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Hip-hop Tehran: Migrating Styles, Musical Meanings, Marginalised Voices

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Introduction

A great deal of ethnomusicological writing in recent years has explored the impact of global processes on the creation and consumption of music in specific locales. Whether expressed in terms of cultural 'deterriorialisation', the emergence of transnational networks and flows, or migrancy (both physical and virtual), it is clear that previously accepted ideas about the intimate connection between music and place – in the sense of specific kinds of music 'belonging' to particular places and peoples – have become disrupted. Musical migrations throughout most of human history have depended on the physical movement of people; however, the rise of mediated technologies since the late nineteenth century made it increasingly possible for musical genres and styles to 'migrate' independently, without any necessary connection to a people, their culture or to the music's 'original' meanings. Moreover, styles or genres could be 'adopted' in new contexts by people who had no cultural or ethnic connection to the music. As Eisentraut (2001) discuses for the case of samba in Wales, in such situations the music can serve as a catalyst for the creation of *new* communities and identities focused around the music itself, and associated lifestyle choices, rather than around cultural or ethnic affiliation.

The complex cultural configuration of many urban centres globally (including but not exclusively those of the metropolitan 'north') encompass musical genres which are closely tied to diaspora and other migrant populations. At the same time, some of these genres, and others, have spread well beyond their 'own' culture: gamelan, samba, salsa, rebetiko, klezmer, bhangra, and so on, are fast gaining a global presence, not in the sense of being heard literally *everywhere*, but in a growing number of physically non-contiguous sites. This includes musics where there is a connection with local diasporic or immigrant populations, but also and increasingly others where genres are disconnected from such populations, even where they have a presence. As musics migrate, and some achieve a near global presence, authors are increasingly attending both to the local as the site of meaning-construction, and to the potential emergence of trans-national meanings.

In this chapter I explore the reasons why certain musics appear to be particularly 'mobile', focusing on hip-hop, a genre which has gained a notable global presence over the last 20 years or so, going well beyond its roots in the Bronx area of New York, as is well documented in the literature.[i] Specifically I focus on the case of hip-hop in Iran, and examine some of the reasons for its remarkable rise in popularity since the mid 2000s, taking on distinct local meanings including, significantly, a reconstructed sense of connection to place, in this case the capital city Tehran. Hip-hop might be regarded as the migrant music par excellence in that its migration has been almost entirely effected through mediation and rarely through the movement of 'tradition bearers'. As such, it's interesting to explore the new meanings that music acquires in contexts which are culturally distant from its origins.

Global Hip-Hop

From its birth in the Bronx in the 1970s, hip-hop started its global spread from the early 1980s, something which took several years to attract scholarly attention. One of the earliest collected studies of hip-hop outside the US was Tony Mitchell's edited volume *Global Noise* (2000) which focuses on Europe, East Asia, Australasia and Canada. As Mitchell notes, 'in most countries where rap has taken root, hip-hop scenes have rapidly developed from an adoption to an adaptation of US musical forms and idioms'. Mitchell uses Robertson's (2005) term 'glocal' to describe the intersection between the local and the global in ways which are particularly apt for hip-hop. Clearly, hip-hop was not the first musical genre to migrate but what is interesting is how hip-hop 'arguably serves both as canvas and template, a blank sheet but also a guide' (Baker 2006: 236). Could one reason for hip-hop's rapid worldwide spread be just this: that it brings with it certain associations but is also malleable enough to take on new meanings in new contexts? There is now a fairly considerable literature on 'global' hip-hop within ethnomusicology and popular music studies, much of it focused on the delicate balance between a specific local embeddedness and a broader consciousness, both of hip-hop's connection to an 'original' locale and its emergence as a 'global' form. In one of the earliest pieces of scholarly writing to include discussion of hip-hop outside the US, Gross et al. point to the significant presence of young Franco-Maghrebis in the French hip-hop scene, most notably in cities such as Paris and Marseilles which have large North African diaspora populations. As elsewhere, rapping becomes a vehicle for hard-hitting comment on racism, marginalisation and other social and political issues (1996: 141–51). In this context, rap

> expresses and mobilizes new forms of identity. It serves as the badge of a multiethnic minority youth subcultural movement that participates in the struggle against the new racism's attempts to impose rigid boundaries around French national culture … Unlike the sometimes nostalgic and community-based appeal of *rai*, rap is aggressively deterritorializing and anti-nostalgic, even as it reterritorializes a multiethnic space … linking the diasporic Mediterranean to the diasporic Black Atlantic. (ibid.149–50)

Many writers describe similar processes of 'deterritorialisation' accompanied or followed by 'reterritorialisation', and which relates directly to processes of globalisation and their impact on the reconfiguration of local identities; 'hip-hop's urge to locality' (Krims 2002: 191) can be seen again and again as artists around the world engage in 'indigenizing, locally re-emplacing the globally circulating musical genres of rap' (Solomon 2005a: 51). Such 're-emplacing' often involves placing hip-hop firmly in a new locale and emphasising this through lyrics and music videos. Both Solomon (2005a) and Baker (2006) describe how hip-hop artists in Istanbul and Havana respectively have 'developed a characteristic discourse about the city', embedding themselves and their music in a specific locale and, as it happens, in both cases commenting on competing visions of urban space and ownership of the city. In Istanbul, 'Turkish rap … embodies the tensions between a cosmopolitan, globalising Istanbul and the "other" Istanbul populated by rural migrants and the urban poor ... Istanbul rappers comment on and critique what globalisation wrought' (51).[ii] In a remarkably similar way, hip-hop in Havana reflects

new divisions within the city as certain parts are cleaned up for tourists whilst the rest of the city continues to disintegrate physically and socially. By creating alternative spaces for those marginalised and socially and financially excluded from the official tourist nightlife, Baker argues that hip-hop represents a reclaiming of the city space, as well as providing a forum for debate in which artists comment on, among other things, the contradictions between an idealistic socialist order and the new hierarchies created by the new tourist economy. Thus, the 'message' of the music lies not just in the lyrics:

> It may be argued that music-making can enable a community to generate (rather than simply embody) a different social order and a distinct set of moral values. The organizational principle of rap *peñas* – as communal, interactive performances in which a number of artists share the stage, collaborate and create space for freestyling – challenges a social order in which opportunities to speak publicly about social issues are limited, and in which such public utterances are usually carefully planned and controlled. (2006: 225–6)

In a striking parallel with the case of Istanbul, 'Rappers explore the disjunctures between Havana as a global city of the imagination, packaged for consumption by foreign tourists, and the realities experienced by most local people' (236).

