

# ‘Living underground is tough’: authenticity and locality in the hip-hop community in Istanbul, Turkey

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## Abstract

*Hip-hoppers in Istanbul, Turkey, spend much discursive energy talking and rapping about how the Turkish hip-hop movement is underground, putting a particularly local spin on their uses of a global cultural form. This spatial metaphor has thus become central to local constructions of hip-hop in Istanbul. This paper explores the different meanings the underground concept has for Turkish hip-hoppers through a combination of ethnographic research and readings of locally produced hip-hop texts. Through discourses on and around the underground metaphor, Turkish hip-hoppers use the globally circulating music genre of rap and the associated arts of hip-hop to construct a specifically local identity, re-emplacing rap and hip-hop within the landscape of Istanbul. The paper uses this case study to explore how people can use mediated music in constructing new imaginaries and identities and more specifically how people can use mediated music as a vehicle for the imagining of place.*

## Introduction

Istanbul, Turkey is home to a small but vibrant hip-hop community, with participants active in all the arts usually associated with hip-hop: rapping, DJing, breakdancing and graffiti. In this paper I discuss some of the ways in which participants in the Istanbul hip-hop community – particularly people who make, listen to, and talk about rap music – work to construct a specifically local version of hip-hop.<sup>1</sup> I suggest these local uses of rap have implications for the study of how people make meaning with mediated musics and challenge some common assumptions about how globally circulating musical styles are received and used outside their points of origin in the so-called ‘centre’ or ‘core’ countries of production.

The approach I have taken in developing this case study draws from two parallel, if somewhat separate currents of research. Ethnomusicologists and anthropologically oriented researchers on popular music have, in the last decade, begun to explore how people make meaning through both the production and consumption of mediated musics (Cohen 1991, 1993; Stokes 1992; Larkey 1993; Thornton 1996; Fox 1997; Gay 1998; Porcello 1998, 2002; Berger 1999; Diehl 2002; Maxwell 2003; Meintjes 2003). The strength of these studies lies especially in their being grounded ethnographically in the experiences and discourses of real people (not abstract categories such as ‘producers’ and ‘consumers’) in specific social situations. Alongside this more

ethnographic current, researchers working within a cultural studies framework have begun to look at the impact of globalisation on popular music production and consumption in so-called peripheral countries and the complex relationships between centre and periphery in the global flow of musics (Lipsitz 1994; Mitchell 1996, 2001; Taylor 1997; Bennett 2000). This latter group of scholars has tended to focus on local uses of global popular music genres and their implications for local identity construction. Following these leads, and attempting to synthesise these two strains of scholarship in terms of both theory and methodology, my purpose in this article is to explore the worlds of meaning people construct through their engagements with mediated musics, through an examination of discourses adopted and adapted – adopted from discourses circulating globally, and adapted to help them make sense of what they are doing and what is going on around them locally. This paper is thus meant to be a locally grounded ethnographic intervention into some of the debates about popular musics in the context of globalisation.

In stressing an ethnographic approach here I mean to emphasise two things, one partly methodological and one partly analytical, though the two are actually intertwined. First, I use the traditional ethnographic methodology of on-site participant observation, interacting with local actors on their home turf. Second, my analytical approach is centred on the worlds of meaning these actors themselves construct. This means a ‘bottom up’ approach (Cohen 1993, p. 123) that privileges the perspectives of real individuals, seeing them as social actors actively making meaning. Sara Cohen summarised the goals of an ethnographic approach some ten years ago in this journal:

An ethnographic approach to popular music [...] would emphasize that popular music is something created, used and interpreted by different individuals and groups. It is human activity involving social relationships, identities and collective practices [...] The focus upon people and their musical practices and processes rather than upon structures, texts or products, illuminates the ways in which music is used and the important role that it plays in everyday life and in society generally. (Cohen 1993, p. 127)

While there has been movement in an ethnographic direction in popular music studies (cf. the authors cited above), more work remains to be done that takes a ‘grounded theory’ approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967), working up from case studies based on detailed empirical research which takes seriously the actions and subjectivities of people making and consuming music.

My examples come from fieldwork in the hip-hop community in Istanbul. I draw on a number of sources, including participant observation at hip-hop parties and concerts; formal interviews, informal conversations and private e-mail exchanges with Turkish rappers, DJs and breakdancers; and information from written material generated by participants in the community, including concert posters, published journalism, fanzines and websites dedicated to Turkish hip-hop.<sup>2</sup> I thus combine a more traditionally ethnographic approach – on-site observation and direct contact with participants in the community – with the more distanced approach typical of cultural studies, analysing the materials of hip-hop public culture that circulate in Istanbul. In the following analysis I thus also draw on media texts – song texts, fanzines, material from websites, etc. – but rather than treating this material as simply texts to be decoded, I also explore how the people who created and deployed this material did so with real and specific social goals in mind. Crucial to my methodology is direct interaction with the people who created these media texts, interrogating through interviews and participant observation what they meant to *do* with these texts.

I focus especially on the trope of being *underground* (*yeraltı* in Turkish), a key concept in discursive practices of identity formation among Istanbul hip-hoppers. Members of this community (*hiphopçular*, lit. 'hip-hoppers') spend much discursive energy talking and rapping about how the Turkish hip-hop movement is underground, putting a particularly local spin on their uses of a global cultural form. This spatial metaphor has thus become central to local constructions of hip-hop in Istanbul. For participants in the Istanbul hip-hop community, being underground is a value in what Sarah Thornton (1996) would call their *subcultural capital*, the 'means by which young people negotiate and accumulate status within their own social worlds' (Thornton 1996, p. 163). In the case of the hip-hop community in Istanbul, exploration of the underground metaphor provides some locally specific answers to Arjun Appadurai's question, '[W]hat is the nature of locality as a lived experience in a globalized, deterritorialized world?' (Appadurai 1996, p. 52). Cohen has defined locality as 'a sense of community or affinity that is linked to notions of place and to the social construction of spatial boundaries' (Cohen 1993, p. 129). For Istanbul hip-hoppers, the subcultural capital constructed via the underground metaphor is not just about constructing status within their community; it is also simultaneously about the construction of boundaries around the community, defining who is in and who is out. What makes this case so interesting, then, is not just that a globally circulating music genre and arts movement are localised, but that they become so intimately intertwined with ways in which people in a place far from the genre's origin use it to construct local identity.

