

GHETTO MACHINES: HIP-HOP AND INTRA-URBAN BORDERS IN ISTANBUL

Kevin Yıldırım

Abstract: *In this paper, I look at how the Istanbul hip-hop group Tahribad-ı İsyân has symbolized the expropriation of Sulukule, a predominantly Romani neighborhood demolished by municipal powers under the guise of urban renewal. By examining how the local government enacted this project, and showing how similar neoliberal city management policies instigated widespread social unrest across Turkey in 2013, I set the stage for a music video analysis that makes two ultimate claims. First, I propose that hip-hop enables the group to overcome the debilitating effects of enforced gentrification by recasting Sulukule's urban decay as a "ghettocentric" urban landscape. Second, and in dialogue with the work of the Turkish urban geographers Ozan Karaman and Tolga Islam, I suggest that Tahribad-ı İsyân provides evidence of how music can construct bounded intra-urban identities amid discourses of borderless and open cities.*

Keywords: *Istanbul; hip-hop; urban renewal; urban borders*

Stand Up

On April 13, 2013, the hip-hop group Tahribad-ı İsyân performed at a festival in Istanbul's Gezi Park, which only weeks later became the focal point of widespread and monumental social unrest across Turkey. Organized by the Taksim Solidarity Group (*Taksim Dayanışması*), the festival was named *Ayağa Kalk* (Stand Up); the subheading on its flyer (Fig. 1) invited local residents to come together in hopes of saving the park (*Parkımızı birlikte kurtaralım*) from imminent destruction. A redevelopment plan announced in September 2011 had called for the park's demolition. In its place, a consortium was to build a commercial plaza in the style of the Ottoman artillery barracks that had

occupied the site until 1940, when, as part of Henri Prost's master plan to modernize Istanbul¹, they were torn down and replaced by the *İnönü Gezisi* (The İnönü Promenade, later Gezi Park). When preliminary stages of this plan were initiated, scores of Istanbul residents staged an occupation of the park, and the antagonistic police intervention that followed led in turn to unprecedented protests against the ruling government, the AK Party².

But while scenes of the Gezi Park protests were too often violent³, the mood on this Saturday evening was peaceful; the park exhibited a true capability for recreation. With two friends, I joined a few thousand people in gathering around a large stage set up along the park's western edge. Many of those around us were teenagers and young adults, sitting in groups on the grass, drinking beers and eating sunflower seeds. Young fathers maneuvered through the crowd with toddlers sitting upright on their shoulders, the latter waving miniature Turkish flags in the air. The majority of attendees stood facing the stage in anticipation, dancing and singing along to the music coming from the PA system. The live music, meant to start at six o'clock, was predictably behind schedule, but amid the excitement, no one seemed to mind.

While it is almost certain that Gezi Park's endangerment prompted the participation of every performer on the festival's program, perhaps no other act was as familiar with the perils of Istanbul's urban redevelopment policies as Tahrirad-ı İsyân; they are a hip-hop group whose name, tellingly, roughly translates into

¹ In Murat Gül's words, "the reorganization of Taksim Square was the centerpiece of [Henri] Prost's master plan" (116) for the modernization of Istanbul. With its straight walkways and contemporary design, the construction of the İnönü Promenade reflected the secular and modern character of the young Turkish Republic, and Gül argues that it was the most successfully implemented aspect of Prost's project. The park's symbolic value has been augmented in recent decades, during which Taksim Square has become the city's leading site of public protest. The square has witnessed aggressive interactions between government forces and demonstrators on many occasions, with perhaps the most famous incident occurring on May 1, 1977, in which 34 people were killed as the result of clashes between Labor Day protestors and the police. Taksim Square has since become a beacon of public expression and dissent. As a result, some interpreted 2011's redevelopment plan as a measure to silence oppositional voices.

² Known in Turkish as AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, The Justice and Development Party), the AK Party assumed political power across much of Turkey in 2002 and have increased their share in every national election since. As part of the most prominent Islamic political movement in Turkey, the AK Party has controlled Istanbul since 1994, when the current Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan won a highly contested mayoral race.

³ See Yaman 2014, who notes that eight people were killed and that journalists and peaceful protestors alike were attacked by the police throughout the period now known as the Gezi Park protests of 2013.



Figure 1: The Poster for the Ayağa Kalk (Stand Up) festival.
 Source: <http://everywheretaksim.net/tr/radikal-gezi-parki-icin-ayaga/>.

