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Women's voices in diaspora: hip hop, spoken word, Islam and web 2.0

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the artistic production of four hip hop and spoken word artists belonging to the Muslim diaspora, Poetic Pilgrimage, Alia Sharrief, Hanouneh and Alia Gabres, aiming to understand if such cultural practices can be understood as forms of political, civic and social activism, with the potential to broaden or create alternative public spheres (Fraser, 1990). It articulates a form of musical production often associated with Islam, hip hop (Alim, 2005; Miah & Kalra, 2008), with spoken word, produced by Muslim women in diaspora, migrants or descendants of migrants, with different backgrounds and different life stories associated with Islam, allowing them effective voice in their self-representation, considered from their online presence (NTI and web 2.0). The diversity of the cultural producers and their forms of expression considered in this paper is understood as an example of the diversity within Islam and also as a denial of any orientalist stereotypes (Saïd, 1979) about Muslim women.

Keywords
Women; hip hop; Islam; public sphere

Vozes de mulheres em diáspora: *hip hop, spoken word*, Islão e web 2.0

Resumo

Este trabalho foca-se na produção artística de quatro artistas muçulmanas em diáspora – Poetic Pilgrimage, Alia Sharrief, Hanouneh e Alia Gabres – nos géneros *hip hop* e *spoken word*, com vista a analisar se as suas práticas culturais podem ser consideradas formas de ativismo político, cívico e social, com o potencial de alargar ou criar esferas públicas alternativas (Fraser, 1990). Articula uma forma de produção musical frequentemente associada ao Islão – o *hip hop* (Alim, 2005; Miah & Kalra, 2008) –, com uma prática artística de escrita e recitação de poesia, o *spoken word*, produzidas por mulheres muçulmanas em diáspora, migrantes ou descendentes de migrantes, de diversas proveniências e origens, com diferentes histórias de entrada no Islão, focando a sua agência na sua auto-representação, através tanto da sua produção artística, como da sua presença online (NTI e web 2.0). A diversidade das produtoras culturais e das suas formas de expressão visa ser demonstrativa da diversidade existente no Islão e anular estereótipos orientalistas (Saïd, 1979) que se lhes queiram impor.

Palavras-chave
Mulheres; *hip hop*; Islão; esfera pública

Introduction

This study looks at a form of musical production often associated with Islam – hip hop (Alim, 2005; Miah & Kalra, 2008), together with the artistic practice of writing and reciting poetry – spoken word –, produced by Muslim women in diaspora, migrants or descendants of migrants, with different backgrounds and different stories of entry in Islam. These women are representative of the great diversity within the religion and, as such, their artistic practices, which they compose, write, perform and share, are powerful examples of that diversity. It interrogates if such cultural production can be considered a form of activism, contributing to the creation of alternative public spheres and subaltern counter-publics (Fraser, 1990), considered from these women' self-representation through their artistic practice and on the internet [use of new information technologies (NTI) and web 2.0 (evolution of websites to social media platforms) tools]. Following Stuart Hall (1997), who celebrates the profound cultural revolution resulting from the artistic self-representation of subaltern groups and their impact on global expressive culture, but also on politics and social life, this paper hopes to be a contribution to the understanding of this revolution.

A second objective is to explore the potential of these expressive practices for the creation of identities and subjectivities as forms of empowerment, challenging orientalist stereotypes about Muslim women and questioning dichotomies such as the West/East (Saïd, 1979), secular/religious (Asad, 2003) and built identity/ascribed identity. Believing, with Ernst (2005), that it is important to look at Islam through the lens of art, a vehicle for self-expression, in order to realize its contribution to identity building and to the construction of networks of interest and activism, I articulate these practices with an exploration of the ways in which NTI influence contemporary networks of Muslim female artists, aiming to demonstrate that these networks are inclusive of their publics and contribute to the emergence of a transnational, deterritorialized community in which young Muslims collectively re-define the effective meaning of being Muslim (El-Nawawy & Khamis, 2011), through the construction of alternative, hybrid identities and belongings. In this way, I explore two other operational concepts: transnational online *Umma* (Mandaville, 2003) and Islamic cyber salons (Van der Veer, 2006).