### Locating Turkish rap and hip-hop: transnational and local

While my focus here is on hip-hop and in particular rap music in Istanbul, I should note from the start that Turkish-language rap and hip-hop is a transnational movement. Accounts of the history of Turkish rap describe how it started not in Turkey, but in Germany, practised by members of the Turkish 'guestworker' [*Gastarbeiter*] community especially in, but not limited to, the cities of Berlin and Frankfurt.<sup>3</sup> Rappers who use the Turkish language are also active in Holland, Switzerland, England and the United States. Rappers from these other countries come to Turkey to perform, and may do guest spots on recordings by rappers based in Turkey, and the latter likewise perform abroad, especially in Germany. For those who have access to the Internet, websites dedicated to Turkish rap and hip-hop help create a feeling of community between participants in the movement living in these different countries, as a perusal of the messages left in the guest notebooks of websites based in both Turkey and other countries will quickly show. Websites devoted to the work of Turkish graffiti groups include photographs of work on walls and trains from Turkey and Europe. A Turkish-language e-mail discussion list named 'Hiphopistan' includes participants from several countries, including Turkey, Europe and the United States. Turkish-language rap compilation CDs and cassettes produced in Turkey typically include tracks by groups from both inside and outside Turkey. I should also point out that the Turkish hip-hop movement within Turkey itself is not confined to Istanbul, but is also active in other Turkish cities, especially Ankara and Izmir.

Given the international range of the Turkish hip-hop movement, focus on discourses circulating in Istanbul cannot artificially exclude sources circulating more widely, such as websites and recordings originating in Germany, since people in Istanbul also have access to, use and talk about them. Hip-hoppers in Turkey thus

get ideas and practices not only directly from US hip-hop, but also as mediated through Turkish rappers, breakers and graffiti artists practising in Europe who have initially culturally reterritorialised US hip-hop in the process of developing diasporic identities (Kaya 2001).

While these transnational issues must be taken into consideration in any larger account of the Turkish hip-hop movement, for my purposes here I will mostly limit the following discussion to the more specifically local constructions of hip-hop in the city of Istanbul, keeping in mind that, like any local discourse, they partake of, incorporate, and remake discourses circulating more widely. While there are rappers, DJs, breakdancers and graffiti writers living throughout Istanbul, including both the Asian and the European sides of the Bosphorus, the hip-hop community is especially concentrated in the largely middle-class western suburb of Bakırköy. Many of the most active and better-known participants in Istanbul hip-hop live there or originally come from there, including the rapper Dr. Fuchs of the group Nefret, the DJ and rapper Mic Check of the 'one-man group' Silahsız Kuvvet, and the rapper and graffiti writer Turbo, as well as a number of breakdance groups. Because of the concentration of hip-hoppers in this area, Bakırköy has become closely associated with hip-hop in all its facets. Participants describe the music coming out of this area, especially that of the groups Nefret and Silahsız Kuvvet, as representing the 'Batı İstanbul sound' (West İstanbul sound), or 'Batı İstanbul style'.

## Yeraltı/underground

In my conversations with Turkish rappers, breakers and DJs, in their songs that I've listened to in live performance and on recordings, and in the words they write in diverse places such as CD and cassette liner notes, concert posters, fanzines and websites, one particular word constantly appears: *yeraltı*, which literally means 'underground' (*yer*='place', 'ground'; *alt*='under'). Some people prefer the Turkish term; others use the English word *underground* itself; for the most part the two words seem to be interchangeable. This pervasive spatial metaphor encapsulates local notions of identity and authenticity. A look at the different ways participants in the hip-hop community in Istanbul use and contest the term shows how fluid this concept is and how important it is in local constructions of hip-hop.

Perhaps the simplest and most transparent way people use the term is to refer to music that is not commercially released on CD or cassette, but circulated through other means. Professional graphic artist, graffiti artist, party DJ, rapper with the İstanbul group Statik, journalist, and general promoter of hip-hop in Turkey, Tunç Dindaş, who goes by the nickname Turbo in the hip-hop community, alluded to this meaning of underground, also expressing his hope that the market for Turkish rap will grow in time:

Herkes yaptıklarını underground'da yapıyor. Büyük 'major' plak şirketleri Türkçe rap'i desteklemiyor. Çünkü satış pazarı olarak oldukça küçük bir pazara sahip. Piyasanın oturması için bence 3-4 senesi var. Bakalım zamanla ne olacak. (e-mail communication, 7 November 2001)

[Everybody's doing their thing underground. The big 'major' record companies don't support Turkish-language rap, because in terms of sales it has quite a small market. I think it will take 3-4 years for it to settle into the market. Let's see what happens with time.]

A lot of commercially unreleased underground Turkish rap music circulates in İstanbul and beyond. One way people get access to it is by downloading songs from

websites or through person-to-person file transfer networks such as Napster or Audiogalaxy. For a while in early 2001 before Napster went offline, a search for the terms 'Turkish rap' or 'Türkçe rap' would often retrieve a maximum number of one hundred hits. Many of these would be songs that had not been commercially released, and were available only online via the people who created the tracks.

Another way people get access to underground rap music is by attending rap concerts and parties. DJs who have a large archive of commercially unreleased tracks and play them at hip-hop parties are respected for their support of underground music, and these parties are one of the few opportunities many people have to hear this music. A number of times at hip-hop parties when I heard an unfamiliar song and asked the DJ about the piece, he explained to me that it was an underground track, and that's why I hadn't heard it before.

The advent of CD-recordable technology has made self-production and distribution accessible to many musicians; some rappers distribute their demo CDs or cassettes through informal networks, selling them at concerts or making copies on demand and selling them through mail order. Musicians may choose to use this way of distributing their music if they are uninterested in commercial distribution or unable to get their music released by a record company. For many this is the only way to disseminate their music; a number of rappers in Istanbul have told me they have a complete album recorded and ready to release, but no record company will put it out. Examples of rappers who have informally sold copies of their CDs as underground releases include Istanbul's Sir G, the Ankara Underground Rap Posse, Izmir's Duman, and Raphane from Edirne.

A number of performers indicated to me their desire to have their music released by a record company, and like Turbo, in the quote above, lamented the lack of support for Turkish rap music by the Turkish record industry. On other occasions, however, these same performers used the fact that their music had not been released commercially as a matter of pride, trumpeting their non-commercial credentials as proof of their authentically underground status. Rappers often point to their music's not having been commercially released, for whatever reason, as an indication of their dedication to the music and to the hip-hop movement, even if they are not going to make money from it. People suggest that music made with this attitude may be intrinsically better than music which is available on commercial releases, which by implication may be compromised artistically. Kahin, a member of the Istanbul rap group Misil, invoked this idea when he posted a message on his group's website in May 2001 announcing an upcoming concert by his group. He wrote:

Boş ve sıkıcı bir parti olacağını düşünenler yanıldıklarını anlıycaklar . . . çünkü biz partilerimizde rap severlerin kanını kaynatmak için underground parçalar tercih ediyoruz PİYASA değil . . . !!! En gaz ve baba parçalar partide çalacak . . . !