English as “The Destruction of Rage.” Since Tahribad-ı İsyân’s formation in 2009, group members Zen-G, Slang, and V-Z have identified and been closely aligned with Sulukule, a centuries-old and predominantly Romani neighborhood in the city’s Fatih district. Formerly known as a thriving entertainment

district and the locus of Romani culture, much of Sulukule was expropriated and destroyed by the Fatih Municipality as part of an urban renewal project beginning in 2006. The neighborhood, sadly, no longer exists in effect; a sterile “luxury” residential development, inelegantly designed with neo-Ottoman touches, now takes its place inside of the city’s ancient Theodosian Walls. This paper adds to the sizeable body of academic analyses on Sulukule’s unfortunate transition⁴ from the point of view of young residents who have appropriated hip-hop in order to redefine their potentially shameful urban geography with empowering terminology. I argue that by casting the physical boundaries of the new Sulukule in line with global hip-hop and contemporary urban design, Tahribad-ı İsyân concocts a new and empowering image of the neighborhood to overcome its top-down restructuring.

Renewal in Sulukule

Before the struggle to protect Gezi Park caught the nation’s attention, Sulukule exemplified aggressive urban redevelopment in Istanbul. Its government-led renewal project attracted unprecedented amounts of civic outcry, but public efforts to halt it were futile owing to a number of laws passed in the early 2000s (Karaman 2013; Somersan & Kirca-Schroeder 2010). Critics of the project claimed that not only were the rights of residents ignored and manipulated by officials, but also that occasional comments from the latter group imbued the project with racist and classist overtones⁵. In response, government personnel appealed to various municipal laws⁶ that had been recently passed as part of a national initiative to justify the need for a radical market-oriented reform of public administration; these laws were introduced by AK Party officials who believed that the first wave of economic liberalization in the 1990s had brought

⁴ See Van Dobben 2014, Aksoy and Robins 2011, Foggo 2007, Somersan and Kirca-Schroeder 2010, Karaman and Islam 2011, Karaman 2014.

⁵ See Karaman 2014, who writes that “the renewal project has displaced more than five thousand people living in the area, and is carried out in the name of “cleaning away the monstrosity” as Prime Minister Erdoğan (2008) put it” (296).

⁶ Among these were the Law on Metropolitan Municipalities, the Law on Municipalities (both passed in 2004), and especially Law no. 5366 on the “Preservation by Renovation and Utilisation by Revitalisation of Deteriorated Immovable Historical and Cultural Properties” (passed in 2005) (Karaman 2013: 6). While the first two apply to all urban renewal projects in Istanbul, Law no. 5366 was crafted to justify redevelopment in historical neighborhoods that are governed by conservation laws, as Sulukule was.

insufficient growth. They encouraged municipalities to behave like semi-autonomous market actors by granting them the right to privatize public assets, implement urban renewal projects, participate in public-private partnerships, form private firms or real estate partnerships with outside enterprises, and to receive loans from national and international financial institutions (Karaman 2013: 5–6). One of the major areas in which municipalities have enacted their newfound entrepreneurial right is in the redevelopment of residential urban areas, wherein the main actor is the Turkish Housing Development Administration (*TOKİ*), a government institution founded in 1984 to address housing shortages which, since the AK Party's ascent to power, has transformed into a major real estate actor on the national stage.

For the government and allied business interests, urban redevelopment projects have two major benefits. First, in replacing sub-standard and illegally built housing located in central areas, significant rent gaps are released; some analysts have predicted that widespread urban renewal in Istanbul would increase real estate values three times over (Şenol 2007). Second, and perhaps more importantly, urban renewal “would incorporate these informal and only partially visible spaces into the formal circuits of capital accumulation, thereby completing the transition from a populist to a neoliberal mode of governance of property markets” (Karaman 2013: 6). Concomitantly, AK Party-led urban renewal in Istanbul alters Istanbul's socio-economic climate in two ways; the first, of increased rents, is perhaps more palpable to the average citizen, while the second, of structural change, is perceptible only in the long-term and represents a seismic change in Istanbul's economic order.

The significance of this second ramification is not to deny the real-life hardships endured by victims of Istanbul's so-called neoliberal urban policy. As details of the Sulukule project were announced in late 2005, the practical consequences of the city's push for free-market rule began, in this case, to clarify: at least 571 predominantly Romani houses were to be destroyed, displacing more than five thousand residents in the process (Somersan & Kirca-Schroeder 2010: 98, Karaman 2014: 296). The municipality presented an impractical relocation plan to those residents fortunate enough to possess home ownership documents, but the majority of Sulukule residents – either lacking such proof or refusing to move from their longstanding home – opted to disperse in and around the nearby neighborhood of Karagümrük. The result, as Van Dobben Schoon puts it, is that the former inhabitants of Sulukule have become a “dislocated community” (658).

