
Critical Traditions

The Poetics and Politics of Ambiguity

In August 2010, I was sitting in Park Yasmina in downtown Casablanca, talking with the emcee Amine Snoop. Amine, who also goes by the name al-Kayssar (Caesar), was old-school. He began his career as a b-boy in a team of friends, dancing at La Cage, the nightclub that the city's hip hop fans went to in the 1990s. His peers believed he was one of the first to rap in Derija in the city, if not the entire country. In later years, he would tell me more about late nights on the corner near his home in Bernoussi, a working-class neighborhood in Casablanca, reciting rhymes to himself while listening to the boomboxes of the dancers practicing on the sidewalk in front of Café Safir. But at this point, we were talking about his first recordings.

"I used to rap the lyrics of Nass el-Ghiwane," he remarked, describing how he and his friends went from imitating their favorite American emcees to attempting their own lyrics. "Al-qaran al-'ashreen."

"Al-qaran al-'ashreen (the twentieth century)," the phrase Amine remembers the song by, is the turning point in the opening poem in one of Nass el-Ghiwane's most iconic songs, "Lebtana (The Sheepskin)."¹ As a kid working on his Arabic rhymes in 1994 and 1995, this poem made part of his repertoire along with his own texts. Like others near his age, Amine hadn't thought much about preserving his music at that time. His recordings of those first songs were made to cassette tape, and his copies were lost long ago. But he could remember how he had performed it.

In the original song, a member of Nass el-Ghiwane recites the poem freely before the instruments enter. When Amine rapped his version for me on a park bench, he left out certain lines and edited others, sometimes eliding words so he could maintain the right number of syllables in a line. He timed his flow so that stressed syllables nearly always landed on the 2 and 4 of the four-beat measure in

his head. The end-rhymes from the original poem landed on the beginning of the 4th beat of each measure.

“Al-qaran al-‘ashreen” became line 5 out of 8, and Amine built the verse to revolve around it: he took a surprise unmetered breath at the beginning of measure 8, then uttered the phrase explosively, twice as fast as the rest of the text. Then, when the next line resumed the rhythmic pattern squarely on beat 1 of the next measure, it had renewed energy, commensurate with the weight his listeners placed on the line “we’re living the life of the flea in the sheepskin (‘aisheen al-‘aish al-dbana fil bțana).”

Line by line and moment by moment, Amine’s small changes adapted “Lebtana” to the boom-bap percussion, rhythmic intensity, and punchy pronunciation of the East Coast emcees he fell in love with as a kid. Most didn’t appreciably change the meaning of the original text. However, his edit to the penultimate line stood out. Instead of saying “you know there’s a great difference between the apple and the pomegranate,” Amine said, “*They make* a great difference (Darou farq ‘athim bin al-tufaḥ wa al-romana).” The final line—“what’s the difference between you, and you, and you and me?”—lands differently as a result.

Was teenage Amine unsatisfied with the impact of Nass el-Ghiwane’s genteel observation about fruit? Or had he always remembered the line beginning with “darou,” with what most people believed the band really wanted to say? Either way, Amine made explicit the consensus interpretation of the song without identifying “they.” The target of critique is still obscured, but this version sounds like a bull-horn to the previous generation’s ears.

This chapter considers how artists have fused Moroccan histories and ideologies of critique with hip hop’s aesthetics of resistance since the early 1990s. Often described as “the Ghiwanien generation” after the germinal band, the popular folk-rock musicians of the 1960s and ’70s anchor today’s nostalgia for the perceived promise, cohesion, and solidarity of the postindependence years. Hip hop emcees and beatmakers who draw from techniques pioneered by these musicians not only invoke listeners’ profound associations with the Ghiwanien generation, but continue a tradition of ambiguous positioning in the face of state violence, in which audiences appreciate critiques pursued through oblique gestures and strategic omissions.

In the first section, I describe how, despite living under nominally different economic paradigms, both Ghiwanien and contemporary hip hop musicians’ work have been enabled by increasing inequality and its accompanying anxieties about Moroccan identity. In the second section, I detail the tactics that both ’60s and ’70s leftists and popular musicians and contemporary hip hop artists used to avoid state scrutiny. In the third section, I argue that the politicized narrative that developed around Nass el-Ghiwane between 1970 and today conditions how today’s hip hop practitioners perform and hear sincerity in their music. Artists use a Moroccan tradition of listening in and for ambiguity, in which a critique in one domain is often read

as indicating a critique in another, to promote a holistic understanding of citizens' rights and privileges as simultaneously political, economic, and social. At the same time, ambiguity that protects musicians and listeners can also protect the powerful.

HIP HOP GENERATIONS

Young people today have one foot down and don't know where to put the other foot. They want to study but they know if they have a diploma they might work in a call center or not work at all. They want to work but they can't make enough money to get married and leave the house. They want to leave but they can't afford it and they might die on the boat.

(PERSONAL CONVERSATION [P.C.] WITH SOULTANA, AUGUST 27, 2010)

[In the 1990s,] things were changing . . . families were completely changing. The change happened on all levels . . . music included. People said, "This kind of music is quite new, it's a danger to Moroccan culture."

(P.C. WITH ISMAIL RAQI, JANUARY 19, 2024)

Moroccan hip hop history has only begun to take shape as a single, continuous narrative with shared reference points. During the earliest years of my research, practitioners from different cities told their own stories of the move from scattered teenage amateurs to national recognition between the early 1990s and the early 2000s. While the people and places involved were different, the kinds of events that merited retelling were often the same. The adoption of Facebook and YouTube; the establishment of influential websites; national press; and nationally televised performances helped to consolidate the story for Moroccans, as recordings and events circulated through various platforms as key points in an emergent timeline.

In what follows, I trace this history in an open-ended fashion by threading events my interlocutors found significant with their political and economic context. My sketch here is inevitably partial and leans heavily on what my oldest, most experienced interlocutors remember about the emergence of Moroccan hip hop. It privileges Casablancon events and people because that is where most of my knowledge came from, but also because Casablancon institutions and musicians came to be understood as central to the genre. I also elaborate on a periodization of Moroccan hip hop that follows practitioners' usage. The goal is not to create a universally accepted, authoritative history, but to illustrate that the youths who first adopted hip hop in the late 1980s and 1990s lived through intense socioeconomic change. At the same time, while they faced less overt political violence, they coped with sensations of loss, lack, disorientation, and inequity similar to what their parents felt in the 1960s and 1970s.

Moroccan hip hop practitioners speak of three generations of artists, loosely defined. The first is generally understood to include the earliest adopters, who

began imitating and creating hip hop in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Those who began in the mid 2000s, after national and municipal government agencies made substantial investments into urban popular cultures, are considered part of the second generation (Salois 2013: 88). Today, the boundaries between generations are blurry, with some performers from the late 2000s and early 2010s heard as stylistically closer to the first generation in comparison to later practitioners.

Khalid Hoummas, a multimodal artist who has run an open mic night for aspiring emcees since 2011, describes three generations in the context of that event. Khalid named H-Kayne and Fez City Clan, two groups from the late 1990s, as his examples of the first generation. Khalid, who is best known for performing with the progressive hip hop band LooNope in 2010–12 and under his solo moniker Boummask today, locates himself in the middle “second generation” (interview, July 1, 2018; Saadi 2012). Shayfeen, a duo from the small Atlantic town of Asfi that introduced trap to the broader Moroccan public, was founded in 2006. They also defined themselves as part of the second generation, telling an interviewer that they formed a “buffer” between the historicist styles of the pioneers and the latest, trap-oriented wave, which they dated to 2016 (Simonian 2018).

