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For the Best of All Listeners

American Islamic Hip Hop as Reminder

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Abstract

This article analyzes lyrics of American Islamic hip hop songs that address views of Muslims as threats to American society as well as negative views of Muslim women. As an alternative to these views, hip hop artists remind Muslim listeners of the Qur'anic principle that they are the best of all peoples, so listeners will define themselves according to this principle and therefore persevere in Islamic faith. Musicological analysis follows this lyrical analysis, revealing a shared temporal structure both lyrically and musically, which strengthens these songs' lyrical reminder.

Introduction

[1] Seeking to provide deeper insight into Black experience in America, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903, a time of legalized racial segregation. According to Du Bois, life as an African American involved existential confusion, since an African American was born into

a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body (364-65).

Du Bois presented this double consciousness as a burden for Blacks, as their identities were torn asunder and dictated to them by Whites who misunderstood them. Furthermore, this burden was compounded with dehumanizing prejudice and practices that demoralized Blacks. Du Bois identifies “personal disrespect and mockery, the ridicule and systematic humiliation, the distortion of fact and wanton license of fancy” (369) that African Americans encountered regularly from Whites in their midst.

[2] Moving one century later, strong connections can be made between early twentieth century Black experience and that of contemporary Muslim Americans, especially since the events of September 11, 2001. Statistically, negative effects upon Muslim Americans following September 11 are easily observable. The Council for American Islamic Relations received over 1,700 complaints of hate crimes and harassment during the two months after September 11, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Hate Crimes Unit recorded a rise in attacks on Muslims, from 28 in 2000 to 481 in 2001. According to a *USA Today*/Gallup Poll five years afterwards, 39 percent of Americans acknowledged personal prejudice against Muslims and believed that all Muslims, even American citizens, should carry special identification. Moreover, under the provisions of the new USA Patriot Act, 1,182 Muslims and Arabs were arrested by November 5, 2001, according to figures released by the U.S. Justice Department.

[3] Beyond these statistics, many Muslims in post-September 11 America have dealt with internal struggles which harken back to Du Bois’s description of African Americans in the early twentieth century. Reflecting Du Bois’s claim that upon viewing Blacks, Whites commonly thought to themselves, “How does it feel to be a problem?” (363), Moustafa Bayoumi writes that Arabs and Muslim Americans are viewed as “the new ‘problem’ of American society” (2). Certainly parallels between Du Boisian analysis and contemporary Muslim experience must not be taken too far. It is the desire neither of Bayoumi nor myself to promote the idea that Muslim Americans are inevitably torn apart by a feeling of “two-ness” as Muslims and Americans, since this generalization certainly does not apply to all Muslim Americans, and it could easily be tied to an “Islam vs. the West” bifurcation that many Muslim Americans and scholars of American Islam have worked so hard to debunk. However, I recognize that a significant connection may exist between the experience of twenty-first century Muslim Americans and Du Bois’s conception of Blacks viewing themselves through the eyes of Whites. Contemporary Muslim Americans may view themselves in accordance with negative stereotypes promoted by non-Muslim Americans, such as the belief that Muslims are dangerous threats to American society.

[4] While the extent to which this occurs is debatable, it is significant that some Muslims in the United States have manifested deep concern about Muslim Americans viewing themselves through the eyes of non-Muslims and, as a result, experiencing discouragement and failing to persevere in Islamic faith. Among these concerned Muslims are American Islamic hip hop artists, many of whom present Muslim Americans as embattled by negative stereotypes. For these artists, Muslim Americans must define themselves not in accordance with these stereotypes but rather in a manner shaped by Islamic principles. The viewpoint of these artists reflects the anthropological insights of Paul Ricoeur, who argues that humans are free, possessing agency for self-definition, but also finite, as self-definition never occurs by an isolated self but by a self influenced by received linguistic material. According to

Ricoeur, a self is simultaneously active and passive, projecting oneself towards possible ways of being in the world, but only through its interaction with linguistic material. American Islamic hip hop artists are concerned that Muslim American self-definition is commonly shaped by linguistic material provided by non-Muslim Americans; they desire instead that Muslim American self-definition be molded by linguistic material rooted in Islamic tradition, so that these Muslims do not succumb to discouragement, no longer persevering in Islamic belief and practice.

[5] To further conceptualize what these hip hop artists seek to accomplish, I turn to a central theme in Islamic tradition, asserting that they *remind* listeners of linguistic material grounded in Islamic discourse. The Arabic DH-K-R root, meaning “to remember” or “to remind,” has played a key role in various articulations of Islamic belief and practice (for examples, see Waugh: 17-18). The Qur’an uses this root to present prophets and itself as reminders and to call believers to help fellow Muslims remember core Islamic ideas, since humans are prone to forgetfulness, in part because Satan seeks to pull believers away from the straight path revealed by God. For American Islamic hip hop artists, amidst definitions of Muslim existence offered by non-Muslims in post-September 11 America, Muslims may be especially prone to forget who they are according to Islamic discourse, and so constant reminder is needed. One common reminder offered by these artists involves the Qur’anic principle that Muslims are the best of all peoples. Following a brief discussion of background information about American Islamic hip hop, I will explore lyrics to uncover ways in which this Qur’anic principle is communicated. Lyrical analysis alone, however, is insufficient, since unlike other forms of Islamic discourse such as sermons or written literature, hip hop must be accounted for as a form of music. Therefore, musicological analysis will follow the lyrical analysis. Together these will reveal a shared temporal structure both lyrically and musically, which strengthens the lyrical reminder to listeners that they are the best of all peoples.