It is thus not surprising, given Sulukule's rich musical history⁷, that neighborhood youth have turned to music to express the disillusionment and hurt that comes with such a transition. Through volunteer-run organizations like the Sulukule Gençlik Orkestrası (*Sulukule Youth Orchestra*), the traditions of Romani music do live on, but nowhere is the social revitalization of the neighborhood more visible than in its burgeoning and youthful hip-hop scene. In the aftermath of the neighborhood's destruction, the members of Tahribad-ı İsyân have led a loose assortment of teenagers and children – mostly male, but not exclusively so – to embrace hip-hop as a fresh and emancipating lifestyle. "Hip-hop makes you civilized," group member Slang told me, "instead of fighting someone, you can answer with your art." The spread of hip-hop music, clothing, and indeed its self-empowering message – here enunciated by Slang – owes much to weekly hip-hop workshops put on by the members of Tahribad-ı İsyân; the gatherings take place in the volunteer-run Sulukule Çocuk Sanat Atölyesi (*Sulukule Children's Art Atelier*), just across the street from the new residential development. There, children whose families have opted to stay in the area learn to rap, compose freestyle (improvised) verses, and foster positive relationships with one another by engaging in shared musical practice. The members of Tahribad-ı İsyân oversee the workshops, acting as instructors and role models for the younger participants, though they themselves are barely of adult age (Fig. 2). Interestingly, while each member of Tahribad-ı İsyân is a genuine member of the Sulukule community, only one of them actually grew up in the neighborhood and claims Romani heritage. Their collective willingness to identify with Sulukule likely derives from the institutional support offered by a vast network of volunteers and activists, a drive to become actors within this network, and Sulukule's aesthetic and socio-political potential as an urban ghetto. I explain this last motivation in the rest of this paper.

Because hip-hop is now an exciting and empowering creative field in Sulukule, allowing disaffected young people the chance for self-expression, those interested in the social effects of urban renewal in Istanbul should carefully engage with musical output emitted from the area. As people, we can get a sense of the artists' struggle, and as researchers of popular music, we can

⁷ Until the early 1990s, it was home to many entertainment houses (*eğlence evleri*), where mostly Romani residents would perform music and dance for paying customers from outside the district. This was, in fact, the economic and social lifeblood of the neighborhood. According to Karaman and Islam, the downfall of the neighborhood began with the government's decision to close many of the entertainment houses in 1992.



Figure 2: The youthful hip-hop scene in Sulukule, including members of Tahribad-ı İsyân. Source: Tahribad-ı İsyân “Ghetto Machines” video.

begin to understand the appeal of hip-hop for distressed urban inhabitants. The need to engage with the music of Tahribad-ı İsyân, the beacons of Sulukule hip-hop, becomes all the more pressing when we realize, as I did at the *Ayağa Kalk* festival in Gezi Park, that the group’s concerns over the aggressive top-down transformation of Istanbul do not apply just to Sulukule and its residents, but to the city’s public spaces and to those who worry about their annexation by capitalist developers. In an ironic twist, the demolition of Sulukule has proved auspicious for Tahribad-ı İsyân’s career. Associations with the imagery of urban ruin and a network of liberal and artistically-minded volunteers, both of which germinated from the renewal project, have helped the group develop from relatively powerless lower-class teenagers into protagonists of the Istanbul Biennial⁸ and mainstays at anti-government music festivals like *Ayağa Kalk*. All to say, the group’s association with Sulukule has garnered them a fan base of those sympathetic to the plight of the urban dispossessed.

The connections between Tahribad-ı İsyân and attendees of *Ayağa Kalk* do not end with fandom. Facing the homogenization of their city at the hands

⁸ A video for the group’s song “Wonderland,” shot by Turkish artist Halil Altındere, premiered at the 2013 Istanbul Biennial and featured in both domestic and foreign reports of the Biennial’s political bent. See Batty 2013; Yalçinkaya 2014.

of real estate developers and politicians⁹, both parties sought to redefine their intimate geography, choosing to highlight their unique values in order to resist the often-unseen forces who want to restructure these places as part of capitalist enterprise. Thus, the public space of Gezi Park became “our park” on the *Ayağa Kalk* flyer – an entity that residents must “save” from the unsavory potentials of redevelopment. I saw many other physical manifestations of this attitude during the government protests of 2013, but one placard captured the local opposition to top-down restructuring with unparalleled concision: it read “Don’t touch my home, my neighborhood, my city” (*Evime, mahalleme, kentime dokunma*). The parallels with the efforts to save Sulukule are clear to see. These localities, from the personal to the urban, again seem to be imagined in opposition to the forces – often unarticulated – which impose global mandates on citizens’ public and private lives. The difference is that while Sulukule residents were powerless to defend their homes from the realization of the Municipality’s plan, Gezi Park protestors benefited from their site’s visibility and, to this date, have succeeded in protecting the park from redevelopment. So as Tahribad-ı İsyân took to the stage at Gezi Park that April night, and launched into their aggressive-sounding track “Ghetto Machines,” the audience responded in cheers that signified an appreciation of their music, yes, but also populist support in the face of top-down urban policy.