The new generation, as my interlocutors still refer to it, is usually dated to the mid-2010s and is situated in relation to trap and other new styles as well as new social media and streaming platforms, marketing strategies, and performance opportunities. In part because of the successful move into platforms like Instagram, Spotify, Deezer, and Genius, as well as the high levels of internet adoption among the Moroccan youths who listen to them, this new generation sustains much greater stylistic diversity than its predecessors.² Throughout this text, I use the terms “generation” and “wave” interchangeably. However, my interlocutors use “generation” almost exclusively, evoking metaphors of lineage and family.

Before the Wave: The Ghiwanien Generation

Born and raised in the nation’s major cities, the first generation of Moroccan hip hop artists grew up with narratives of their parents’ and grandparents’ rebellious pursuit of cultural and political independence from France. As these young people grew along with their craft, the same narratives reappeared again and again, heard in stark contrast to the inequity and immobility of the 1980 and 1990s.

For commentators then and now, cultural change and experimentation could not be separated from political ferment in the late 1960s and ’70s. Leftist journals, including *Souffles*, *Anfas*, and *Lamalif*, mutually opposed Islamist and Marxist-Leninist students’ movements, and labor unions’ agitation were all responses to the increasing economic inequality and autocracy of King Hassan II’s regime (Sefrioui 2014; El Guabli 2020). Violent responses to protests and riots in the 1970s and early

'80s, and the constant fear provoked by the state's repressive practices, characterized Morocco's Years of Lead (Slyomovics 2005: 110; Bouaziz 1999: 74).³ This long period of surveillance, forced disappearance, and censorship, roughly from 1975 to the 1990s, coincided with Morocco's preparation for and adoption of the standard practices of economic neoliberalism. The state was encouraged, and in some cases forced, to grant more freedoms to national and international corporations in the 1980s and 1990s as it opened to global markets.⁴ Yet, at the same time, its citizens experienced a generation-defining lack of freedoms.

In this emerging climate of socioeconomic upheaval, cultural experimentation, and political repression, the band Nass el-Ghiwane and its counterparts appeared at the end of the 1960s. In Morocco's urban centers of the 1950s and '60s, the most popular recording artists represented local traditions, participated in pan-Arab song forms, or both. Artists who spoke to the nation's recent independence, whether through satire or expressions of unity, were widely beloved (Bargach 1999; Karl 2014; Silver 2020). In the meantime, young musicians were experimenting with "Western" genres, leading to remarkable if short-lived careers for soul and rock acts like Vigon or Les Golden Hands (Samie 2004; Bensalmia 2004).

Nass el-Ghiwane and bands like it, such as Jil Jilala and Lem Chaheb, crafted distinct sounds despite sharing cultural backgrounds, musical aspirations, and occasionally band members. Despite—or perhaps because of—the fact that Nass el-Ghiwane's music drew heavily from genres traditionally heard as marginal, it quickly set a standard, inspiring a wave of similar groups and producing a popular music that was at once nationally representative and responsive to trans-Atlantic trends. The band was made possible by postindependence migration to Casablanca, as each of its members' families came from a different region of the country.⁵ Band members were also shaped by the creative and political ferment of Hay Mohammedi, a working-class Casablanca neighborhood that was already famous for its resistance during the nation's independence movement (Slyomovics 2005: 108). Living near first- or second-generation migrants from all over the country provided Nass el-Ghiwane with firsthand opportunities to study other Moroccan musics and folkways.

The original band members honed their creative sensibility in Masrah an-Nass (The People's Theater), a troupe led by the playwright, dramaturg, and director Tayeb Saddiki. There, they and fellow musicians acted and sang in *Diwan Sīdī Abdelrahmān al-Majdūb* (1965), an adaptation of Moroccan street performances (*ḥalqat*, sing. *ḥalqa*) that drew on the traditions of the sixteenth-century Sufi poet al-Majdub (Miller 2017: 94; Amine 2001: 61). Nass el-Ghiwane would become famous for their references to al-Majdub, as well as their invocations of *malḥun*, a form of Derija-language song from the sixteenth century that al-Saddiki frequently used in his theater pieces (Amine 2001: 60; Magidow 2016: 32).

Already well-known in Casablanca, Nass el-Ghiwane performed in 1970 and 1971 on Moroccan television for the first time, revealing to a delighted national public their effortless Moroccanization of trans-Atlantic popular styles (Es-Sayed et al. 2011: 391). They combined the American banjo with the sub-Saharan guimbri, the classical oud, and an array of traditional Moroccan percussion, each of which indexed different regions and genres.⁶ Their songs sounded the band members' familiarity with a wide range of genres, including the *'aita* of the central plains, the ritual music of the Gnawa, and Sufi traditions of Meknes and Fes. By bringing these gestures together, they presented something radical and neotraditional at the same time—something that recuperated marginalized groups' musics for a broad public while also working in the folkloric paradigm established by colonial curators and affirmed by postcolonial elites. At the same time, the band unmistakably embraced trans-Atlantic fashion, musical form, and performance practice (Schuyler 1993).

By contemporary accounts, the appearance of Nass el-Ghiwane was transformational. Moroccan scholars and commentators continue to celebrate the band's impact, often through the lens of their own formative years (Simour 2016). Speaking in 2010, cultural studies professor Said Graioui recalled the band's debut as changing youth culture overnight: "Literally overnight, we woke up in the morning, we [all] found ourselves on the streets humming the lyrics to this piece that we had heard the night before on Moroccan television. That was the beginning of a . . . subcultural movement. And that was actually the beginning of Nass el-Ghiwane" (Graioui 2010). Abdelhaï Sadiq argues that the band offered listeners a powerful new way to understand themselves: "Nothing distinguished them from their audience. . . . In a way, the *Ghiwane* was the voice of an expression that belonged to all of us. It was only bringing to the stage and singing by 'proxy' the protest of a youth which, otherwise, was singularly prepared to take the path of violence" (2014: 33).

In the years after independence, artists and writers concerned about the loss of popular traditions under the French took stock of how music, storytelling, poetry, and other arts had maintained oral transmission (e.g., Bouanani 1966). Nass el-Ghiwane and bands that became popular following its innovations—Lem Chaheb, Essiham, Mesnaoua, Jil Jilala, Izenzaren, and others—offered a recuperation of Moroccan musical heritage at a time when many, across socioeconomic locations, were still wrestling with their sense of French cultural superiority. For some whose traditions were incorporated, here was a wholesale re-valuation: an opportunity for young people to see their practices wrapped into a trans-Atlantic rock frame, played for thousands in concerts across North Africa and France. For some of the elite, educated to hold the colonizer's culture in higher regard than their own, it awakened a sense of the creative potential in their Moroccan heritage (van der Peer 2017: 168). This alone afforded this musical moment enormous cultural import. But today, most Moroccans still remember Nass el-Ghiwane best for

their lyrics—and the perception that their lyrics spoke truth to power in an era of swift, brutal repression.

The First Wave

As with their predecessors, who drew on pop and rock currents from the Black Atlantic world in the 1960s to 1980s, the teens who encountered and adapted the hip hop arts in the 1980s and 1990s experienced them as both exciting aesthetic practices that seemed to offer new possibilities for translocal connection, and a reaffirmation of Morocco's marginal position in global north circuits of culture (Salois 2016). Like other locations across the world at this time, Moroccan hip hop lovers were introduced to the genre through transnational media rather than directly from its New York originators. However, the ways media reached Morocco were shaped by postcolonial patterns of access and of migration.