American Islamic Hip Hop: Background Information

[6] Hip hop originated in New York’s South Bronx in the 1970s, a setting marked by industrial decline and social turmoil. While the term “hip hop” can refer to a multifaceted cultural response to this setting, including not only a genre of music but also a style of dress, a unique vocabulary, graffiti art, and break dancing, “hip hop” in this article refers only to the musical genre, also known as “rap.” Almost from its beginnings, this form of music was connected to the Islamic tradition due to its associations with the Nation of Islam and the Nation of Gods and Earths (or the Five Percent Nation). Numerous hip hop artists, including the widely popular Public Enemy, have been adherents of the Nation of Islam and have featured Nation of Islam themes in their songs, for example calling for Black separation rather than integration or honoring Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan. Similarly, many hip hop artists such as Big Daddy Kane, Brand Nubian, and the Wu-Tang Clan have been part of the Nation of Gods and Earths, and phrases originating from Five Percent Nation theology, including “droppin’ science,” “sup G,” and “let me break it down for ya,” have become commonplace in hip hop terminology (see further, Knight). Many Muslim Americans, however, place both the Nation of Islam and Nation of Gods and Earths outside the pale of Islamic orthodoxy, due among other reasons to the Nation of Islam teaching that God appeared on earth in the 1930s in the human form of Wallace Fard and to the Nation

of Gods and Earths belief that Black men collectively are God. While members of these groups have significantly shaped the hip hop world, my focus instead will be on Islamic hip hop artists who have followed neither movement and therefore may be classified as followers of “mainstream Islam.” I will narrow my focus further, considering that whereas some hip hop artists within mainstream Islam are known for secular pursuits in which Islamic belief and practice play little or no role in their songs’ lyrics, others have made their Islamic faith central. I will concentrate on the latter, and in doing so I adopt the following terminological distinction from Suad Abdul Khabeer:

I use the term Islamic rather than Muslim to distinguish a genre of hip hop music and culture created by American Muslims that seeks to comply with Islamic religious standards and practices whose current and primary audience is Muslims. For example, Islamic hip hop may restrict the types of musical instruments used, generally does not employ expletives and frequently refers to issues of doctrinal import (125-26).

Differentiated in this manner, songs I will analyze come from American *Islamic* instead of American *Muslim* hip hop artists.

[7] Brief profiles of American Islamic hip hop artists whose lyrics will be considered in this article can illuminate ways in which they desire to make Islamic faith central in their musical pursuits. Native Deen (the Arabic *deen* can be translated as “religion”) comprises three African Americans from the Washington D.C. area who aim to call listeners “to keep the faith, to live better lives, and to NOT succumb to the pressures and temptations of modern society” (MuslimHipHop.com). The best known of all American Islamic hip hop artists, Native Deen has performed their message of following Islam in all circumstances in over 60 cities in four continents. 3ILM (ILM stands for “Islamically Liberated Minds” but also refers to the Arabic *ilm*, meaning “knowledge”) is made up of five Arab Americans from the Tampa Bay area who claim to be “dedicated to unifying Muslim Minds for the sake of Allah, one song at a time” (MuslimHipHop.com). 3ILM donates 25 percent of their record profits to Islamic schools in the Tampa Bay area, similar to the commitment of MPAC (Muslim Produced Athletic Company) to assist Islamic schools in Chicago. MPAC includes four Arab Americans and two African Americans from Chicago, and their profile on MuslimHipHop.com highlights their religious observance as well as their belief that hip hop speaks powerfully to contemporary Muslim Americans, declaring that their music represents “a transition in history from conventional conservative means of expression to more powerful identity-forming methods of self-awareness.” Importantly, many American Islamic hip hop artists aspire not only to promote Islamic teaching but also to create high-quality hip hop music. New York-based Jabbar & Ali, for example, identify their “vision of making authentic and original music that sets them apart from the redundant artists and sounds so prevalent in Hip Hop today . . . Our intention is to bring back the days of hip hop, we’re coming with 360 degrees of rap, expect the unexpected” (MuslimHipHop.com). Furthermore, the Minneapolis duo The Faculty highlights another goal of many American Islamic hip hop artists, with their desire to identify and criticize examples of social injustice. MuslimHipHop.com identifies The Faculty as “a politically, socially, and morally conscious hip hop group” with “penetrating lyrics” that commonly expose wrongdoings committed against Muslims as well as by Muslims who engage in acts of violence.

[8] One particularly significant goal of many American Islamic hip hop artists involves building a more unified American Islam, especially one that transcends what in some cases has been a powerful divide between immigrant Muslims and African American Muslims. This divide results from multiple factors, chiefly the commonly stated African American Muslim concern that immigrants look down upon them as lacking authority in regard to Islamic belief and practice. Abdul Khabeer writes that African American Islamic hip hop artists perform “against the dominant narrative of the *immigrant* Muslim,” as they see “themselves as already American and demand that their experience is acknowledged in the discourse on Islam in America” (137). Rather than foregrounding their racial identity, however, some African American artists such as Native Deen emphasize that they belong to the *ummah*, the worldwide community of believers. Moreover, some prominent American Islamic hip hop groups are racially or ethnically diverse, such as the aforementioned MPAC as well as the Sons of Hagar, made up of two Arab Americans, one Irish American, and a Korean American. As Geneive Abdo comments about the Sons of Hagar, such groups manifest a cooperative effort among multiethnic Muslim Americans “to place their Muslim identity first” in order to construct a stronger, more cohesive American Islam (116).

[9] According to Abdul Khabeer, American Islamic hip hop artists “promote discourse and representations of whom they believe Muslims are, as well as who they should and can be” (125). While these artists appeal to Muslim audiences with their discourse and representations, they aim to reach non-Muslim listeners as well. The concept of *da’wa*, or spreading the Islamic message, holds great importance to many Islamic hip hop artists, in part due to a desire to attract non-Muslims to Islamic faith but also in order to change non-Muslims’ views of Islam and Muslims. Abdul Khabeer writes that “artists believe that through the proliferation and popularity of Islamically-themed hip hop, non-Muslims will begin to learn that Muslims are not the dangerous ‘other’; rather, that Muslims are people who share many of the same aspirations and fears as non-Muslims, particularly other Americans” (135). These artists battle negative stereotypes of Muslims in America not only to change the consciousness of Muslims in America but also of non-Muslims. Nonetheless, this article will focus on Muslim audiences, who according to these artists must view themselves as the best of all peoples.