The cheers, it should be said, likely had to do with the popularity of the “Ghetto Machines” video as well, which since being uploaded to YouTube in 2012 has amassed more than 400,000 views. I imagine that many of the group’s fans in attendance had been introduced to the group by watching the video on the internet, as I had been the previous year. The video had been made in a spirit of collaboration: enlisting the help of activist photographer Nejla Osseiran and children from the Sulukule Children’s Art Atelier, Tahribad-ı İsyân were responsible for most of the video’s stylistic direction. They largely improvised ideas for the shoot and chose their favorites in the editing room later. “We weren’t really influenced by anything,” Zen-G told me, reflecting on the

⁹ The discourse surrounding the city’s changing landscape has been near-constant in liberal circles recently, with the most common narrative pitting residents’ right to the city against business interests who wish to remake Istanbul as a receptacle of global capital. *Ekümenopolis*, a Turkish documentary from 2011 that is revered by many Istanbul liberals, embodies the left’s standard narrative when it contends that the onset of neoliberalism in post-1980s Istanbul has amounted to a “greedy vision based on real estate speculation, shopping mall frenzy, and the construction of identical concrete slabs [which] not only takes Istanbul away from its inhabitants under the guise of [developing] a touristic, financial, and cultural center, but also requires the plunder of the [city’s] northern forests.”

aesthetics and direction of the video. “We just did whatever came from inside of us.” We should look to the video, then, as collaboration between three principal bodies: Tahribad-ı İsyân, the volunteer network of activists around Sulukule, and the neighborhood’s younger generation. And because Tahribad-ı İsyân enjoyed complete agency in creating their visual environment, to analyze the “Ghetto Machines” video is to give warranted attention to Sulukule’s new generation, the way they wished to be seen¹⁰. The group has repeatedly told me that videos are a key medium for their music, and “Ghetto Machines” and other videos have, indeed, attracted them the most attention: they have been viewed by hundreds of thousands online, and plentiful others in contemporary art exhibits as far away as Brazil, and as prestigious as the Museum of Modern Art in New York¹¹. Though what follows is undoubtedly my own interpretation of the video, I hope to communicate the potential of music video analysis for popular music scholars, particularly those working in visually rich musical subcultures like hip-hop.

Urban Borders

Before looking at a few shots from the video, I want to direct attention to the work of urban geographers Ozan Karaman and Tolga Islam, who in 2011 introduced the historic neighborhood of Sulukule in terms of “bordering;” the idea is borrowed from cell biology but applicable to intercity neighborhoods all the same. “An entity is defined by its borders,” they write, adding that urban boundaries differ from their biological counterparts in that they often are “inchoate” and “escape facile designation” (2011: 1). To counter this ambivalence, “border” becomes “bordering,” signifying “an ongoing process of regulating mobility of flows (of people, goods, information) through which distinct places are defined and identified” (ibid.). In other words, while the idea of “borders” implies concrete and well-defined boundaries, “bordering” allows for them to be nascent, incomplete, degenerative, or any such state that denotes fluidity and incompleteness. In the context of urban geography, “bordering” defines the phenomenon of boundary generation most effectively: the term refers at once to the blurred aspects of intra-city boundaries, and the ongoing nature of their (de)construction. Questioning the nature of intra-urban borders from

¹⁰ The video for the group’s song “Wonderland” (see footnote 8), for instance, attracted significant controversy over what some saw as misrepresentation of the Sulukule hip-hop scene by director Halil Altındere. See Van Dobben Schoon (2014).

¹¹ See Demir 2014.

a politico-ethical point of view, Karaman and Islam suggest that a case study of Sulukule may provide answers when asking a question thoroughly of our times: “to what extent are intra-urban borders acceptable at a time of proliferating discourses about a borderless world, and open cities?” (ibid.). This recognition, of so-called closed and open places existing in flux with one another, informs a principal point of their paper, one from which my own, currently, will proceed. “Intra-urban borders,” they write, “may disable by excluding strangers, yet they also enable by defining a communal territory” (ibid.: 2).