The oldest practitioners I worked with described learning about hip hop culture soon after it was made available to audiences in Europe through informal exchanges with relatives and friends who studied or worked in France, the Netherlands, and less often Spain, Italy, or Belgium. These sojourners would bring home cassettes, LPs, dance moves, magazines, fashions, and knowledge. Satellite television became widely available in the early 1990s, allowing people to find American and Francophone hip hop in European music programs (DJ Key 2004: 12). Two early adopters mentioned watching *Viva*, a music-video program they remember to be Russian, for information about hip hop in the early and mid-1990s (DJ Key 2004; p.c. Soultana, July 2015). Khalid Douache, a.k.a. DJ Key, Morocco's finest hip hop turntablist and a sought-after director of music videos, noted how difficult it was to find the materials needed to study and perform hip hop in these early years. "[T]he hip hop movement appeared at the end of the 1980s, but it did not take. . . . The lack of the means employed [to make hip hop] kept us from reaching our objective" (2004: 12).

In the 1980s and '90s, the heyday of neoliberal economic doctrine, commentators regarded Morocco and other North African countries as "success stories" for their zealous adoption of prescribed reforms (Pfeifer 1999). As it had done with the Moroccanization law of 1973, the monarchy used early-1990s privatization to reinforce its patronage network, further concentrating business interests in the hands of the existing economic elite (Gilson-Miller 2013: 208). Through its two holding companies, the royal family acquired some of the largest assets made available, literally transferring state assets to the king's and his family's personal accounts. In other cases, the former European owners of Moroccan companies, who sold them under the 1973 law, bought back the same assets (Catusse 2009: 194–95).⁷ In addition, the government shed large numbers of public sector jobs just as a generation of college graduates educated to expect a place in the country's bureaucracy was coming to the workforce. This led, starting in 1991, to the formation of several

highly organized groups demanding a return to pre-neoliberalization levels of public employment (Emperador 2007: 298).

By the early 1990s, teens not yet finished with high school were coming of age in an environment where old expectations about attainable education, employment, and income were diminishing and detaching from the nation-state (Cohen 2017: 48–50). New narratives were forming around them about the recent past and the present. Nores, a beatmaker and emcee from Salé, bitterly recalled how King Hassan II had given speeches encouraging students to seek degrees in STEM fields in the early 1980s. According to what he was told—he was a small child at the time—engineers and scientists then graduated into a nation with little industry to support them (p.c., June 2010).

In most of Morocco's major cities, small groups of these same teens were picking up information about hip hop music and culture wherever they could find it. The paucity of hip hop media available at the time enabled connections across neighborhoods and social classes that would not otherwise exist. Teens dressed in hip hop signifiers would spot each other in public spaces and strike up conversations. The inherited magazines, copied tapes, and knowledge acquired from friends and family sojourning in Europe were shared with new acquaintances without such connections.

As in elsewhere on the continent, the first generation of musicians often began their acculturation into the hip hop arts as dancers before moving into emceeing or deejaying (Appert 2017: 17; Shipley 2013: 60). Artists from Fes, Salé, and Casablanca explained in interviews that their earliest experiences were imitating dances they had seen with their friends. Several spent multiple years dancing with friends before moving into other art forms. Amine Snoop, who opens this chapter, encountered “the Smurf” as early as 1985 (p.c., August 2, 2010). The men of the Fez group Syndi-K recalled beginning to dance in 1993 or 1994 (p.c., October 2009). Soultana, who started out by practicing dancing with a crew of young men and one other young woman between 1997 and 2000, remembered “waiting until after midnight so we could go and practice” in front of Café Safir (p.c., July 2015, August 2022). Others recall seeking out the smooth floors at the Autohall and elsewhere in Casablanca. The emcee Masta Flow, who was already an experienced group performer by the time his quartet Casa Crew was founded in 1998, echoed others' memories of attempting Michael Jackson choreography before beginning to imitate b-boys. An injury ended his dance career and led him to start writing rhymes (interview, June 8, 2010).

While students of hip hop learned from newly imported media and each other, the music and fashions were acceptable in few public places in the 1990s. To my knowledge, only Casablanca had any commercial infrastructure that supported hip hop at this time. Morocco's free-trade agreement with the EU dates to 1996 (Gilson-Miller 2013: 208) and may have impacted deejays' ability to purchase the music they played at La Cage and Club 84, two sites frequently

mentioned as central for hip hop fans in the 1990s. By 1996, La Cage held all-ages sessions from 3 to 8 p.m., when no alcohol was served and two Moroccan deejays played American hip hop. Writing in 2004, DJ Key can still recall the first names of the emcees who impressed the youths at both clubs: “MC Youss . . . Abdelghani and Naïm . . . were the leaders of that era, with their *Beat Street* and their Adidas sneakers . . . they showed up every weekend . . . rapping on instrumentals like ‘Feel Me Flow’ by Naughty by Nature or ‘Ain’t New to This’ by Ice T” (2004: 12).

Casablancans in their thirties and forties remember La Cage as home to a golden age of youthful experimentation. “It was like a *madrassa*, like an *école*,” recalled Hisham Sajir, a professional dance teacher who frequented La Cage starting in 1997. “For everyone who came there, it was the place to meet and raise your level and listen to the hip hop you loved. . . . It was the only place where the deejay could play a whole set of hip hop” (interview, Casablanca–DC, August 9, 2022). Barry, an emcee and singer, called it “my best school,” where he learned hip hop arts and some English (p.c., October 21, 2009).⁸

Pioneers from Casablanca formed relationships at La Cage that influence their work to this day. Dancers competed in battles there before the first municipally funded cyphers opened in a *dar al-chabab* (youth house) in downtown Casablanca in 1999 (interview, Hicham Abkari, June 24, 2010; Cestor 2008; interview, Hisham Sajir, August 19, 2022). Young people who would go on to become members of leading groups, or skilled in deejaying, videography, recording, and other capacities, built a network they would draw upon into the 2010s. When the club closed in 2002 to make way for redevelopment of the Casa Port train station and marina, practitioners lost their earliest hip hop institution, as well as the site of some cherished memories.⁹ The building itself was demolished in 2006, two years before work began on the new train station (*La Vie Éco* 2008). Both the train station and the marina “mega-project” were made possible by policy changes required by Morocco’s structural adjustment program, in which the state sought out foreign direct investment, often through agencies created especially for the purpose (*La Vie Éco* 2008, Barthel and Planel 2010).

While Casablanca’s public and commercial infrastructure allowed some emerging artists to move between neighborhoods to find each other, youths in Morocco’s other major cities were also experimenting with hip hop culture. Often, the earliest practitioners in each city did not know much about their fellow hip hop fans in other cities or even other neighborhoods.¹⁰ Aspiring emcees began by reciting American and French rhymes from their favorite artists, then attempting their own in those languages. Today, the duo Double A from Salé is generally accepted to have released the first album in Derija, in 1996. However, youths in many cities began to record rhymes in Derija in the same years. By the late 1990s, most emcees were working in Derija, while some of the best-known first-generation

groups from multiple cities—including H-Kayne from Meknes (established in 1996); Fez City Clan (established in 2000); and Casablanca's Bizz2Risk—included emcees of diverse backgrounds who specialized in French.

By the end of King Hassan II's reign in 1999, Moroccans had lived with decades of surveillance, silencing, and self-censorship. Direct involvement in electoral politics was understood as pointless at best. Rahma Bourquia and her colleagues write of the university students they surveyed in the 1990s: "Political action inspires among our youths . . . fear; it is synonymous with a lack of interest and a discredited political class who meets with derision. In this sense, the Moroccan youths of the 1990s are very different from the youths of the 1960s and '70s" (Bourquia et al. 2000: 16). Fadoua Loudiy explains, "The past has been a 'foreign land' for most Moroccans for a long time, because of both fear and a blackout on information. Prior to the creation of the IER [Equity and Reconciliation Commission, in 2003], to speak of the past was to be political and to be political was synonymous with subversion, making one a potential victim of state violence" (2014: 7).