Lyrical Analysis of American Islamic Hip Hop

[10] Seeking to remind listeners of key Islamic principles so that their self-definition is not shaped by stereotypes advanced by non-Muslim Americans, American Islamic hip hop artists want listeners to persevere in their faith amidst difficult circumstances, an idea that appears in numerous Qur’anic verses such as 2:153 (“O you who believe, seek courage in fortitude and prayer, for God is with those who are patient and persevere”; all Qur’anic translations from Ahmed Ali). This theme of perseverance is heard in many post-September 11 American Islamic hip hop songs, including those that decry crackdowns on Muslim civil liberties. Naeem Mohaiemen notes that whereas in the 1980s and 1990s Public Enemy responded to police brutality by rapping about “Driving While Black,” Islamic hip hop artists have recently highlighted the difficulty of “Flying While Brown” (332). Similarly, they have protested against, and called listeners to persevere amidst, government detention of

law-abiding Muslim Americans. For example, in “Still Strong,” Native Deen tells a story of an innocent Muslim taken from his home by government agents. The protagonist declares:

And they was asking me that and asking me this
Accusing me of being on somebody’s terrorist list
I had to resist, I want a lawyer’s all I would say
But they said that they would torture me all night and all day . . .
Osama Bin who, they want to say I support him
If I don’t give in, I’ll never see my family again
It’s been more than 10 months since they dragged me from home
4 hours questioning and 20 in my cell alone

As the song continues, we see the protagonist persevering in Islamic faith despite this abuse of civil liberties. Then shifting from first-person singular to describe the plight of the protagonist to first-person plural to speak for Muslim Americans in general, Native Deen proclaims in the refrain, “We’re not breaking, we’re still strong / No matter what they do we’re moving on.” Native Deen emphasizes in this song that Muslims should persevere because their difficulties are ultimately a test from God, consistent with a principle expressed in Qur’anic verses such as 2:155 (“Be sure We shall try you with something of fear and hunger and loss of wealth and life and the fruits [of your labour]; but give tidings of happiness to those who have patience”). The protagonist states, “Keep my head high, can’t no one take my pride / Nothing but a test from Him, we gotta take in stride.” Native Deen wants to remind listeners that according to Islamic belief, hardship that may appear to be caused solely by human wrongdoing may in fact be a temporary period of testing under the aegis of divine control.

[11] Other American Islamic hip hop songs feature this particular basis for calling listeners to persevere, but I will focus instead on another which artists draw upon more frequently, the principle that Muslims are the best of all peoples, which derives especially from Qur’an 3:110 (“Of all the communities raised among men you are the best, enjoining the good, forbidding the wrong, and believing in God.”). The implicit argument I will trace in various American Islamic hip hop songs is that by defining themselves as the best of all peoples, Muslim listeners can rise above viewing themselves according to stereotypes from non-Muslims and persevere in Islamic faith. In particular, I will explore this argument in songs that address a view of Muslims as threats to American society and songs that deal with negative conceptions of Muslim women.

Muslims as Threats to American Society

[12] Accounting for the prevalence of the view that Muslims threaten American society, hip hop artists often blame the American media due to its predilection for sensationalism and its tendency to advance stereotypes about Muslims. While some members of the American media have portrayed Muslims negatively for many decades, this has especially been the case since September 11, and Islamic hip hop artists see a need to speak against such media activity. According to these artists, the media promulgates the view that Muslims as a whole are prone to engage in violent actions against innocent Americans and that they want to transform America into an Islamic state. One goal of American Islamic hip hop artists is to present non-Muslim listeners with a version of Islam that sharply counteracts what is

commonly presented by the American media. Recognizing that the great majority of their audience comprises Muslim listeners, however, the more pressing goal of these artists is to help Muslims shape their self-definition through the principle that they are the best of all peoples instead of the view that they are unwanted threats to American society.

[13] Native Deen addresses media representation of Muslims in “Be At the Top,” declaring, “We all know the media ain’t doing us right.” Expanding on this claim, they sing:

How come every time I go and I flip on the news channel
I see these images of Muslims having crude manners
Angry men, holding guns and a few camels
Terrorist pumping fists with their rude banners
You get anxiety, from symbols of our piety
Cause they don’t show us Muslims who contribute to society
How come they don’t show us doing positive things
We get abused and harassed so many problems this brings.

In response to this disturbing media portrayal, Native Deen seeks to encourage listeners with the song’s refrain:

We gonna be at the top, *Inshallah* [God willing]
We’re the cream of the crop, *Inshallah*
We’re gonna rock till we drop, *Inshallah*
Cause believers never stop, *Mashallah* [God has willed it]
We are the people with the plan, *Inshallah*

For Native Deen, Muslims must not be defeated by discouragement; instead they must never stop in their faith, persevering through trials and recognizing that the omnipotent God has given them a plan which cannot be thwarted by events on earth. More importantly for this song, however, Muslims are to persevere knowing that they are “at the top” and “the cream of the crop,” i.e., the best of all peoples, placed by God in the United States for the benefit of those around them, a view that sharply opposes the mindset that Muslims threaten American society. This definition of Muslims as the best of all peoples also plays a major role in Native Deen’s “M-U-S-L-I-M.” Bemoaning that “Everywhere I see, even on TV, / People talking trash about the way I be,” Native Deen proclaims:

Don’t ever frown, or your head looking down,
If you read the Qur’an you’re the best in the town.
Y’all have doubt say – we have no clout
But within a few years see how we’ve come about.
We’re back on the scene, the number-one *deen*,
I’m proud to be down with the *Muslimmeen* [Muslims]!

Despite what they hear about themselves from the media or from the non-Muslim populace shaped by the media, Muslim Americans are exhorted to persevere amidst negative stereotypes, viewing themselves as the best of all peoples, members of the “number-one *deen*.”

[14] Moving from Native Deen to another prominent American Islamic hip hop group, 3ILM also reminds Muslim listeners that they need to persevere in their faith despite negative media portrayal in the song “Knowledge is Power.” 3ILM identifies specific members of the American media, singing:

Rush Limbaugh, Glen Beck, all they do is disrespect
Tryin to keep Islam in check, callin for a disinfect
Labelled a disease as if we got malaria
Spreadin like fleas all across America

In light of this situation, listeners are told throughout the song that “knowledge is power.” On one level, 3ILM wants non-Muslims to gain knowledge about Islam, which would empower them to see beyond what they encounter in the media, thereby stopping what these artists call the “bleed of Islamophobia.” At the same time, though, 3ILM intends to remind Muslims of this knowledge, so they might be empowered to persevere in their faith amidst media-promoted stereotypes. 3ILM declares in the refrain, “Look beyond what you can see, knowledge is power,” calling upon Muslim listeners to look past these stereotypes and instead look towards Islamic knowledge, which according to 3ILM is based on the revealed will of God and therefore provides Muslims with a position of epistemic superiority in relation to those who do not know God’s revealed will recorded in the Qur’an. Furthermore, Muslims are encouraged to view themselves as the best of all peoples not only because of this epistemic superiority but also because of their forebears’ scientific accomplishments. 3ILM proclaims, “Our fathers led the way with the astrolabe / Who you think led Columbus on that trip he made?” By suggesting that non-Muslim Europeans depended on Muslims in order to settle America, Muslims are again portrayed in a superior manner that sharply counteracts common American media presentations of Muslims.