In the discussion below, I explore the local meanings of hip-hop – as a globally circulating music – in Iran, where it has been the fastest growing popular music genre in recent years. As will be seen, many of the issues encountered elsewhere – the creation of a space for

marginalised voices, the emergence of new globally-influenced local identities, and the intimate connection with urban geography – are pertinent to Iran.[iii]

Mediated Popular Music in Iran: An Historical Overview

The significance of the emergence of a hip-hop scene in Iran should be understood in relation to the specific conditions under which mass mediated popular music developed there, something which I have discussed elsewhere but will summarise here. A local popular music industry first developed in Iran after the Second World War and was promoted by the regime of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (r.1941–79) in line with his policies of modernisation, westernisation and secularisation, a trajectory initiated in a somewhat autocratic way by his father, Reza Shah Pahlavi (r.1925–41). The music was heavily influenced by Euro-American artists whose recordings were imported into Iran at this time. From the 1960s, locally-produced pop music increasingly came to dominate Iran's public soundscapes and attracted a huge following among young people for whom the new pop stars became role models in fashion and lifestyle. By the late 1970s, both western popular music and western-style Iranian pop had become a symbol both of the Shah's modernisation project and of his close political ties with Europe and the US.

In February 1979, the Shah was overthrown in a revolution which brought together religious, nationalist and leftists groups in what was essentially an anti-imperialist bid for self-determination. The resulting power vacuum was rapidly filled with the return of senior religious figure Ruhollah Khomeini after sixteen years of exile, and Iran officially became an Islamic Republic on 1 April 1979. Amongst the many issues facing the new regime, the

attempt to shape a legal framework which would accord with religious law had profound implications for music, whose status has for centuries been debated within Islamic orthodoxy. For popular music in particular, the associations accrued in the 1960s and 70s – the perceived connection with the pre-revolutionary regime and with the 'West', not to mention its use for dancing and what the authorities regarded as un-Islamic lyrics – resulted in all popular music being banned. The prohibition remained for almost 20 years, during which time mediated popular music was presented by official discourses as a symbol of Western imperialism and cultural decline. Many musicians left the country and an exilic pop music industry developed abroad with Los Angeles as its hub. Between 1979 and 1998, many Iranians continued to listen to popular music in private, both pre-1979 recordings and music imported through the black market or (from the early 1990s) accessed through satellite television. As I have argued elsewhere, listening to popular music at this time became a form of oblique 'resistance by consumption' (2005a: 243–4).

In 1998, as part of the cultural thaw which followed the election of reformist President Mohammad Khatami the previous year, certain types of popular music, most notably mainstream 'pop', became legal again and were brought under the auspices of the government through the permit system operated by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, by which all public performances and published recordings require a permit (*mojavvez*). In this way, the government was able to exercise control over popular music, something it had been unable to do through two decades of a flourishing black market and general flouting of official restrictions. Today, locally produced pop music is largely unproblematic and it is relatively easy for musicians to gain a permit. However, the loosening of restrictions after 1998 led to something unexpected: alongside the newly

legalised pop music there emerged an alternative, independent grass-roots 'underground' music movement encompassing a wide range of styles and genres from rock and heavy metal to hip-hop and techno. And, since the birth of this movement coincided with the arrival and rapid growth of the Internet in Iran, musicians no longer needed government authorisation, nor even the illegal channels of the black market or satellite, to reach audiences. Indeed, the Internet has played a crucial role in the development of the alternative music scene in Iran (Nooshin 2005b: 472–4) with hundreds of band websites and generic alternative Iranian music sites, as well as postings on social networking and video hosting sites. Never has it been easier for musicians to circumvent central control and reach audiences directly, at least those that have Internet access.

As well as the Internet, two factors have been significant in the growth of the alternative music scene. First, Iran's large youth population: following the steep birth rate increase after the revolution, approximately two thirds of the population are currently under the age of thirty; young people and urban dwellers represents the two largest sectors of Iranian society (Human Development Report 2009). The second factor is the civil-society discourse which became a hallmark of Khatami's presidency and which promoted an opening of the social space to a diversity of voices (Nooshin 2005a: 255, 257). In this context, the new music scene created an alternative space in which those born after the revolution, and who in the late 1990s were coming of age, could claim their share of this new civil society, as they expressed their concerns and frustrations, whether personal, social or political (Nooshin 2005b: 474–80). The end of Khatami's presidency and its associated discourses of civil society, 'dialogue of civilisations', cultural tolerance and liberalism, and some rapprochement with Europe and the US, and his succession in 2004

by conservative Mahmud Ahmadinejad, seems not to have affected the astounding growth in the alternative music scene.

The Emergence of Hip-hop in Iran

Which brings us to hip-hop, arguably the fastest growing alternative music genre in Iran in recent years. Iranian hip-hop[iv] first emerged in the diaspora in the mid-1990s, initially in Los Angeles, the best known artists being the band Sandy; but it was rapper Deev and his politically-charged lyrics, particularly in '*Dasta Bala*' ('Hands Up', 2002), who gave the first indication of the potential for social and political comment through rap in Persian. The arrival of satellite television in Iran brought the sounds of hip-hop – including non-Iranian artists such as Eminen and Tupac, both immensely influential in Iran – and images of hip-hop culture to the ears and eyes of Iranians at home. By the early 2000s there were a handful of hip-hop artists in Iran and, from 2003, a local hip-hop scene started to take shape. Since 2005 hip-hop has experienced an extraordinary growth and in a relatively short time has become a central part of the alternative popular music scene from which it emerged, the scene itself growing out of the liberalising policies of the Khatami period. Based on both official and unofficial figures, Bilan et al. (2010) estimate that there are currently between 1,000 and 2,000 amateur and professional rappers in Iran, a figure which is quite unprecedented.