When Hassan II's son King Mohamed VI ascended the throne, he made a series of gestures toward further change. Among the most important was the firing of Minister of the Interior Driss Basri, who was understood as the "symbol of state secrecy and oppression under Hassan II" as well as its chief perpetrator (Gilson-Miller 2013: 222). Basri's removal led many to hope for a decisive break with the former surveillance state. Taken together with other moves, such as the return of political exiles, the appearance of enhanced press freedoms, and the creation of a royal consultative council on human rights, Mohamed VI's leadership seemed to signal a new commitment to Moroccans' economic and political freedom in the 2000s (Zerhouni 2004: 68). This climate influenced the creation of new institutions for hip hop and popular musics starting in 1999.

In the early 2000s, as a result of events and choices that I detail more thoroughly in chapters 3 and 4, state and private sponsorship provided sudden new levels of support for hip hop performance. This occurred over the same period that highly visible forms of foreign direct investment and public-private partnerships began to reshape Moroccan cities according to whether they were envisioned as centers of commerce or of tourism (Barthel and Planel 2010; Bogaert 2012; Strava 2018). Artists' sounds and bodies frequently accompanied the public introduction of what Koen Bogaert, following Neil Brenner, calls "new state spaces," locations "seen to exemplify Morocco's openness to global capital," marking what kinds of citizens were understood as the proper beneficiaries of those spaces (2012: 256).

Competitions and festivals of all sizes, in which hip hop practitioners could perform and perfect their craft, emerged in the early 2000s. In part because of these events, which suddenly made small, dedicated networks of people seem highly visible to outsiders, Morocco's press produced a flurry of pieces on the new hip hop and popular music scenes.

Their authors, often members of those scenes, immediately pointed to the suppression of the public sphere under Hassan II. “One only has to listen to understand that after thirty years’ absence, a generation of artists is born. Finally!” exclaimed Chadwane Bensalmia and Ahmed Benchemsi in the liberal weekly *TelQuel*, of which Benchemsi would later serve as editor (Benchemsi 2006). They quote Awdellil (“night horse”), an early, celebrated emcee who continues to be anonymous, on the role of hip hop: “Our society has a great need to express itself and has not really had this in the artistic productions currently circulating in our country” (Benchemsi 2006). A roundtable published in the daily *Libération* declared that “these young people are the reflection of a youth who . . . reclaims its right to speak and to freedom of expression” (Alaoui et al. 2007).¹¹

However, the intense media attention to hip hop did not indicate a wide acceptance of the music. I vividly recall sitting in a friend’s home in Fez, trying to convince a musician near my own age that hip hop was worth studying. “Some people study biology, geology, physics . . . but hip hop music?” he asked, his barely visible smile conveying skepticism rather than humor (June 5, 2010). Reda Allali, a journalist and member of the rock band Hoba Hoba Spirit, cited a then-recent television program where Abdelkrim Berchid, a former official of the ministry of culture, declared, “Rap is a stolen music, it doesn’t belong to us. It’s like the contraband products that enter [the country] via Ceuta: they are dangerous for the consumer. What is the government doing to fight against this?” Allali notes, wryly, that “he spoke in the name of one of the two principal Moroccan artists’ unions” (2006).

In this climate, when journalists counter-framed hip hop musicians as inheritors of Nass el-Ghiwane, they not only argued for the authenticity of their music, but they counteracted the anti-Black stereotypes that underpinned reactionary responses to hip hop. As one writer insisted, “Thirty years after the appearance of Nass el-Ghiwane, the Moroccan music scene is witnessing a revolution. Young people think hip hop is about ideas and aspirations as much as it is about art. Most rap and hip hop artists assert that their message condemns violence and calls for peace, optimism, love of life and the bold expression of youth issues” (Belhaj 2008).

As first-generation artists described in statements and songs, teenagers wearing hip hop fashions or practicing in the street with their friends were subject to suspicion from the police throughout the 1990s.¹² Relating artists and their music to Nass el-Ghiwane offered a form of protection from rhetorical and material violence. The ultimate support for this framing came from Nass el-Ghiwane’s singer and spokesperson, ‘Omar Es-Sayed, who told his interviewers in the documentary *Casanayda!* that hip hop and other Western-identified musicians “are our children” (Belyazid and Mettour 2007). In mobilizing the memory and meaning of Nass el-Ghiwane, journalists and commentators positioned the hip hop arts in an

ongoing debate about changes to youth culture and the social fabric wrought by economic neoliberalization.

LISTENING FOR AMBIGUITY:
THE USES OF NASS EL-GHIWANE

The widely held belief that Nass el-Ghiwane's lyrics were consistently critical of the repressive government of the 1970s is sustained by their vagueness. The lyrics' proverbs, allusions, outdated vocabulary, and elaborate imagery celebrated the power of Moroccan traditions, allowed them to avoid censorship, and promoted speculation about their political meanings all at the same time. In the early to mid-1970s, when adult literacy was low, oral transmission was not simply an elaboration of or alternative to the state-owned TV and radio stations; it was a crucial source of information. In this context, Nass el-Ghiwane's lyrics were interpreted as an alternative form of media, one that took positions state news would not allow (Zoulef and Dernouny 1980: 14).

The early hit "Es-Şiniyya (The Tea Tray)" is frequently cited as evidence that the band buried oppositional intent well below the surface of their work. In lines that recall the melodic contours of 'aita and the responsorial singing of the 'Aissawa Sufi brotherhood, the lead singer personifies his empty tea glass (Zoulef and Dernouny 1980: 17). Over the course of the opening verses, the glass might be understood as the nation-state ("Where are the people of good intentions who [once] gathered around you?") or the singer himself ("Where is my neighborhood and my people? . . . Why is my glass still alone?").¹³

Asserting a unified interpretation, Philip Schuyler explains that "when the singer demanded to know why his glass had not been filled, listeners understood that he was accusing the king of monopolizing rights and material goods in the country" (1993: 292n5).¹⁴ Others recall that the band encouraged resistant readings of their songs through performance practice (Muhanna 2003: 146). In films, concert recordings, and my own concertgoing experiences, audiences frequently chant or sing along with the lyrics heard as most significant, sometimes overriding the vocalists with joyous sarcasm and chaotic force.

However, one can just as easily focus on the way "Es-Şiniyya" evokes the disorientation and isolation of the migrant experience. Without his friends and family, the singer's sense of self and place, his lived experiences of his roots, are also lost to him.¹⁵ 'Omar Es-Sayed, the oldest performing member of the group and the band's de facto spokesperson, consistently refuses narrow interpretations of their repertoire. "Despite what you say, I don't think the average listener thought of us as a political group," he told Elias Muhanna in 2003. "They were songs of protest, sure, but they were more than merely political" (Muhanna 2003: 144–46). Instead, he emphasizes that "Es-Şiniyya" and other songs seek to transcend their political

moment, asking listeners to consider what has been lost over generations of forced migration to cities (Muhanna 2003: 146).

Audience interpretations demonstrate how important it is, for many Moroccans, to remember that era's political repression and forms of critique in certain ways. When listeners who were born after Nass el-Ghiwane's debut—or its first three decades—sing their belief in the band's lyrical subversion back to the stage during concerts, it is the audience who carries narratives of past resistance into the present. They perform what Brahim El Guabli calls “other-archives,” “cultural production that . . . encompass[es] all forms of sources that provide access to uncomfortable histories, which lie outside the purview of classical official archives” (2022: 209).¹⁶

The multiple meanings in Nass el-Ghiwane's repertoire stem from skillful use of Derija. At every opportunity, Es-Sayed stresses the beauty and potential of Derija, its potential latent in practices and places understood as belonging to Morocco's past. In one interview with the linguist Dominique Caubet, he focused on the idea that Derija was more elevated than many believed: “The Derija that we had was powerful and had ‘imagery’ in it . . . not some superficial Derija . . . and this Derija I find in *melhun* and I find it in the *zawaya* and I find it in the south” (Caubet 1999: 122).¹⁷

For Es-Sayed, this power comes from Moroccans' rural ancestors and must be preserved: “Our parents spoke in a . . . vernacular that was very poetic. It was creative and complicated, and they had learned it from their parents. That language is almost seductive in its descriptiveness” (Muhanna 2003: 143). For language full of “imagery” to have an effect, listeners must be well versed in its interpretation. Nass el-Ghiwane's practice of sustaining deliberate ambiguity, a context-based skill that many perceived as resisting state repression, was framed by Es-Sayed as a piece of Derija-speaking Moroccans' culture under threat of disappearance along with the proverbs and references themselves.