The concept of “bordering” in Sulukule is important due to the neighborhood’s long-standing marginality and physical and social distinction. Situated just inside of the city’s ancient walls in a conservative neighborhood, Sulukule’s marginal location within the old city provides a backdrop for its “closed” aspect in later years. It’s vital to understand that the neighborhood’s peripheral location in the old city has little to do with land claims. Sulukule was in fact one of the oldest neighborhoods in the city, part of a select group in which the street patterns of Ottoman-era Istanbul were still visible. But the history of it as a Romani settlement extends far past the Ottoman Empire, as there are accounts of Romani inhabitants there as far back as the year 1050. Once they settled around the walls, in Karaman and Islam’s view, Romani residents constructed “a variety of physical factors [that] separated Sulukule from its immediate surroundings” (ibid.). These included complex street patterns, culs-de-sac, and narrow passageways. And just as there were physical instances of “bordering”, there were also social ones. Karaman writes elsewhere that Sulukule was also very rare in terms of the existence of a highly communitarian lifestyle, and that most of the residents were related to one another. Moreover, there was a lack of basic amenities in the neighborhood’s living spaces, which meant that Sulukule’s communitarian lifestyle most often materialized in public spaces: the streets, courtyards, gardens, etc. It is also likely that the neighborhood’s collectivism was at least in part a reaction against widespread anti-Romani sentiments among the Turkish public and its institutions. This recognition, of so-called closed and open places existing in flux, informs their claim that neighborhood boundaries operate in two very different ways. First, they can allow communities to survive by claiming territory as their own, and second, they can also isolate communities by marginalization at the hands of outside majorities. By looking at how the “Ghetto Machines” music video interacts with these concepts, I will show that part of hip-hop’s appeal for the community in question is its capacity to reframe urban decay as something positive. For Tahrabad-ı İsyân, hip-hop is an enabling device that overcomes marginalization.

Ghetto Machines

“Ghetto Machines” is a short (two minutes and nineteen seconds) rap song recorded and put to video by Tahribad-ı İsyân in 2011 and 2012 respectively. Musically speaking, the song has a simple verse-chorus structure that highlights individual contribution: each of the group’s three members delivers a verse in turn, separated by a chorus sung by Slang. Compared with other songs by the group, the lyrics are non-provocative and politically tame in that they center on casual boasting and the expressive power of hip-hop¹². As a visual document, the video conforms to hip-hop standards in two principal ways. First, it depicts the artists’ local neighborhood without a narrative arc, showcasing instead a variety of shots of the group in and around the crumbling houses and derelict streets of the old Sulukule. Second, in featuring low-angle camera shots, washed out colors, graffiti-inspired digital graphics, and young people dressed in hip-hop clothing, the video engages with the aesthetics of mainstream hip-hop. Both of these points are instrumental in constructing Tahribad-ı İsyân’s urban landscape as “ghettocentric,” a term Nelson George refers to as “making the values and lifestyles of America’s poverty-stricken urban homelands central to one’s being” (1992: 95). By enlisting these globalized stylistic and aesthetics standards, the “Ghetto Machines” video responds to the opening of Sulukule’s borders by promoting a new and communal vision for the neighborhood.

Following the video’s opening shot (Fig. 3), which shows the border between the new development and older houses in the midst of demolition, we see various shots of the urban landscape around Sulukule, of which I want to discuss three in particular.

The first consists of shots of group members in closed spaces that look out onto the urban environment (Fig. 4). This image is an example of how the video uses ghettocentric aesthetics in order to comment on urban dilapidation. With its blackened interior, this shot orients group member Slang and the viewer to the realities of locality in Sulukule, in which public areas overrode private ones in terms of social importance. Though Slang is inside of a building here, our attention is drawn to what is outside; careful attention to the background

¹² From Zen-G’s verse: “Flow yapabilir koma” (This flow can put you in a coma); from V-Z’s verse: “Bak bu kalem benim helalim, yok haberim, yaşadıklarım da benim kaderim” (Look this pen is my partner, no it’s my message, my fate in what I’ve lived through); from Slang’s verse: “Satır başı yine hayat, hip-hop lafa dayak” (At the start of a line [of writing] there’s life again, hip-hop’s a beating for your empty words).

reveals the urban conditions of post-redevelopment Sulukule: no more than a bleak, lifeless, run-down neighborhood. The aestheticized contrast between interior and exterior space suggests that Sulukule's once vibrant public sphere has been reduced to dereliction. Having lost their principal social territory, those displaced by the redevelopment have little to turn to. The shot, then, amounts to a critique of the renewal project and its effects on locality, as if Istanbul's urban policy has led to abandoned houses, decaying walls, and unchecked power lines. The social hazards on view in this shot, and others with similar visual orientations, are not entirely lost on the viewing public; YouTube user Qaramsar Qara confirms the dangerous appearance of the neighborhood when commenting on a similar shot of Asil in a darkened interior space (00:47 of the video). He (mistakenly) identifies the location as the site of a recent murder of an American female tourist, and mockingly asks the group if there is anything suspicious going on¹³. Though he is almost certainly joking, his comment acknowledges that the video's unabashed treatment of urban dereliction has been transmitted to and absorbed by its viewers.

