

The Ethics and Aesthetics of Competitions

The dazzling sunlight seemed to illuminate this July Saturday in Casablanca inside and out. Tucked away in a paved lot between apartment blocks, several kilometers from downtown, the street art festival Sbagha Bagha was closing a week of activities with its second annual graffiti battle. As Soultana and I climbed out of a petit taxi at the corner, a tiny Renault puttered past. “It’s this way,” yelled Khalid, the organizer of the Block Dix open-mic series, from the driver’s-side window. We strolled after him, talking about people we used to know.

“The guys from Rime Fire Crew used to live in these apartments,” said Soultana. “You remember them.”

“Oh yeah, we saw them at the Tremplin all those years ago. Are they still together?”

“No way. They are doing nothing with music,” laughed Soultana.

“I looked up Bellops on Facebook this morning,” I said. Bellops had belonged to an emcee duo named Dirtyfaces. They had won the Jil Mawazine competition’s hip hop category in 2009, and I ran into him at seemingly every concert in 2010.¹

“I think he went to Paris. To study *les audiovisuelles*.”

“Yeah, I think so. His latest photo is from a control room at Mawazine.” In the picture, he was sitting in front of a bank of televisions during that May’s Mawazine festival, each feeding one camera from performances broadcast live on 2M.

“That is the best thing,” exclaimed Soultana, suddenly energized. “It is the best thing when people realize they can’t making a living from rap and they go study.” We passed Khalid’s Renault, parked next to others just like it, and entered the concrete courtyard.

By 4 p.m., six contestants had been narrowed to two. Two pristine gray boards in wooden frames, the size of a lecture hall chalkboard and about four feet off

the ground, sat in the center of the lot. Roped off from the crowd, the finalists—MEVOK, from Tangier, and SAKO, from Casa—sat hunched over sketchbooks on plastic crates. As they plotted their final images, two deejays a few meters away traded samples foundational to the hip hop arts. Using a vinyl controller, DJ Rasch scratched over unison bass and guitar from Incredible Bongo Band's cover of "Ina Gadda Da Vida" to texture his transition to Arthur Baker's "Breaker's Revenge," a track many older participants would remember from bootleg copies of *Beat Street* (1984). "Khouya, ay! (my brother, ay!)" exclaimed the day's *animateur*, our microphone-wielding host, as the familiar bass line emerged from the noise.

Standing next to Rasch in front of his CDs, DJ Sam Noise simultaneously prepped his next song and decorated Rasch's mix by scratching, releasing the disc into a single measure of the iconic percussion break from Incredible Bongo Band's "Apache" precisely on beat. Rasch nodded his approval, and on the third release, Sam Noise kept spinning while Rasch faded out his mix, arriving at complete silence at the guitar strum heralding the call-and-response horns of "Apache."

While Sam Noise scratched the "p" of "party people . . . Can y'all get funky? / Soul sonic force" into "Apache's" guitar theme, the host continued to layer over the music. "Maximum du bruit pour MEVOK et SAKO (lots of noise for MEVOK and SAKO)," he called out over the guitar line, now sandwiched between two-bar chirp scratches. "Ça, ça, ça, le finale." Together, the three improvised a dense texture that recalled generations of dance battles, soundtracking the afternoon with American recordings nearly fifty years old.

Music for the day's battle was provided by Block Dix, an open-mic event held at the Boulevard Festival's headquarters in Casablanca. Rasch and Sam Noise were its main deejays, returning each month to support young emcees. In addition to entertaining the artists, spectators, and neighborhood children milling about the lot, Block Dix broadcast Sbagha Bagha live through its web radio setup in the adjacent tent. On the other side of the graffiti battle, the visual artists' collective Skefskef had set up booths with merchandise and a used book table. And all around us, the walls of the apartment buildings and garages glowed with portraits, fantastical imagery, wildstyle lettering, and tags—the work of artists from Sbagha Bagha's previous competitions and murals. They made perfect backdrops as fresh-dressed participants posed for friends, the publicist, or the professional photographer roaming the lot.

As soon as the competition concluded, the *animateur* opened the stage to Block Dix participants. After three teen regulars performed original songs, an up-and-coming young emcee from Rabat named Lionbad took the stage. The sun had barely dropped below the high rise next door at 7:30 p.m. when his set ended. As volunteers wrapped cables and broke down tents, clusters of friends straggled away from the lot, a long summer evening still ahead.

The contours of this event are similar to countless events across Morocco and the world since the hip hop arts spread internationally through competitions,



FIGURE 4. Emcee Lionbad posing for photos, Casablanca, 2018. Photo by author.

concerts, and recordings starting in the 1980s. Throughout the day's activities, the tension between individual expression and convention that powers the hip hop arts generated opportunities to differentiate and compete, to learn and mentor.

Layers of formal and informal competition were built into the day across the elements, as well as in the ways people dressed, reacted, and socialized. Some, like the graffiti contest itself, were overt, synchronous, and interpersonal. But some were potential, asynchronous, and self-directed. For example, the artwork surrounding the lot and the videos and photos taken that day may endure for years to come. For aspiring writers (graffiti artists) and muralists, the painted walls offer a standard to hold oneself to; for everyone captured in a photo or video, those documents offer entry into possible future contests over credibility and social capital. Likewise, while the open-mic participants weren't officially judged, they could expect critique from their peers and audience members that might impact their social status, just as they would use someone else's performance to hone their own craft and aesthetics.

Although the graffiti artists on view that day competed for substantial amounts of money and bragging rights, as with musicians, winning was unlikely to open up professional opportunities. They could not even expect to judge the next year's competition, since Sbagha Bagha's foreign judges were a key way they

attracted top participants (La Rédaction 2018).² In the absence of paying gigs, getting in front of well-respected artists for constructive feedback was as meaningful as prize money.

This chapter could have opened with many other examples of formal competitions, where aspiring artists prepare recordings and performances to enter in order to win other opportunities to record and perform. Why have these been so central to the culture of Moroccan hip hop practitioners? Since at least 2000, Moroccan hip hop artists have embraced juried competitions to hone skills, share music, and strengthen social ties. The cyphers, battles, and discourses of self-improvement fundamental to transnational hip hop culture provide not only opportunities for mastery, but for solidarity across stylistic and social difference as practitioners recognize their competitors' commitment. At the same time, the hip hop arts' forms of competition, and the differentiation they promote and circulate, have intertwined with existing markets—and enabled new ones—since their inception.

This chapter explores how musicians' competitive ethos and practices help to produce their understandings of markets and of themselves as market actors. While state-sponsored and independently organized competitions are opposed to each other in many ways, in practice, organizers and musicians depict both as a prelude to and substitute for an idealized market in which artists make a living wage. I suggest that for my interlocutors, competition is both an acceptance of and a solution to ways practitioners' lives are dominated under Morocco's authoritarian neoliberalism. Because my interlocutors conceive of markets as both natural and necessary, competing in a way that sustains, rather than weakens, social bonds becomes a form of care for oneself and others.

To make this argument, I define markets not solely as sites where products are exchanged, but as domains where actors circulate tangible and intangible goods and compete to create and obtain various kinds of capital. I define market actors here as heads of self-designed projects of circulation who seek value and mobility. My interlocutors were savvy participants in both a material market for musical products, including recordings, performances, and expertise, and an intangible market for personal values and modes of being. Both kinds hold the potential to enable desirable change in one's life; both sometimes operate in the same moment. Both circulate hip hop cultural expressions and, in so doing, generate social and sometimes material value through other practitioners' recognition.

From the perspective of neoclassical economics, hip hop practitioners' informal markets might appear unhealthy (or inefficient). However, many artists understand themselves to be collectively pursuing more formal markets, which would behave similarly to textbook capitalism and in which they could be more effective entrepreneurs. In order to promote a more secure formal market, practitioners simultaneously cultivate their audiences' willingness to pay for things like

recordings and performances, and they act on themselves to become something worth paying for. Throughout the chapter, I argue that the ways artists work on both themselves and their artistry blur analytical lines between self and labor, individual and community. They also bring to the surface practitioners' alignment with the state's ideologies of "development," in which the goal of global market integration drives decisions across regions, decades, and forms of governance.³ Since thriving markets of any kind are understood as closer to the situation of the global north, both material and intangible markets have important ethical and political ramifications.

Practitioners' embrace of development paradigms speaks to the unavoidable complicities my interlocutors faced. As creative workers and entrepreneurs, they pursued their goals DIY or in bottom-up ways, in opposition to the top-down approach of the state, its provinces, or its municipalities. However, actors carrying out plans from both orientations desire similar outcomes. To oversimplify, DIY and state actors may start from different perspectives, hold different politics, and prefer different methods yet effectively pursue the same thing—increased visibility and mobility in a transnational marketplace that has historically structured North Africa as a source of exotic artifacts, sunny vacations, agricultural products, and low-skilled labor. Critically, my interlocutors were well aware that appearing to align with state ideologies could backfire among their peers, yet there was little to be gained in doing otherwise.