To this day, musicians and practitioners speak admiringly of the ways that Moroccan Derija can contain multiple meanings at once. The lead singer of the punk band Haoussa emphasized its orality, telling his interviewers that “[the Derija] dialect is good . . . the same sentence, you hear it from two different people, and you'll get two different understandings” (quoted in Kiwan 2014: 985). Hicham Bahou, cofounder and current head of the Boulevard Festival, grew up speaking Tamazight as his first language. He recalled that Nass el-Ghiwane, who performed in Derija, “meant nothing to me” until he matured as a Derija speaker. For his parents' generation, however, the band's use of archaic vocabulary and allusions was meaningful precisely because of its multiplicity. “Their parents—our parents—to them it was perfectly clear. There was a layer and another layer and they were clear” (p.c., July 2, 2018).

Artists' reflections on the creativity and possibility that Derija affords mirror the value placed on ambiguity in everyday social interactions. Generations

of Moroccanist ethnographers have been fascinated by the productive roles that ambiguous statements and actions play in ordinary Moroccans' public and private lives, as well as in its most powerful institutions (e.g., Hammoudi 1997; Rosen 1984; Kapchan 1996; Carey 2012). From the 1960s to the '90s, independent journals were forced to calculate how much critique and how many subscriptions would lead to censorship (Bennani 2006). Today, media scholars consider the relationship between the public and private sectors, where the state has wide authority over content, competes with privately owned TV and radio, and uses legal and social tactics to intimidate journalists, to be "ambivalent," "conflicted," "incoherent," or "contradictory" (Zaid 2017; El-Issawi 2016).

"Listening," here, indicates a literal description of an activity, a metaphor for analyzing information from a variety of sources, and, in a broad sense, a technique for deciding what constitutes the interesting and the knowable. Attitudes toward listening are shaped by hearing and reciting religious texts, but also historic and current forms of news media. The vast majority of Moroccans' media consumption comes via TV, radio, and internet video. Sound and speech, in place of or supplemented by text, continue to be the predominant ways that most Moroccans get their news coverage (Sonay 2017: 419).

In historic and current contexts, maintaining ambiguity is both a vital skill and a source of pleasure. Many different forms of expression, from music to newspaper editorials, proverbs to Facebook comments, promote listening for potential meanings in multiple registers. Hip hop artists, like other musicians, exploit this practice for a variety of reasons. In her video for "B.W.B. (Brani Wst Bladi) [Outsider in My Country]" (2020), the Casablanca emcee Tendresse the One alternates between two characters rapping the same text. One presents as wealthy and successful, the other as impoverished and suffering. Her rhymes on the lack of honesty and integrity in society could be aimed at individuals, an entire citizenry, or both. Performing hip hop conventions through one character and visualizing a mainstream Moroccan morality through the other, Tendresse not only asserts cross-class solidarity but invites the viewer to consider how their interpretations change as the scene flips (Almeida 2023: 452).

Katharina Schmoll argues that women in the Islamist Justice and Development Party conceptualize "listening" to a wide variety of audio and visual news sources—from party-identified newspapers to Facebook comments—as simultaneously an obligation, a right, and a source of pride. "Where listening as a right is restricted, assembling valuable civic knowledge, for instance, through media reception, becomes a major task" concludes Schmoll (2020: 5–6). Schmoll's interlocutors stressed the time and skill it takes to arrive at one's own point of view informed by listening to others. They also framed their listening as labor on behalf of and with others, explaining that "listening served as an invitation for fellow citizens to enter into dialogue and thus become empowered active citizens" (Schmoll 2020: 13).

The women Schmoll interviewed were generally unlike my interlocutors in their commitment to Islamist forms of governance. However, their belief in the power and agency of the listening subject, as well as their techniques for overcoming disinformation, resonate with the ways hip hop artists and fans of my acquaintance practiced listening to each other and to broader public debates. Adept at reading and listening through the lines of musical performances or recordings, news, and social media, my interlocutors frequently listened for more information than I realized was available in everyday situations. For example, when an emcee I knew was passed over for a teaching gig, he took it as both a referendum on his popularity and as assurance that the person hiring would simply book a friend for the position. When I declined social invitations, my stated reasons were almost never accepted at face value. My interlocutors were more likely to work from locally relevant assumptions, speculating about what I was doing instead and with whom, and to proceed from their conclusions rather than from my words (e.g., Carey 2012).¹⁸ Whether the context was song lyrics, a newscast, or a friend's narrative, listening required critical reasoning.

CRAFTING AND CHALLENGING AMBIGUITY: HIP HOP ARTISTS' INHERITANCE

Hip hop artists' work has both reflected and heightened characteristic forms of ambiguity. As the pioneers of Moroccan hip hop refined their local and national norms over the 1990s and 2000s, audiences experienced their speech as unprecedentedly direct. In 2004, the prominent journalist Driss Ksikes proclaimed of hip hop artists, "Cultural globalization . . . combined with the need to approach more concretely their tangible, raw, Moroccan reality, has given birth to the pioneers of 'truth-speaking' in Morocco" (Ksikes et al. 2004). Ksikes compared the emcees he cited directly to Nass el-Ghiwane, noting that they were "no longer detoured through metaphor in order to speak taboos, but no longer the will to revolt, either" (Ksikes et al. 2004).

Emcees continue to use time-honored strategies of deflection and inference in their work. In many hip hop songs, as in the most celebrated of Nass el-Ghiwane's lyrics, emcees critique without naming their targets. They reference allusions, proverbs, and other oral tradition to authenticate their arguments; develop metaphors, imagery, and wordplay to illustrate their critiques; and represent dissent through the figure of the other. In this section and the next chapter, I show that practitioners combine values from both their Moroccan predecessors and their adopted musical culture. Even as practitioners enjoy playing with aesthetic and rhetorical ambiguity in their music and lyrics, they nonetheless strive for overarching narrative and moral clarity. As in Amine Snoop's recollections at the beginning of this chapter, artists often cite or allude to Nass el-Ghiwane itself as they use these tactics (Salois 2014).

Drawing as much from local models of testimony as from influential first-person hip hop narratives, Muslim's "Machi Ana Li Khtart (I Didn't Choose This)" (2010) uses sonic and lyrical contrasts and ambiguities to create a sympathetic portrait of an outcast. Like other examples in which hip hop artists portray people on the margins of Moroccan society, Muslim asks listeners to imagine these figures in new ways while retaining a firm moral viewpoint.

To contextualize the close reading of "Machi Ana" that follows, I begin here with the first time I saw Muslim live. In November 2009, I attended a benefit concert he headlined at Dar al-Kabira, an orphanage on the outskirts of the small city of Kenitra. I was already well aware of Muslim's reputation as an underground artist. He had announced his departure from popular music in 2008, citing concerns that it was inconsistent with his religious beliefs. His reversal led to feverish anticipation of his 2010 comeback album, on which he toured in late 2009.