[Those who think it will be an empty and boring party will realise they were mistaken . . . because in our parties in order to excite the rap fans we choose underground songs not ones on the MARKET . . . !!! The hottest and best music will be played at the party . . . !]

In some cases, underground distribution is the only option available to rappers because their lyrics are effectively censored by the Turkish government. To explain this, a brief account of government intervention in music distribution in Turkey is necessary.

All pre-recorded media products (CDs, cassettes, videotapes, DVDs, etc.) sold in Turkey must carry a *bandrol*, a sticker issued by the Turkish Ministry of Culture. A code number on the bandrol identifies the manufacturer of the product and indicates

that the manufacturer has paid the required tax on the recorded material. The cultural ministry tightly controls the issuing of bandrols, and this governmental department may refuse to issue a bandrol for any particular recording, effectively banning it from the retail market. Among the reasons for this censoring of recordings may be language objectionable to the government for its political content, such as song lyrics perceived to advocate violence, political views the government would rather not see expressed, such as advocating Kurdish cultural rights, or simply the presence of swear words. For recordings excluded from the market in this way, the only way for the artists to get their music out is through underground distribution. Turkish rappers whose style includes using a lot of swear words in Turkish generally don't even bother trying to have their music released commercially, because they know it would never pass the bandrol-issuing process, and instead seek distribution of their music through other means, such as putting the songs on their websites for download or informally circulating their music on demo CDs and cassettes. An example of music distributed in this way is the *Pesimist* album of Sagopa Kajmer, which was available for download from the Silahsız Kuvvet website, and subsequently made available by other hip-hop enthusiasts on Napster and various websites. One of the songs on this album is titled 'Siktirin Gidin' ('Fuck Off'); the title phrase is repeated throughout the song, assuring that it would not be approved by the language police that issue the bandrols. Another example is a cassette by Fuat, a Turkish rapper from Germany who also uses a lot of swear words, which the informal 'record company' Istanbul Underground Recordz circulated by selling homemade dubbed copies at not much above the cost of a blank cassette, with a photocopied J-card insert – and without a bandrol – at hip-hop concerts and parties.

While some people thus define 'underground' in negative terms – as music not released by commercial record companies – other rappers, while acknowledging the lack of support by the Turkish music industry for Turkish rap, define 'underground' more in terms of style and attitude. These rappers tend to value a Turkish version of what they think of as 'hardcore' style, including a more liberal use of swear words. An example of a rapper who stresses this aspect is DJ Mic Check. Besides using his DJ name, Mic Check raps under two other names, corresponding to two rap projects with distinct styles in music and lyrics: Silahsız Kuvvet (literally 'Strength without Weapons', but more colloquially, 'Unarmed Forces') and Sagopa Kajmer (a name he says came to him in a dream). He explained to me the difference in style between his Silahsız Kuvvet and Sagopa Kajmer projects in terms of style and attitude, developing the underground concept with other spatial metaphors:

Sagopa Kajmer dipte kalan rapin temsilcisi. Silahsız Kuvvet ise Sagopaya nazaran daha toplumsal ve edebiyatı bir tarza sahip. Underground demek, içinden geleni aynen yansıttığın ortamdır, küfür, slang, rhyme ve flow. Her bazda kendini iyi hissettiğin yer, yerin dibidir. Ben Sagopa Kajmer'de dibin dibindeyim. Silahsız Kuvvet'te ise biraz daha yeryüzüne yakınım. Ama ikisininde eşit noktası gerçeklik olgusu. (e-mail communication, 18 February 2002)

[Sagopa Kajmer is the representative of rap left over at the bottom. In comparison with Sagopa, Silahsız Kuvvet has a more social and literate style. Underground means saying exactly what's on your mind whatever it may be, swearing, slang, rhyme, and flow. The place where in every sense you feel good, it's the depth of that place. As Sagopa Kajmer I am in the depth of depth. As Silahsız Kuvvet I am a little closer to the surface. But what's the same in both of them is the amount of reality.]

In saying that his Sagopa Kajmer persona is 'deeper' and that his Silahsız Kuvvet project, while still underground, is 'a little closer to the surface', Mic Check implies

that there can be a continuum of 'underground-ness'. In purely textual terms, his underground recordings as Sagopa Kajmer do contain a lot more swear words than his songs released under the name Silahsız Kuvvet.

Still another way people used the term underground is to refer to participation in illegal or quasi-legal activities. The most common reference here is to doing graffiti art in public spaces or on someone else's private property. A number of graffiti artists in Istanbul can tell stories about being picked up by the police while tagging or working on illegal murals. The sonic correlate to this is the underground sale of CDs and cassettes without bandrol, as discussed above. A spatial analogy to this occurs when breakdancers appropriate public space to practise, such as a plaza or wide sidewalk, until stopped and told to move on by the police. What makes all these activities underground is that they are discouraged or prohibited by the state, and if people are caught doing them, they can get in minor or major trouble. The choice by hip-hoppers to engage in these activities despite the risks is a choice to assert the importance of underground cultural practices in their lives and self-definitions.

The most encompassing way people used the term *yeraltı*/underground, including aspects of all the meanings already discussed, was in talk about how Turkish rap and hip-hop are marginal in terms of Turkish popular culture as a whole. Istanbul hip-hoppers were adamant about this, wanting to distance themselves and the hip-hop movement from what they refer to as *popçular*, people who make or are fans of pop music. When I explained to rappers that I teach courses about and do research on what in Turkish is called *popüler müzik*, they invariably reminded me that Turkish rap does not fit into that category, which they reserve for pop genres they perceive as mainstream. My academic distinction between *pop music* as a particular genre and *popular music* as a more encompassing abstract category that can also include underground genres did not make sense to them.

In quantitative terms, rappers who complain about Turkish rap's marginal status have a point. While rap continues to be a major genre in the music markets of the United States and European countries such as France and Germany, rap as a whole, and especially Turkish-language rap, represents a minuscule part of the total music market in Turkey, which is dominated by Turkish language pop (including the home-grown *arabesk* genre; see Stokes 1992) and imported American and European pop and rock. It is significant that few albums by Turkish rappers based in Turkey have been released by record companies based in Unkapanı, a neighbourhood on the European side of Istanbul where the offices of most Turkish record companies are concentrated in a mall-like complex. Rather, most Turkish rap albums made in Turkey have been released by small companies such as Hammer Müzik and Zihni Müzik Merkezi, both based on the Asian side of the city in the neighbourhood of Kadıköy. These labels specialise in various small-market niche types of music. For example, Hammer Müzik's area of speciality has been the licensing for release in Turkey of albums by American and European heavy metal and hardcore groups; acts in the company's catalogue include Sepultura, Biohazard, Judas Priest and Motörhead. The company created a special sub-label Hipnetic Productions for its new foray into Turkish rap, and as of early 2004 had released twelve Turkish rap albums. These record companies have made few video clips to promote their Turkish rap releases, and those few clips that have been made are rarely aired. The rappers' perception of their underground status is thus seemingly verified by the marginal place Turkish rap has in the Turkish music market as a whole.