Twenty years of independent competitions have built the hip hop arts community and taught many to view competition as self-improvement, as a moral good, and as a site of solidarity. At the same time, as I will show, neoliberal realities situate competition as both a sincere form of collective care and a way to build individual mobility and capital. Viewed in conjunction with the personal responsibility discourse described in the previous chapter, the expressions of care and solidarity performed through competition supported profound feelings of community without a disposition toward collective action in a traditional political sense. Instead, they solidified norms around building and participating in markets not only for recordings and performances, but for as-yet-unknown opportunities.

In what follows, I position hip hop's emergence and transnational spread as a story of artists' simultaneous rejection of and success in racial capitalism, showing how musicians promote care for themselves and one another through competitive contexts. Then, I offer a brief history of Moroccan hip hop's emphasis on formal competitions in order to contextualize the divergent visions of musical labor, artistic success, and professionalism put into practice by the two largest independent and state-sponsored competitions of the 2000s and 2010s. Finally, the chapter returns to the idea of solidarity by discussing practitioners' hopes for mobility. As Moroccans' possibilities and methods of migration are polarized by inequality, solidarity can take the form of seeking social and geographic mobility in order to

care for one's community, but also to help imagine productive futures for the hip hop arts.

COMPETITION AS CARE FOR THE CULTURE

Shortly after 5 p.m., Sbagha Bagha's host strolled into the center of the graffiti artists' circle. People gathered around the competition area while MEVOK and SAKO stood back to observe the full effect of their finished panels. Each had painted the same letters with distinctive shapes, colors, shading, and background. At the host's shout of "*trois . . . deux . . . un . . . STOP!*" the artists put down their cans and brushes, the deejays quieted their music, and the judges stood up behind their makeshift table.

Each judge said a few words, in French, in front of the artists and audience. With phone and video cameras rolling, the first judge noted that MEVOK's sweeping, fluid serifs were "a little too complex compared to the other one." The second congratulated both writers but concluded that "SAKO has better used the full space of the panel." The third stressed that he "really enjoyed both styles. MEVOK, it's super as always, but that 'A' has lost the style a little." A cheer went up as SAKO struck a half-joking prize-fighter pose then gave MEVOK a bear hug before shaking the judges' hands. While each of the judges brought out a different detail in his comments, they showed a clear preference for SAKO's simpler, more angular style, featuring a classic gradient that drew one's eye from the lighter-colored, thinner forms at the top of the panel to the darker, broader limbs of the letters at the bottom. SAKO's way of shaping and using space upheld canonical forms; in contrast, as one judge said to MEVOK, "you are making another [kind of] graff."

Competition is baked into hip hop's history and culture. Informal and formal contests are foundational to b-boying/b-girling and deejaying in the form of battles, emceeing in the form of cyphers, and graffiti in writers' jockeying for status (Austin 2016: 224). Practitioners and historians often make the competitive drive itself sound as natural and unavoidable as the tides. In a characteristic example, art historian Maia Morgan Wells presents graffiti's development as self-explanatory: "As an increasing number of teenagers added their own twist to what they saw on the subways, competition ignited rapid stylistic innovation" (Wells 2016: 467). Celebrated flyer maker Buddy Esquire described the desire to compete in sensory terms: "'It's like an itch,' he says, 'a drive to want to do it, to want to get better, to want to work hard at it'" (Smith 2010, quoted in Ewoodzie 2017: 131). Mark Katz describes competition as a vital force propelling deejays: "It motivated them, gave them direction, and structured their daily lives" (2012: 44). The deejays and dancers that Katz and Joseph Schloss interviewed frequently describe their competitive feelings as both primal and cultivated, a natural resource to be harnessed (Schloss 2009).

These narratives celebrate competition's benefits for individuals and for the collective improvement of the art form. For each person, devotion to craft and thus to competition with others and oneself is a virtue, a practice with moral force. It defines the person as she refines her abilities; it invites a habit of self-interrogation on what, when, and how to achieve.⁴ Giggling musicians in hip hop and other genres adopt entrepreneurial discourses, citing competition against oneself as continuous self-improvement and self-care (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010; Scharff 2016).⁵

Competition within the hip hop arts thrives on the differentiation, commodification, and entrepreneurship that powers contemporary capitalism. Yet, while competition has grown from and energized individuals' capitalistic labors, individual competitions can sustain profoundly meaningful sociality. Throughout transnational hip hop history, competitions produced and continue to produce solidarity as the flip side of the individualization described above.

Competitions exhibit artists' dedication to their art forms, traditions, and mentorship. In Joseph Schloss's work, b-boys and b-girls describe battling as "sharing," as "topping the next one and going to the next level," to collectively build better dancers and dance forms (2009: 108). Producers would compete to find obscure breaks, "[establishing] a canon of records . . . that a producer had to be familiar with, an expectation that still stands to this day" (Schloss 2004: 37–38). Today's international competitions in deejaying and dancing allow competitors and fans to draw connections between uniquely talented performers and national or regional trends. Assertive individuality makes possible continually expanding genre boundaries and higher expectations for performance. Discernible differences—of technical ability, aesthetic preference, regional style, etc.—are required, in this view, for artistic advancement to occur. Competition strengthens bonds across difference by reinforcing the sense that everyone can and should contribute to the development of the art form.

Competition also passes on cultural memory as performance conventions. Older artists remain relevant by mentoring, judging, and sustaining unwritten rules of conduct. Joseph Ewoodzie Jr. cites an early deejaying battle in which Afrika Bambaataa noticed that Grandmaster Flash was using rented equipment. Feeling this violated unspoken but established standards for fair play, Bambaataa coached Flash's opponent, the young Grandwizzard Theodore, in real time to beat Flash (Ewoodzie 2017: 117). Approximately two decades later, Marcylina Morgan described LA's Project Blowed open-mic nights as "a space of hard work, skill, approval, and dreams . . . an uncensored yet scrutinized space where [freestylers'] discourse is meticulously monitored, judged, and applauded or ridiculed based on their skill and ability to express their lives" (2009: 5). When mentors set standards for performance and behavior, competition becomes a crucial site of technical, aesthetic, and ethical education.

Hip hop's competitive practices are fundamentally shaped by US racial capitalism, which leverages racialization to generate saleable difference (Melamed 2015: 77). With some exceptions, most of Morocco's hip hop artists do not explicitly link success under neoliberal racial capitalism with ostentatious displays of wealth. Instead, they celebrate ordinary individuals making a living under systemic political and economic constraints. Further, many conceptualize success as accessing a formal market like those they understand to exist in Europe and North America. My interlocutors' frequent critiques of the informal state of Moroccan popular music markets referenced their desire to participate in what is represented as capitalist modernity.

Prior to the hip hop arts' emergence in the 1990s, regionally and nationally known art forms had their own competitive traditions. *Ḥalqat* (sing. *ḥalqa*, lit. "throat" or "link in a chain") are audience circles assembled around live performances in markets and gathering places. *Ḥalqat* vary widely, from storytelling and live music, to magic tricks, healers, and clairvoyants (Kapchan 1996: 30; Schuyler 1984: 96). Caprice, an emcee from the first-generation Casa Crew group, recalled the *ḥalqat* in his neighborhood of Hay Mohammadi, suggesting that cyphers took their place for hip hop fans of his generation (interview, June 24, 2010). While performers usually do not jostle for airtime within a single *ḥalqa*, they incite a competitive atmosphere as they coax audiences away from nearby artists.

Cyphers and *ḥalqat* were also conceptually linked in their supposed distance from respectable activities. At least in the first decade of Moroccan hip hop, emcees, dancers, and their audiences could be sure that people outside the cypher were, at best, indifferent to their art. As a foreign practice associated with Afro-diasporic populations, poverty, and urban decay in the United States and in France, hip hop was often understood as a sign of moral and economic degradation among Moroccan youths, inviting surveillance by their neighbors and the police (Cestor 2008).⁶

For Deborah Kapchan, *ḥalayqiya*, or *halqa* performers, remind their fellow citizens that markets have both winners and losers: "Ḥalayqiya (pl.) are socially devalued because their goods are often intangible or ephemeral and because their activities challenge dominant notions of what constitutes value in society. Performers . . . are excluded from a material economy whose primary value is the generation of capital, yet included in it as an example of refuse" (1996: 40–41). Both *ḥalayqiya* and early hip hop artists were seen, at least by some, as the surplus that reminded observers of the dominant culture's comparative value.

From hip hop's emergence in Morocco in the mid-1990s to the late 2000s, the vast majority of performance opportunities were in formal and informal competitions, from cyphers to juried exhibitions. Recalling musicians' and dancers' practice in the 1990s, sociolinguist Dominique Caubet invokes an anticommmercial discourse: "There was no money involved, there were no festivals, no venues, and the artists were all playing . . . for the pleasure of it" (2016: 251). While Caubet describes a lack of infrastructure as positive, implying that "playing for the

pleasure of it” is opposed to playing for financial gain, emerging artists tell stories of competing against each other and against their own achievements during this period. As groups of friends grew in their abilities, they linked to others, creating networks and relations that would circulate and assign value to styles, techniques, and trends—creating, in other words, a market for intangible practices.