[15] Like 3ILM, the Minneapolis-based duo The Faculty names a specific member of the American media in “Twisted.” They declare:

Hey, Bill O’Reilly, man, I’m talking to you
I’ve had it up to here with these neo-con fascists
All they want to do is bring drama like an actress
When will they stop with their underhand tactics

For The Faculty, Muslims must not be influenced by O’Reilly and others who define Muslims as threats to American society, a definition that crumbles amidst what they identify as the truth of Islam. The Faculty sings:

Fact is, truth got our back like a mattress
I wish I could debate O’Reilly on The Factor
Spin him out the No Spin Zone, he’s an actor

Given access to what The Faculty presents as divine truth, Muslims can persevere in a climate of anti-Muslim prejudice which is fueled by “an actor” performing before a misinformed audience. According to The Faculty, Muslim listeners should view themselves as the best of all peoples because they possess what might be called the “best of all knowledge,” God-given truth that “got our back like a mattress” against O’Reilly and others who misrepresent Islam. Similarly, in their song “Muslim American,” MPAC responds to

negative media representation of Muslim Americans by presenting Islam as a religion of truth, thereby placing Muslims in a position of epistemic superiority compared to those who do not know this truth. Certainly a portion of this song is directed towards non-Muslims, who are asked to “Take a step into the world of the American Muslim.” MPAC sings:

How would you deal with being labeled as evil
To such an extreme point
You’re no longer being labeled as people
These thoughts are lethal injections
Affecting cerebral connections, through media feeding projections

Other portions of this song, though, address Muslim listeners, who are reminded that “Islam’s a treasure, a religion based on truth.” Moreover, MPAC proclaims, “We need to stand and stop being viewed as children crawling,” maintaining that although Muslims have been granted a privileged position among Americans because of what MPAC describes as a treasure-like religion based on truth, Muslims frequently have not lived accordingly, succumbing to discouragement and failing to persevere in their Islamic faith due to negative stereotypes promulgated by the American media. MPAC seeks to change this trend by reminding Muslim listeners to shape their self-definition not by these stereotypes but by the Qur’anic principle that they are the best of all peoples.

[16] While my primary purpose in analyzing these songs’ lyrics is to highlight their implicit argument that by defining themselves as the best of all peoples, Muslim listeners can persevere in Islamic faith, it should at least be acknowledged that potentially deleterious results could emerge due to promoting this argument. In particular, negative consequences may arise from countering the superiority over Muslims assumed by many non-Muslims in the United States with a view that emphasizes the superiority of Muslims over non-Muslims. The subject position constructed in these songs may promote a separatist mindset that strongly challenges the desires of Muslim Americans who seek to avoid such an isolationist approach. Many Muslim Americans have made a conscious effort to integrate within the surrounding American society, reflecting the declaration from Feisal Abdul Rauf, a leader of a prominent mosque in New York, that the “crucial need of our day is to find ways to accelerate the process whereby American Muslims will be able to establish their Islamic identity not apart from or in spite of their American identity, but precisely in and through it” (221). Many Muslim Americans with this mindset believe that faithfulness to God requires that they attempt to make a positive impact upon American society, which cannot be done through an isolated existence; rather they must engage with American society for the sake of its reformation while maintaining their core Islamic beliefs and practices. Advocates of such selective engagement constitute one subgroup of Muslim Americans, one whose vision of Muslim existence in the United States differs greatly from that of Muslim Americans who endorse isolation. Insofar as American Islamic hip hop artists may contribute to an isolationist mindset, the aforementioned goal of many hip hop artists to build a more unified Islam may be undermined by strengthening the convictions of one subgroup of Muslim Americans over against another.

Negative Views of Muslim Women

[17] The next songs to be discussed also deal with negative stereotypes faced by Muslim Americans, but in this case I will focus on lyrics which particularly address Muslim women. Furthermore, while the hip hop artists under consideration may believe that the American media plays a role in the prevalence of negative stereotypes of Muslim women, they do not emphasize the media in these songs; rather attention falls directly on non-Muslim Americans in general and the way in which they view Muslim women. More specifically, these songs deal with negative views of Muslim women based on their manner of dress, which causes non-Muslims to make numerous claims about Muslim women such as their not being beautiful or not being able to think for themselves. In response to these understandings, artists present an alternative view featuring the principle of Muslims as the best of all peoples, or in this case the best of all women. These songs argue that amidst discriminatory, misinformed definitions of their existence, Muslim women can persevere in Islamic faith by remembering that they stand above non-Muslim women in America, especially because of their true beauty that transcends external appearance and because of their strong sense of purpose which results from their God-given role in advancing Islam in America. Hip hop artists want Muslim American women to define themselves as superior to non-Muslim women, who according to these artists are often mesmerized by a concept of beauty defined by external image rather than internal character and who frequently fail to find a meaningful sense of purpose in life. Importantly, though, this superiority is to shape Muslim women's self-definition not for the sake of arrogance but instead for the purpose of perseverance in Islamic faith.

[18] 3ILM addresses negative reactions that Muslim women receive due to their manner of dress in the song "Queen of the Land." They sing:

All some people wanna do is look, glare, and stare at you
Rude and not fair how dare they be telling you
To confess that you're oppressed and you're uneducated
Cuz they say the way you're dressed makes you unliberated . . .
Still they think that you're forced and you got no voice
They think you dressing in *hijab* [head covering] ain't your choice.

In light of these reactions, 3ILM advises, "Don't let them get the best of you and fall under pressure"; these artists hope to prevent Muslim American women from falling prey to discouragement and relinquishing Islamic beliefs and practices such as wearing *hijab*. In order to keep these consequences from occurring, 3ILM wants female listeners to view themselves as superior to non-Muslim women. Although they tell Muslim women that "your *hijab*, it looks elegant," 3ILM ultimately emphasizes the idea that internal character outweighs external appearance. A Muslim woman is "the queen of the land," representing and continuing Islamic faith in America. They tell their female listeners:

You rep for the deen
You never let social pressure get between
Your tightness with the Lord that's what I've seen

And furthermore, they declare:

You are the future mothers of the future generation
Hold the ax to break the barriers that Muslims keep facin
So sister sister you're the queen of the land

Contrary to women who are focused on external beauty at the expense of cultivating strong, beautiful inner character and who lack a meaningful purpose in life such as representing and continuing Islam in America, Muslim women are to view themselves as the best of all women in America.