Before and after his much-discussed break, Muslim's fidelity to his aesthetic, political, and moral positions rendered legible his use of musical and vocal indices from US gangsta rap. First-generation hip hop artists with whom I worked often mentioned stereotypical attributes of gangsta rap, dismissing them as unconnected to Moroccan realities and inappropriate for Moroccan sensibilities. But with his repertoire of songs that rejected poverty, powerlessness, and inequality as morally wrong, Muslim's musical and onstage persona projected fierce commitment to his fans' concerns. Where other people might be mocked for splicing their own verses into Tupac's "All Eyez on Me" (retitled "All Eyez on Me feat. Tupac" [2005]), Muslim was understood by his fans as paying homage and professing genuine convictions.

Knowing this reputation helped me interpret my experience at Dar al-Kabira that evening. The orphanage cared for children of all ages, some of whom had experienced homelessness before arriving. The long, whitewashed building surrounded by an empty yard and a low wall sat at the edge of an industrial section of Kenitra, sandwiched between factories and facing newly built villas across the street. Though even the youngest residents attended the show, most of the crowd filling the courtyard in front of the temporary stage were boys and young men from Kenitra itself. Each had paid forty dirhams to enter—at that time an unusual requirement for live hip hop. Dar al-Kabira's main costs for the event appeared to be renting the stage, lights, and sound equipment, and paying the numerous private security guards who surrounded the stage.

Muslim's set that night was preceded by two local acts and a third from Kachela Records, his independent label in Tangier. During the first performance, I noticed groups in the crowd sending scouts to catch glimpses of the artists. Two or three boys would run back and forth from the back door of Dar al-Kabira to their friends in the courtyard, relaying anything they had seen. When an emcee passed by inside the building, a tight semicircle would materialize around the door or window as young men jostled for a better view. A ripple of excitement spread through

the whole audience when Muslim and his colleagues finally emerged from the building, turning almost everyone's gaze away from the local rapper mid-song. The third act, who also functioned as hype men once Muslim took the stage, wore T-shirts with the logo for Muslim's new album, *al-Tamarroud Vol. 1: al-Rissala* (The Rebellion Vol. 1: The Message). Though I was a head taller than much of the audience, I struggled to get a good look as the artists carved a path through the courtyard, since they were surrounded by private security with raised batons. One guard guided a German Shepherd on a short leash.

Rows of young children from Dar al-Kabira, wearing matching neon yellow vests with the orphanage's logo, stood just in front of the stage. The Dar's director introduced me to those nearby as she ushered me into the VIP section. Behind me, the young men closest to the metal fence separating us from the rest of the audience knew every word of Muslim's set. When the power went out two songs in, the crowd made a game out of the wait, chanting titles of songs. Some minutes later, a light came back on in the Dar, and the cheering behind me was so gleeful that I wondered whether the moment was planned to hype up the crowd.

Near the end of his set, Muslim launched into the lead single "A.K.A. Moutamarred (A.K.A. Rebel)" from his forthcoming album. The song begins with a fiercely staccato chorus, delivered twice in Muslim's gravelly voice:

Muslim is one of the people
My rap is a revolution, not just a game
North, south, east, west
'Bring the glory or get out of the way' always in [my] heart¹⁹

The introduction to "A.K.A. Moutamarred" is built for mass participation: a two-measure minor arpeggio in straight eighth notes forms the key building block of the eight-measure cycle under both the verses and chorus. The rapped chorus is rhythmically simple and repetitive, with clear stresses on the 1 and 3 of each measure balanced by the backbeat. Many in the audience that night knew the chorus and launched into the song as energetically as Muslim himself. Some rapped along with the verses, though the song had been released less than two months prior.

From the first lines, Muslim reassured his fans about his return to hip hop and his steadfast principles, invoking "the people" and the role hip hop artists occupied, or should occupy, toward them. As he raps in the first verse, "When I started I knew rap wasn't a game / I brought myself to look out for the people / I brought myself to be responsible for the generation."²⁰ These sentiments were echoed throughout his album as he delved into related topics, such as on "Hob al-Watan (Love of the Homeland [or Patriotism])," which opens with the declaration, "My country gave me nothing, yet it wants my love / And one-sided love leads only to rejection" (Almeida 2017: 96). Throughout his work and his concert, Muslim returned to his message—that as citizens have responsibilities to each other, so

does the state to them; that as Muslims should look out for each other, so should the state.

As the crowd filed out at the end of the evening, I got into a conversation with a young man who had been standing behind me. *Muslim is your favorite rapper?* I asked. *Yes!* He shouted over the chatter. *He is the best rapper in Morocco*, he asserted. *He speaks the truth about our problems.*

But other rappers talk about politics, too, I countered. He seemed to know where I was headed. *Yes, others talk*, he said, *but they don't always tell the truth. Or they talk about real problems, but they also want money. Muslim is an underground rapper—he doesn't want money*, said the young man, waving his arm toward the Dar.²¹

In 2009, Muslim's stylistic and lyrical trademarks were still understood as underground despite his wide popularity. Events like this benefit concert drew a dedicated fan base, and he earned capital he could spend on situations like that described in the introduction of this book. Muslim's frequent insistence that rap music was more than entertainment—more than “a game”—and his direct claim of responsibility to the community were heard as both morally upright and as a rebuke of the state that had withdrawn from or delegated its obligations to citizens. In this framework, young people must have a leader who is “responsible for the generation.” They are as much in need of moral guidance as they are material support, and, indeed, these are sometimes two sides of the same coin. In the context of the monarchy's patriarchal relationship to the nation, in which the king is simultaneously the political head and the leader of the nation's Muslims, claiming one is responsible indicates a powerful but safely veiled critique.

With this experience and others in mind, I hear many continuities in “Machi Ana li Khtart,” which appeared on the same 2010 album as “A.K.A. Moutamarred.” On the surface a bleak first-person rant from a gangster, it uses some of the tactics inherited from the previous generation of musicians and activists to very different ends. The first sound we hear in “Machi Ana” is a minor arpeggio, breathlessly unfolding itself into empty space, outlining the same harmonies again and again. Voiced by what sounds like a tinny electric piano, the pattern immediately groups the measure into two sets of sixteenth notes. Each arpeggio peaks on the second and fourth beats of the measure, foreshadowing the snare that will sound at those moments and creating a wave-like action that raises one's heart rate and speeds one's breathing. Four measures into this foreboding environment, Muslim intones the title of the song as a pickup to the fifth measure, dropping *khtart* (“choose”) on beat 1 and underscoring it with the deep buzz of the song's bass. The phrase's echoes fade behind the arpeggio, and we are suspended for a few measures, anticipating the percussion's entry, listening to the distance between the highest ranges of the piano and the lowest of the increasingly active bass line.

From the moment Muslim speaks, his voice is double-tracked; the gruff timbre and micro-discrepancies in his delivery create a thick spoken texture. The opening verse shifts the rhythm of the phrase *machi ana li khtart* so that the *chi* of *machi*

lands on the first beat of the first measure and *khtart* lands on the second, with the snare drum behind it.²² Then, he leaves a full beat of silence in the middle of the measure before spitting with rising intensity, cresting on the one of the next bar and placing the third line—“It just happened to me”—in the same place as the first. His short phrases imitate at an offset the pace and shape of the arpeggio underneath his voice, giving the impression of someone blurting out his feelings after a long silence. Throughout the song, Muslim uses these overlapping densities of sound, syllable, and meaning to illustrate an unrelenting, confessional urgency.

Like an opera character whose aria portrays her most despairing moment, Muslim plunges the listener into his character’s thoughts without explanation, relying on the backing track and his flow to convey a frenzied emotional state. Only a few lines in the first verse refer to how the character became a homeless criminal. “Brother I am not convinced / that I am human, I was created for life on the streets,” he cries. “You don’t know why I left for this path, my sister, and why it was necessary / They were my reasons, parents and poverty and everyone.” This phrase only hints at the trauma the character may have endured before leaving (or being forced to leave) home. Most Moroccan listeners have some awareness—some more intimately than others—of the depth of poverty in major cities, as well as the incidence of untreated physical and mental illness across incomes (Hajer 2015).²³ While the “sister” in this line needs a few words of explanation, implicitly we listeners, by contrast, can picture the character’s profound alienation.