Some of the earliest practitioners still active in the 2010s recalled how young aspirants built off each element to develop their competencies in the others. Amine Snoop described to me how, as a young teen, he would sit near b-boys’ late-night practice sessions, composing rhymes to the beats from their boom box (July 29, 2015). When sharing her origin story, Soultana often mentions hanging out with boys her age in her sprawling apartment complex, joining the emcees’ cypher between pickup basketball games. Yoriyas, who competed as a b-boy before becoming a professional photographer, agreed with my theory that his experience with the layered rhythms of hip hop shaped the visual rhythm of his compositions (July 5, 2018).

In the years before widespread internet access and self-produced videos, aspiring musicians and dancers had to attend competitions to see each other work. Deejays unable to afford their own equipment could practice by accompanying emcees on someone else’s decks during dance or musical competitions. For emcees, more formal competitions were not only a place to hear rhymes and flows beyond those of their closest friends, but also a way to gain experience with performance practice they could not reproduce in a courtyard cypher, including how to hold a microphone and move onstage. Dance crews’ rehearsals, whether in state-funded youth centers or on the smooth floors of abandoned lobbies after hours, took the form of cyphers where learners simultaneously shared, advised, and competed.

To the best of my knowledge, the earliest formal competitions were established in Casablanca. In 1999, Hicham Abkari, who would become the artistic director of the annual Festival de Casablanca and head of Casablanca’s Mohamed VI municipal theater, was working at a state-funded cultural center in the city. He organized a dance battle “like those that exist, for example, in Germany” (Cestor 2008). “Everything happened in a little room in the Sidi Belyout cultural complex. . . . I worked in the site as an assistant director. I had an easier time than someone from outside [the complex] . . . because it was not viewed very well at the time” (Cestor 2008). As someone charged, in theory, with supporting urban youth culture, Abkari became an early supporter of the new trend (personal communication [p.c.], July 24, 2010). Knowing that many Moroccans learned about hip hop through the racist discourses that often accompanied it in US and international media, Abkari thought competition would legitimize teens’ passion. Inviting TV crews and explaining that dance battles were already common in Europe could “give a little visibility and diminish the suspicion that this genre of dance and . . . [rapping] might create” (Cestor 2008).

Fez emcee L-Tzack began dancing in 1999 and entered formal competitions almost immediately. “We [went] to an *achiri* competition at that time in Casablanca for free. At that time you go, you work, and you dance the whole day, no Red Bulls, no water, no nothing,” he recalled in a 2010 interview.⁷

And I did this like first time, second time, the third time we win. . . . The third time the year is like 2002 . . . And then we just like—win, the battle, and then we just like leave the whole shit, like leave and take the bus and go back to Fez [laughter]. . . . They were like “wait we gotta give you, we gotta give you something!” And it was just like an *achiri* thing, you can buy it from the medina. I can buy like a collection [of trophies] for myself (interview, Fes, January 2010).

L-Tzack laughed as he remembered his first plastic trophy, but he also stressed his team’s dedication, describing their efforts as “work” and noting that they had to pay their own way to Casablanca. “You pay all, and at that time you were more poor because you were more young. And you don’t work [a job],” he explained. For L-Tzack and others, neither education nor available jobs could guarantee a future worth having. While early competitions also provided little, they did offer challenge, growth, and a sense of belonging.

MAKING MARKETS, MAKING ONESELF

During the final round of the graffiti competition, as small circles danced and chatted to James Brown tunes, the originator of the Block Dix open mic took a break from his web radio duties to stand in front of a sprawling mural for an interview. I asked Khalid, a professional musician and producer, why he started the series. Khalid knew exactly what he wanted to say. “In 2011 or around then, I did a tour in Germany,” he began. “The idea came to me when I went to Berlin. . . . There were . . . these beautiful open mics I enjoyed. And I had a little [jealousy] *fi hal*, like why don’t we have these in Morocco? And it was just in their circles, it’s not that the state did it or something. Some kids who are friends, between them, they do this thing . . . *Donc* that’s how the idea got in my head. And that’s the beautiful thing about traveling in life” (July 2018).

Khalid continued to recount a capsule history of Block Dix, offhandedly mentioning the series’ achievements. Yes, it had been held every month without fail since 2011, he confirmed. Yes, it was the only open mic in Morocco that had continued for so long. He was almost bored by my amazement.

“So from 2011 until now we did a lot of things, a compilation, a [TV] program, a web radio specializing in hip hop, we partnered with Boultek on this thing Sbagha Bagha . . . but this had been our idea from 2011.” Here, Khalid dragged out his statement in a knowing fashion, pausing between each word with a conspiratorial smile. “With it, we create a hip hop industry in Morocco.”⁸

We both laughed at his exaggerated delivery. “In order to do anything, we had to have so much money. It’s normal if you know the history of rap in America, how it worked, you understand me? . . . Our way is from our cheap standard of living [*min al-ḡaiya économique*].”

Khalid explained that Block Dix’s first goal was to create a label under which to organize all their activities—releases, concerts, tours, merch. But he was also contending with young artists’ desire to build their reputations quickly by posting all their music on YouTube. Khalid was sympathetic, but he also hoped to convince them to play a longer game.

Now that we’ve arrived at a certain level, I advise kids to be wise. They post their releases for free so that Moroccan youths, the Moroccan public is with them. Now the public is used to something for nothing . . . they’re used to getting something for a dirham. You understand? *Donc*, I told them post the music on YouTube, put one post there, and later we’ll find some way to sell it to a fan. . . . [If you can sell] this CD or this original title, then you found a real fan. A good fan. And then they have a lot of views and it will bring you to them, and we can listen to music like it’s their job, you understand? We don’t say “ah, we need the state to do this for us,” we don’t have a problem [doing it ourselves].

As the next sections will show, Khalid’s justification echoed those of his elders. As a professional several years into his career, Khalid conceived of Block Dix as a way of building infrastructure for the next generation of artists. Throughout our interview, he framed his thinking and labor as mentorship, as caring for the future of the field. His generational solidarity is the ground in which productive competition could occur and young emcees could flourish.

From the late 1990s through the 2000s, organizers, funders, and participants used formal competitions to determine collectively the boundaries and expressions of professionalism. Rather than denoting paid versus unpaid performers, professionalism discourse emerged as a way practitioners identified gaps between desired and actual conduct. Through discussing and holding themselves and others to “professional” standards, practitioners located, critiqued, and took responsibility for structural inequalities between their informal markets and those they imagined to exist in Europe and North America. Dancers, emcees, beatmakers, and deejays understood learning professional-level musical, technical, and physical skills as a necessary step toward competing in a transnational marketplace.

Markers of professionalism were both business and personal, public and private. They included practitioners’ efforts to circulate their work and the ways they treated others and themselves. Artists frequently complained about the unprofessionalism of venue owners, event organizers, and even colleagues who devalued musicians’ skills and time through disrespectful acts. For example, my teacher, DJ Sim-H, once told me a cautionary tale about a former friend. When their event

fell through and they owed money to a nightclub owner, his partner drove off with their shared equipment and left Sim-H alone with an angry creditor (interview, July 26 2010).

More prosaically, artists complained in public and in private about handshake agreements that left them vulnerable to last-minute changes, or about event organizers that refused to pay for decent sound and lighting equipment.⁹ Salé-based emcee K-Prime summed up his advice to his fellow musicians in the following way: “Not all Moroccans are artists. ‘Cause you know some people, you just call them and say ‘Can you come? There is a concert.’ . . . He doesn’t know that he has to be professional and he has to think before answering yes. Which kind of concert? Which microphones? Which speakers? . . . If you are a professional, [if] you do professional work, you have to get paid to get on the stage. If we all do that, people, they gonna pay us to get on stage” (interview, Salé, March 26, 2010).

In these and other examples, practitioners sought to cultivate a reputation for being a *fnan*, or artist, rather than simply a singer or entertainer, hoping that acting as if one deserved proper treatment would encourage event organizers to provide it. Convincing oneself of one’s own value was not simply good for one’s mental health, but a necessary step to convincing others. Collectively acting on these beliefs could, ideally, transform behaviors among those doing the hiring. As K-Prime assured the group listening during our interview, “If we all do that, people, they[re] gonna pay us to get on stage.” The tangible and intangible dimensions of efforts to professionalize their market were equally important to artists’ potential future success.