Structure of the paper

This paper starts with a discussion of topics essential to the understanding of its objectives, including culture, subculture, diaspora, creativity, hip hop and spoken word, internet, activism, and public sphere. From this theoretical framework, it will advance to a comparative content and discourse analysis of the artistic productions selected for this study. Four Muslim female artists were chosen – with which I became familiar through research on Creative Ummah, a website aimed at promoting the cultural productions of Muslim artists in diaspora[1]. Based on the number of views on YouTube – a platform widely used by these artists to publish and share their work – a few songs/performances were

[1] Available at http://creativeummah.com/

picked for detailed analysis. Further content analysis was conducted on the artists' social media pages and their own personal websites, as well as those of projects they promote.

Theoretical framework

Thomas Turino (1993) refers to culture as a process located in the tangible lives of people, embedded in their social practices, through selection, (re-)creation and appropriation of available resources, and Dick Hebdige (1979) points out that culture is always an ambiguous concept, stressing the importance of conjectures and contextual specificities in the creation and articulation of cultural and artistic practices of social groups in subaltern positions, demonstrating how these appropriate the cultural resources available in certain moments and contexts, carefully selecting them to build alternative identities aimed at creating a sense of autonomy in an increasingly fragmented society. Similarly, Paul Gilroy (1995) emphasizes how contemporary cultural practices are heirs of a shared social imaginary, with great identity-building power, based on relations of authenticity and solidarity, providing recognition and appreciation, both individually and collectively, in political, economic and social contexts that can be considered hostile. Cultural practice constitutes itself as a fundamental strategy for the creation of individual and collective identities and subjectivities, understood in articulation with hegemonic power relations and projects (Hall, 1992), constituting a set of strategies defined and selected by cultural producers in dialectical relation with the contexts they occur in, as well as with the objectives and needs of social groups in a position of subalternity and otherness. As Ramnarine (2007) argues, any cultural expression is always constructed in interaction between different groups who share different experiences, which are reflected in the identities it engenders – in this sense, the cultural productions of diasporic young people in a minority situation, being located in the tension-space between power relations and class hierarchies, cannot be reduced to the simple function of resistance, as it is also a powerful tool of identity-building, interpersonal relations and solidarity.

I believe it is necessary to reflect on how expressive culture is transformed creatively through the experience of mobility, specifically through the dimension of migration and female diasporic experiences, considering the possibility of new social functions of artistic productions emerging in new, globalised contexts of inequality and intersectional discrimination. With El-Nawawy & Khamis (2011), I understand identity as a complex, dynamic and multifaceted concept, in the intersection between various aspects, including gender, religion, political orientation, migration status, economic and social class, etc., categories which are not univocal, but are in constant evolution and articulation, producing cultural meanings that can be shared by groups, even intermittently, in diaspora.

Through musical and performative productions, artistic practices such as the ones this paper focus on can be a place of representational struggles, reflecting new forms of identity and belonging, questioning hegemonic social positions and traditional gender roles, dismantling the meaning of concepts such as tradition, modernity, culture, multiculturalism – terms, as Michaels (1992) demonstrates, of difficult delimitation, linked to

colonialism and postcolonialism, constituting a form of adaptation to new contexts, with urbanization being an important factor.

Such practices must be considered through innovative methodologies and analysis strategies: following Talal Asad (Mahmood, 1996), we need to understand these phenomena in an inclusive way, embedded in their specific contexts of production and reception, since they are "both modern and traditional, both authentic and creative". Asad (2003) rejects the ideological weight given to modernity as a universal model, stating that it reflects a Western neoliberal project, constituting a normative frame of what modernity should be (rather than a description of what it actually is), thus leading to the rejection of cultural acts produced by actors in non-hegemonic positions, judged as traditional, retrograde or mere imitations of Western standards. Stuart Hall (1997) goes further, emphasizing that the emergence of new themes, regions, ethnicities, communities – to which I add religions and gender – previously excluded from the mainstream forms of cultural representation, allows for the creation of new counter-hegemonic discourses, in which subalternity is constructed as an alternative position of power, and as a form of legitimation in the field of modern artistic production (although still in a marginalized position in relation to the mainstream); he adds:

> all the most explosive modern musics are crossovers. The aesthetics of modern popular music is the aesthetics of the hybrid, the aesthetics of the crossover, the aesthetics of the diaspora, the aesthetics of creolization. (...) [The new artists want to] get hold of some of the modern technologies, to speak their own tongue, to speak of their own condition, then they are out of place, then the Other is not where it is. The primitive has somehow escaped from control. (Hall, 1997, p. 40)

In this sense, Hinnells (2005) emphasises the importance of art in solving one of the main challenges of globalization: the tension between homogenization and cultural heterogenization (Appadurai, 1990). Hip hop and spoken word can then be understood as resulting from processes of globalization as a dialectical phenomenon, in which events in different locations affect each other, in possibly divergent ways (Giddens, 2000), with cultural messages being dispersed from hegemonic positions – as is the case with hip hop, dispersed from the USA – being received and interpreted by individuals and groups in different locations, reinvented and adapted, incorporating their own traditions and identities. As music migrates, artists find new meanings in their localities, fostering the emergence of transnational cultural practices (Nooshin, 2011). In this sense, Toynbee and Dueck (2011) emphasize the importance of translation practices in music production: a musical trope is translated because it responds to a need of the social group that adopts it, where it gains a new social function. This is particularly noticeable when it comes to hip hop, a musical genre interpreted as "the natural language of self-expression", as a "powerful language of resistance" (Nooshin, 2011, p. 91), or as the "lingua franca of the street" (Miah & Kalra, 2008, p. 17), being integrated into everyday language, articulating local and global concerns.

Hip hop musicians can act as mediators of emerging identities, reformulating boundaries of belonging adapted to the cultural universe of urban centres, incorporating processes of identity formation that account for the subaltern statutes of some of the inhabitants of the city. As such, Miah & Kalra (2008) see hip hop as central to the urban culture of young Muslims, both in diaspora and in Muslim-majority countries. The authors state that hip hop produced by Muslims musicians demands a degree of ideological engagement from its audience, constituting a source of dialogue and debate, as it goes beyond the boundary of traditional cultural norms, uniting producers and consumers in the conscious challenge of stereotypes linked to the demonization of Islam, to situations of poverty and social exclusion, and, I argue, to the subversion of traditional gender roles. Hip hop can also serve as a form of intergenerational distinction, with artists distancing themselves from the cultural forms of previous generations, constituting an instrument of identity construction in a diasporic context.

Islam has been influencing this musical genre since its inception, when Afrika Bambaataa founded the Zulu Nation in 1973, incorporating references to Islam and Arabic words in their songs. In Europe and the United States, Aidi (2011) argues that it is necessary to consider the growing importance of Islam in poor and marginalized neighbourhoods as a result of immigration and integration policies, deindustrialization, unemployment and reduction of the social state, simultaneous to ideologies of African nationalism (such as the Nation of Islam), in order to understand the appeal of hip hop to young people in a minority, subaltern and marginalized situation; in the Middle East, LeVine (2009) demonstrates that Hip Hop and hardcore music became popular tools to criticize the *status quo* and – equally important – to imagine a different, more positive future: as Appadurai (1990) states, the power of imagination and creativity is fundamental in creating alternative worlds in the diasporic consciousness ("ideoscapes"). LeVine adds that hip hop, heavy metal and rock music became the "Al-Jazeera of the Streets" (2009, p. 35), constituting not only a form of expression, but also a network of access to knowledge and a way of sharing information. Artists incorporate elements of their economic, political, social and musical experience into their cultural productions, which clearly surpass simple imitation of Western practices: new styles and new directions emerge which redefine identities and forms of belonging to the *Umma* (as the transnational community of belief in Islam), contributing to the appearance of new non-traditional public spheres in the Arab world in diaspora, fuelled by alternative and counter-hegemonic publics, mostly young and constantly innovating.

As migration flows increase, so does artistic production by diasporic artists, some reflecting their diasporic existence, including its tensions as major themes – by appealing to a nostalgic place of origin or referring to difficulties of integration, socialization and conflict at various levels, both in host countries and in countries of origin, both at community and personal level. However, following Ramnarine (2007), it is not this paper´s goal to point out the uniqueness of cultural production in diaspora: these artistic practices must be understood within the normality of creative production, situating artists in their contexts and not reducing their contributions to the simple result of migratory movements and multicultural contacts.