One thing that *yeraltı*/underground does *not* seem to refer to is the ethnic and class background of the participants in the Turkish hip-hop community. Discourses of authenticity in the Istanbul hip-hop community do not focus on ‘street credibility’ of people in terms of their socio-economic background. The rappers and DJs in this community are generally not poor people or members of socially marginalised minority groups such as Kurds, Roma, or Muslim refugees from the Balkan wars of the 1990s, but are largely middle-class ethnic Turks, university-educated, often with good jobs.<sup>4</sup> Most seem to have come to rap through an interest in technology and computers, and part of the appeal of rap seems to be that it is music they can make on their PCs at home. This is not a problem in terms of their authenticity; they see themselves, and are accepted by others in the hip-hop community, as able to speak for the less-privileged members of Turkish society, particularly in songs about the difficulty of living in the urban environment for people who have migrated to the city from rural areas of Turkey. My initial impression is that Istanbul breakdancers are more likely to be working class and less technology-oriented, but I need to investigate this further through interviews with more breakers.<sup>5</sup>

When I asked people what the opposite of underground would be, there was no agreement on a specific term. A few people offered the literal opposite *yer üstü* (‘above ground’), but noted that they did not really use the term in that way, to mean something which is not underground. Other people suggested that the opposite of *yeraltı* would be *ticari* (commercial) or *ticaret* (commerce). As I discuss below, however, the relationship between the underground and the market is more complex than this simple opposition would make it seem. Another term sometimes used in contrast with *yeraltı* is *yeryüzü*, literally, ‘the surface’. Groups known in the underground community who have an album released by a commercial record company are spoken of as having ‘come out to the surface’ (*yeryüzüne çıkmak*). The way people use this term develops the spatial metaphor of ‘underground-ness’ in a particular way; coming ‘to the surface’ is something positive, the result of work and determination, rather than being something like the English-language concept of ‘selling out’. DJ Mic Check, as noted above, also used this term in suggesting that there is a continuum between the ‘deep underground’ and ‘the surface’.

## Tensions

So far I have discussed the different meanings of *underground* as existing in parallel, but not necessarily conflicting, discourses. When these different meanings come up against each other or against actual practices, however, tensions in the underground community may rise to the surface. This is especially evident in discourses around two inter-related issues: one concerned with publicity for Turkish rap music and hip-hop, and the other concerned with whether specific rap recordings qualify or not as being underground. In conflicts arising over these issues it becomes evident that not all people in the Istanbul hip-hop community share the same opinions about what constitutes underground-ness, nor do they all necessarily think that forever staying underground is a good thing. There is instead an uneasy relationship between taking pride in being underground, with the exclusive specialness it brings and feelings of community it fosters among those there, on the one hand, and welcoming publicity for Turkish rap and recognition and success for those who perform it, on the other. Convinced that they are doing something good and right, many want to spread the message of and about Turkish rap to a wider audience. This ambition is expressed in

the often-invoked saying 'Birgün herkes Türkçe rap dinleyecek' ('Someday everybody will listen to Turkish rap').

When local and international media such as newspapers, magazines, television and radio cover Turkish rap and other hip-hop activities, hip-hoppers take notice and spread the word about the press coverage. At hip-hop parties I frequently saw people carrying and showing to each other magazines and newspaper articles with coverage of Turkish hip-hop. Those with websites eagerly post information about such media coverage, sometimes scanning and reproducing the printed articles, summarising them, or providing links to articles elsewhere on the web, proudly showing how Turkish hip-hop is 'developing' (*gelişiyor* in Turkish). When mainstream clubs host hip-hop parties or book Turkish rap acts for performance, people (and not just the performers directly concerned) advertise the gigs incessantly in e-mail messages and on the home page of locally based websites. When TV stations air video clips of Turkish rap (a rare occurrence) or have rappers as guests on live talk shows (even rarer), people talk and write about these occurrences with pride. When record companies release Turkish rap recordings, it is a big event. People advertise the release dates well in advance and eagerly wait for initial sales figures. While the difficulty in finding a record company that will release Turkish rap recordings is often discussed and lamented, when a group or compiler does succeed in having their album or compilation released, people usually celebrate it as a success, not just for the people directly involved in the recording, but for the hip-hop movement as a whole. All these attitudes and activities indicate a great interest in and desire for 'developing' Turkish hip-hop outside of a strictly underground sphere.

The tensions between maintaining an underground identity as exclusive sub-cultural capital and the desire for success and wider recognition can be read in the packaging of the first Turkish rap compilation album produced and released in Turkey, self-consciously titled *Yeraltı Operasyonu* ('Underground Operation'), released by the independent label Kod Müzik in April 1999. This compilation features five groups from Turkey (three from Istanbul and two from Izmir) and one from Frankfurt, Germany. The album was compiled by Tunç 'Turbo' Dindaş. Turbo drew on his professional experience as a graphic designer to create the CD's front cover (Figure 1), composed to carefully represent all the elements of hip-hop. Over a banner with the album's title in a stencilled letter-like typeface are photographs illustrating the main activities associated with hip-hop: a turntable for DJing and rapping, a sneakered foot for breakdancing, and spraypaint cans for graffiti. The album announces itself as being authentically underground, but its careful design and presentation, along with the photographs and notes inside the CD booklet introducing the groups, seem aimed at bringing Turkish rap and hip-hop out into the open, and thus to a wider audience. This concern with finding a wider audience for Turkish rap can also be seen in the arrangement Turbo made for a sequel album, *Yeraltı Operasyonu 2*, produced as a joint release by the independent company Kod and the major label Universal in December 2001, thus taking advantage of Universal's wider distribution network.

In September 2001 Turbo posted on a highly trafficked Turkish hip-hop website an invitation for rappers to send him their demos for a new compilation album, which was planned to eventually be released as *Yeraltı Operasyonu 3*. In his posting he listed some requirements for potential contributions, including the stipulations that they must not contain 'swearing and bad words'<sup>6</sup> or 'political opinion and lyrics running counter to the values of society'.<sup>7</sup> While this self-censoring can be seen as a strategy for



Figure 1. Front cover of the CD, Yeraltı Operasyonu.

ensuring record company acceptance and wider success for the potential album, it can also be interpreted as compromising some stylistic features of underground rap. And as part of an invitation to participate in an album with the word *underground* in the title, these stipulations seem surprising and not a little ironic.