Professionalism discourse also generated difference along existing socioeconomic fault lines. For musicians like Don Bigg, who characterized himself as “middle class” in our first conversation in 2009, postsecondary education, access to resources, and exposure to formal markets in other sectors enabled specific interventions (p.c., October 21, 2009). In order to circumvent the pervasive piracy of CDs, he placed official copies of his 2006 and 2009 albums in a single store in each major Moroccan city. Unlike the majority of CDs one could find at the time, these “real” versions looked, felt, and sounded “professional”—they came in new jewel cases, included a glossy booklet, and sported the statement “all rights reserved” as if they had been produced in the United States. More importantly, his recordings were professionally mixed and mastered. Most Moroccans purchased music in local boutiques where the seller made a profit by copying music onto CDs or tapes, often on demand. Bigg’s strategy, instead, emulated the buying experience found in cities’ most upscale neighborhoods. In a moment when most emcees pursued a full album as a personal and artistic milestone, using it as a credential to attract performance opportunities like musicians in other popular genres, Bigg invested in an attempt to re-value recorded media.

By contrast, a much larger group of practitioners, including full-time musicians, lacked the resources or knowledge to do more than critique the market as

they experienced it. L-Tzack had left his successful first-generation group Fez City Clan shortly before I first met him in 2009. After his father passed away when he was young, he grew up in a low-income neighborhood in Fez's old city with his mother and younger brother. By 1999 he had fallen in love with b-boying.

LT: I was just like going *inside* this hip hop. No competition, no radios, no TV show, no nothing. And I'm poor, I don't have a father. I was just like, just doing this, I don't know why. I was just like, "I found my thing. I found what I love in this *achiri* country." . . . I leave my school for this.

KS: You left school?

LT: Yeah, I didn't—it was like coming to [the] bac[calaureate], and I didn't go the day for the final exam . . . I just, like, go to dance a competition in Casablanca and forget about it (interview, Fez, January 2010).

In late 2009 and early 2010, L-Tzack leveraged a seemingly free resource—his Facebook network—to build support for his forthcoming album. Using a tactic he observed from multinational recording companies, L-Tzack released a series of freestyles to generate excitement, hoping that audience interaction on his posts would become an attraction in itself. By February 2010, his series had failed to increase his network or provoke invitations to perform. In a somewhat cryptic Facebook post, he complained that musicians couldn't "do it big" in Morocco. When I messaged L-Tzack, his reply listed all the ways the country lacked essential market infrastructure, but he also demonstrated how he understood the forces at work.

[I]'m mad about my co[u]ntry i'm real[l]y tired of all this thin[gs] work[ing] incorrect[ly]. . . . no music tv, for people to [see] faces of rappers . . . no stores to [sell] music CD[s], no industry, no marks to support bands, no sponsoring . . . so what [do] we have [for] the big event of hip hop . . . one day of hip hop in boulevard festival??? . . . come on it's really not [enough]. A lot of collaboration[s] ask [emcees] to travel in Europe to make concerts and promotion there, but here they say rap is nothing, so . . . we will never have this normal support from people.

In L-Tzack's view, until "they" expressed respect for hip hop music through material interventions, "people" would not respond with "normal" behaviors like purchasing CDs or paying for tickets. Attempts to advertise and normalize hip hop music would make little difference without the kinds of structures in place in Europe, structures that Moroccans lucky or rich enough to travel could learn about by collaborating with European musicians and organizations. At the same time, despite his former group's experiences performing at state-funded events, L-Tzack cited only the annual Boulevard festival as a "big event of hip hop." Standing outside the emerging networks and funding sources in Casablanca and Rabat, L-Tzack saw independent and state-sponsored festivals as part of the same system. He also made it clear to me that the formal market he desired could not be built

by practitioners alone: “We need really to jump right now to the professionalism step. I mean this every fucking *responsable* in this country have to do something for all young [people]. They have to stop to think . . . about [how] to make all this lost energy go in [the] right way, and let all [these] artist[s] make [their lives] and dreams . . . and [e]specially not like the old artist[s]. I mean not [spend] all my life in music and in the end finish [poor]” (Rabat–Fez, February 7, 2010).

L-Tzack’s message ignored the state’s increased platforming of hip hop in the mid-2000s. But these opportunities affected only a handful of artists who were well positioned to take advantage of the efforts of the state and international recording companies. His analysis reflected the experience of the broad majority of emcees, who might achieve gratifying local recognition yet have no means to convert that popularity into something more enduring.

L-Tzack’s background, and the experiences with the repressive side of state power that accompanied his poverty, also shaped how he viewed potential solutions. His use of the French *responsable*, which could invoke either government officials or business owners, aptly demonstrated the necessity for a specialized term. Calling for only businesses or only local officials to exert influence would not capture Makhzenian power to maintain the single government/economy nexus. Despite the rhetoric that surrounded him from practitioners, major venues, and the lyrics of hip hop songs he loved, L-Tzack identified the state’s role in creating and maintaining new markets precisely because, in his lived experience, it was little different than the government’s historic control over the economy.

While much has changed for working artists since 2010, some assumptions in both Khalid’s and L-Tzack’s arguments have stayed the same. Khalid’s assertion that practitioners will eventually build a functioning market, one that by definition attracts consumers from the global north without the aid of the state, appears at odds with the logic deployed by L-Tzack in our decade-old conversation. Both socioeconomic positioning and the age of the speaker contribute to those differences. However, as Khalid’s remarks above demonstrate, practitioners continue to conflate the idea of being professional with being competitive in global north markets. This is not only because they are surrounded by an ideology that prizes the structures, resources, and rewards that appear to exist in Europe and North America, but because their analysis of the limits of their market is still correct. For practitioners, as long as they lack a formal market—with all its rapaciousness and opacity—they lack a fundamental similarity with the global north, a difference that literally and figuratively powers the “developed” world’s perceived monopoly on “modernity.”

In addition, both Khalid and L-Tzack make their arguments for themselves and others. Khalid has coached aspiring emcees for nearly a decade. L-Tzack compares “all young people’s” chances to those of artists from previous generations, who often had little security when they were too old to work.¹⁰ In the chain of associations within professionalization discourse, links between individual moves and community well-being—between posting boastful freestyles and creating a training infrastructure—appear and reappear. The discourse surfaces deeply

held concerns about material sufficiency and prestige, but also beliefs in musicians' worth. A "modern," "professional" market would confer on its participants society's "normal support," as L-Tzack put it, rather than the tolerance, bemusement, or even dismissal that Moroccans outside of practitioner communities often expressed toward hip hop culture in its first decades.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, multiple competitions emerged from artists' networks in Casablanca, Rabat, and Meknes. In one of these, amateur rock musicians Mohamed "Momo" Merhari and Hicham Bahou created Le Tremplin ("springboard") in Casablanca. The nonprofit that grew to produce Le Tremplin and the Boulevard festival would become profoundly influential for "Western" musical genres in Casablanca and throughout Morocco. From its earliest years, this association paired skill- and network-building with a professionalization discourse in which entrepreneurship was linked to the ideal of aesthetic and political independence.

Le Tremplin grew out of an informal series of concerts organized by Merhari and Bahou at a community theater named Le Fédération des Oeuvres Laïques, or F.O.L., in Casablanca's upscale Gautier neighborhood. At the time, Bahou ran the Association for Artistic and Cultural Education, itself a part of the F.O.L., in addition to still working his day job at an ad agency (Callen 2006: 124; p.c. with Bahou, Casablanca, July 2, 2018). Merhari and Bahou sought to provide a laboratory for unappreciated, even persecuted youth musicking (Callen 2006: 125–26). From their inception, Le Tremplin and the Boulevard festival were designed to bring scattered practitioners of alternative musics into regular dialogue and to build mutual support.

The first annual Tremplin included several rock and metal bands and three fusion bands (EAC-L'Boulvart 2008: 37). In 2000, hip hop was added to the competition, and it soon became the category with the largest number of applicants each year.¹¹ Merhari has claimed that "2000 was the birth of rap in Derija," rather than English, because "groups had to include in their application tapes [*maquettes*] some tracks in Arabic" (Berrada 2015). By 2001, the three-day event included workshops for participating musicians. These included instruction in beatmaking software, preproduction and postproduction musical effects, recording technology, and sometimes instrumental technique (Callen 2006: 23).

By 2003, Tremplin relocated to Casablanca's rugby stadium to accommodate the hundreds of young people who came to the free four-day event (Caubet 2016: 251). By 2008, the enterprise had grown into two separate events: the spring Tremplin and its companion, the fall Boulevard festival, four days of invited domestic and international acts in rock and metal, fusion, hip hop and rap, and electronic musics (Harmach 2009a). By the late 2000s, the winner in each genre at Tremplin performed at the larger Boulevard festival months later. Depending on the year's sponsorship, winners also received additional training, access to a recording studio, and/or money.

Throughout the 2000s, Tremplin and Boulevard festival were funded through an ever-changing combination of municipal, NGO, and corporate gifts, including funding from the Institut Français and the American embassy and consulate.¹² In 2008, as the organization was building out its new headquarters in the basement of Casablanca's Technopark, it received a check worth two million Moroccan dirhams from the personal funds of King Mohammed VI. Widely reported in the media at the time, this gift acted as "a stamp" of approval (p.c. with Bahou, Casablanca, July 2, 2018) that insulated the Tremplin and Boulevard festival from conservatives' and Islamists' criticism.