The relationship between migration and expressive practices cannot be seen as linear: sounds and music can be symbols of alterity in the public sphere, but, at the same time, public space, precisely because it is public, can be reappropriated by the margins. Nancy Fraser (1990) points to the existence of an official public sphere and alternative public spheres, where multiple stakeholders, participatory at different levels and with different interests, which she refers to as "subaltern counter-publics", create alternative discourses and interpretations, and promote new identity positionings. If we look at the public sphere constituted by Muslim hip hop and spoken word female artists and their publics, we witness how these artistic practices become a prominent voice in the debate on ethnicity, gender, immigration, integration, social exclusion, at local, regional, and transnational levels, while, simultaneously questioning which version of Islam is considered acceptable in the Western public sphere (and, in this sense, such cultural productions add to the debates about secularity, the permissibility of the veil, or the construction of mosques in Western cities).

Mosquera (2015), in a study of the impact of artistic performances by Muslim women, concludes that these are powerful ways of challenging orientalist stereotypes and media discourses about Muslims, leading the spectators to seek further knowledge on other cultures and art forms. This acceptance is not, however, complete, as we see Muslim female artists constantly defending themselves and their artistic practice in various arenas: to other Muslims who consider not only musical practice, but the presentation of women on stage or online as *haran* (contrary to Islam) (Piela, 2010), to a non-religious audience who may not appreciate openly religious and political content, or in relation to misogynistic visions that do not appreciate women in the world of the arts. In this way, hip hop and spoken word produced by Muslim female artists have the potential to construct a counter-hegemonic, anti-racist, anti-Islamophobic and anti-patriarchal discourse and can, I argue, be considered a form of activism.

cooke (2001) indicates the potential of poetry produced by Muslim women as an instrument of subversion and even protection, with a wide range of objectives, be it advocacy for women's rights, advocacy for global causes (peace and disarmament) or specific causes, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, or even advocacy for the simple right of being an artist, demonstrating how this practice acquires multiple functions – memory, catharsis, empowerment, sharing, creating communities and networks, but also destroying stereotypes, both Orientalist and patriarchal. El Saadawi (1997) had already equated creativity with social protest, considering that artistic practices imply sensitivity regarding social injustices and all forms of discrimination and, in this sense, constitute a form of activism; also, Toman (2009) argues that artistic creation has the potential to become a means of communication and activism common to diasporic Muslim women, and a catalyst for social change and reform. Art, as the focus of imagination, constitutes an individual and/or collective form of expression, drawing on shared experiences: in Arjun Appadurai's (1990) vision of a globalized world as a site of confluence of different landscapes, it is precisely the intersection of mediatic, imaginative, economic and labour landscapes, with their commonalities and divergences, that allows for the creation of

innovative, fluid cultural productions, for multiple actors occupying multiple spaces, consumed by an even more dispersed community, for which the development of NTI is fundamental.

Peter Mandaville (2003) recognizes the role of NTIs in the creation of the transnational virtual *Umma* as an innovative community of shared belief and knowledge, enabling the emergence of Muslim identities and alternative, hybrid, counter-hegemonic discourses, first online, and progressively offline, promoting pluralism and diversity in Islam, particularly through the action of young Muslims, and Peter Van der Veer (2006) describes this phenomenon as Islamic cyber salons, comparing them with the illuminist halls of European capitals, capable of expanding the public arena of political and civic discussion, in which artistic expression is also present. The internet facilitates the construction and maintenance of globalised, transnational, deterritorialized (El-Nawawy & Khamis, 2011) – to which I add gendered – networks, in which Muslim women can create their own articulations. In the case of Muslim female artists, new transnational spaces of autonomy emerge (Piela, 2010), in the conjugation of online and offline locations, in which they negotiate their identities and belongings at multiple levels: local, national, religious, artistic, etc. (cooke, 2001). It should be noted that NTI are an instrument, a technology that remains geographically mediated: as Castells indicates (2004), the network society (as the social structure resulting from interactions between social organizations and technologies in constant negotiation, evolution and innovation, constituted by interconnected nodes, without clearly identified hierarchies, centre or peripheries, linking local, national and transnational levels), although global, excludes a large part of the population due to the fragmentation of the conditions of access ("digital divide"), also in constant negotiation.