The video, however, does not only lament the loss of positive local space. While its commentary on changes in public space does amount to a critique of the redevelopment plan, the "Ghetto Machines" video introduces and tacitly celebrates a new vision of locality in Sulukule. Here, two concepts discussed in depth in Adam Krims' book *Music and Urban Geography* are revealing. The first is of integrated aestheticized space, which refers to the tendency in advanced capitalist cities to "coordinate aspects of urban spaces to unified, or complementary, aestheticized purposes" (Krims 2007: XXXI). The second is of design intensity, which Krims defines as "the tendency in advanced societies for products and services to owe much of their value to aspects of design and informational content, and for design and informational aspects of products and services to develop rapidly."¹⁴

Both of the shots I have shown from "Ghetto Machines" reflect how integrated aestheticized spaces can rely on design-intensity to instigate cultural regeneration and add value to urban environments. The video celebrates locality

¹³ See the comment section of the "Ghetto Machines" video on YouTube. Qaramsar Qara writes: 00:47 amerikalı fotoğrafçı kadının öldürüldüğü yer :D hayırdır gençler :D (00:47 is the spot where the American photographer [the tourist was taking pictures of the city walls at the time of her murder] was killed :D what's going on guys :D).

¹⁴ For a more in-depth look at how design-intensity interacts with advanced capitalism in Istanbul and Sulukule, please see Yıldırım (forthcoming).



Figure 3: The opening shot of the “Ghetto Machines” video.
Source: Tahribad-ı İsyân “Ghetto Machines” video.

Figure 4: Darkened interiors in the “Ghetto Machines” video.
Source: Tahribad-ı İsyân “Ghetto Machines” video.



in Sulukule by aestheticizing its damaged environment, thereby reconstructing urban bleakness into a ghettocentric setting. Both shots feature dilapidated urban environments, which in the context of the song's name and its musical style, come to symbolically represent the ghetto of Sulukule. In doing so, the video concocts a vision of the neighborhood as an integrated aestheticized space. When we consider that the government imposed their own, top-down aesthetic on Sulukule, an aesthetic that hints at the imperial hegemony of the Ottoman Empire no less, the remodeling of Sulukule as a ghetto amounts to a populist claim for self-representation. The ghetto has so often served as a key site of black popular music for two interlinked reasons. The site at once roots musicians to their local neighborhoods and connects them to other ghetto inhabitants. So when teenagers from Sulukule claims through rap music that their neighborhood is a ghetto, they connect themselves and their milieu to other oppressed communities from around the world. This is what George Lipsitz had in mind when he claimed that one of the functions of Black Nationalism has been to "turn national minorities into global majorities" (1994: 31) by uniting people of color.

I asked Slang once why he preferred hip-hop to traditional music, and he answered simply that "this was the age of hip-hop". I want to resist the temptation to brush this off, and suggest instead that one aspect of hip-hop's great relevance for young people today is its capacity to contain and transmit symbolic information. In comparison to the more traditional music cultures available to youth in Sulukule – principally in the Romani tradition – hip-hop offers more opportunities for participants to engage with contemporary globalized culture and aesthetic signifiers, which may be an end in and of itself. As a subculture with culturally significant and ubiquitous visual signifiers around the world – think of the rise of baggy clothing and graffiti over the last thirty years – hip-hop can not only empower young people to reclaim their neighborhood, but also offer a platform from which entrance to the information-rich world at large is made possible.

The second notable image of the "Ghetto Machines" video (Fig. 5) serves as a focal point in this regard; we see a lingering shot mid-way through the video that features satellite dishes and a communication tower, an image that is significant for two reasons. For one, these shots reflect that the opening of Sulukule's borders is not just the liberation of an enclosed neighborhood into its immediate urban surroundings, but also the connection of a once-isolated community to the rest of the world. Importantly – and this is the second reason – these shots communicate the genesis of Tahrabad-i İsyān and the video itself.



Figure 5: Communication Technology in the “Ghetto Machines” video.

Source: Tahribad-ı İsyân “Ghetto Machines” video.

That is, network technology speaks to the group’s discovery of hip-hop through foreign media and the internet, their adoption of its sounds by pirated music production software, visual aesthetics through Hollywood films, and the very production of this symbol-laden video¹⁵. And because this video reorients the viewer’s impression of Sulukule in the wake of its destruction, we see how these international networks actually allow Tahribad-ı İsyân to construct their sense of musical locality. Although the images of the group’s urban environment are bleak and ghettocentric, their aestheticized qualities – including the low-angle shots, suggestive contrasts of wealth and poverty, and highly symbolic content – imbue the video with a message of celebratory adjustment to the world at

¹⁵ Group member Slang imparted as much when he told me about the group’s genesis. Influenced first by the music videos and dance moves of Michael Jackson, he turned to hip-hop around the time he and Zen-G discovered the 2004 film *You Got Served*. The film tells the story of two friends in Los Angeles who try and win a breakdancing competition in order to follow their dreams and open up a recording studio. After watching the film, the pair saved money for months in order to buy a tape recorder (later, using pirated music production software like Fruity Loops) with which they recorded rudimentary songs influenced by American rappers like Eminem and Busta Rhymes.

large. The ghetto machines referred to in the song's title then may just as well refer to the infrastructure of network technology as they do to bulldozers and heavy machinery.