When Turkish rap made in Turkey does find a (relatively) wider audience, the tensions between underground authenticity and (relative) success become even further highlighted, a topic I now will explore with accounts of a rap group and a solo rapper whose albums have had quite different receptions in the underground community in Istanbul.

### Case studies

The group Nefret, whose name means 'Hate', is an example of a group that has maintained 'underground' credentials despite relative success (at least relative to other rap groups in Turkey). The group consists of two rappers, Dr. Fuchs and Ceza,



Figure 2. Front cover of Nefret's first album, *Meclis-i Âlâ – İstanbul*.

both in their early twenties. After having worked separately as solo rappers or in other groups, they founded Nefret in Istanbul in January 1998. After contributing to a collaboration between four groups on the 1998 single 'Vatan' and having four songs included on the 1999 *Yeraltı Operasyonu* compilation mentioned above, in 2000 they released their first full album, titled *Meclis-i Âlâ – İstanbul* ('High Council – Istanbul'). The album's cover photo (Figure 2) shows the two rappers beside the Bosphorus, with one of the two bridges spanning the strait in the background, thus unmistakably placing them within the geography of the city. A fold-out inlay card included with the CD contains the lyrics of all the songs printed over a four-panel panoramic view of the Bosphorus, looking over the strait toward the Asian side of the city.

The group's first video clip, for the song 'İstanbul' (also included as a bonus CD-ROM track on the audio CD of the album), received frequent airplay on the Turkish music television station Genç ('Young') for several weeks during Spring 2001. As of September 2002, the *Meclis-i Âlâ – İstanbul* album had sold about 20,000 copies in total, including about 3,000 copies outside of Turkey (Enis Kızılkaya [the person in charge marketing and international sales for Hammer Müzik], e-mail communication, 7 September 2002) – modest by Turkish pop standards, but very good for a Turkish rap album. Their second album, *Anahtar* ('The Key') was released

in September 2001 on the same label. *Anahtar* has also been selling briskly, becoming Hammer Müzik's best-selling rap album with 22,000 units sold as of September 2002 (Enis Kızılkaya, e-mail communication, 7 September 2002). The group has been covered by major newspapers and mainstream entertainment magazines. The group has also received media coverage outside Turkey as well, notably in Germany and Sweden.

Despite this (relative) success, the group is still accepted as being underground without question by the underground hip-hop community. Nefret's claim to underground authenticity is substantiated in part by their uncompromising style, including a highly aggressive delivery and songs critical of the urban environment of Istanbul (borrowing at least in part from the familiar descriptions of the ghetto in African-American rap) or of the vacuousness of Turkish popular culture, attacking TV magazine programmes and what they perceive as soulless Turkish pop music. None of the songs on Nefret's first album could be considered 'love songs', with romance and relationships as the topic. They also maintain their underground credentials in part by showing they are not content to rest on their laurels, constantly working on new material, creating new songs and performing them in concerts. One of the members of the group, Dr. Fuchs, reportedly lost his job because of continual absences from work for performances; this story circulated as proof of the group's dedication to their music and to hip-hop.

One of Nefret's best-known songs, 'Yeraltında Yaşamak' ('Living Underground'), is about the underground concept itself. The chorus consists of two lines repeated several times:

Yeraltında yaşamak senin için çok zor	Living underground is tough for you
Yeraltında yaşamak sana çok kor	Living underground screws you up

The verses of the song develop the group's favourite themes of criticising commercialism and the superficiality of Turkish popular culture, such as TV magazine programmes that focus on the lives of the rich and famous stars of Turkish pop music, cinema and television, presenting such people and media texts as being the antithesis of everything that is underground. With its indictment of attention-hungry celebrities (*şöhretler* in Turkish) and the media that focuses on them, the song thus gives an idea of what Nefret regards as *not* being underground, and also expresses the group's commitment to not enter into that world:

Kendi kendime düşündüm nedir bu her gece?	I thought to myself, what is this every night?
Televizyonlardaki işkence bıktım bunu görmekten	The torture on TV, I'm bored of seeing it
Ana haber bülteni mi magazin programı mı?	Is this the newscast or a paparazzi programme?
Kimin eli kimin cebinde belli değil bana ne	It isn't clear who's doing what to who, I don't care
Sizi bilmiyorum ama beni ilgilendirmez	I don't know about you but it doesn't interest me
Sansasyonel sosyete beni alakadar etmez Nefrettir doğruları anlatma komisyonu Anlattıklarımız vicdanımızın bir vizyonu	Sensational high society doesn't interest me Nefret is the truth-telling commission The things we are telling are the vision of our conscience
Alet eder evliliğini namusunu kimi	Some use their marriage and honour

Piyasaya düşürür benliğini kimliğini	They put their personality and identity on the market
Cezaysa adım ben de yıkılmadım ayaktayım	If my name is Ceza [Punishment] then I am not ruined, I am standing up
Bunlarınki dünyaysa ben de uzaylıyım Kıçını başını acıp şöhret olmaya çalışana	If the world is theirs, then I'm an alien The people who are trying to become famous by using their sexuality
Arsız neden arlanır çul da giyer sallanır	Why would the shameless ones come to their senses? even wearing a sackcloth they would draw attention to themselves!
Onların var arabası jet ski jakuzi Fazla gösterişçi olma diyor yeraltındaki	They have cars, jetskis, jacuzzis The one underground says don't be such a show-off

In contrast to Nefret's continued maintenance of their underground credibility while achieving some visibility in the Turkish media and some small success in the market, the solo rapper Fresh B has been roundly criticised by many in the underground community for what they perceive as his selling out. Fresh B was born in Munich, Germany, and now lives in Istanbul. He has good credentials in the underground Turkish rap community both in Germany and in Turkey, with well-respected work in the arenas of rapping, DJing and breakdancing. He has won numerous breakdance competitions organised by Turkish breakdance groups. After winning a local DJ competition, he represented Turkey in the DMC World DJ Championship in 1996 in Italy, the first time Turkey was represented. Parallel to his underground activities, he has also worked in more 'above ground' arenas, for example as a dancer and choreographer for a well-known modelling agency, choreographing fashion shows for Levis, Converse, Adidas and other brands.