There are several websites dedicated to sharing and collaboration used by music producers, such as SoundCloud[2] or Myspace[3], allied to traditional social media platforms such as Facebook or YouTube. Likewise, several webpages are dedicated exclusively to Muslim artists: Muslim Hip Hop[4] presents this musical genre as a commercially viable alternative to mainstream music, and promotes any artist whose lyrics demonstrate that s/he follows the principles of Islam, or MUSLIMA[5], Muslimah Montage[6] or Hijabi Chronicles[7], focused exclusively on the artistic production by Muslim women. These tools promote networking and collaboration between artists, but also direct interaction with their support base (and their antagonizers). The world wide web, thus, emerges as a new arena of individual and group self-representation, fostering new counter-hegemonic discourses, even within popular culture.

[2] Available at https://soundcloud.com/

[3] Available at https://myspace.com/

[4] Available at www.muslimhiphop.com

[5] Available at http://muslima.globalfundforwomen.org/

[6] Available at http://muslimahmontage.com/

[7] Available at http://thehijabichronicles.com

I now turn to the analysis of the artistic practices that constitute the focus of this paper, noting, however, some limitations: the sample selected pretends to be an example of the diversity that exists in Islam, but it is in no way extensive; it is limited to artistic productions in English, although our research accounts for a large number of artists in these genres in every language of the *Umma*; further, the analysis here is focused on the musical and lyrical production, not on the multimodal content (visual art, video) produced by these artists, which is certainly worthy of future attention.

The artists – Poetic Pilgrimage, Alia Sharrief, Hanouneh e Alia Gabres

Poetic Pilgrimage are a British Hip Hop and Spoken Word duo created in 2002 by Muneera Rashida and Sukina Abdul Noor, poets, songwriters and singers, first generation British citizens of Jamaican descent, converted to Islam in 2005. Their musical style mixes African and Caribbean influences with Middle Eastern sounds, such as soul, afrobeat or jazz, with great instrumental diversity, allying the aesthetic language of hip hop with world music (traditional instruments of the Middle East, Jamaican percussions, traditional Muslim women chanting), and lyrics referencing the existence in diaspora, Islam and the situation of women ["Land far away" (Poetic Pilgrimage, 2010a, track 6); "What a girl to do" (Poetic Pilgrimage, 2015)], but also focusing on international politics, particularly matters concerning the *Umma* ["Silence is consent" (Poetic Pilgrimage e Yahya, 2010b, track 12) exhaustively lists situations of armed conflict, instability or lack of political and democratic freedom affecting Muslim-majority countries, with particular reference to the Arab-Israeli conflict and the political situation in Saudi Arabia]. Poetic Pilgrimage claims that they see themselves as Hip Hop female artists who are also Muslim, demonstrating how music and poetry enables them to articulate multiple and complex identities in the creation of their own discourse, often self-referencing their other positionings such as women, activists, migrants, British, African and Caribbean.

As such, another topic that Poetic Pilgrimage often addresses is that of racism and discrimination, which they encounter on various fronts: because of their skin colour, origin, religion, gender, both from Muslim and non-Muslim sectors of society. The duo clearly assumes their anti-racism, anti-Islamophobia, anti-patriarchy and anti-discrimination positions in the song "Modern day Marys" (Poetic Pilgrimage, 2007), as well as on interviews and on their social media pages, particularly focusing on gender equality, which is also central to the singers' discourse in the Al-Jazeera documentary, *Hip hop Hijabis*[8], where they discuss the intersectional discrimination they often face. Both their artistic production and their positioning on online platforms, as well as in the media, are forms of political activism, aimed at creating and expanding subaltern public spheres (Fraser, 1990), integrating the cultural revolution of the self-representation of the margins that Hall (1997) describes. Hip hop, thus, emerges as an instrument of social and political action and change, based on full participation in multiple communities of belonging, through the dissemination of a powerful, multi-directional message.

[8] Available at https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/witness/2015/03/hip-hop-hijabis-150305091541022.html.