It is not my intention here to provide a history of hip-hop in Iran; I will, however, mention the most influential artists before moving on to my specific case study. First, two points should be noted. As mentioned, for much of its sixty-plus year history, mediated popular

music in Iran has been closely associated with the relatively affluent, educated and cosmopolitan middle and upper classes.[v] Such associations are partly rooted in polarities established before the revolution and which were reflected in dominant discourses and official policies and rhetoric – which presented Islam and tradition as incompatible with modernity – and which partly resulted in the intense reaction against popular music after 1979. Moreover, these associations were reinforced by the ways in which Iranian pop music was used and promoted by those who had benefited under the Shah and who fled Iran after 1979 to places such as London and Los Angeles, taking their wealth and their music with them; many musicians who left Iran after 1979 were from the same privileged background. In recent years, however, the class demographics of Iranian popular music have started to change, with artists and audiences coming from less affluent backgrounds, some even from the religious and traditional areas of south Tehran and the provinces, which would have been unthinkable a decade ago.[vi] This is happening in the context of a more general, and very gradual, social acceptance of music since 1979. Slowly but surely, music has entered the homes of those who, before the revolution, would not have permitted a radio or a television, let alone a musical instrument. Thus, what thirty years ago was presented as the epitome of western cultural imperialism and decadence, and hitherto largely the preserve of the westernised middle classes, is starting to be taken up by members of those social classes which have been the strongest supporters of the government and its anti-Western rhetoric. This is not to say that mediated popular music has gained widespread acceptance amongst such social classes – it is still contested – but a trend is emerging and is more marked in the case of some genres than others. Rock music, for instance, has remained steadfastly the domain of the middle classes; hip-hop, however, is starting to gain ground amongst the less privileged, as discussed below.

Second, it is important to distinguish between rapping as a musical style and the broader culture of hip-hop within which it originally developed, including breakdancing, graffiti and DJing. Whilst some of these broader cultural manifestations are found in Iran, as seen on some music videos, until recently hip-hop music in Iran was largely divorced from the broader culture. However, there is an emerging hip-hop community which draws directly on such signifiers as breakdancing or public rap contests.[vii]

There is relatively little academic writing on hip-hop in Iran, the most comprehensive to date being Elling (2007) and Johnston (2008). There are a number of Persian language articles, including Mowlaei (2008) and Bilan et al. (2010), the latter including material collected from interviews with young hip-hop audiences. Mowlaei seeks to categorise contemporary Iranian rap through lyrical analysis, resulting in a four-fold classification based on, first, whether the lyrics are largely in line with and respectful of the 'norms' of Iranian society (*hanjārgarā*) or against such norms (*hanjārshekan*); and second whether they are socially-engaged or focused on personal issues. Within these categories, Mowlaei suggests a further series of sub-categories and gives examples of each. Breyley (2008, 2009) has written about the female rapper Koli who I discuss below. In contrast to the academic literature, there is a wealth of information, interviews, discussion and analysis on websites such as www.zirzamin.org/ ('*zirzamin*', lit: 'underground'), the main alternative Iranian music site, and dedicated Iranian rap sites such as www.rapfa.com, bia2rap.com and www.farsihiphop.com, the latter launched in 2009 by the Tehran-based rap outfit Raplarzeh ('Rap Quake').[viii]

Even a brief websearch reveals an extraordinary number of artists, male and female, in Iran and in diaspora (with strong connections between the two). In February 2010 'Voices of Change', the first festival of Iranian hip-hop, was held in Sweden and included performances by Ghogha (Iran), Erfan and Khashayar (US) and Shahin Najafi (Germany). Within Iran, the pioneer of Iranian rap and still widely regarded as the most significant figure is Hichkas ('Nobody'; Soroush Lashkary, b.1985), whose work epitomises the kind of social engagement typical of Iranian hip-hop. Hichkas established the group 021 in 2003 and released the album *Jangale Asfalt* (*The Asphalt Jungle*) in 2006. His early work was mainly in English, but he now raps mostly in Persian. Hichkas has collaborated with several artists in diaspora including UK-based Reveal on '*Tripe Ma'* ('Our Everyday', 2004[ix]), which comments on Tehran's high level of street crime. '*Tripe Ma*' has a strong local feel typical of Hichkas's work, beginning with an invocation to God and weaving the 'traditional' sound of the *setar* lute through the music, as well as a gentle background male chorus. Against this, Hichkas and Reveal take turns to rap a verse, and then join together for the final verse in which they alternate lines, Reveal echoing Hichkas, sometimes providing a direct translation into 'street' English of the previous line. Perhaps more than any other Iranian rapper, Hichkas has worked to shift the class associations of hip-hop: for instance, *Ye Mosht Sarbaz* ('Bunch of Soldiers'[x]) places hip-hop firmly in the poor, working class and traditional areas of south Tehran, with its militia-style imagery in the young men rapping with Hichkas, and its prominent references to religion and nationhood, together with the poor urban environment where the video is shot. Seven years after establishing 021, Hichkas was finally able to perform live, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in May 2010, sharing the platform with Reveal. Hichkas has also worked with Saman Wilson from the UK/France-based (largely gangsta) rap group *Zedbazi* on '*Vase har Iruni*' ('For

Any Iranian', 2005) about the power of hip-hop and sung in Persian.[xi] Elsewhere I have discussed the new collective ethos apparent in alternative popular music (2005b: 487), something which takes on particular significance in the context of the civil-society discourses inherited from the Khatami period. Not only do many hip-hop artists collaborate on an equal basis (in contrast to the predominant 'solo star singer' cult of mainstream pop), but a number of established rappers such as Hichkas use this as a way of introducing new artists to audiences.

At the time of writing, other hip-hop artists based in Iran include Yas, Sasy Mankan, Eblis, Tohi and Reza Pishro, although new artists are emerging all the time, and those who become successful often leave Iran for personal or other reasons. For those who cannot travel, the Internet allows them to transcend physical borders. The female rapper Salome, for instance, has collaborated online with Germany-based Turkish rapper Pusat on an anti-Iraq War rap called '*Petrolika*' with lyrics in Persian and Turkish, and with Iranian rapper Shirali, also based in Germany, on the pieces '*Mayous Nasho*' ('Don't Give Up') and 'My Path, My Fight', without having met either artist.