The Turkish branch of Universal Music released Fresh B's first album in 2000. Universal supported the album with two promotional video clips, and Fresh worked hard to promote the album through concerts and television appearances. The title of the album – *Gerçek Kal*, which literally means 'Stay True', but which also evokes the English-language hip-hop maxim 'keep it real' – would prove to be ironic, given the mixed reception the album received in the underground rap community. In the opinion of many the album seemed designed specifically for commercial appeal, from the packaging to the musical content. The CD cover (Figure 3) features Fresh B's smiling face superimposed over a bright orange sunburst pattern. The songs on the album are for the most part innocuous, devoted to romance and partying, with little social commentary. The opening track of the CD, a rapped love song titled 'Neden' ('Why?'), prominently uses the very recognisable introductory guitar sequence from Sting's 'Shape of My Heart' as its main musical motif, immediately announcing the album's musically cosmopolitan orientation.

Fresh B's vocal style is also very different from that used by the two rappers of Nefret. He raps in a relaxed style, especially soft-spoken on the romantic songs. On the album's few more serious tracks, he delivers the lines with a quiet irony that contrasts with Nefret's aggressive, angry vocal sneer. Compared with American rap, the over-all style of the album is comparable to the pop rap of American artists such as Will Smith or MC Hammer. While many in the hip-hop community defended Fresh B's right to make whatever kind of music he wanted, others felt that Fresh had sold out on his underground roots and made a deliberately commercial (*ticari*) album. In a television interview broadcast around this time, in response to these and other critics Fresh defended himself saying he was tired of being underground.

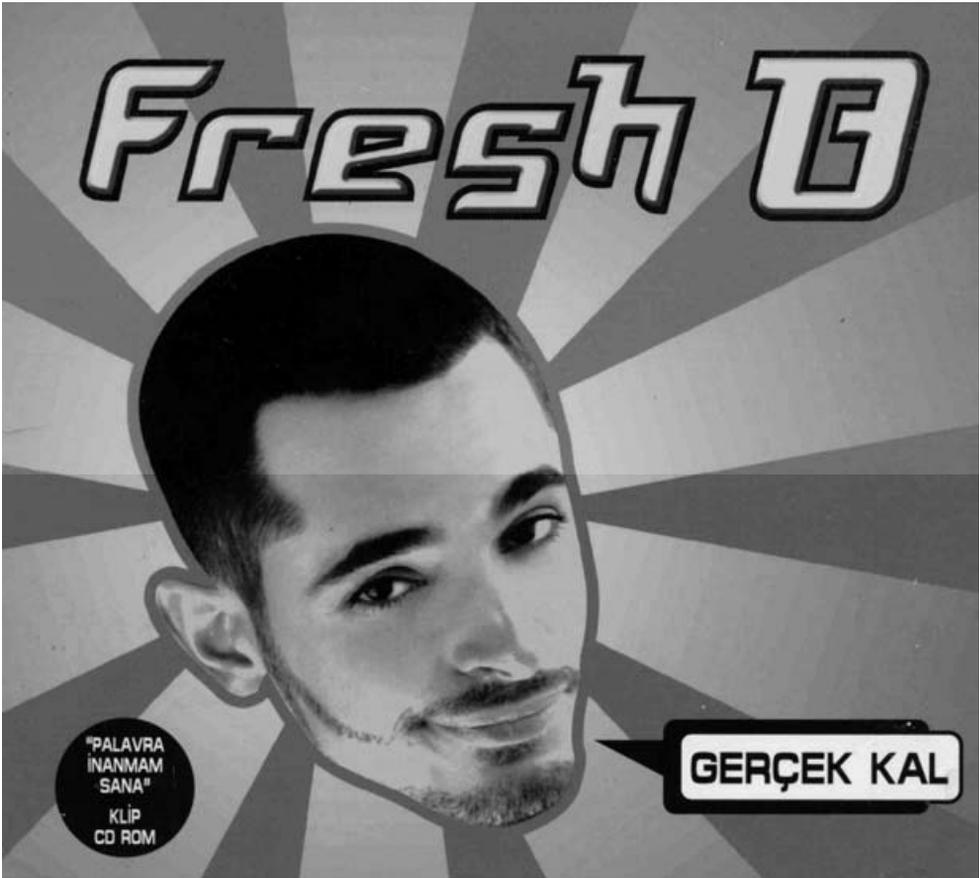


Figure 3. Front cover of Fresh B's album, *Gerçek Kal*.

In order to bring this discussion of Turkish hip-hop from the local in Istanbul back to a transnational (or, more properly, *inter-local*) level, it's worth discussing briefly how the debate on Fresh B's album extended beyond Istanbul, and included participants from Germany. Several months after Fresh B's album was released, the Berlin 'battle rapper' Fuat made a song specifically criticising and insulting Fresh B, and included it on his underground cassette *Hassickdir? II*.<sup>8</sup> The title and chorus of the song, 'Yeraltında Ayna Var' ('There's a Mirror Underground'), refer to a well-known Turkish folk song 'Fosforlu Cevriyem', which begins with the line 'Karakolda ayna var' ('There's a mirror in the police station'). Fuat used the mirror image from the original song, but re-placed the metaphorical mirror in the imaginary space of the Turkish hip-hop underground, to suggest that the things Fresh B has done reflect back upon him and affect his standing in the underground community. Some lines in the song specifically belittle Fresh B's rapping, calling it *nafile* ('vain', 'useless'); one particularly insulting line is 'Dünkü çıktığın rap senin neyine' ('You think you're so hot with that rap you shit yesterday', implying that he's a rookie, and out of his league trying to do rap). The song is also full of homophobic sexual insults and Turkish swear words aimed at Fresh B; in the chorus Fuat calls him a 'homo', using the English slang. Fuat also phrases the 'battle' (as such insulting exchanges in rap songs are referred to)

in terms of geography, asserting the primacy of Turkish rappers living in West Berlin, in the line 'Batı Berlin'de yaşayan kabilemizin eşi yoktur' ('There is no equal to our tribe living in West Berlin').

Not long after this song originated in Berlin it began circulating in Istanbul, including in mp3 form downloadable from several Turkish hip-hop-related websites based both in Istanbul and in Germany. Fresh B soon replied with a battle rap of his own, titled 'Gereken Cevap' ('The Necessary Answer'). Over beats provided by West Istanbul DJ Mic Check, Fresh responded in kind to Fuat's insults, using vocabulary and an aggressive high-speed rap delivery unlike anything on his *Gerçek Kal* album. This return by Fresh to a decidedly underground style included lots of swear words in both Turkish and English, and also returned the homophobic insults to Fuat in slangy lines like 'Koyyim de tur at/Burası Batı İstanbul yavaşak!' ('I put it in you, take a stroll around and show everybody/This is West Istanbul you fag!'). As this line suggests, Fresh B also asserts West Istanbul as his place, responding to Fuat's claims for West Berlin in this line and in the rap's closing signature line, 'Mikrofondaki Batı İstanbul temsilcisi Fresh B' ('Fresh B, the representative of West Istanbul on the microphone'). This song was not commercially released, but circulated extensively as an underground track, posted for download on websites and file transfer networks like Audiogalaxy.