The implications behind the group's design-intensive construction of a musical locality depends on my third image (Fig. 6), which features group members rapping against backdrops of walls. If the first image showed the damaging effects of the renewal plan, and the second image hints at the neighborhood's redefinition, then this third image might tell us that we are dealing with an ongoing process. Returning to Karaman and Islam's paper, a clearer understanding of this emerges: "We maintain," they write, "that it is important to make a distinction between the two ways in which neighborhood boundaries perform: 1. Enabling communities to survive and self-sustain through appropriation and demarcation of territory, 2. Entrapping and isolating communities through marginalization and negative discrimination by the majority" (2011: 8). My central contention here is that "Ghetto Machines" video overcomes Karaman and Islam's second function by enacting the first. While Sulukule's borders may have once stood for the isolation of a subaltern group, the video transforms the neighborhood's marginality into something powerful; it achieves this by appropriating what is left of its urban environment in line with global hip-hop and design-intensive urbanism. The video's heavy use of shots featuring borders reveals the process of "opening up" as gradual and ambivalent, as if "Ghetto Machines" situates Tahribad-ı İsyani in a liminal moment, caught between their neighborhood and the world at large. The video thus amounts to an instance of bordering, in which the flow of new information in and out of the neighborhood amounts to a redefinition of place.

This liminal moment expresses itself in musical as well as visual form. In this regard it is important to note two things. First, Tahribad-ı İsyani themselves did not create the musical accompaniment for the "Ghetto Machines" track; instead, they heard the beat from a friend of theirs and selected it from among others as a suitable piece to rap over. Second, the song has only been released as a music video on YouTube, at the time of writing. Watching the video online, in other words, is the only way audiences can hear "Ghetto Machines" outside of a live performance setting. I suggest that musical and visual cues complement each other to the effect that the group's liminal position – as identified above in the video – finds its aural equivalent in the music.

To borrow once more from Adam Krims, much of "Ghetto Machines" fits into what he labeled as "reality rap," a subgenre of hip-hop music whose main



Figure 6: Backdrops of walls in the “Ghetto Machines” video.
Source: Tahribad-ı İsyân “Ghetto Machines” video.

focus is to “map the realities of (usually black) inner-city life” (2000: 70). As a particularly active site of development and innovation (ibid.: 72) throughout the history of hip-hop, reality rap includes many musical and stylistic fluctuations, with one constant: the connotation of “hardness.” Central to the “hardness” factor in Krims’ view is the “hip-hop sublime” (ibid.: 74), a stylistic feature resulting from dense combinations of musical layers. Rhythmically, these layers reinforce a four-beat meter, but, in the domain of pitch, they comprise a sharply dissonant combination. Beyond the parameters of rhythm and pitch, reality rap also involves layering clashing timbral qualities that are often associated with varying sound sources.

When brought together, these discordant characteristics create a “sublime” quality that incorporates both Edmund Burke and Frederic Jameson’s classic definitions of the word. Drawing from Burke, the hip-hop sublime embodies a simultaneous response of fear and pleasure. And from Jameson, the term becomes at once the pretext and occasion for intuitive, sheer power, which in its “unfigurable force...stuns the imagination in the most literal sense” (ibid.: 34). For Krims, both Burke and Jameson indicate how the layering involved in the hip-hop sublime comes to involve both “hardness” and “realness.” On the part of audiences, he claims that the consumption of such production techniques

involves “both an “unfigurable force” of layering combination and a pleasure of stunned musical imagination,” (ibid.: 74) which come together to form a vision of the sublime that is specifically musical. Because this production style has become an important signifier of “realness” in hip-hop over the years, Krims sees the musical poetics of the hip-hop sublime as intimately connected to the semantics and representations of identities in rap music.