Over time, Boulevard's corporate and governmental funding has enabled it to conduct year-round programming. Today, the umbrella organization EAC-L'Boulvart oversees many additional events in and beyond Casablanca, including Sbagha Bagha and other street art events, concerts, artist residencies, and partnerships with foreign festivals.

By the late 2000s, annual Boulevard happenings were understood as central events in the temporal, spatial, and social dimensions of the regional and national hip hop network. Tremplin in particular educated performers and audiences in the social and musical skills to be considered a competent participant.

I attended the Tremplins in 2008 and 2010. The 2008 competition took place in a large, traditional auditorium in Rabat that held several hundred people. It offered competitors experience on a proscenium stage, with the typical lighting, sound, and audience interactions of that experience. As one of the largest theaters in the country, the venue was likely the most prestigious any of the competitors had played. However, it offered the audience few of the opportunities to interact with performers that were critical to later editions of Tremplin.

In 2009 and 2010, Tremplin was held at Les Abbatoirs, the site of the former city slaughterhouse. Maintained by the city with several Casablancon cultural associations, Les Abbatoirs had recently been rescued from redevelopment and was serving as an all-purpose cultural center and event space. According to the estimates of the Boulevard Festival, ten thousand people aged between sixteen to thirty-five years old visited Tremplin daily in 2009 (EAC-L'Boulvart 2009: 7).

In 2010, Les Abbatoirs made an intriguing and sometimes disturbing site for an event at the leading edge of Casablanca's musical cultures. Tremplin stages were placed throughout a crumbling multibuilding complex in which signs of its former use were slowly being papered over—literally—in the form of tags, posters, murals, and advertisements. At the same time, the drains in the floor and giant hooks dangling from the ceiling of the huge, colonnaded halls allowed one to trace the path of generations of cows and sheep through the complex. The competition stage was located in a courtyard near the back of the available portion of the complex; later in the evening, the audience moved to a smaller space near the main gate, where another stage was set up for the invited artists. The former offered competitors and audiences the opportunity to circulate, to come and go, to cluster

near the stage or to hang back. The latter, more crowded as people poured in to watch the headliners, ensured an atmosphere of sweaty electricity. Both spaces enabled moments of introduction, reacquaintance, or collaboration.

The daytime competition courtyard was small enough for well-known artists to be clearly visible in the audience or in the crowd socializing behind the sound technicians' tent. Throughout the day, moments of mentorship, critique, and mutual support undergirded the competition. The youngest competitor was just eight years old while the oldest were in their mid-twenties. Their approaches ranged from hard-hitting social commentary to the skits, group dance moves, and *rap comique* of Rime Fire Crew. The most comfortable performers simultaneously played to the live audience and the cameraman, prompting cheers from an audience that recognized their skill and enjoyed watching emcees lean into the camera. Several groups inserted practiced moments of audience interaction in their four-song sets, including classic call-and-response patterns. One coached the audience to wave their hands from side to side in time with the music, shouting "Limen! Lissr! Limen! Lissr! (Right! Left!)" as if we were marching in unruly formation.

As groups left the stage, they would join the audience, watching their competition with a mixture of appraisal and enjoyment. Competitors and audience members watched each other for indications of how groups were doing, noting the difference between clumps of fans who came to support their friends and those who moved when inspired by the music. Those circulating in the audience compared preferences and opinions, forming shared narratives about the performers in real time. When I remarked to a friend that I enjoyed one group's instrumentals, she scoffed, pointing out the American artists each track was taken from. Others would turn to me when their favorites appeared, making sure I had my camera ready.

As younger aspirants competed on stage and connected in the audience, established musicians from hip hop's earliest years in Morocco reconnected with each other. I witnessed people who knew each other only by sight, by conversations over Facebook, or by reputation meeting for the first time. Older musicians arrived singly or in small groups to the delight of younger competitors and audience members. Their investment in the event added legitimacy and excitement to the competition. The judges themselves were deeply embedded in the formation of the network unfolding in front of them. And while the competition portion of Tremplin was not televised, the evening's invited performers were broadcast live on the 2M program *Korsa* (p.c. with Younes Lazrak, March 18, 2010).

First-wave artists and event organizers scattered about the audience and dispensed photo ops and advice to enthusiastic amateurs. When Muslim crossed the courtyard, he was mobbed by fans of all ages. Masta Flow and J-Ok, from Casa Crew, were at the center of a circle of well-wishers, constantly shaking hands or greeting old friends. As the afternoon stretched into evening, a small but steady stream of young women approached Sultana. At one point, she coached a young

girl on her flow, showing her how to keep her original lyrics in time by stressing the same beats on every line. While Tremplin did not impose stylistic or technical rules on its competitors, as I noted in other competitions, the elder musicians and younger audience members collectively built expectations for performers' musical and stage skills, forming a sense of the day as a critical event for the future of Casablanca's hip hop.

The effects of Le Tremplin and the Boulevard festival on performers of "Western" genres, in Casablanca and throughout the country, over the past twenty years cannot be overstated. The organization's many staff and volunteers consistently focused on supporting the basic infrastructural needs of aspiring artists. Their events functioned as key opportunities to circulate diverse styles, enhance young people's networks and reputations, and build capacities, all outcomes that continued in later events like Sbagha Bagha. The organization also popularized its own beliefs about meritocratic competition, freedom of expression, and professionalization.

FAKE MARKETS AND REAL COMMODITIES

The day after Sbagha Bagha's closing battle in 2018, I met Hicham Bahou for coffee at Boultek. Le Tremplin, EAC-L'Boulevard's original program, had met goals far beyond its original purpose. In their first year, Bahou and Merhari told a journalist they hoped their fledgling competition would inspire state support for "young artists" (Dades 1999 quoted in Callen 2006: 125–26). Nearly twenty years later, Hicham noted that when the national Jil Mawazine competition ended in 2014, people expected him to be pleased because state-sponsored competitions had "stolen" their format. But they were wrong, said Bahou—it was good for the musicians. Plus, there was nothing to steal. "That's not our idea. It's just a competition," he remarked to me. "It's no one's idea" (Casablanca, July 2, 2018).

As we talked, he took a call from WeCasablanca, a city-run event-planning agency. Earlier that year, the agency had asked to partner with L'Boulevard on their own mural project around el-Hank, an impoverished coastal neighborhood named for the lighthouse at its center. According to Hicham, L'Boulevard agreed to help find walls to paint and artists to invite. They also suggested adopting other aspects of the Sbagha Bagha program—spending weeks, not days, in the neighborhood; inviting young people to watch artists work and to join workshops with muralists; ensuring that residents felt the art was for them as much as for others. In the end, the city agency invited four or five artists to spend a week painting murals, then left the neighborhood. Now, they were ready to announce the completion of the murals and wanted Hicham's assistance with outreach. "The murals were finished two months ago . . . and now they will invite people to tour them next week?" related Hicham after his call, eyes narrowed in exasperation. WeCasablanca had benefited from L'Boulevard's unpaid legwork and expertise but ignored the values behind their work.

The success of Tremplin inspired regional and local competitions across the country. The state has acted both within and parallel to this tradition of musician-organized competitions. Between 2006 and 2015, the nonprofit association Maroc Cultures held a tournament-style popular music competition known as Jil Mawazine (“Mawazine Generation”) alongside the international Mawazine festival. Jil Mawazine was the largest and most influential popular music competition to receive state funding during that period.¹³ Like Tremplin, it was open to applicants from across the country. With greater resources, however, Jil Mawazine created a multilevel live application process in which applicants performed at five regional competitions before the finalists competed in Rabat. For over a decade, through Jil Mawazine and similar regional competitions, the state both underwrote the emerging popular music market and played a defining role in what musicians interested in these competitions wrote, rehearsed, released, and performed.

While the competition created value for the Moroccan state by attracting favorable media coverage, for most winners Jil Mawazine failed to make the signal contribution it advertised: to lead to a viable next stage in one’s professional career, ideally via exposure to international markets. The market Jil Mawazine and similar state-funded competitions created was “fake,” in that it promoted ways of composing music, performing, and promoting that were driven by competition rules instead of by listeners’ or artists’ preferences. Yet winners became symbols of the government’s preferred narrative of the country and its citizens, a commoditization that simultaneously exoticized winning artists and tamed their appeal to national and international consumers.

