists, audiences, and enthusiasts to connect and share music, commentary, and lyrics. See: http://revolutionaryarabraptheindex.blogspot.com/.

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