Listening to “Ghetto Machines” on YouTube, one is struck with incongruous musical qualities from the very beginning of the track. “The beat has a hard manner to it,” Zen-G told me, “and so do our vocal techniques.” Though somewhat vaguely described by Zen-G, one can immediately grasp the instrumental “hardness” of Ghetto Machines from its opening hook: a two-note melody played on a synthesizer programmed to generate multiple octaves of the same note simultaneously. In its very basic exploration of a minor second interval, this synthesizer hook embodies anxiety. With an effective though now worn-out tenor, brought to public consciousness as part of the infamous *Jaws* theme song, melodies founded on minor second intervals often seem to acknowledge two distinct bodies in contention with each other, and “Ghetto Machines” in this regard complies with convention. Coupled with the metallic timbre of the synthesizer, this hook inaugurates an unsettling sonic environment that continues throughout the track. Aurally, these shifting tones may communicate unease, but its looming quality finds no embodiment and thus the hook is dreadful only in hypothetical terms. But when experienced in tandem with the video, the hook’s anxiety manifests itself in the opening shot, which contrasts the demolition and renewal of Sulukule¹⁶. The renewal project is cast into unease and incongruity.

The chorus of “Ghetto Machines” takes this anxious melodic line to the very forefront of the song by vocalizing it. Slang delivers his lines in a semi-spoken daze, mimicking the principal hook of the song with an undecorated melody based on a minor second interval. Slang’s chorus and the instrumental track are nearly harmonious, but the rapper’s intonation is conspicuously flat. When he repeats the chorus, the listener notes the addition of a distinct dissonant layer: a backing vocal line appears, laced with the auto-tune audio effect. As originally intended, the auto-tune effect corrects errant sung pitches by bending vocal

¹⁶ This is not to say that the song was created with this effect in mind, but rather that Tahribad-İsyan likely chose to rap over this track because of its jarring, dissonant qualities. Once they wrote and recorded the song, its sonic environment likely informed their conceptualization of the music video.

signals to their nearest semitone, theoretically creating a sonic environment of perfect harmony. “Ghetto Machines” inverts its purpose, however, by keeping Slang’s off-key vocal line at the forefront of the song, using the addition of an auto-tuned vocal line in the background to create a disharmonious union between two voices: one of them human though lifeless, and the other his mirror, vitalized through machines. And while auto-tune was at first meant to remain hidden in a song’s mix – to create the impression of a singer’s perfect pitch – in recent years it has been a conspicuous feature of popular rap music, as well as other genres. In “Ghetto Machines”, as elsewhere, the prominence of auto-tune reveals conscious and mechanical design as a central feature of contemporary rap. Technology may raise Slang’s voice to its proper intonation, but the overall sonic environment is aesthetically dissonant and unsettling, bringing together the music video, song, and the group’s place in Istanbul’s changing urban atmosphere.

Conclusion

Facing the homogenization of their city at the hands of real estate developers and politicians, certain Istanbul residents have redefined their intimate geography in a bid to lay a claim on it. As I have shown here, in the case of Tahribad-ı İsyân and Sulukule, these efforts have amounted to the appropriation of global hip-hop, especially the notion of ghettocentricity. By redefining Sulukule in its post-redevelopment age as ghettocentric – a move that demands the aestheticizing of place – the group and its team of volunteer filmmakers concoct a vision of locality that resists the neighborhood’s restructuring in line with social conformity and the advanced capitalist enterprise. The “Ghetto Machines” video uses the visual conventions of hip-hop alongside design-intensive urbanism in order to demarcate Sulukule’s new borders, and yet this demarcation is unclear due to its rawness, an ambiguity expressed visually through liminal imagery and aurally through anxious melodies and dissonant layering in line with Krims’ “hip-hop sublime”. This claim to self-definition is in itself an act of empowerment, but parallels between local claims to public land use in Sulukule and Istanbul at large render the video a rallying cry that, ironically, extends past the very borders it seeks to construct. As a response to Karaman and Islam’s questioning of the values of intra-urban boundaries in a borderless world and open cities, “Ghetto Machines” testifies to the relevance of hip-hop in our age: its conventions simultaneously demand a turn both to the local and

the global. Spread globally by network technology, ghetto aesthetics transform the conditions of urban austerity into prideful surroundings, and in doing so form connections between oppressed populations separated by vast physical distances. Ghetto borders are accordingly caught in a liminal place between local and global applicability. As residents of Istanbul struggle to maintain local claims over the physical spaces that matter most to them, the fluidity of hip-hop's urban boundaries seem as strong a tool as any in the fight against urban expropriation.

Kevin Yıldırım received his Master's degree in Ethnomusicology from İTÜ MİAM in Istanbul in 2014. His interests lie in the social implications of popular music, particularly in relation to technology and cities. Recently, he explored these themes as part of a Master's thesis that reconciled two academic methods: a fieldwork-based approach that identifies the positive effects of embracing hip-hop culture for inhabitants of derelict urban environments, and an analytic approach suggesting that hip-hop "resistance" is futile because of its implication in the wide-scale socio-economic processes of global capitalism and design-intensive urban design. He is currently an independent researcher living in Istanbul.

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