The artists state that they aim to position themselves as models for other women, Muslims or not, particularly for the younger generations, on various topics, from the use of the *hijab* to their artistic practice, focused on political and civic participation – they report receiving contacts from listeners around the globe who acknowledge and thank them for their work, demonstrating the transnational reach of expressive culture and the participation of the public in the creation of communities of interest and belonging around cultural practices. In fact, Poetic Pilgrimage consider hip hop as an instrument of *Dawah*, the Koranic practice of educating Muslims and non-Muslims about Islam. This practice can be particularly important in diaspora, creating spaces for discussion and information on global Islam, but it is also a source of empowerment against gender discrimination within the *Umma* itself. In this way, the duo creates a space for their own expression through the balance between their various identity systems – Islam, hip hop culture, African, Caribbean and Muslim diaspora, Europe, etc.

Dawah is the main goal of the second artist, Alia Sharrief, African-American rapper and activist, who clearly states that her main inspiration is Islam: she creates Muslim hip hop, with constant references to the Koran and the Nation of Islam, clearly explaining aspects of Islam to her audience, aiming to promote the unity of the *Umma* and the understanding of Islam in the West, actively dismantling, both musically and visually, Orientalist stereotypes. We find plenty of Islamic references in her artistic production, for instances the call to prayer in "Maula Ya" (Sharrief, 2015) as well as the repetitive use of Koranic verses, resorting to the Islamic tradition of poetry and recitation, embodied in the Quran and in daily ritual practices and oral tradition of the Middle East. The artist clearly uses this tradition as a form of empowerment, departing from here to justify her artistic practice, in face of criticisms associating female musical production and performance to *haran*. The artist is also clear about her affiliation to the Nation of Islam, through songs dedicated to Malcolm X ["Who ready" (Sharrief, 2017, track 1) e "Black heros" (Sharrief, 2014)] and references to the movement. Alia Sharrief thus defines her primary identity as religious, and adds other layers – such as artist, black woman, activist, wife. She is particularly critical of misogynistic, materialistic and hyper-sexualized lyrical and visual content in the hip hop industry, seeking to counteract it with her own artistic practice, which often refers to feminist discourse associated with the fight against patriarchy, and highlights the role of Muslim women in forms of activism against Islamophobia, while, at the same time, promoting traditional family values and gender roles within the *Umma*.

She is also the creator and administrator of The Hijabi Chronicles website[9], a creative platform in which Muslim female artists can share content, functioning as a space for empowering women through their cultural expression and their use of NTI and web 2.0 tools, and a *locus* of community building between artists and their publics, around a common belief and common expressive practices. Her feminist activism encounters cooke, who accepts the term to refer to "women who think and do something about changing expectations for women's social roles and responsibilities" (cooke, 2001, p. vii) and Badran (2009), who defines feminist activism by the awareness of the restrictions

[9] Available at http://thehijabichronicles.com/

imposed on women and the attempts to eliminate them. In fact, the spectrum of feminism in Muslim contexts includes Islamic movements of women with feminist goals who oppose identification as such (since they understand it as applying to movements that are exclusively Western and secular in character), feminist secular movements, and other movements that lie at the intersection of these two positions (Badran & cooke, 1993; Karam, 1997), where Alia Sharrief discursively positions herself. She also constantly calls for an end to Islamophobia, racism, discrimination, police violence and portrayals of otherness attributed to Muslims in the Western mass media, and refers to the situation in Palestine.

Hanouneh (a pseudonym meaning affectionate, pleasant and intelligent in Arabic) is a Swedish hip hop and reggae songwriter. She culturally and politically identifies with Palestine, even claiming Palestinian nationality which she in fact does not have, a positioning made clear in her lyrics, plenty of political references about the MENA region, particularly the Gaza Strip ("Real Gaza me seh" (Hanouheh, 2011a, track 1) and "Police inna mi yard" (Hanouheh, 2011b, track 3)]. The artist justifies this self-ascribed identity as an expression of love and longing for the Gaza Strip, where she lived for a few months, adding that she negotiates a position of privilege as a European vs. blame for abandoning Palestine, with the responsibility of "doing something" – she wishes to be the voice of her sisters in the Palestinian territories (Dankic, 2013). This type of transnational activism through expressive culture fits with Appadurai's (1990) reflections on the power of ideoscapes and also with cooke (2001), who attributes the function of catharsis, memory and community creation – imagined or not – to the artistic practices of Muslim women. Artistically, Hanouneh distances herself from the hip hop tradition by creating simple and easy-to-understand lyrics, that she considers stronger, which is contrary to the metalanguage of the genre, usually with complex discursive constructions, of which Alia Sharrief is the most comprehensive example among the four artists selected.