Artists' performance style, delivery, body language and even dress, are heavily influenced by US hip-hop. Some create their own backing tracks and beats or collaborate with musicians; others access 'ready made' beats, often downloading other rappers' 'instrumentals' without the lyrics (Elling 2007: 4). As one might expect, Iranian rappers sing about a range of topics; most write their own lyrics, but some draw on the rich heritage of Persian poetry. Indeed, as has been observed for hip-hop elsewhere, Iranian hip-hop is strongly inter-textual and includes references to other artists and their work[xii] as

well as being ‘filled with insiders’ slang and references which in some cases can only be understood by young Tehranis from a certain part of the city or from a certain milieu’ (ibid.: 6). Elling suggests that about two thirds of lyrics ‘belong to the category *boasting*, i.e. bragging and self-staging. The rapper proclaims his skills and other rappers’ mediocrity, or uses the lyrics to *diss* (disrespect) the other rappers’ (5) in a manner familiar outside Iran. However, there is a large contingent who use hip-hop to engage with social and political issues, and it is this that I focus on in this chapter. Such issues include addiction, street crime, women’s rights, social injustice and poverty, street children, the pressure of university entrance exams, internet addiction, the nuclear power issue, the representation of Iranians outside Iran,[xiii] internal politics,[xiv] international politics,[xv] religion, nationalism, and so on, through to some of the most taboo subjects in Iranian society such as suicide and sex. There is a history of music as social comment in Iran going back at least to the constitutional revolution of 1906, and which was revived in the 1960s and ’70s with singers such as Farhad and again in the late 1990s, since when it has been an important element in alternative ‘underground’ music. However, social comment on such a scale, with so many artists and covering such a range of topics, is unprecedented. Whether this is because the Internet allows the circulation of ‘sensitive’ material to an extent not experienced before or because of other factors is unclear. Certainly, the level of state censorship and social taboos prior to 1979 should not be underestimated, the former arguably tighter than today, and there has been a palpable shift in attitudes towards certain taboo subjects as well.

Most hip-hop artists in Iran operate without a permit. Few are prepared to jump through the necessary hoops, involving months, sometimes years, of waiting and responding to the

demands of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, only to be finally rejected. There is also a sense that gaining a permit compromises one's perceived independence. Whilst decisions on permits rest with the Ministry of Culture, these are inevitably influenced by the political climate of the day and there has been some recent anti-hip-hop rhetoric from government officials (see Elling 2007: 5).[xvi] However, a very few artists have managed to gain authorisation, the earliest being Shahkar Bineshpajooh - a somewhat dapper, quasi-comic rapper - for his 2003 album *Eskenas* (*Cash*). Yas has also gained permission for six tracks, including one recorded after the Bam earthquake in 2003.

Hip-hop is a music of the city and as discussed for Cuba and Turkey, so in Iran it has developed a close relationship with its urban locale, particularly Tehran; music videos show hard-hitting images of the urban environment and lyrics reference the city, most often in relation to social problems.[xvii] The first hip-hop group in Iran, 021, was named after Tehran's telephone code and this has now become a signifier for Iranian hip-hop, including a hand gesture which forms the three numbers; rappers also regularly reference the code in their lyrics. The use of local slang was noted above. Just as Baker and Solomon describe hip-hop in Havana and Istanbul as showing a side of the city often hidden to outsiders (tourists in Havana; the global 'community' in the case of Istanbul), so in Iran hip-hop artists reveal the underbelly of society, rapping about an alternative reality which is taboo or hidden from view. As UK-based rapper Reveal says, 'I have chosen the stage name Reveal because my art is about revealing the truth, regardless of what the reality seems to be.' (Farzad 2009–10: 5) Hichkas's *Ekhtelaf (Inja Tehrane)*' ('Difference (This is Tehran')) addresses the social and economic divide between rich and poor in Iranian Society:

A hobo stands next to a Benz

He isn't worth enough to rent it

Me, you and him came from a single drop

Look at the gap between us now[xviii]

Tehran and its social inequalities also form a constant backdrop to the work of female rapper Koli, the name of whose group, Metro 707 (now disbanded), references Tehran's relatively new metro system. Having introduced the broader hip-hop scene in Iran, much of it focused on the capital, the following section will discuss Koli and her work.

Rapper Koli and the Omid-e Mehr Project: Hip-hop as Therapy, Hip-hop as Social Conscience

Whilst Iranian hip-hop has been dominated by the presence of men, women do also play a role. The best known female rappers are Salome and Ghogha.[xix] Elling briefly discusses Ghogha (2007: 12), focusing on a rap about runaway girls, and another female artist, Pani. The outfit Raplarzeh includes female rapper Shahya, who also works on her own. In this section, I focus on a young woman whose rap name is Koli ('Gypsy', b.1988) and who has turned to hip-hop as a form of social comment but also as a means of personal therapy. I will begin with some background on Koli and then explore the meanings that hip-hop has for her. Koli is little known in Iran, but gained exposure internationally through *The Glass House*, a 2008 documentary film about the Omid-e Mehr Foundation, a Tehran-based charity which offers training and therapeutic support to girls and young women from

disadvantaged backgrounds.[xx] I decided to focus on Koli because she epitomises the growth of a grassroots hip-hop movement in Iran, and specifically in a sector of society where popular music has traditionally been problematic. Even after appearing in the film, which has not been screened in Iran, members of Koli's family (other than her sister and aunt) were unaware of her involvement in hip-hop. The idea of hip-hop as 'the voice of the people' is a well-worn cliché that has been widely used by commentators in Iran and elsewhere; at the same time, it is true that for many on the margins of Iranian society there has hitherto simply been no forum in which their voices can be heard. Koli also illustrates how the increasing presence of women rappers shapes the kinds of topics addressed in Iranian hip-hop, particularly formerly 'hidden' subjects which disproportionately affect women such as domestic violence, runaway girls and rape.[xxi]