Jil Mawazine consistently reaffirmed the state’s vision of itself as the ultimate arbiter of opportunities for Moroccan youths. Statements from Maroc Cultures often assumed or asserted the musical, technical, and cultural underdevelopment of the competitors. In 2007, then-president of the festival Abdeljalil Lahjomri described the competition’s goal as “to push [young artists] toward quality and to impose upon them certain professional requirements [*exigence professionnelle*]” (Chabaa 2007). The competition’s head judge, musicologist Ahmed Aydoun, frequently cited “the opportunity to play . . . in professional conditions” as important to uncovering talented musicians (Harmach 2008). Ten years later, looking back at Jil Mawazine, the festival’s official press booklet characterized exposure as support: “As a concrete aid to launching their careers, the winners were offered the opportunity to play during the festival” (Maroc Cultures 2017: 13). The 2017 edition continued to imply that Moroccan acts needed the increased exposure the festival could provide. Moroccan musicians’ stages “offer[ed] conditions equivalent to the stages reserved for international stars. During the nine days of the festival, Moroccan groups and singers also benefit from collaboration with . . . true event professionals at every level: technicians, logistics, communications, etc.” (Maroc Cultures 2017: 16). During the years Jil Mawazine ran, in order for competitors to

enjoy the benefits advertised by the festival, they had to meet vague but exacting standards for how to represent Moroccanness in sound.

The competition changed in many ways over its nine years, but general outlines were maintained. Musicians competed in several “Western” genres, including hip hop, rock, fusion, and electronica. Competitors submitted an application described as imitating a professional dossier, including a CV, photos, a press blurb describing their biography and musical style, and two recordings on CD or cassette.

During the live competitions, each act played two to four songs. A multi-judge panel assessed and ranked each act. A second round was held in each city approximately one month later, and from there, one ensemble in each genre of music was chosen to compete at the national finals in Rabat. Winning ensembles usually performed the following year at the Mawazine festival’s stage on the beach at Salé.

Over the years, Jil Mawazine winners were rewarded with forms of professionalization in various forms and amounts. The first year’s awardees received new instruments and “the possibility of being produced” (Chabaa 2006). In later years, advertised awards included a three- to five-year contract with Maroc Cultures, a professionally recorded and promoted debut album, and a music video to be played on national TV (Jadraoui 2009; Bouithy 2010; *Libération* 2010).

By the time journalist and musician Jihane Boughrine published her inquiry into Jil Mawazine in 2014, the advertised prize had expanded to “a management contract of five years”; musical and technical training; recording, producing, and promoting an album with professional staff; and the expectation that each winner would perform during the Mawazine festival in 2014 and during the next competition in 2015 (Boughrine 2014). Regardless of their performance history, winners were amateurs in the sense that they had not released a full-length album.

In practice, awards usually included time in a professional studio with a producer and sound engineer, the opportunity to produce a music video, and promotional placements on state-sponsored TV and radio. Execution of these awards varied widely. In at least one year, King Mohamed VI gifted personal funds to winners, solidifying the appearance of unified monarchical and governmental support for “Western” genres (Ghayet 2008).

Musicians who matched the competition’s preferences, often by returning with refined entries every year, could move to finalist and eventually winner status. In 2010, I met with the members of Hakmin (“rulers” or “wise ones”), who had won the second Jil Mawazine competition in the hip hop category in 2007. Their beatmaker and vocalist, Rachid, invited me to his family apartment in Meknes. We said hello to his mother in the spacious living room before he showed me the group’s studio—his emptied bedroom *armoire*, lined with blankets and outfitted with a mic and a plastic-covered window cut into the side. From his desk next to the *armoire*, Rachid could see the occupant of the recording booth simply by

glancing to his left. Two other group members perched around the tiny room as we talked.

At the time, the group was writing songs for their projected second album. During our conversation, they told me the group formed in 2006 and entered the first Jil Mawazine competition that year. Disqualified because the youngest member was not yet fifteen, they entered again in 2007. Their second try won praise from judges and press for including indices of Moroccan genres in their performances. Rachid described the group to me as “rap *en fusion*,” noting that they adopted this term after a journalist applied it to them in 2006. “Rap was waiting for this concept,” said Rachid, as he played fragments from their 2009 album, *Besm Allah* (In the Name of God), on his MIDI keyboard. “Our development at Mawazine took us to a professional level” (interview, March 17, 2010). With their mix of sung harmonies, ragga-inspired chanting, rapped verses, and melodies that recalled *malhun*, ‘Aissawa, and Gnawa repertoires, Hakmin understood themselves as expressing national pride in a fresh, innovative way.

By the time they won in 2007, Hakmin was already part of a discourse that rewarded the transformation of select Moroccan genres into forms of recontextualized heritage.¹⁴ The first Jil Mawazine winners, a boy-band-inspired group named Tiraline, combined tightly choreographed dance moves with rapped verses and sung references to *‘aita*, traditional song whose transformation from a controversial, if beloved, genre to national folkloric asset had begun only in the 1990s (Kapchan 1996: 209). In the years following their wins, both groups’ rare performances were linked to the state or non-Moroccan state entities like the US Embassy.¹⁵ In 2010, I attended Hakmin performances like the closing concert for L’Université de l’Été (the Summer University), sponsored by the ministry of foreign affairs, in which college students with Moroccan heritage spent two weeks in Morocco.

Jil Mawazine produced a stable of ensembles whose repertoire consistently recalled genres already considered beloved folklore and whose opportunities rarely went beyond concerts at state-sponsored regional festivals. Competition winners were also unable to effectively contest any breach of their planned awards or contract by Maroc Cultures. By 2008, Hakmin were promoting an upcoming tour “in Morocco and abroad” in support of their album.¹⁶ To my knowledge, the album was released and promoted through a music video produced as a result of their award, but no tour occurred.

The choices of Tiraline and Hakmin set a precedent that would recur in 2010 and 2011, when the solo singer/emcee AZ Flow and the group Rwapa Crew, both of whom had competed multiple times, won using similar tactics (Salois forthcoming). In between, Morocco’s first all-woman hip hop group, Tigresse Flow, won their category in 2008. The song that received the most attention did not feature musical indices of Moroccanness, but instead celebrated their identities as Moroccan women in their lyrics.

The 2008 and 2009 winners' awards included the recording and promotion of a full-length LP (Harmach 2009). According to Soultana, who launched her solo career in 2009, Maroc Cultures declined to produce Tigresse Flow's album despite doing so for the all-male ensembles who won the rock and fusion categories that year. Since it was widely assumed that young women musicians would stop performing once married, Soultana surmised that the festival team thought they were a poor investment (Salois 2014). However, the appearance of an all-female hip hop group enabled much positive coverage of Morocco in 2008 and 2009 (e.g., Pfiefer 2009; Raiss 2009).¹⁷

In practice, the Jil Mawazine competition effectively underdeveloped its musicians and potential national market in several ways. First, the competition's disproportionate impact on the otherwise self-organized hip hop network provoked the formation of groups whose central goal was winning competitions and who disbanded after that goal was met or when they gave up trying. Though some of the artists I met during this period saw little distinction between competing at Tremplin, Jil Mawazine, or other festivals, the state's resources, reach, and narratives set expectations and shaped the conditions of possibility for performing opportunities in a way no other institution could do.

Jil Mawazine also incentivized musicians to adopt certain musical and textual choices by selecting musicians who chose options like these, year after year, in a program explicitly advertised as identifying musicians ready for professional careers. Cumulatively, the competition communicated that the state supported a narrow range of styles or approaches to each genre. More importantly, it communicated that the judges and organizers of Jil Mawazine could only imagine music that essentialized Moroccan identity within the framework of transnationally popular "Western" genres as internationally competitive. While for many musicians this was irrelevant, the significant number of repeat competitors suggests that for some, at least, the market vision Jil Mawazine advertised was strongly attractive.

Though I cannot confirm this, the competition's preferences may have made a bigger impact on those without a deep network of fellow practitioners or access to a wide variety of international media. In the small mid-Atlas town of Ifrane, regional competitions backed by both governmental and corporate sponsors help young hip hop artists legitimate their practice to their skeptical parents (Seilstad and Essiffi 2015: 82). Of the winners in Jil Mawazine's first six years, only the two from Casablanca—Tigresse Flow (2008) and Dirtyfaces (2009)—performed tracks without explicit musical markers of Moroccaness. The other four were from smaller towns in the greater Casablanca region (Tiraline and AZ Flow), from Meknes (Hakmin), or from Fes (Rwapa Crew), none of whom had a community of hip hop practitioners of the size, depth, or resources of Casablanca.¹⁸

Finally, once a musician or group won the competition, Maroc Cultures maintained a high level of control over musicians' sounds and winners' postcompetition performances. This control intensified in 2008 or 2009, when musicians were

required by contract to perform only at the invitation of Maroc Cultures for three to five years after their win. Regardless of gender, the market that Jil Mawazine constructed for its winners in the hip hop category offered few—or in Tigresse Flow's case, no—stepping stones to opportunities outside of state-sponsored events.¹⁹

During its nearly ten-year run, Jil Mawazine had a far-reaching impact on how career-minded musicians in Morocco's hip hop, rock, and fusion networks thought about their work. In a fast-moving stylistic environment in which most competitors were in their late teens to late twenties, and in which competitions were difficult and expensive to run, its state backing and seemingly unlimited budget made Jil Mawazine appear especially stable. Its organization and the preferences of its judges profoundly shaped popular musics throughout its tenure, making it an excellent site to explore how hip hop artists understood the state's role in the genre and its market.