Hanouneh also fully uses NTI and web 2.0 tools to build collaborative networks with other musicians: she used Myspace to join the collective 961 Underground, a transnational hip hop group based in Lebanon, with 10 members in various locations in Europe and the Middle East; more recently (2015/2016), the singer collaborated with several Lebanese musicians on a project entitled "Tawasul", dedicated to freedom of expression – this project is part of Hanouneh activism, focused on intercultural communication and transnational solidarity. The artist also works with musicians in other locations, notably in Jamaica.

The last artist is a spoken word practitioner: Alia Gabres is a poet and activist with Eritrean and Australian nationality. Involved in several projects promoting literacy and female writers at the community level, her activism aims to promote artistic practice as a generator of knowledge and cultural transmission, and is very close to cooke's (2001) reflections on literature produced by Muslim women, acquiring the function of memory, self-expression, story-telling, as shown in "This house" (Gabres, 2011a) or "She cotton summer dress" (Gabres, 2012). She does not attribute the focus of her artistic practice to her religion, describing her identity as being separated by hyphens:

woman-African-Muslim-migrant (she does not mention "Australian"). Her poetry is based on personal experiences, breaking down stereotypes and responding to situations of intersectional discrimination in relation to her multiple identities ["Scent of love" (Gabres, 2011b)], but also on political issues, notably the Arab-Israeli conflict on "This house" (Gabres, 2011a). This is a point in common for the four artists included in this work – the Palestinian question is identified by El-Nawawy & Khamis (2011) as absolutely central to the identity of young diasporic Muslims, who state that solidarity around this conflict give them a sense of belonging to the *Umma*.

Conclusions

This analysis identifies two main common themes in these artists' cultural productions: the Arab-Israeli conflict and the fight against Islamophobia – all artists share a common concern for Palestine and a symbolic identification with this territory and the ongoing conflict, as well as hope for its resolution; they also reject and deconstruct stereotypes and hegemonic discourses on Muslims in general, and on Muslim women in particular, creating an alternative and innovative discourse on Islam, in their own voice, unabashedly feminine, designing, simultaneously, an alternative public sphere for its discussion, where listeners are encouraged to share and construct opinions collectively, allowing for both agreement and divergence.

The language of hip hop and its constant appeal to intertextuality is suitable to the multiple identities and self-positionings of these artists, as shown in their lyrical content and poems, featuring many references to the semantic field of pain and suffering, as well as that of hope for a better future – even when situations of discrimination, lack of freedom, war, death, racism, etc. are exhaustively listed (and here I refer to a song by each artist, because this meta-language is common to all of them – "Silence is consent" (Poetic Pilgrimage e Yahya, 2010b, track 12), "Black heros" (Sharrief, 2014), "Police inna mi yard" (Hanouheh, 2011b, track 3), "This house" (Gabres, 2011a)], the songs celebrate an imagined positive ending to all these situations. These feelings directly refer to one of the characteristics of hip hop and spoken word, which is the appeal to authenticity as a response to the need for self-expression (Alim, 2005; Nooshin, 2011), or to what Paul Gilroy describes as "the condition of suffering" (1995, p. 203) – music, therefore, can constitute a creative escape to channel experiences of pain linked to situations of armed conflict, violence, social exclusion, poverty, patriarchy, discrimination, injustice, Islamophobia, etc., surpassing the simple function of passive resistance and stepping forward as an activist practice, a way to overcome the imposition of silence and a bridge to establish dialogues and networks, between artists and with their public. In this way, these cultural productions have the potential to create broad dialogues with counter-publics in subaltern situations, constituting a vehicle for self-expression in the struggle against oppression, repression and discrimination, simultaneously allowing for feelings of belonging and of challenge (Landau, 2011).