The Omid-e Mehr foundation was established in 2004 'as a privately-funded charity to provide emotional and practical support for severely disadvantaged young women in Tehran'.[xxii] Aged between fifteen and twenty-five, the women are referred by social services or family members, or self-refer. The foundation runs a day centre which offers training over an 18 month period in areas such as computer literacy, office skills, English language, and so on, to equip the women for the workplace and, ultimately, economic and social independence. The charity started with seven women and now has capacity for seventy at any one time. Many of the women have suffered physical or psychological trauma or both, and most come from poor, traditional and religious families where social pressures, unemployment and poverty often create the conditions of violence, abuse and neglect. Alongside vocational training, therefore, the women are offered therapeutic support, and are also encouraged to explore creative outlets through visual arts, poetry,

music, and so on. As Koli explained, 'Omid is all about finding your voice and your sense of self'.[xxiii]

Koli became responsible for her six siblings at the age of 13, when her parents separated and her mother left home. She has faced many challenges, including domestic violence, a period in jail, and trying to find accommodation for her family following eviction from their rented room. Koli attended Omid-e Mehr's training programme and is now working on her English; she hopes eventually to train as a Montessori teacher in the UK.[xxiv] For Koli, rap provides a vehicle to express and come to terms with her past experiences: 'rap allows me to talk about the things that everyone tries to deny. The problems which I had in the past; the problems which I see in society today; the problems which the national media doesn't want to be spoken about'.[xxv] She enjoys rapping because it enables her to communicate her feelings, thoughts and experiences using everyday language.

The topics that Koli raps about range from personal experiences of abandonment and violence, and earlier feelings of anger towards her mother followed by greater understanding as she has grown older; to broader social issues such as the consequences of social injustice – poverty, addiction, street children, and so on, issues which other rappers also sing about – and the 'often forgotten victims of social changes since the revolution' (Breyley 2009). A good example of how Koli's lyrics bring the two together can be heard in *The Glass House*: one of the film's final scenes shows Koli, her sister (Yaghi) and her best friend (Toofan), in a recording studio. Koli begins,

> I am living a sequestered life

Carrying a doomed legacy to eternity

I want you to know why I was left behind

Left with all those silent moments

The horror of sarcasm still in my mind

…

My survival was balanced on the edge of a knife

And the whole world expected my end without a cry

My prayers were nothing but screams in painful nights

The nightmare of living a tomorrow worst than today

Only hell could hear my pleas.[xxvi]

After further verses, Toofan takes over,

I was quiet but now I'm gonna shout

Like when you shouted at me when I called you 'dad'

Mum thinks we're still kids

We're fed up with you being our stepdad

You destroyed her body and soul

Even when you acted nice, you were mean

You took everything away from us, you bastard

I can see my misery in your wicked eyes

…

Only the mirror knows if I'm lying

I must bring out my deep scars

I don't need soothing hands over my head

I don't care, I'll carry on.[xxvii]

Yaghi subsequently comes in:

I'm not content, I don't wanna be isolated

Although they look upon me as fading light

I am not bothered if I have no support

All I want is respect and nothing else

Because we are not asleep, we are like others

But we are used to all that injustice

Living in hell, we pretend to be happy

Tired of being thrown around and living penniless

Even the law didn't want to know about us

And that's why we have sunk so deep

Society ignores the reality

And when you talk, you end up in a cage

No two ways about it.[xxviii]

The deeply personal and direct nature of the lyrics is unprecedented in Iranian music, where sensitive topics have tended to be addressed obliquely, or at a very general level. The scene begins with the three girls arriving at the studio late; they have told Koli's father that they have gone to buy a tin of stew – he doesn't know where they are. As they leave at the end, they remind themselves to buy a tin of stew on the way home. Whether the story was exaggerated for dramatic effect, it conveys the social opprobrium attached to music performance for women, particularly in the domain of popular music. Adding to the family tension, legal outlets for solo female singing are severely circumscribed and the recording studio was likely operating without a licence. Thus, female rappers such as Koli face both social pressures – resistance to hip-hop per se and reputational risks to themselves and their families – and considerable legal risks. In an earlier scene, Koli's aunt (her father's sister), tries to forbid her from recording, terrified of the fallout for the family if the studio were to be raided. But rapping is a lifeline for Koli and she is determined to continue, 'I have found independence in my loneliness … I was living in a situation that forced me to bear all the difficulties by myself ... Maybe it wasn't all bad, because it helped me to stand on my own'. Then she starts to rap,

> I'm steadfast in my place; I won't move
> Difficulties have forced me to stand on my own
> I'm standing all alone
> I have to keep going and I have no fear.[xxix]

This discourse of 'survival against the odds' (familial, social, financial) is a strong element in Koli's work and resonates with what Elling describes as the 'global hip-hop community's socio-cultural self identification' and particularly the symbolic power of the 'ghetto'. As noted above, compared with other popular genres in Iran, hip-hop has developed a close association with the socially disadvantaged and many artists stress (even fabricate) an upbringing in harsh economic and social conditions in order to authenticate themselves as hip-hop artists. Citing Saman Wilson's weblog about the life of rapper Babak Tighe ('Babak Razorblade'), Elling observes,

> With a powerful history of a boy from the ghetto, who has everything against him, but decides to verbalize his dissatisfaction through rap music, a symbolic and cultural capital for Babak Tighe has been established … he has survived the *real* ghetto … This is a self-representation that one will find with rappers the world over, from Los Angeles and London to Rio de Janeiro and Teheran (2007: 9).

Koli first encountered hip-hop at the age of twelve when she and her friends started listening to artists, mainly from the US. She was drawn to hip-hop and gradually became aware of rappers in Iran, which was a revelation to her. She describes the stark realisation that someone else was singing about her life,

> At first it was so interesting and new that I just listened out of surprise. The things that were said, the ways in which the poetry was shaped … I was attracted by all of this … but when I listened more closely, I

> realised that they were singing about *my* life, *my* pain, *my* experiences. (interview, 17 April 2010)

Koli became involved in the early Tehran hip-hop 'scene' at a time when new songs would be eagerly awaited and discussed on-line,

> In those days, our numbers were very small. One was in the east, one in the north, one in the south or centre … they would sing a song at night and then put it on the Internet. We had a chat room at that time. Everyone met in the room and we debated and discussed, gave our opinions and critiqued the songs. It was very fast. When a song was sung – because there were so few of us and so few songs being produced – when one rap would come out it was *really* listened to. Everyone was waiting to see who had produced what new work. (ibid.)