In the introduction, I noted that the Mawazine festival incurs criticism from a wide range of voices on both moral and financial grounds. Hip hop artists of my acquaintance frequently added that the festival underpaid Moroccan artists relative to those from Europe, the United States, or the Middle East. Jil Mawazine's effects on the professional horizons of hip hop artists during the 2000s and 2010s became another way that, through state-funded and state-aligned projects, the government maintained the underdevelopment of youth culture while claiming to support its eventual transformation.

Throughout the 2000s, the large number of small, independently organized competitions inspired by the Tremplin model—as well as Tremplin itself—offered ways for local musicians to build working relationships with each other and to practice solidarity across difference and despite personal and professional jealousies. The smallest competitions gathered and activated local networks by cobbling together borrowed, rented, and volunteered equipment, spaces, and labor. In a very real sense, the awards offered by these competitions enhanced this effect since they were usually small amounts of money paid for out of the competitors' entry fees.

In contrast, the small number of hip hop musicians who earned the state's overt approval by winning a festival competition, of which Jil Mawazine was the largest, could count on being paid for a handful of performances every year for a few years. But of the hip hop musicians who won the first six years of Jil Mawazine, only Soultana was able to continue performing at the national level after this relationship ended, albeit at an attenuated pace.²⁰ Winners rarely returned, or were invited to return, to stages they might have played pre-award; as Hicham Bahou told me, these artists might reasonably see themselves as having outgrown all but the biggest national stages (July 2, 2018).

Despite this, aspiring musicians continued to hope that national-level performances live, on TV, or on the radio would offer wealth as well as convertible prestige. While some state-sponsored competitions attract amateurs from their

specific region, the largest have the budget and infrastructure to reach beyond the major cities, drawing young musicians from the largely rural south and east. Their status as government-funded entities with access to national media outlets also adds legitimacy to the idea that winning ensures entry into a national or even international market. While I cannot say what effects the lower levels of the Jil Mawazine tournament may have had on participants who did not ascend to the final round, I suggest its advertised prizes made striving to appear successful all the more important for the awardees. The way the state disburses funding, including occasional high-profile gifts from King Mohamed VI, extracts value from youth cultures by creating a sense of competition spurred by scarcity rather than solidarity.

National competitions like Jil Mawazine, and today's competitions attached to regional festivals, are often described by Moroccan theorists and others as a tool to police popular musicians and hip hop artists in particular. Early in the 2000s, Taieb Belghazi described the impacts of the Fes Festival of Sacred Music as the "festivalization" of that city. Instead of an opportunity to turn social relations upside down, as Turnerian theorizing emphasizes, this and other elite-led, state-sponsored festivals "[reproduce] the dominant[-]power political structures in Morocco" (Belghazi 2006: 97). Said Graiouid and Taieb Belghazi point out that the small and densely connected network that controls access to national platforms depends on royal patronage to do its work.²¹ This has "enhanced state dominance, 'naturalized' art's ties to the market, curbed the development of the public sphere, and accentuated forms of inequity among cultural workers" (2013: 264).

Aomar Boum holds that the state's actions have successfully co-opted some hip hop artists and events. Implying that state support invalidates artists' present or future critiques, he describes the King's 2008 gift to EAC-L'Boulvard as "soft surveillance" through which sponsorship "succeed[ed], if only partly, in turning protest music disseminated primarily through YouTube into a profitable industry and weakening rappers as a political force amidst the Arab uprisings" (2012a: 25). He suggests that "we can identify a number of artists who became close to political parties or state agencies while creating a false consciousness of state contestation. . . . The fragmentation of the industry of hip hop demonstrates the structural strength of the Moroccan system and its power to weaken these protests" (2012b: 6).

Boum's argument resonates with analyses of the Moroccan state's successful divide-and-rule strategies (e.g., Cavatorta 2007; Maghraoui 2020). However, to make this argument, Boum suggests that the development of a "profitable industry" will chill rappers' speech, and he asserts the existence of an industry in order to describe the state's disruption of it. In his first example, focusing on the king's gift alone obscures the long-term support the Boulevard Festival has enjoyed from the municipality of Casablanca, the ministry of culture, and from non-Moroccan state entities like the Institut Français and the US Embassy and instead posits a

clear line between a state of independence and one of corruption. It also avoids consideration of artists' and event organizers' possibilities and limitations. For example, for the state, the fact that the Boulevard Festival's founders literally could not refuse a gift from the monarch surely heightens the effectiveness of the donation. Yet in our conversation, Bahou chose to highlight how this helped his organization rather than constrained it. Precisely because it was described as an unsought "gift" in national media, EAC-L'Boulevard could disavow any alteration to its beliefs or commitments.

While it is beyond the scope of his argument, Boum also does not note that for EAC-L'Boulevard, DIY artistry and aesthetic diversity express a politics of freedom that aligns the organization with "Western" narratives about the affordances of art and civil society. Tremplin, Sbagha Bagha, and other events build spaces in which colleagues' desires to learn and to experiment are seen as natural. "The objective of Boulevard has never been to organize a simple music festival for three or four days each year, but to continually . . . defend a principle: the freedom of expression," claimed EAC-L'Boulevard President Braham Bihi in the pages of the organization's annual journal, *L'Kounache* (The Notebook). Bihi cites article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, noting that "access to playing an musical instrument is considered an intrinsic right of mankind" (Bihi 2009: 18). In the context of EAC-L'Boulevard's ideologies and objectives, the King's 2008 gift could be—and has been—read as support for cultural "westernization," consistent with the state's goal of promoting youth cultures post-2003 while simultaneously cultivating loyalty to the monarchy.

Academics' responses to state power in the cultural field, and its expression in festivals, frames the intertwined nature of the monarchy, the state, and the country's primary economic actors in ways that legibly intervene in existing social science discourses. To do this, scholars paradoxically both underplay and overplay the historic and pervasive power of the Makhzen. On the one hand, each framework conforms to unexamined expectations to separate states and markets analytically. This minimizes the power the state wields through its imbrication into all parts of the supposedly postprivatization economy. On the other hand, each framework starts by imagining a state that is not only unitary but successful at controlling citizens through surveillance, patronage, or the threat of reprisals. While the state certainly does deploy these tactics, such analyses do not include the ways that the state undermines its own control by appearing fragmented, contradictory, or simply ineffectual. Nor do they leave room to think through the roles of citizens who are neither co-opted nor militantly resistant. Further, describing the state as a singular, canny actor in this way takes for granted the effect that the monarchy and the Makhzen seek to perpetuate.

While scholars have described hip hop practitioners' interactions with state-sponsored and state-aligned projects as an inevitable process of co-optation, a more capacious question is how state sponsorship furthers—rather than

inspires—citizens’ complicity. How do we account for the fact that EAC-L’Boulvard accepted funding from Casablanca and various postcolonial states for over fifteen years, yet there was no widespread discussion of their “independent” status until they received a gift from King Mohamed VI?²² How can we account for the motivations of amateur hip hop groups like Hakmin, who originated with the goal of competing in *Jil Mawazine* and defined themselves through the styles its judges found most attractive? These are questions that a diagnosis of co-optation does not seek to answer, precisely because the diagnosis imagines prior separation from the state and its ideologies. Yet many of these actors were not outside those ideologies in the first place.

Pervasive yet insufficient state funding contributes to a lack of genuinely private funding options. Moreover, these forms of funding set expectations for what is to be supported, so that corporations without financial ties to the state might be less likely to fund activities without direct or indirect seals of approval. Further, *Jil Mawazine* and similar regional competitions successfully presented themselves as benefactors to Moroccan youths, appearing to cultivate a national audience for Moroccan performers in “Western” genres by offering access to platforms that could be reached in no other way. Yet they simultaneously appealed to existing desires for transnational mobility and recognition. Such state-funded competitions thus represented most of the avenues of ambition a young artist might reasonably imagine.

In both financial and discursive ways, then, state sponsorship makes it more difficult to imagine oneself outside of the current cultural field. Even an entrepreneur like Khalid, the Block Dix organizer who counsels his mentees to seek multiple ways of reaching international listeners, encounters a gray area between “post the music on YouTube” and “later we’ll find some way to sell it.” The premise of *Jil Mawazine*, and of more recent state-funded initiatives, seems to fill that gap by positing an audience for those whose music conforms to the state’s long-term vision of saleable Moroccan culture.

The environment I have described here renders complicity with the state’s norms, goals, and practices nearly impossible to avoid as musicians reach beyond their immediate neighborhoods. The state’s successful strategy of inserting support into developing realms of the musical market has continued into the present, with the emergence of state-supported recording studios like Studio Hiba and events like Visa for Music, a WOMEX-like annual showcase sponsored in part by the ministry of culture. In these ways, and in addition to older forms of support, musicians from across the socioeconomic spectrum find that state funding is implicated in the structures that best meet their needs.