Fuat's 'Yeraltında Ayna Var' and Fresh B's 'Gereken Cevap' generated a lot of commentary within the Turkish hip-hop movement, including the Istanbul community. Some people sided with Fuat, others with Fresh B, lauding in particular the latter's return to an underground style. Others refused to take sides, noting that this sort of battle is a normal thing within rap, and suggesting that both pieces were good and deserved listening, and that if in the end two good songs came out of it, it doesn't matter which side you are on or who 'wins' the battle. Still others criticised both songs, saying that using so many swear words and graphic sexual insults was not appropriate in Turkish rap.

Just as the Fuat–Fresh B battle was phrased partly in terms of locality, so also did people's commentary on the battle engage the Berlin vs Istanbul aspect of the exchange. Many comments posted to the 'guest writer' section of the [turkishhiphop.net](http://turkishhiphop.net) website suggested that the air of superiority some German-Turkish rappers display in putting down Istanbul rappers was inappropriate, as the latter were responding to a different reality than the former. These writers also suggested that while the cradle of Turkish rap was Germany, Turkish rap made in Turkey had come of age, and had to reflect the reality of Turkey rather than imitate German-Turkish models. Typical of this discourse was a message titled 'Fuat kendine gel burası Berlin değil!! İstanbul' ('Fuat, come to your senses. This is not Berlin!! It's Istanbul').

The messages from Istanbul in support of Fresh B also suggest that the positions taken by people for or against the authenticity of specific artists and recordings may be situational, changing according to whom one's discourse is directed at, and that it was possible to both criticise and defend Fresh B on the basis of his local authenticity/authentic locality. When his album first came out, Fresh B, as a member of the Istanbul underground hip-hop community, was criticised by some as not being locally oriented enough – despite the album's title 'Stay True', he appeared to be decidedly *not* true to the Istanbul underground way of doing things. But when Fresh was attacked by Berliner Fuat – someone perceived as an outsider – many people defended Fresh as authentically representing Istanbul. Because of his strategic return to a decidedly underground style in the song 'Gereken Cevap' – even collaborating with the

respected local underground DJ Mic Check for the piece – and identifying himself in the lyrics of this very underground song as a ‘Bati İstanbul temsilcisi’ (‘representative of West Istanbul’), he had redeemed himself in the ears of much of the Istanbul underground community, or at least put them in the position of having to defend him as an authentic representative of the community.

For their part, the group Nefret weighed in with support for Fresh B, inviting him to do a guest spot (referred to as a ‘featuring’ in Turkish, using the English word) on one of the songs on their second album *Anahtar*, simultaneously casting their vote against divisiveness in the hip-hop community and giving Fresh another opportunity to reclaim his underground credentials. The same album also included featuring by German-Turkish rappers Bektaş and Erci-E, showing that Nefret’s commitment to representing Istanbul did not necessarily preclude going outside the local community to include participants in the wider Turkish hip-hop movement.

### Some implications

The sketch here of the discourses that Istanbul hip-hoppers construct and deploy has implications for many aspects of ethnomusicology and popular music studies; I will focus on only a few here: (i) the use of mediated musics in constructing new imaginaries and identities (what I like to refer to with the rubric ‘making meaning with mediated musics’) and, in this Turkish context, (ii) the implications this has for cultural imperialist assumptions about the centre-to-periphery global flow of popular music styles and genres; (iii) mediated music more specifically as a vehicle for place-imagining; and (iv) the status of the concept of authenticity in popular music studies.

By ‘use of mediated musics’ I mean not just what people do with mediated sounds themselves, but also the ways they deploy discourses on and around those sounds. In the same way they use the sound and style of rap music itself, Istanbul hip-hoppers adopt and adapt the widely circulating discourses of rap and hip-hop and use them as resources for constructing locally specific meanings. Through their own study of the internationally circulating media texts of hip-hop (song lyrics, the liner notes of recordings, fanzines, websites, etc.) originating outside of Turkey, Istanbul hip-hoppers understand that the discourse of rap characteristically includes the practice of *representing* (Forman 2000) one’s place. This practice thus permeates Turkish rap just as much as it does American rap, to the extent that the concept of *represent* is even translated into Turkish, as in Fresh B’s referring to himself as the *temsilci* (‘representative’) of West Istanbul.

In his critique of the wide-spread view that the global flow of American popular culture from centre to periphery is resulting in a global homogenisation of culture and the disappearance of cultural difference, Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz (1989, 1992) suggests that rather than obliterating cultural difference, global popular culture becomes yet another resource which people in different places in the periphery can draw on and put in dialogue with local cultural forms, resulting in new hybrid or creole forms that integrate the global and the local. The new forms and meanings that people thus create give them the means to confront modernity on their own terms. That Turkish rappers rap about Istanbul, Izmir and Ankara rather than New York and Compton, should come as no surprise. As Hannerz argues:

the people of the periphery encounter the meanings and the symbolic forms of the center with [different] perspectives [. . .] and the very fact that they are shaped by the experience of being at

the periphery will contribute to making them different from those of the centre. (Hannerz 1989, p. 213; see also Hannerz 1992)

Rather than making assumptions about global cultural homogenisation, ethnomusicology and popular music researchers have a responsibility to investigate and take seriously both the hybrid forms and the worlds of meaning people create through their understanding and emplacing of globally mediated musics. As the essays in Mitchell's (2001) recent edited volume on rap and hip-hop outside the USA suggest, people in many different locales have made the expressive resources of rap and hip-hop relevant to their own local experiences and concerns. In this essay I have thus tried to explore one particular case of this, blending the cultural studies approach that dominates most of the essays in that volume with a more ethnographic approach that tries to give a sense of the local worlds of meaning people make using rap and hip-hop.

I thus come back here to Appadurai's question, quoted at the beginning of this paper: 'What is the nature of locality as a lived experience in a globalized, deterritorialized world?' I would argue that while it is necessary to keep in mind the 'big picture' view of globalisation, the answer to this question must be sought locally in grounded case studies of people engaging in various ways with global culture, investigating how they understand, re-imagine, use and emplace it. Despite the global flow of media content, people may still want to ground themselves solidly in specific places, even if in the process of imagining those places they are using as resources cultural products and styles that ultimately have their origin in other places. By focusing on such practices of place-making, we can move from abstract platitudes about 'globalisation' to concrete examples of *inter-local* practices. While the term *globalisation* encourages analysis at a quite abstract (literally global) level, the term *inter-local* (Grenier and Guilbault 1997, p. 228) suggests a focus on more concrete relationships between specific lived and imagined places, as in the Berlin–Istanbul axis discussed above.