At that time, there were rap meetings outside the Eskan shopping centre on Thursday evenings; they would often be moved on by police who had no idea what hip-hop was; later, Koli formed Metro 707 with her sister and best friend. For the backing tracks, like other Iranian rappers, Koli uses both downloadable tracks and also has an arrangement with a group which records tracks for her.

Koli cites among her influences rappers such as Tupac and Eminem and singers such as Bob Dylan and Bob Seger. Amongst Iranian artists she has been particularly influenced by Shahin Najafi, a rapper who addresses issues relating to women, most famously in

'*Ma Mard Nistim, To Zan Bash'* ('We are Not Men, You be Women'),[xxx] dedicated to Iran's women's movement and a catalogue of the suffering inflicted on Iranian women,

> Najafi's words are like a cutting blade … when you listen to him it makes your hairs stand up and you become shocked from all these pure and unobstructed words, and so much openness about such issues … for me, it was really interesting how a man could so easily sing about being a woman in Iran, the pains of being a woman. (ibid.)

The case of Koli raises many questions. First, why hip-hop? What does it mean that thirty years after a revolution in which all forms of westernised popular music were banned, that young people, including those from traditionally religious and conservative backgrounds, should ally themselves with a musical style borne out of very different circumstances, as an expression of African-American disenfranchisement? Specifically, it seems intriguing that hip-hop should be embraced by a young woman from a social milieu that has traditionally rejected manifestations of Western culture. With a growing global hip-hop culture on the one hand, and on the other, the long-standing denigration of Western popular culture by official discourses within Iran, one might ask how far the increasing popularity of hip-hop in Iran resonates with the genre's meanings elsewhere.

In response to a question about why hip-hop has become so popular in Iran, Koli replied,

> You know what? At first, you think it's a very hard thing. You have a pain in your being, you want to express it [*be zabān biarish*] in

> whatever way you can. You start to write poetry, and then you find some music. And then you see that they sit together so beautifully. You persevere, you hire a studio and start to sing. And gradually you see that it is possible, you can put into words the pain you have held within you for years; something that you know and others don't know, you can write it and others can listen to you … you feel something in your being is boiling over [*joosh mizaneh*] (ibid.)

Asked how she feels when rapping, Koli said.

> It's a very interesting feeling. You get used to it gradually but every time I stand before the microphone … as a young woman, when you come from a society that … it forces you to think … What are you doing here? What are *you* doing here? Then, I wait … for me, it's an achievement. That I started doing something and have got to a position where not everyone can easily get … of course, I worked hard. Maybe it isn't a very big achievement but in a society like Iran as a woman, and the kind of family background that I have come from … I was swimming against the flow of the river. And just so that I could say that I know things and I hear things and I see things that many people don't pay attention to. And it's necessary for these things to be heard. I felt there are pains that I know and feel that if I write them maybe someone like me would hear it and get comfort from it. I remember a time when I was so alone and saw such hard things. I said to myself, is there

> someone else like me who is suffering in the same way? And that's why when I write about the problems that I had in the past, I think maybe one day a girl like me will hear these songs and if I can say to her that I got myself out of that situation, I got somewhere, and maybe you can as well. All of this so that somehow you can give hope to people. (ibid.)

It is clear from these quotations that rapping is an important form of expression for Koli: both personally, as a means of voicing and coming to terms with past traumatic experiences; and as a commentary on social issues. Writing about trauma and performativity in relation to Koli's work, and drawing on Walter Benjamin's writings on memory and truth, Breyley describes rapping as a form of therapy for Koli and suggests that 'rapping practices serve to perform the unfolding of her personal "fan of memory" and its various "truths"' (2008), including both her personal memory and also the collective 'postmemory'[xxxi] of the Iran-Iraq war that she was born into, in the process helping her move from a feeling of alienation to social 'reinstatement' (ibid.). Beyond this, there's an important sense in which Koli seeks to reach those with similar experiences, even seeing herself as a role model for other girls in her situation: 'Kuoli explains that the articulation of her most personal and traumatic memories always has collective significance; this is partly why rap is, for her, the most effective medium' (ibid.). Perhaps this is part of hip-hop's appeal: allowing artists to frame personal experiences within a broader social framework, seamlessly synthesising the personal and the political, just as it does the local and global. To quote again from Koli,

> When hip-hop arrived in Iran, artists used this tool well to express many things through the mould of this style of music. So, you would suddenly be shocked that someone is singing about, for example, runaway girls or addiction or political issues. You would never have thought [this possible]. In the past, talking about certain things was taboo; you just wouldn't hear about them. But then when rap established itself after a while, you could very easily hear about such things. (ibid.)

Concluding Thoughts. Why Rap?

What does the case of Iran, and specifically that of rapper Koli, tell us about hip-hop as a migrating global genre? And why has it been so avidly adopted in Iran in recent years? The kinds of sentiments expressed by Koli, and which resonate strongly with hip-hop discourses around the world, suggest that hip-hop as a means of expression is the single most important factor in its wide appeal, whether at a personal level as therapeutic outlet, or as a means of making one's literal and figurative voice heard. Time and again, musicians and audiences claim that that hip-hop is a forum unlike any other; as with marginalised voices elsewhere, hip-hop offers a powerful means by which individuals can tell their stories,

> Look, with this music style I can tell a whole story which is impossible in other music styles. I had a lot to say. I have stories that I can express only through this style. Stories about the problems in the society and the problems I've gone through. It is only this genre that can capture the

> attention of the audience to what you want to say. That is why I turned to this genre.[xxxii]

In the words of Hichkas, 'you can speak about anything in it. And since most of it is verbal, it's possible to say a lot of things and open up subjects'[xxxiii]; as noted above, this is significant in the context of a civil-society discourse which encouraged debate and plurality in the public domain. The fact that the end of Khatami's presidency (2004) coincided with hip-hop's meteoric rise is maybe not coincidental: as the new regime started to rein in public debate, some of this was perhaps diverted into hip-hop. Several artists sing about the power of rap to reveal the truth. For instance, the official Mousavi campaign song '*Mibarim Ma*' (see footnote 7) includes the line, 'Rap has become an excuse to speak the truth, anyone who says otherwise is lying', at the same time subtly commenting on hip-hop's officially contested status. There's also the fact that rap speaks 'In the current everyday language of the youth of Iran' (Sahand Qazi, member of Raplarzeh, personal communication, July 2009). Certainly, a constant theme emerges of hip-hop providing a forum to talk about real issues which are ignored by the mainstream (and largely government-controlled) media.