The next two verses heighten both the character’s unstable psychology and his artistry. The second verse increases rhythmic interest, running poetic lines over measure lines and creating a sense of unbalance with dense interior rhymes. Because many Arabic words that serve the same function have the same vowel patterns, emcees often ensure end-rhymes by structuring each line in parallel ways. Muslim uses this device in the first portion of his second verse:

The streets are crazy (*majnouna*)
 They taught me how to survive through a prison mentality (*mesjouna*)
 And how to make people fear me so they respect us (*yhtirmouna*)
 They taught me to reject the world and I couldn’t reject us (*nakhouna*)
 The streets are cursed (*mela ‘ouna*)²⁴

“The streets are cursed” then serves as both the ending of one thought and the beginning of another in the next four-bar section of the verse. Throughout the second verse, interior rhymes connect one idea to the next, as in the pair “I wish I was locked up (*mahbous*), but even if I give Satan (*Iblis*) my hand he would kiss it (*ghaybous*) / and the police (*bouliss*) are always at your service (*sirfis*).” “Locked up” (*mahbous*) and “kiss it” (*ghaybous*) land on the first beats of their measures; in between, *Iblis* rhymes with the next measure’s interior word, *bouliss*. The measure is neatly concluded with a sardonic end-rhyme on “service.” These are some of the few loan words in the song, heightening the mocking effect of Muslim’s delivery.

The final lines of the third verse return our attention to the conceit of the song—that Muslim is sympathetically narrating a character while retaining a clear moral position on the story—through an extended metaphor.

I see bullets coming at my chest and my heart is pierced
 Even death is determined
 And I knew that a book has been written
 And it was me who chose the style

Muslim uses the word *qasida* (قاصدة) before “my chest,” conveying that the bullets are destined for him. (The root of this word can also give “purpose” or “goal.”) Pronounced in nearly the same way, *qasida* (قصيدة) is an ancient poetic form that closes every line with the same rhyme, just as these four lines do. In the next line, one would typically say that death is “written,” but Muslim finds another rhyme here in “determined” (*mehsoub*) to give the same sense of inevitability. Finally, we arrive at the metaphor prepared by the related meanings shading the previous lines. Muslim’s character alludes to the widely shared idea that one’s life is *mek-toub*, “written,” in the sense that it is preordained by God. In a twist we are not that surprised to hear, his character stops defending or self-aggrandizing at the moment of his death; it was, in fact, he who made his choices, despite the hand he was dealt.

The three verses of “Machi Ana li Khtart” depict a character’s mental and emotional responses to the trauma of being surplus to society. The sonic and poetic contrast of the chorus, however, adds a new layer to this character study. The chorus moves just as quickly as the rest of the text, but it is sung rather than rapped. It uses easily intelligible terms shared with Modern Standard Arabic, elevating the text and ensuring non-Moroccan Arabic speakers will understand some part of the song. And instead of continuing the first-person narrative, it places the character in a reflective moment:

What value has a rose when it withers?
 What value has the ground without a mountain?
 What value has the Sahara without sand?
 What value has the bee without honey?
 . . .
 Even if the rose grew up in the garden
 You will die cold among the thorns

The first six lines of the chorus ask “what value” or “what worth” (*shnou qimt?*) each object could have without a purpose or a context to which it belongs.²⁵ Muslim’s character asks himself, and Muslim asks us, what is the point of life as an outcast from human society? The end of the chorus returns to the character’s perspective on that society, serving as a transition back to the verses and a moral to the story.

The first-person narrator in “Machi Ana” is an antihero in the tradition of iconic US tracks like Mobb Deep’s “Shook Ones Pt II” (1995) or Geto Boys’ “Mind Playin’ Tricks on Me” (1991). He never loses sight of the pain and injury he has caused, and his regret makes him long for death, even as he describes the cruelty of others. Muslim’s ordering of the story, his musical semiotics of panic and dread, and his public persona contribute to the song’s reception as an unmistakable morality tale. At the same time, listeners are well prepared to hear descriptions of poverty and resentment as indictments of society’s and the state’s neglect. When the character finally admits that “it was me who chose the style” of his life and death, he takes more responsibility than the invisible institutions shaping the world he ran from and the underworld he encountered on the streets. In “Machi Ana,” Muslim has it both ways—we feel sorry for the narrator but never accept his behavior, much less seek to emulate him. In fact, we can sympathize (not empathize) with the character because he disapproves of his own acts; we share his moral compass and are invited to imagine how easily we could act against what we know to be right.

“Machi Ana li Khtart” and similar songs are regarded as different than the work of Nass el-Ghiwane and their contemporaries in significant ways. Yet hip hop artists inherited from this era musical and poetic techniques that continue to move listeners and advance different kinds of arguments. By recalling the music of marginalized Moroccan groups, Nass el-Ghiwane invoked othered figures, heightening the nostalgia of their lyrics through sonic references to people and places constructed as part of Morocco’s past rather than its path toward modernity. Instead of implying dissent through difference, the character speaking in “Machi Ana” embraces difference; he rejects the garden in which roses grow as he is rejected from it. In addition, his choice of electric piano to ground the story reflects Moroccan amateur musicians’ transformations of a semiotic tradition derived from Western art and popular musics, often through self-taught techniques, outdated gear, and pirated software. The numbing repetition and anemic timbre of the arpeggios reference not only musical expressions of pathos, but the constraints many face in producing them. One might read the class position of the character through the degree of material access the electric piano indexes.

The nuance and indirection in Nass el-Ghiwane’s texts are regarded as both artful and necessary. Muslim’s character is quite direct in some places, yet allusive in others. As in “Es-Şiniyya,” here a single person describes his losses, and during the chorus—a moment of peak expression that can contain multiple potential interpretations—he retreats to metaphor. As Rayya el-Zein notes, Arabophone hip hop frequently articulates the alienated community through the self, framing dissension and critique in “a mode of longing” for reincorporation or unification (2016: 157).²⁶

Nass el-Ghiwane’s legendary status and aura of protest continue to resonate through the often retold memories of those who experienced the band as

groundbreaking in the late 1960s and '70s (e.g., Benjelloun 2010; Al Jazeera 2010). When “Machi Ana” was released, it fit into the interpretive frame of Muslim’s album *al-Tamarroud Vol. 1*, as well as the frames audiences already held. Like the young man I spoke to in 2009, many explained to me that Muslim depicted the reality of Moroccan socioeconomic problems in ways they felt others would not. Public understanding of his religious devotion, along with his claimed responsibility to his generation, also factored into his fans’ acceptance of Muslim as the conscience of hip hop during the 2000s.

Fans’ appreciation for Muslim’s consistency—the moral rectitude, passion, and embrace of a masculinist responsibility for the body politic delivered in song after song—demonstrate how perceived sincerity was read and rewarded among a growing community of practitioners. Other artists specialized more in expressions of sarcasm, parody, or dark humor. While these could certainly be received as sincere, they also contain a kind of doubleness in that they require the listener to decode—at least a little—the moral or political statement. This, in turn, produces an in-group knowledge that enhances the experience of listening for some while excluding others.