It is perhaps no accident that one of the key terms participants in the hip-hop community in Istanbul use in negotiating the localisation of hip-hop is a spatial metaphor. Istanbul hip-hoppers' use of locally imagined and produced rap music in creating locally grounded identities, and the ways they negotiate these identities through reference to the underground metaphor, show how people can be deeply invested in musics that by their very nature exist only in highly mediated form. In making rap their own and seriously taking part in local debates about it, Istanbul hip-hoppers use it to tell themselves a story about themselves, producing not just rhymes and beats, but their own identities as hip-hoppers and Istanbulites through it.

Besides locality, another key issue for Istanbul hip-hoppers was authenticity. The way in which the criticism of Fresh B's album was phrased in terms of forsaking his underground roots for a more commercially oriented path echoes the familiar discourse, both in other popular music-oriented communities and scenes, and in some academic work on popular music that contrasts authenticity and creativity with commercialism. More specifically, the debate echoes discourses within American hip-hop that contrast the 'party rap' genre with more hardcore rapping styles, mapping them onto the commercialism–authenticity divide (Krimms 2000, pp. 55–6). I agree with Krimms (2000, p. 10), Thornton (1996, p. 116), Fenster and Swiss (1999), Forman (2002, pp. 216–18) and others who argue that taking authenticity and commercialism as diametrically opposed is theoretically problematic. My concern here, however, is with recounting local discourses and practices on and around issues of

authenticity. While from a cultural- and social-theoretical perspective these categories are problematic, it is simply a social fact that a lot of people in the hip-hop community in Istanbul use these categories. As Negus has suggested, 'From the knowing perspective of academic theory, commerce versus creativity may be a clichéd argument, but from the perspective of participants of music scenes these ideas are part of the way in which they make sense of what is happening to them' (Negus 1996, p. 48). More importantly, to reduce the debates over authenticity in Istanbul to simple, abstract terms of 'commerce versus creativity' is to erase the embeddedness of the debate in local practices of place-making – practices that make these ideas meaningful for people who use them to emplace themselves in an imagined underground geography. Particularly interesting is the way Istanbul hip-hoppers intertwine issues of locality and authenticity in their discourses about Turkish rap. The discursive association between underground-ness and the 'West Istanbul sound', for example, is an explicit way of linking issues of authenticity and place. Interconnections between locality and authenticity that more explicitly focus on boundary drawing (between *our* place/authenticity and *their* place/inauthenticity) are also important in this community. By contesting, through discourses of place and authenticity, what underground means and what specific expressions (songs, recordings) can be considered 'Istanbul underground', those who have a stake in underground rap are making a statement about who they are and what kind of place Istanbul is to them.

In this paper I have focused on discourses on and around issues of locality and authenticity in the Istanbul hip-hop community, and have tried to show how the raw materials of ethnography (here, instances of language use collected through participant observation and interviews) and cultural studies (the mass-mediated texts of public culture) may be used together to explore these issues in some detail from an ethnographically grounded position. The implication here is that academic discourses on locality and authenticity can benefit from a grounded approach to how people actually think and talk about these issues, building theory on this type of grounded case study. I suggest that ethnomusicology and popular music studies can learn a lot about how people make meaning with mediated music by trying to understand the strategies Istanbul hip-hoppers have developed for living underground.

## Copyright acknowledgement

'Yeraltında Yaşamak' lyrics by Nefret © 2000 Hammer Müzik. Used by permission.

## Endnotes

1. The research reported in this paper was carried out in Turkey while I was employed as assistant professor (ethnomusicology) in the Graduate Program in Music at Istanbul Technical University. I would like to offer thanks to the Turkish students in my classes there between Fall 1999 and Spring 2002 for explaining many things about Turkish popular music to me. My appreciation goes especially to Engül Atamert for help in translating song texts. I should also note that I gave drafts of this paper to several Turkish hip-hoppers who understand English, in hopes of getting their comments; unfortunately, at the time I submitted the manuscript for publication, none of them had yet replied.
2. Websites devoted to Turkish rap appear on and disappear from the web at what sometimes seems a dizzying rate. Some of the sites I mention in this paper had already disappeared by the time of this writing, while others had been reorganised by their webmasters, deleting some material I refer to (and had thankfully printed out or saved to disc earlier).
3. Diessel (2001), Kaya (2001), Robins and Morley (1996). See also Bennett (2000, pp. 138–48), Cheesman (1998), Çınar (1999, 2001), Elflein (1998) and Soysal (1999) on rap by German Turks.
4. Perhaps I should say, if any of the rappers *are* of minority background, it is not something they rap about, talk about in interviews, or otherwise

make a part of their public personas. Given the pervasive nationalist discourse of Turkish rap (discussed in Solomon [i.p.]), it would be understandable if members of minority groups would want to de-emphasise or hide non-ethnic Turkish aspects of their background.

5. The readers of this paper for *Popular Music* pointed out that the issue of class is not developed here as it could be. I agree with this critique, and must acknowledge that Turkish hip-hoppers' class background and class-consciousness is not something that I have focused on so far in this ongoing research project. I hope to address this lacuna in future ethnographic research in Istanbul. An added focus on class and class consciousness might illuminate the complex ways the growth of interest in rap and hip-hop in Turkey during the 1990s coincided with a recession in the Turkish middle class, which had begun expanding during the 1980s under president Turgut Özal, whose free-market policies and openness to foreign cultural products in part created the conditions for Western popular music, including rap, to gain a larger share of the Turkish

music market in the 1980s and 1990s. One of the readers also suggested that the growth in interest in rap and hip-hop among Turkish youth coincided in interesting ways with the raised and then frustrated middle-class hopes connected with this recent erosion of the middle class. I'm not sure I would describe this correlation in such broad cause-and-effect strokes, but it is a worthwhile issue to pursue in further empirical research. I thank the readers of *Popular Music* for their helpful comments on this point.

6. İçersinde küfür ve kötü sözler bulunmayacak'.
7. 'Politik görüş ve toplum değerlerine ters düşecek sözler içermeyecek'.
8. The title of Fuat's underground cassette *Hassick-dir?* is a cross-lingual pun between the Turkish slang expression *hasiktir* ('fuck off', 'fuck you') and the Berlin-dialect German *Haß ich dir?* ('Do I hate you?'). This title evokes both Fuat's underground orientation (via the swear word of the Turkish meaning and aggressive question of the German meaning) and his (Berlin-) German-Turkish identity (via the cross-lingual nature itself of the pun).

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