To return to the charge often made by the authorities that hip-hop is a 'foreign' import – something particularly pertinent in relation to those social classes where popular music continues to be problematic – it is significant that most rappers, Koli included, don't regard hip-hop as foreign at all. Besides the fact that '*Rap-e farsi* has developed a distinctly "Iranian" sound and identity' (Johnston 2008: 108) through references to poets such as Rumi and Hafez and to traditional music, there's also an important sense in which

hip-hop's recent popularity can be understood not as the adoption of something culturally distant, but as an extension both of the centuries-old centrality of poetry to Iranian culture generally, and specifically the use of poetry as a vehicle for social comment.[xxxiv] Moreover, just as rock musicians – through their musical choices – problematise accepted notions of belonging and what it means to be Iranian in the global context of the twenty-first century (Nooshin 2005b: 480–4), so through the adoption of this migrating style hip-hop artists assert new and complex identities which are both rooted locally and shaped by a broader global consciousness.

In relation to the changing social demographics of Iranian popular music, seen most strikingly in hip-hop, the association with African-American culture is important. Although issues of 'race' are rarely addressed by rappers, the explicit link with 'ghetto culture' noted above can be understood as a form of postcolonial empathy with the 'disempowered'. Koli talks about using hip-hop as a weapon to expose social inequalities and *The Glass House* even includes a passing reference to Latin American revolutionaries and leaders of the US civil rights movement,

> Che Guevara and Zapata are my leaders
> Martin Luther King and Malcolm X are black but they are my colour[xxxv]

In this way, local concerns and global consciousness are brought to bear on one another in ways which are quite new to Iranian music.

Other reasons have been suggested for hip-hop's popularity and the inroads it has made into disadvantaged areas. First, in comparison with other popular genres, hip-hop requires little specialist technology and is thus relatively cheap to produce, 'Rap invites creativity with language, one resource available to all' (Breyley 2009). Both entertaining and thought provoking, hip-hop provides a refreshing alternative to saccharine mainstream pop. Some have claimed that it is simply a matter of fashion, that hip-hop is a passing fad that has acquired a certain caché. Whilst artists themselves dismiss this idea, Bilan et al (2010) suggest a recent decline in popularity as the novelty of the hip-hop phenomenon starts to wear off. At the same time, there are indications that the government is starting to realise the potential of hip-hop as a way of reaching young people. I have already noted the choice of hip-hop for Mousavi's 2009 Presidential election campaign song, a clear attempt to attract the youth vote. In February 2010, a pro-government YouTube video was posted showing aerial shots of street parades on the anniversary of the revolution set to a hip-hop track.[xxxvi] Indeed, according to Bilan et al. (2010), a team of filmmakers has been tasked with making a documentary film about Iranian rap artists to be shown to members of the Iranian Parliament as a means of informing them about hip-hop. All of this suggests a possible shift in future strategy from confrontation to control (as happened for cinema in the 1980s and for pop music in the late 1990s). How any such 'mainstreaming' will impact on the trajectory and future meanings of Iranian hip-hop remains to be seen.

In this chapter, I have explored the question of why hip-hop has gained such a presence in Iran in recent years, and increasingly amongst those social groups which have hitherto rejected western popular culture. Most obviously, the privileging of text and message

provides an ideal medium through which artists can make their voices heard. Whether the voice which hip-hop offers can effect anything beyond provisional empowerment to rappers such as Koli remains to be seen. Musical styles migrate and are adopted because they answer a need. In Iran, hip-hop has become indigenised or 're-emplaced' (to quote from Solomon), creating a space of its own within which local meanings can be inflected against a global backdrop, and where the personal becomes the social.

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[i] The fluid boundaries between terms such as 'genre', 'style', 'idiom', and so on, have been addressed by several authors (see in particular Holt 2007: 12–20). One might argue that rapping is a *style* of delivery within the broader *genre* of hip-hop music, although the term hip-hop of course also refers to a broader sub-cultural entity that goes well beyond music. Clearly, choices in relation to terminology are far from neutral. Holt, for instance, points to the connections between 'genre' and notions of both biological lineage and the fixing of certain types, leading to the eventual emergence of a canon. To my mind, 'hip-hop' implies both style (of the music, text, delivery, performance, and so on) and genre in the sense of a type of music with its own identity, but one that is (like all genres) constantly in flux.

[ii] The particular song (lyrics and music video) analysed by Solomon is 'Istanbul' by *Nefret*. Solomon has written extensively on the Turkish rap scene; see, for example, 2005b and 2008.

[iii] Whilst it is not possible to give a detailed overview of the academic literature on 'global' hip-hop, useful writings in addition to those mentioned include Pardue (2004, 2008) and Baker (2005). For a different perspective, see Tan's (2009) discussion of the appropriation of hip-hop by the Singapore state governing body for music, film, print and television for an in-house promotional video which aimed to present its employees as 'cool', but which took on a life of its own as it was circulated around the Internet. Several documentary films have been made about hip-hop around the world including, for the Middle East, *Slingshot Hip Hop* (2008, Jackie Reem Salloum) about Palestinian hip-hop and *I Love Hip Hop in Morocco* (2006, Joshua Asen and Jennifer Needleman).

[iv] Also widely known as *rap-e farsi* since the lyrics tend to be in the Farsi language (Persian).

[v] In contrast, perhaps, with the predominant class associations of popular music in Europe and the US.

[vi] Whilst class issues are complex, there is a clear divide in Tehran between the affluent, cosmopolitan and 'westernised' middle and upper classes of north Tehran and the less affluent, more traditional and more overtly religious in the south, a divide marked visually through the manner of dressing, particularly for women. See Nooshin 2009: 256–7.