By contrast, the key aspects of Muslim’s performances and reputation appear transparent and righteous, opposed to the strategic position-taking and ambiguity that both scholars and everyday Moroccans identify in their social interactions and arts. Muslim’s most ardent fans found this refreshing precisely because it addressed their perceptions of hypocrisy by elders, elites, and other power-holders. Although the opposite of the Nass el-Ghiwane mythos, Muslim’s lyricism is celebrated by his fans for similar reasons. In a sense, Muslim was beloved for returning his fans to themselves, much like Nass el-Ghiwane inspiring musicians and audiences to appreciate anew their cultural heritage.

Finally, like Nass el-Ghiwane and its fellow bands, Muslim’s hip hop was not at all the most radical cultural or political movement of its moment (e.g., Tolan-Szkilnik 2023). Rather, the singular memorialization of Nass el-Ghiwane, who received the award of Chevalier in the French government’s Order of Arts and Letters in 2010, not only crowds out the contributions of other Ghiwanien bands but also public recognition of '60s and '70s leftists. By narrating the band—and implicitly its 1970s audience—as at once progressive, resistant, and unitary, national media celebrate the achievements of the past in order to avoid the present. As one interviewee responded when I mentioned a generational link between hip hop and Nass el-Ghiwane, “Yes, but the subversive ones are dead” (interview, Paris–DC, May 2018). In a similar fashion, Muslim’s work, and that of other first-wave artists, is already narrated by fans as a golden era of lyrical quality and authenticity.

In both cases, musical resources from beyond their local, national, or regional identities helped the artists perform a different relationship between the individual and the collective. While Nass el-Ghiwane performed a vision of a diverse nation in the face of oppression, they, or at least ‘Omar Es-Sayed, maintained they were not commenting on the relationship between the state and its subjects, but

between the individual and their inheritance. As I argue in the next chapter, hip hop artists rarely draw attention to differences of ethnicity, lineage, or even religion in their performances. Instead, since the emergence of the genre, many have articulated a desire for translocal affiliation to hip hop while asserting the unity of national culture.

THE ANALYTICAL PURCHASE OF AMBIGUITY,
OR THE INEVITABILITY OF COMPLICITY

In the introduction to this book, I related how, in 2018, audiences heard Muslim forthrightly defend his alleged decision to accept money to publicly support a state-sponsored music festival that opponents argued exacerbated class inequality. “Machi Ana li Khtart,” and the benefit concert I attended in 2009, might appear to depict the upstanding underground rapper before his downfall. However, no great shift occurred in Muslim’s public persona between 2009 and 2018. Instead, I argue that the entrepreneurial and moral commitments highlighted in these analyses go together. Intertwined, they express a locally meaningful neoliberal subjectivity cultivated by hip hop practitioners, a subjectivity whose conditions of possibility emerged from the events and memorialization of the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s.

The previous generation’s nationalism, debates, protests, and popular musics communicated a holistic view of citizens’ deserved, if not conferred, rights and privileges. Much like Egyptians’ 2011 calls for both “bread and dignity (‘aish u karama)” refused to separate economic security from humans’ intrinsic worth, postindependence activism responded to colonialist conceptual divisions between the economic, political, and social by stressing the unity of these domains. Whether *Souffles*’s pan-Africanist essays, the 1980s bread riots, the demands of political victims heard by the Equity and Reconciliation Commission in 2003, or unemployed graduates’ recurrent demonstrations at Parliament, Moroccans framed recognition, accountability, and material needs as interdependent, seeking each through the others.²⁷

Overlapping with this period, top-down neoliberal economic policy has also eroded perceived boundaries between the economic, political, and social from precisely the opposite ideological direction. Yet it is not sufficient to complement top-down neoliberalization by claiming a bottom-up version, as if these are not in a dialectical relationship. I also wish to avoid characterizing the diversely informed ideologies of my interlocutors as revolutionary on the one hand or reactionary on the other. Different incomes, exposures, educations, cultural and religious perspectives, and experiences of state power shaped the different stories my interlocutors told themselves about their economic and social precarity. Yet all recognized inequalities, and experienced feelings of precarity, in relation to forms of power that were reshaped during their lifetimes by neoliberalization.

Cultural neoliberalization, in ways informed by each person's specific circumstances, shaped a narrative about how to respond to inevitable collisions with past and present forms of exclusion. In songs, humor, comments, and behavior, my interlocutors lived their awareness that neoliberalization was not only simultaneously economic and political, but that it preserved—or enhanced—existing inequalities. Across vast regional differences, neoliberalization has enabled reconceptions of success as financial rather than social or ethical, individual rather than communal, to encroach upon prior discourses on what constitutes success and a good life. In this chapter's example, Muslim's entrepreneurship, his way of carving a niche in an emerging national market for hip hop, has always depended on expressing religious fervor and business acumen simultaneously. Recall that his 2010 album was widely anticipated precisely because he cast it as his return to music after exploring the notion that devout Muslims could not make hip hop. Similarly, when Muslim and the emcee Don Bigg were reported to have beef in 2007–9, most practitioners I spoke with stressed the free publicity both received, regardless of their position on whether the beef actually existed or not.²⁸ In accordance with the notion that ambiguous actions keep one's options open, artists, fans, and colleagues simultaneously appreciated the possibility of sincerity and the market applications of that sincerity.

Not all the artists discussed in the next chapters identify with their faith as explicitly as Muslim does in his songs, but they are nonetheless “moral neoliberals” who try to sensitize their audiences to injustice and suffering in order to encourage what they see as the appropriate relationship between the state, its citizens, and its economy (Meuhlebach 2012). Muslim's religiosity is not somehow absorbed or replaced by the realities of neoliberalization, but articulated to them. Exhorting others to more moral behavior supports, rather than contradicts, choices that maximize one's success or options—even at the expense of others—precisely because those choices can also be ethical, in the sense of being in what one understands as the proper relation to oneself (Foucault 1983: 238).

Actions that allow one to gather wealth, prestige, and opportunity rarely escape relations of complicity with existing power structures. Opposing some effects of those structures while reinforcing their fundamental qualities, as the hip hop artists I knew nearly always found themselves doing, leverages that unavoidable relationship for both potential gain and self-protection. For example, Muslim's invocations of traditional morality allow him to critique the state's treatment of the poor in ways that are both more impactful and less susceptible to censorship. At the same time, because political and religious leadership are united in the person of the king, arguing from moral authority ultimately reinforces the monarchy's authority. Since “Machi Ana li Khtart” expresses disappointment with everyone—the state that left the narrator in poverty, the everyday people who fear or ignore the degraded poor, and the narrator himself—the song places the state's and

the citizens' responsibilities on the same rhetorical plane. In effect, Muslim points to complicity in a way that, paradoxically, decreases the perceived culpability of the state.

This chapter has attempted to sketch the cultural resources hip hop practitioners bring to their embrace of the transnational hip hop tradition and to offer a framework through which to think about artists' choices in the next chapters. Ambiguous actions, including listening, are not only strategic or pleasing, but necessary—perhaps for me as much as for Moroccans who must contend with the daily effects of authoritarianism. The pervasiveness and productivity of ambiguity as both sincere and complicit complicates my desire to elevate, much less fix, a single reading of any of the examples in this book. When, as Louise Meintjes describes, “ambiguity that appears to be a problem analytically is in fact the point politically,” my role as a scholar making ethnographically grounded arguments is tested in productive ways (2017: 119). When I trace, and then retreat from, the crafted polysemy of musical compositions and performances in order to focus readers' attention on my own concerns and those of current scholarship, I am making what we characterize as the signal intellectual contributions of the researcher—and unavoidably linking my interlocutors and their work to some discursive relationship to existing depictions of Arab and/or Muslim difference. Whether that is a relationship of similarity or contestation may not change the effects, since, like the relations of complicity throughout this book, resistance and acquiescence are both forms of participation that recenter an unjust system. It is our desire—mine, my Moroccan interlocutors', and hip hop scholars'—for more that keeps the political purchase of both hip hop and ethnography alive.