[19] In "Queens of Islam," MPAC begins by stating, "We always doin it for the brothers, so for right here, we're gonna do it for the sisters." What they seek to do for their Muslim sisters is to encourage them to persevere in their faith, strengthened by the reminder that they are the best of all women. Like 3ILM, MPAC responds to negative views of Muslim women because of their manner of dress, desiring for female listeners not to be discouraged or feel shame in light of these views. MPAC proclaims:

I know it's tough for you, they always callin you names
But you the best women alive, and never feel ashamed . . .
Just because you dress different don't mean you gotta feel bad . . .
Don't think you're ugly rockin that Muslim attire
You look modest, queen-like, a type to keep a deen tight,
A treasure, a man should be lucky to have your pleasure

This song explicitly identifies Muslim women as the best of all women, calling them "the best women alive." According to MPAC, Muslim women surpass others by far in regard to purity and sense of purpose; they sing, "I hear you women are oppressed, what they talkin about / Check it, our sisters are secure, not walkin about naked." This security comes not only from modest dress that emphasizes internal qualities rather than external appearance but also from what MPAC identifies as Muslim women's God-given role as "queens," keeping the Islamic "deen tight" so that it can flourish in America despite difficulties faced by Muslim Americans.

[20] Jabbar & Ali present a similar argument in "1-800-Muslims," a song which is cast as a call-in show for Muslims dealing with problems endemic to twenty-first century America. The final portion of the song specifically addresses Muslim women, who according to Jabbar & Ali are viewed negatively because of their manner of dress. They declare:

Me as a guy don't know what you've been through
Men wanna talk even though you don't speak
And girls talk about you like you're walking the streets

The duo is concerned that this negative portrayal may promote discouragement among Muslim women, and so to foster perseverance amidst this discouragement, they advise:

Next time a chick asks why you wearing a sheet?
You reply in her face why you gotta look cheap?
Why you lookin all swollen like you got a disease?

Unlike these non-Muslim women, who dress provocatively and are later said to be "Sleepin around," Jabbar & Ali claim that Muslim women are "a gift from the Most High," focused

on internal character and devotion to God. For Jabbar & Ali, Muslim women are superior to non-Muslim women, many of whom are sexually promiscuous and obsessed with external appearance, lacking any deep, meaningful sense of purpose. Jabbar & Ali want female listeners to define themselves in accordance with this theme of superiority rather than common themes promoted by non-Muslims such as the beliefs that Muslim women lack beauty and lack the ability to think for themselves.

[21] Finally, another song by Native Deen, “Stand Alone,” contains a strong call for Muslim perseverance, reflected most clearly in the refrain:

I am not afraid to stand alone. If Allah is by my side.
I am not afraid to stand alone. Everything will be alright.
I am not afraid to stand alone. Gonna keep my head up high.

The song’s verses present multiple scenarios describing potential hindrances to persevering in Islamic faith, and two verses focus particularly on women’s experiences. First, listeners hear of a struggling single mother who interviews for a job she would love to have but is told, “You got the job, but you gotta lose the outfit,” presumably because a woman wearing hijab does not fit the company’s image of an educated, liberated woman. She responds by saying:

It’s a tough position that they put me in
Cause I’ve been struggling with my two children
But I’ll continue looking for a job again
My faith in my religion now will never bend

Her commitment to stand firm in her belief that God requires her to cover her head in public supersedes the benefits she would receive from taking the job. Native Deen presents her as an exemplar whose sense of purpose as a Muslim woman makes her stand out amongst Americans whose lives are commonly determined by the vagaries of circumstance. In another verse, Native Deen raps about adolescent Muslim women who are treated as inferior by non-Muslim peers due to their manner of dress. They declare:

Man, these sisters be resolute
Never stressed when the rest say they wasn’t cute
And they get the respect of the other youth
Come best with the dress yo and that’s the truth
These sisters are strong gonna hand it down

The trio admires the perseverance of these young Muslim women who are disparaged by peers for not conforming to cultural assumptions and standards about physical beauty. Not only is their persistence in faith admirable to Muslims, but it eventually garners respect from non-Muslim peers, furthering the cause of representing Islam to the American public. Again Native Deen offers a vision of a model Muslim woman, presented as superior to non-Muslim women because of her commitment to Islamic dress and because of her strong sense of purpose, which in this case involves a commitment to enabling non-Muslim Americans to gain a positive view of Islam. Native Deen wants female listeners to emulate these women whom they portray as the best of all women, so listeners will shape their self-definition similarly instead of in accordance with negative views from non-Muslims.

[22] Having highlighted the implicit argument within these songs focusing on Muslim women, once again it should at least be acknowledged that potentially deleterious results could arise from the way in which American Islamic hip hop artists portray Muslim women as the best of all women. By presenting the best of all women as those who are steadfastly committed to covering their heads in public, 3ILM, MPAC, Jabbar & Ali, and Native Deen construct a normative vision of Muslim female piety that does not reflect the diversity of Muslim American women. These artists seem to suggest that a Muslim woman should be thought of as pious only when wearing hijab, which goes against the view of those Muslim American women who do not consider hijab to be a religious obligation. Many such women agree with a claim expressed by Amina Wadud, a leading advocate for women's rights in Islam, who writes that "in Arabia at the time of the revelation, women of wealthy and powerful tribes were veiled and secluded as an indication of protection. The Qur'an acknowledges the virtue of modesty and demonstrates it through the prevailing practices. The principle of modesty is important – not the veiling and seclusion which were manifestations particular to that context" (9-10). Women with this mindset are excluded from a conception of Muslim female piety that involves obligatory wearing of hijab, and so again, insofar as American Islamic hip hop artists may contribute to this conception, their stated goal of building a more unified Islam may be undermined by strengthening the convictions of one subgroup of Muslim Americans, that which views hijab as a religious requirement, over against another that does not share this view.