[vii] As reported by a number of observers. See, for instance, a video of breakdancing in Park-e Mellat, southern Tehran, in 2007 <www.youtube.com/watch?v=j5pQbJUp6U0&feature=fvw> (accessed 14 May 2010); also 'Persian Rap Meeting Ariashahr', a competitive meeting in a public space in 2008 (and marked as suitable for those over the age of 18) <www.youtube.com/watch?v=_neuonS-tvM> (accessed 14 May 2010). Rapper Salome (see below) is also a graffiti artist.

[viii] Raplarzeh recorded the official song for Mir Hossein Mousavi's 2009 Presidential election campaign. '*Mibarim Ma*' ('We Will Win') is a dancey rap piece which can be heard on <www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XpuBSqqlBo> (accessed 2 March 2010).

[ix] See <www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYXW5lpEJps> (accessed 12 March 2010) and discussion in Elling 2007: 7–8.
[x] See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QU1NNAH6b_g> (accessed 18 August 2010).
[xi] See <www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdjCjaI-Ojc> (accessed 15 May 2010).
[xii] For instance, Hichkas references pre-revolutionary singers Googoosh and Delkash; and Yas and Hichkas include sounds from Iranian classical music in their backing tracks. Johnston (2008: 111–16) discusses the use of 'indigenising' elements by hip-hop artists, including dedications to Medieval poets such as Rumi and Hafez, drawing on traditional music, and invocations to religiosity, particularly Sufism: 'Iranian rap is often perceived as secular and anti-religious, but in fact shows that Iranian youths have not forsaken their ancient culture of spirituality' (114). She suggests that this is one way in which artists seek to reach older audiences for what is generally regarded as a music for young people.
[xiii] See, for instance, Yas's response to the film *300* and its alleged misrepresentation of Iranians, '*Hoviate Man*' ('My Identity') <www.youtube.com/watch?v=VdJClWSMNT0> (accessed 17 May 2010).
[xiv] For example '*Nameh-i be Rais Jomhour*' ('Letter to the President') by Bahram, presumably influenced by US rapper Tupac's song of the same name.
[xv] Particularly US foreign policy in the Middle East, and the Israel/Palestine issue. See '*George-e Goosh Kon*' ('Listening George') by Geev (Mowlaei 2008: 10).
[xvi] It should be noted that the 'government' is by no means a unified body and has long been divided on questions of cultural policy. Interestingly, such rhetoric is similar to that used against popular music in the early 1980s; and there are also parallels with media representations of hip-hop elsewhere. See Binder's (1993) discussion of the negative media discourses surrounding heavy metal and (the more racialised discourses around) hip-hop in the US in the mid-1980s to early 90s.
[xvii] The many songs which directly reference Tehran include '*Tehran*' by (female) rapper Pani and '*Shahr-e Gom Shodeh'* ('Lost City') by Kami MC; the latter presents a nostalgic view of old Tehran which is contrasted with the problems of the city today.
[xviii] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9WLGglo0cRc> (accessed 18 May 2010): 1'11 to 1'19. *Ekhtelaf* also features in Bahman Ghobadi's 2009 film *No One knows about Persian Cats*.
[xix] See interview with Salome <www.kolahstudio.com/Underground/?p=192> (accessed 12 May 2010). Ghogha can be seen performing '*Aroosake Kooki*' ('Wind-up Doll') at the 2010 'Voices of Change' festival <www.youtube.com/watch?v=J8AlsR5oEjU&feature=related> (accessed 28 March 2010).
[xx] *The Glass House* (2008), dir. Hamid Rahmanian and Melissa Hibbard, Fictionville Studio <http://fictionvillestudio.com/> (accessed 18 May 2010). The film focuses on the personal stories of four women, including Koli.
[xxi] See Breyley 2009 for discussion of a rap by Koli about the rape and murder of a 9-year old boy.
[xxii] See <www.omid-e-mehr.org/> (accessed 27 May 2010) for the aims of the foundation, its activities, and some of the stories of the girls and women who have been helped.
[xxiii] Omid-e Mehr Foundation Annual Report 2006–7, page 8.
[xxiv] Information on Koli's life is taken from *The Glass House*, from correspondence (in Persian and English, May 2009) and personal interview (in Persian, translated by the author, April 2010).
[xxv] Personal correspondence, May 2009.

[xxvi] *The Glass House*, 1:26:44 to 1:27:24. The translation (in the English subtitles) does not preserve the rhyming patterns of the original Persian. All the lyrics presented here are by Koli.
[xxvii] 1:27:45 to 1:28:43.
[xxviii] 1:29:04 to 1:29:56.
[xxix] *The Glass House*, 1:13:33 to 1:14:22.
[xxx] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_c-5jJCZxE> (accessed 12 May 2010). Najafi left Iran in 2005 and now lives in Germany. The opening lyrics give some idea of the tone of this song: 'Like the girl with the hymen sewn/And the poor one in the fire thrown/Like my mother's oppressed lot/Summed up in her kettle and pot/Her body yet unseen/Her veiling unforeseen …'. My thanks to Shahin Najafi for sharing this translation with me.
[xxxi] 'the response of the second generation to the trauma of the first … Postmemory most specifically describes the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents …' (Hirsch 2001: 8,9, quoted in Breyley 2008).
[xxxii] 'An Interview with Yas, a Rapper from the Persian Underground Hip-hop Scene of Tehran', Nassir Mashkouri (10/29/2007) <http://zirzamin.se/?q=node/198> (accessed 18 May 2010).
[xxxiii] Hamid Monebatti, 'Before Us There Was No One Else – An Interview with Soroush Lashkari', 15 May 2009 <www.zirzamin.org/?q=node/776> (accessed 17 May 2010).
[xxxiv] With the important difference that the poetics of Iranian hip-hop tend to be deliberately forthright in comparison with the veiled and ambiguous messages in poetry from the medieval period through to the present day.
[xxxv] Yaghi, *The Glass House*, 14:40.
[xxxvi] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HbYqckFvUJI> (accessed 18 August 2010)