Hip hop also emerges as a form of celebrating belonging to the *Umma*, particularly through the practice of *Dawah*, which two of the artists (Poetic Pilgrimage and Alia

Sharrief) actively do, and through appeals to unity among Muslims and identification with the same conditions and conflicts. These artists seem, therefore, to find themselves between two positions: defence and education: defence of their right to their artistic practice, and education about Islam and the diversity within it, promoting broader understanding and knowledge about the religion, fostering interreligious dialogue and creating an empowered discourse against gender discrimination, showing how Muslim female artists creatively conceptualize links between their artistic production and their faith in Islam, contributing to the creation and consciousness of the *Umma*. I believe, therefore, that these artistic practices constitute forms of participation and enlargement of the online transnational *Umma* of Mandaville (2003) and Islamic cyber salons of Van der Veer (2006), adding an extra layer – that of gender. The artistic practices analysed here are the result of and provide a new language, a new way for these women to demand their place in the globalized cultural field, so the artists share a very acute sense of personal and social responsibility, combining Islam and artistic production when they so wish, maintaining and defending a positive religious identity in a context that is often hostile.

Hip hop and spoken word, essentially verbal practices with a wide discursive scope, are important for the opening of the discussion in the public space, deconstructing any orientalist perspective describing these female cultural producers as distant, exotic or silenced. These artist demand recognition of their autonomy as cultural producers, and their expressive practices constitute cross-border and transnational linkages, built through a counter-hegemonic discourse aimed at social and political change, while also contributing to the creation of a shared Muslim identity, inclusive of the differences between them. These identity-building processes are carried out by these women within their personal religious framework, more or less overtly exposed: if religious belonging is never ambiguous, even if it is not claimed as a primary identity, it does not attribute them a position of immediate alterity, but rather complex, multifaceted positionings, built through dialogue and negotiation. As such, the diversity of the artists selected for this paper is also an invitation to look at Muslim women as individuals, even if they share common practices (such as being an artist or opting for a certain type of garment) – the work here is not to define the Muslim woman, but rather to undefine her, to individualize her.

As such, the condition of women and the intersectional discrimination they face is another shared theme. They all contribute to the annihilation of orientalist stereotypes, while representing the diversity in Islam: the artists are different, with different backgrounds and entrances in the religion, with different positions in civil society and different identities. Through their artistic practices, these women build bridges between themselves and other Muslim women, but also with the rest of the world. Therefore, women's rights constitute one of the focus of their artistic practice, in tandem with miriam cooke's (2001) broad definition of feminist activism: feminism as an epistemology, revealing awareness of the role of gender in the organization of society and of the existence of intersectional discrimination against women, allied to any form of fight against its perpetuation.

We thus see how the artistic production of Muslim women in diaspora reflects the diasporic existence and its tensions, sometimes nostalgically appealing to a place of

origin (real or imaginary), sometimes incorporating memories of situations of conflict and resistance. These women make known their side of the story, refusing to be silenced, creating their own narratives and protest repertoires, which are legitimate forms of empowerment. These stories are often told by incorporating traditional themes of Islamic music, reconstructed and reinterpreted, which functions both as a form of *Dawah* and as a personal claim, valid even when the memories and stories were not experienced in the first person, as artists can appeal to the common memory of the *Umma* in the face of situations of injustice and discrimination perceived as common.

Women remain underrepresented in the artistic and cultural fields – as Adorno (1975) argues, the cultural industry's criteria are always those of the *status quo*, and it is the cultural revolution from the margins (Hall, 1997) that is beginning to crumble it, with the entrance of new actors, such as these female artists. These new cultural producers challenge and question concepts such as gender, multiculturalism, belonging, ethnicity, religion and even culture itself, and demand that their interpretations are considered, harnessing the transnational reach of expressive culture to deconstruct ascribed positions of otherness and subalternity. As this paper shows, music and performance can create and maintain networks of access and sharing of information and knowledge on a transnational scale, in line with the functions attributed to the artist practice by cooke (2001), El Saawadi (1997) and Toman (2009): catharsis, memory, social protest, creation of communities, identity positioning. Such cultural and social practices expand the public sphere at various levels, inserting multiple and complex identities that Habermas (1991) did not consider, such as gender or religion, creating alternative and inclusive public spheres through social and cultural acts which reveal processes of globalization from below, creating communities that are fluid and open to transnational participation.

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