[23] Furthermore, attention should be given to the fact that every hip hop artist considered above is male. Thus it is Muslim men who are telling Muslim females how to conduct their lives as "the best of all women." These male hip hop artists intend to replace a definition of Muslim women's lives offered by others (non-Muslim Americans) with a definition again provided by others (Muslim men). Notably, this will most likely continue to be a dominant trend in American Islamic hip hop until a significant number of Muslim women enter the hip hop world. Anaya McMurray identifies a hindrance to Muslim women following such a path, stating that "Muslim women are often expected to fit into stereotypical 'good girl' roles by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. These expectations encourage them to be tied to the home, submissive, and veiled, conditions that are not reconcilable with a career in the rap music industry" (87). It appears, however, that little by little Muslim American women are becoming hip hop artists. MuslimHipHop.com provides profiles and musical samples of three Muslim American female hip hop artists, Miss Undastood, Ms. Latifah, and Sister Haera. Of these three, Miss Undastood, an African American who grew up in inner-city New York, enjoys the widest audience. While Miss Undastood expresses a personal commitment to wearing hijab, both in terms of how she appears in performances as well as through song lyrics, she emphasizes that Muslim women who do not share this commitment should not be disparaged. For example, in "Hijab is the One Thing," she sings, "Just because I cover don't mean I'm more righteous. / Just because she doesn't, don't mean she's less pious." Miss Undastood is adamant that Muslim women must possess the right to determine their own understanding of Muslim piety rather than allow Muslim men to dictate conformity to a vision of "the ideal Muslim woman," a construction which typically emphasizes submission to one's husband and other Muslim men. Thus in her "Around the Way Muslimah," Miss Undastood praises a Muslim female who takes her Islamic piety

seriously, who “prays, fasts” and is “a sister with *taqwa* [consciousness] of Allah,” yet who also challenges the stereotyped “ideal Muslim woman” by being an “independent woman makin her own bread.” In a segment of this song in which she speaks over background music, she declares:

I see you all doin big things.
I'm congratulatin you . . .
I'm saying around the way Muslimah,
She could be a housewife, she could be a teacher, she could be a doctor, she
could be an author.
What I like about her is that she thinks outside the box, like me.

In addition to Miss Undastood and a few other Muslim Americans, women are becoming hip hop artists in other nations, entering what H. Samy Alim calls the “transglobal hip hop *umma*” (see Alim). British duo Poetic Pilgrimage, for example, states on their MuslimHipHop.com profile: “Poetic Pilgrimage brings a refreshing perspective on issues of identity, immigration, and global politics and as one of the very few Muslim, female Hip Hop acts in the world, their music reflects this unique experience.” As more female Islamic hip hop artists emerge, Muslim women, both in the United States and throughout the world, will have greater opportunity to shape their own definitions of Muslim female piety.

Musicological Analysis of Hip Hop

The Temporal Structure of Reminding

[24] Human experience of time defies simplistic conceptualization. Whereas in the modern Western mindset, with its dependence on precise measurement of duration through calendars, mechanical clocks, and other means, time is commonly viewed solely in a sequential, linear manner, anthropologists have uncovered alternative, non-linear conceptions of time in various cultures throughout the world, and philosophers have made distinctions between linear and non-linear temporalities (on non-linear conceptions of time, see Bender and Wellbery; Hall). One such philosopher, John Ellis McTaggart, differentiated the static, linear “earlier-simultaneous-later” from the dynamic, non-linear “past-present-future.” In the former, events never change, since if one event is earlier than another it will always remain earlier. In the latter, on the other hand, time is constantly in flux, with events moving fluidly between being anticipated as future, perceived as present, and remembered as past; for example, every event once anticipated as future will eventually be remembered as past. Despite this difference in conceptualization, however, these two temporal structures need not be mutually exclusive. Human relation with particular events can simultaneously involve static, linear temporal experience as well as dynamic, non-linear temporality.

[25] Such dual temporality characterizes the experience of a Muslim American who listens to the lyrics of hip hop songs discussed above. On one level, linear temporal experience shapes one's relation to these lyrics, which address non-Muslims' views of Muslim existence that have arisen especially because of the recent sequential course of events such as September 11. On another level, non-linear temporal experience plays a deeply influential role, as listeners are told they are the best of all peoples, a principle which for Muslims transcends any particular moment in linear temporal experience. For American Islamic hip hop artists,

linear temporal experience carries great importance, as it is the locus of difficulties which may prevent Muslim listeners from persevering in their Islamic faith. However, dynamic temporal experience holds even greater significance, since it is within dynamic temporality that listeners can access an enduring Islamic principle that can enable them to persevere at any given moment of linear temporal experience. Through dynamic temporality, Muslims are able to recognize that a way of viewing themselves, embedded in Islamic tradition in the past and poised to continue to shape Muslim existence in the future, is much larger than any view promoted by non-Muslims in the present moment. As hip hop artists remind listeners of the enduring principle that they are the best of all peoples, listeners are able to step outside the confines of linear temporal experience while also remaining within it, so that this linear experience may be transformed in accordance with the enduring principle.

[26] Importantly, this particular temporal structure mirrors that found throughout the Qur'an. On the one hand, events in linear, sequential experience are of great significance in the Qur'an. One reads of historical figures such as Noah, Moses, and Jesus, as well as numerous events that took place during the lifetime of Muhammad in seventh-century Arabia. On the other hand, though, the significance of this linear temporality is relativized by a dynamic temporality that acknowledges yet transcends moments in linear history. As L. E. Goodman argues, linear temporality is important in the Qur'an ultimately because it is the arena of God's divine purpose for humankind, involving human moral decisions and divine judgment based on these decisions (139). While these decisions take place in linear time, their ultimate significance is seen only in relation to the corresponding divine judgment characterized by a dynamic temporality that transcends any particular moment of human decision. Abdoldjavad Falatūri contributes to this understanding by discussing why the Qur'an speaks of historical events yet diminishes the importance of historical chronology. Falatūri points out that in comparison to the Bible, the Qur'an contains almost no narratives or other chronological elements, thereby communicating that God "could have ordered the course of history in a totally different way. . . [H]e could have allowed Noah to appear before Adam, Jesus before Abraham, and Muhammad before all the others; and nonetheless the goal of creation, surrender to God, would not have been altered" (68-69). As a result of this diminishment of the importance of linear temporality, in the Qur'an it is "not the historical but rather the unhistorical which is decisive: that is, the enactment of the human response to the supra-temporal message of revelation, the actualization of reward and punishment as fulfillment of the same supra-temporal, unhistorical message of revelation" (68). While the Qur'an recounts many events in humans' experience of linear time, these events are part of a much larger picture characterized by dynamic, non-linear temporality.