While I have attempted to show how unavoidable state interventions have been, it is equally important to consider how complicity works differently across diverse levels of income, wealth, education, or social capital. While L-Tzack, for example, argues for the state’s responsibilities to its citizens precisely because of his

experience of the state's repressive powers, those with greater affluence find that state-sponsored interventions constrain and benefit them in more subtle ways. The women of Tigresse Flow, all of whom were young, unmarried, and from working-class neighborhoods at the time of their 2008 Jil Mawazine win, had few options when they were denied their award except to leverage the short-term notoriety of being females in the public eye to complain to the press. Even for internationally famous EAC-L'Boulvart, simply maintaining core events still requires financial support from multiple levels of the state, constraining the way the organization can act. "We are like the goldfish—[every year] we forget all the last years and we return with a smile," Bahou joked to me about EAC-L'Boulvart's municipal sources of funding (July 2, 2018). Across socioeconomic differences, actors were highly aware of both the limitations and affordances of state support, even if they were unsure of which agencies contributed what amounts. Entering a market for performances, images, or reputations required understanding the influences at work or, equally importantly, those perceived to be at work. In turn, responding in ways that asserted one's values—regardless of one's field of choices and eventual actions—was critical to maintaining one's personal and professional connections, and to potential future collaborations.

CONCLUSION: IMAGINING MOBILITIES, IMAGINING FUTURES

Early in the afternoon of Sbagha Bagha, before the deejays had finished setting up, MC Dalim and I chatted about his background. Dalim was a longtime mentor at Block Dix. He earned a degree in African American studies while perfecting his craft as a rapper, he told me, writing a thesis on how the Harlem Renaissance influenced Malcolm X, Louis Farrakhan, and Martin Luther King Jr.

We found a freshly painted wall for a backdrop, and I asked him the same question I would ask "elders" all day: What advice would you give your younger self?²³ Dalim could sum it up in a single word. "Study!" he urged.

"Study, study, study well," he insisted. "Why? Not to work. To toughen yourself [*bash tw3ir rassik*]."

"But you already have your degree," I responded.

"Even though I have studied up to a certain level, you have to study to the next level," he said to his hypothetical teenage self. "If you study, you won't be afraid. You'll understand things I don't know." You have to enlighten yourself if you want to enlighten others, he stressed. Dalim concluded by opening up his remarks to the present. "If we want society to go forward, people have to become a little more *intellectual*," he said, using the English term.

Later that day, I watched Dalim coach his young mentees during the open mic. I watched them pour energy into their performance personae, lifting their chins, straightening their shoulders, angling their elbows sharply outward as they stepped



FIGURE 5. MC Dalim during an interview with the author, Casablanca, 2018. Photo by author.

out from behind the deejays. At the edge of the stage, Dalim quietly checked in with each performer before and after their set, offering praise, feedback, or just a clap on the shoulder.

Perhaps because I asked him to give advice, Dalim's remarks were normative rather than specific. He referenced several values I understand as widely shared among first-generation Moroccan hip hop artists. One is a belief in education as

good for the self. Another is a belief that the right kind of person, with the right kind of mentality, is good for society and the nation. Instead of being afraid of what you don't know, you'll have control over your own self (*rassik*), allowing you to contribute to society instead of being swept along with it or held back by it. As a mentor, Dalim puts these beliefs into action, encouraging others to take charge of their own learning within hip hop culture and supporting institutions in which young emcees could grow.

I was unable to return to Sbagha Bagha the following year. Watching for glimpses of it on social media, I noticed that Dalim had posted a reflection on his work to Instagram. Under shots of himself with young artists in the web radio tent, laughing with Khalid and that year's Block Dix performers, he had written in English: "ambition is doing what u love."²⁴

This chapter has positioned solidarity, expressed as deeply felt commitments to mentorship, fellowship, and artistic excellence, as vital to the competitive practices that form the social and musical foundation of Moroccan hip hop culture. In turn, those competitive practices make it possible for participants to think of their social and musical labor as interventions into different kinds of markets and to think of themselves as entrepreneurs in those markets. Competition is routinely understood as core to neoliberal subjectivation, as the primary way one interacts in a world made up of increasingly intimate cost-benefit analyses (e.g., Feher 2009; Read 2009). Yet solidarity is equally necessary to our picture of neoliberal subjects precisely because it helps sustain that competition. It offers competitors opportunities to feel morally upright, emotionally fulfilled, and socially connected even while they live with or embrace a zero-sum approach to both material and immaterial questions. These sentiments and sensations continue to affect practitioners when competition is conducted against physically distant, invisible, or unknown competitors, or even—perhaps especially—against oneself.

Most of my interlocutors embraced the informality and precarity of their market even as they noted its shortcomings and worked, when they had the means, to reform it. They also enjoyed formal and informal competitions as important and common sociomusical events. And critically, my interlocutors treated and continue to treat competitions as a form of care for oneself and one's community. Caring labor, differentiated by socioeconomic status and by gender expression, often took the form of mentoring across artistic generations.

Likewise, self-care often took the form of preparing oneself for informal and formal competition. Striving in competitions and markets brought a sense of pride for both "winners" and "losers," for both individuals and their communities. L-Tzack sounded a note of wonder when he reflected on how much he had learned through his decades-long love of hip hop culture: "I can make beats, I can record, I can mix it and master it. Me. I can do so much" (interview, Fes, January 2010).

When Moroccan b-boy Fouad Ambelj, known as Lil Zoo, became the world champion of Red Bull's BC One competition, his former teacher Yoriyas posted

a joyful tribute on Facebook in October 2018. “10 years ago at mid of night I was practicing alone at a park of street of Casablanca 04 district, a 12 years kid was watching me dancing, for few min i asked him: yo kid!!! it’s too late what you are doing here,” he began.

After 4 years I play against this kid in final of Morocco championship and I lose (I was happy to lose even i did my best to win) . . . Yesterday I was drinking a tea and watching a live of the number one world championship of breakdance called @ redbullbcone [. . .] in the end a great dancer won it and he become the new world champion this guy is the same kid I meet 10 years ago his name Foad we call him Lilzoo!!! Congratulation bro, thanks for the inspiration!!!

Competitions act simultaneously as markets for styles and skills, movements toward “development” and professionalization, expressions of care for others, and allegiance to something bigger than oneself. Markets were and are seen as something that could free practitioners from inheritances, expectations, or stagnations they lived with, even as informal versions could heighten old inequities or impose new ones.

By demonstrating the degree to which the state intervened in the growth of hip hop music-making over the 2000s, but also the ways in which practitioners themselves shaped that growth, I argue that practitioners’ identities as market actors can be read as both an acceptance of and a solution to forms of domination under Moroccan neoliberalism. As David Scott describes this dynamic, recalling Talal Asad and Stanley Diamond, market aspirants are “coercively obliged to render themselves its objects and its agents” (2004: 9).

My interlocutors conceived of markets as enabling their desired futures. In both material markets for music and intangible markets for personal values, immediate benefits were as or even less important than the speculative value—the potential future value—of market participation. This chapter has sought to show how these material and intangible markets are inseparable from one another, and how the value “discovered” by them is oriented toward the future, whether the participant imagined sales, physical mobility, or simply a time and place in which they felt supported, proud, and accomplished.

The solidarity I have described throughout this chapter does not necessarily extend to musicians’ political beliefs. However, it does permit a shared calculus of what success might look like. For many of my interlocutors, regardless of their family’s income, mobility is the most valued “thing” one can obtain from one’s market actions. Geographic, social, or financial mobility amounts to a potential for all other kinds of capital and, in turn, other futures. Moulay Driss El Maarouf summarizes the ever-present belief in this potential, located within the mobility of people and various forms of capital: “The west, as an idea traded across local markets through music and fashion, might represent precious opportunities for local cultural economy to thrive and become richer with time” (2014: 263).

Geographic mobility in particular allows a person to circulate in markets elsewhere, markets for labor, music, or otherness imagined to be better—bigger, busier, more lucrative. Thus, solidarity can also take the form of feedback on practices of differentiation as individual tactics for mobility, from one tactician to another. When the judges of *Sbagha Bagha* described MEVOK's entry as insufficiently canonical, or when MC Dalim argued that young artists must study to "move society forward," both were encouraging individualization within community norms. Both spent energy on a project in which individuals might contribute to a better future, but they did so by supporting competition against others or oneself.

David Graeber returns to the perennial question of whether "value" and "values" are the same (2001: 78). My contention is that among my interlocutors, the latter is now often understood in terms of the former—not as an amount of currency, but in conceiving of personal values as part of one's market value alongside one's education, skills, or social connections. As the next chapters elaborate, many of my interlocutors find themselves in markets that circulate people who are seen to embody valued qualities like resourcefulness, determination, or resilience. The emphases on personal responsibility and community, meritocracy and solidarity, that appear throughout this book underpin people's desires to form markets. They also make them marketable persons in a community that defines itself partly through its mentality about the future. The markets my interlocutors sought to build did not always circulate money, but they did have to hold the possibility of change.