[27] With this temporal structure firmly in place, the Qur'an is equipped to serve as a reminder, providing Muslims in any particular moment in linear time with principles marked by a dynamic temporal flexibility, able to affect the course of sequential events without being constrained by them. American Islamic hip hop artists follow this model, drawing upon the temporally flexible Qur'anic principle that Muslims are the best of all peoples in order to shape listeners' course of sequential events in the present and future. Indeed this future orientation is important for hip hop artists, as they want to help shape listeners' self-definition not only to prevent them from discouragement in the present but also so they might persevere in Islamic faith during moments in the future. Jacques Berque reflects on

the concept of *dhikr* (“reminder” or “remembrance”) in Islamic discourse, writing, “Here is what further reinforces the motive force of the concept of *dhikr*. The future slumbers in memory. Its activation depends more on a revival of memory than on an activation of what has not been experienced” (76). In the eyes of many American Islamic hip hop artists, the memory that must be revived for Muslim listeners is the time-transcending principle that they are the best of all peoples. Reminded of this principle and defining themselves accordingly, listeners can face future events with a resolve to persevere in Islamic faith despite the prevalence of negative views of Muslim Americans.

The Temporal Structure of Hip Hop Music

[28] While recognizing the temporal structure of reminding sheds valuable insight into the function of American Islamic hip hop lyrics, a fuller understanding of American Islamic hip hop requires investigating its characteristics as a form of music. I will do so by continuing the discussion of temporal structure, turning to the temporal structure of hip hop music rather than hip hop lyrics. I will demonstrate that a similar temporal structure exists in both hip hop’s lyrics and its music. As a result of this similarity, American Islamic hip hop’s capacity to function as a reminder through its lyrics is enhanced by its musical structure.

[29] Before exploring hip hop music’s temporal structure, it should be acknowledged that hip hop is not the only musical genre that involves more than one type of temporal experience. Any form of music, as a means of expression which progresses through successive moments, manifests a linear, sequential temporality; additionally, though, various types of music demonstrate alternative temporal experiences. Thomas Clifton writes, “There is a distinction between the time which a piece *takes* and the time which a piece presents or *evokes*” (81), as music conveys a sense of duration and temporal relation which often differs from linear temporal experience. Importantly, the same piece of music can promote multiple temporal experiences simultaneously, made possible according to Jonathan Kramer because “time does not obey the law of contradiction: it can be many different things at once. All music is heard at first as a moment-to-moment succession, although it also creates the very different continua of musical time” (7). In some musical works, these different continua are manufactured and manipulated by musical composers, as occurs for example in what Kramer calls a “false ending,” which sounds like a typical ending without actually functioning in that manner.

[30] Kramer’s analysis provides a tremendously valuable resource on the topic of multiple temporal experiences in music, yet he focuses on Western tonal music rather than hip hop. Whereas the former primarily emphasizes melody and harmony, the latter chiefly accentuates rhythm, as is the case with other African-derived musical forms. In addition to this major difference, Tricia Rose identifies another by stating that Western tonal music features “forward drive toward resolution of a musical sequence that leads to a final resolution” (66), while hip hop and other African-derived music do not primarily feature linear, sequential temporal progression. Cheryl Keyes writes that “the Western concept of linear time is not sufficient in the analysis of African-derived music” (140); fundamentally this is the case because of this music’s heavy reliance upon repetition. Indeed all music contains repetition in some form, yet a distinction should be made between two forms of repetition, corresponding to the aforementioned distinction between Western tonal music and African-

derived music. Christopher Small writes, “The repetitions of African music have a function in time which is the reverse of (Western classical) music – to dissolve the past and future into one eternal present, in which the passing of time is no longer noticed” (54-55). Whereas repetition in Western tonal music highlights linear, teleological progression, repetition in African-derived music transcends such sequential temporal experience. According to James Snead, this type of repetition is prominent in Black cultures, which perceive repetition as a means of circulation and equilibrium rather than accumulation and growth towards a final goal, as is the norm in European cultures. Snead states that in Black cultures “the thing (the ritual, the dance, the beat) is there for you to pick up when you come back to get it. If there is a goal . . . it is always deferred; it constantly ‘cuts’ back to the start” (150).

[31] Richard Middleton reflects upon these two types of repetition, which he labels “discursive” and “musematic.” Discursive repetition, commonly found in Western tonal music, entails the repetition of longer units and tends towards “a hierarchically ordered discourse” (269). Units of repetition are “*worked into* a larger unit of ‘narrative’ flow” (271), producing a sense of teleological directedness. Musematic repetition, on the other hand, features riffs or musemes, repeated sound particles that provide the rhythmic layers of African-derived music such as jazz, rhythm and blues, and hip hop. Middleton writes that in comparison to discursive repetition’s hierarchically ordered discourse, musematic repetition is much more uniform, displaying a “one-levelled structural effect” (269). Focusing especially on the use of riffs in twentieth-century African-derived music, he comments that these riffs’ “effect, to a greater or lesser extent, is always to level out the temporal flow, to challenge any ‘narrative’ functionality attaching to chord patterns and verse sequences” (281). Akin to Snead’s emphasis on circulation and equilibrium, Middleton presents an understanding of repetition in African-derived music that highlights a lack of linear temporal progression. He declares that pieces of music with a high degree of musematic repetition function “as ‘instruments for the obliteration of time’; the push towards the monadic denies clock time” (223). Instead of static, linear temporal experience, the type of repetition at the heart of hip hop music falls in line with dynamic, non-linear temporality.

[32] Thus as Middleton, Snead, and others describe, because of its characteristic repetition, listening to hip hop music involves transcending sequential temporal experience. However, while this experience is transcended, it is by no means nullified, since hip hop music contains more than musematic repetition alone. Amidst this repetition are points of musical rupture, which as musically significant moments in time, draw attention to linear, sequential temporality. Rose notes that hip hop artists ground their songs in loops of sounds featuring musematic repetition, but within these loops they “build in critical moments, where the established rhythm is manipulated and suspended” (67). This manipulation and suspension of repetitive equilibrium occurs through hip hop devices such as scratching, in which artists produce sounds by moving a record back and forth on a turntable. Rupturing repetitive equilibrium, scratching makes listeners aware of linear temporal flow. Similarly, musematic repetition is disrupted through sampling. Used more frequently than scratching in American Islamic hip hop, sampling refers to the utilization of digital technology that can duplicate sounds and play them in any order and in any key or pitch. Samplers contain a seemingly endless number of digital sounds, including recently released songs as well as songs from many years ago. Notably, some American Islamic hip hop artists sample portions of songs

from outside the Islamic tradition. Jabbar & Ali's "Bang Bang," for example, begins with and returns to a segment of Nancy Sinatra's "Bang Bang," although whereas Sinatra's version refers to male-female attraction, Jabbar & Ali focus on Muslims who have been victimized by government-inspired violence.

[33] Sampling and other forms of musical rupture play a major role in hip hop music; ultimately, however, it is musematic repetition that undergirds this music, serving as the backbone of any hip hop song. Rose illustrates this point by discussing "break beats," in which hip hop artists sample a break, which is a segment of a hip hop song where all elements except for percussion disappear. She argues that while break beats are important in hip hop songs, "the 'break beat' itself is looped – repositioned as repetition, as equilibrium inside the rupture. Rap music highlights points of rupture as it equalizes them" (70). Using a term employed by Snead, break beats are a type of "cut," or a point at which artists depart from the repetitive musical flow but can pick up where they left off. According to Snead, "the 'cut' overtly insists on the repetitive nature of the music" (69). The disruptive cut, in the form of scratching, break beats, or other types of sampling, contributes to hip hop music's powerful effects upon listeners, but effects produced by musical disruption are ultimately relativized by effects caused by the backbone of hip hop music, musematic repetition. Within the consciousness of a hip hop listener, there is awareness of linear temporal experience because of musical disruption, but there is even deeper awareness of dynamic, non-linear temporality because of musematic repetition. Thus striking similarity exists between the temporal structure of hip hop music and the temporal structure of reminding found in lyrics of many American Islamic hip hop songs, as in each case linear temporality is significant yet not nearly as significant as dynamic, non-linear temporal experience. Due to this shared temporal structure, the music of American Islamic hip hop strengthens lyrical reminders that Muslims are the best of all peoples.

Further Considerations

[34] While this discussion of hip hop music's temporal structure casts light upon ways in which American Islamic hip hop can function as a powerful reminder, more complete understanding admittedly would include additional considerations concerning hip hop music's effects upon listeners. One possible consideration pertains to the fact that like poetry and other forms of communication that feature a strong sense of rhythm and rhyme, hip hop is replete with mnemonic aids. Numerous scholars have explored the connection between memory and sound similarity and pattern, a link which may be at its strongest when rhythm and rhyme work in tandem. Oliver Sacks declares, "Entire books can be held in memory – *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, famously, could be recited at length because, like ballads, they had rhythm and rhyme" (238). Similar to these ancient epics, hip hop commonly features rhymes that are synchronized with a metrical beat, thereby facilitating memory of the song's content.

[35] This consideration can be related to another, namely musical entrainment, in which anatomical movements and other physiological or psychological functions become synchronized with musical rhythms. Tia DeNora explains this phenomenon by stating, "Perhaps the most straightforward example of musical entrainment in relation to the body can be found when music is used as a basis for marching in step or otherwise synchronizing

bodily movement, such as skipping rope. . . Musically entrained, the body and its processes unfold in relation to musical elements (in these examples, its regular pulse); they are aligned and regularized in relation to music” (78). As Daniel Schneck and Dorita Berger discuss, a large number of bodily rhythms may become entrained with musical rhythm. They write, “Concurrent with the rhythms of human propulsion and motor activities are a complex array of compound rhythms simultaneously taking place within our physiological systems. For example, there are the pulsations of heartbeat; there are the myriad rhythmicities of neurons firing in the brain” (140). Because of hip hop’s heavy emphasis on rhythm, a strong connection may exist between hip hop music and neurological functioning tied to memory functions. While it is beyond the scope of this article to explore this connection further, it should at least be acknowledged that multiple factors may combine in making hip hop a powerful means to remind Muslims to define themselves as the best of all peoples.

[36] Furthermore, attention should be given to the fact that not all Muslim Americans listen to hip hop music. In some cases this is a matter of personal musical preference, but notably for some Muslims, this results from religious conviction. Muslim Americans have different views regarding the acceptability of listening to hip hop music, in large part because of a long-standing disagreement among Muslims over whether music, or certain forms of music, is *halal* (permissible) or *haram* (impermissible). At one end of the spectrum stand Muslims who, due to their understanding of Islamic teachings, listen to no music, which they regard as a distracting, deleterious influence upon their faith. Although no Qur’anic verse explicitly forbids music, Muslims holding this viewpoint often include music as part of the Qur’anic concept of *laghw*, which connotes forbidden oral activities such as gossip. At another point on the spectrum are Muslims who accept music but only if it does not use musical instruments, a conviction shaped by sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad such as, “From among my followers there will be some people who will consider illegal sexual intercourse, the wearing of silk (clothes), the drinking of alcoholic drinks and the use of musical instruments, as lawful.” Importantly, though, Islamic scholars debate the authenticity of such sayings, thereby contributing to Muslim Americans’ diverse viewpoints regarding music. As Abdul Khabeer points out, while many Muslim Americans take a strong stance on the issue, many others are ambivalent. For the latter, the “ends justify the means; uncertainty regarding the permissibility of music is outweighed by the ways Islamic hip hop is believed to benefit the Muslim community” (129). In light of this debate, it would be illuminating to build upon this article by acquiring detailed demographic data regarding Muslim Americans’ opinions and convictions about Islamic hip hop. Since this music can function as a powerful reminder of Islamic principles, it would be interesting to determine who indeed is listening to this music and therefore may be benefitting from it in this way. While certain assumptions, such as the idea that the majority of Muslim youth in America view hip hop as *halal*, may be verified, some surprising discoveries may also materialize, thus providing a fuller picture of American Islamic hip hop’s effects upon Muslim Americans.

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