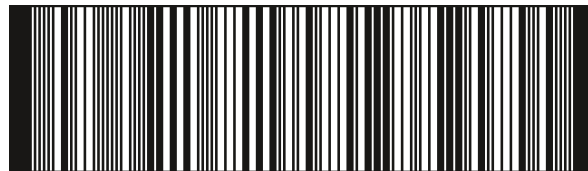




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**ETNOGRAFIA DIGITAL E RAP COMO LOCAL DE
RESISTÊNCIA TRANSNACIONAL: RAPPERS SÍRIOS
NA ALEMANHA**



**DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY AND RAP AS A SITE OF
TRANSNATIONAL RESISTANCE: SYRIAN RAPPERS
IN GERMANY**

Abstract: Since 2011, Syrian artists in exile have turned to rap to narrate displacement, contest silencing, and build community. Focusing on Germany, this paper employs digital ethnography (2022–2024) to examine how Syrian rappers utilise lyrics and online platforms to articulate what can be heard as “soundscapes of exile,” transforming music into testimony, memory work, and political critique. In order to demonstrate the dual roles of digital platforms as arenas of constraint (algorithmic down-ranking, content moderation) and channels of visibility, this work integrates semi-structured interviews, long-term observation of YouTube and Instagram, and a close analysis of selected tracks. Three interrelated dynamics are illustrated by case snapshots of rappers who are active in Germany: testimony (Murder Eyez), negotiation (Amouri), and refusal (Abu Hajar). I argue that Syrian rap in Germany serves as a transnational act of resistance, establishing diasporic publics across dispersed geographies and navigating the cultural politics of European host societies. The article contributes to debates in diaspora and hip-hop studies by foregrounding digital ethnography as a method and platform politics as a terrain of struggle.

Keywords: Syrian rap; digital ethnography; diaspora; exile; transnational resistance; platform politics; Germany; hip-hop

Resumo: Desde 2011, artistas sírios no exílio recorreram ao rap para narrar deslocamentos, contestar o silenciamento e construir comunidade. Focando-se na Alemanha, este artigo utiliza etnografia digital (2022–2024) para examinar como rappers sírios utilizam letras e plataformas online para articular o que pode ser ouvido como “paisagens sonoras do exílio”, transformando a música em testemunho, trabalho de memória e crítica política. Para demonstrar os papéis duplos das plataformas digitais como arenas de restrição (down-ranking algorítmico, moderação de conteúdos) e canais de visibilidade, este trabalho integra entrevistas semi-estruturadas, observação a longo prazo do YouTube e do Instagram, e uma análise detalhada de faixas selecionadas. Três dinâmicas inter-relacionadas são ilustradas por fotografias de casos de rappers ativos na Alemanha: testemunho (Murder Eyez), negociação (Amouri) e recusa (Abu Hajar). Defendo que o rap sírio na Alemanha serve como um ato transnacional de resistência, estabelecendo públicos diaspóricos em geografias dispersas e navegando pela política cultural das sociedades europeias anfitriãs. O artigo contribui para os debates na diáspora e nos estudos do hip-hop, destacando a etnografia digital como método e a política de plataforma como terreno de luta.

Palavras-chave: rap sírio; etnografia digital; diáspora; exílio; resistência transnacional; política de plataforma; Alemanha; Hip-Hop

1. Introduction

Millions of Syrians had been compelled into exile since the uprising began in 2011, resulting in the transformation of the cultural and social landscapes of both their homeland and host countries. Artists who have utilised creative expression as a means of survival and political resistance are among those who have been displaced (Zubaidi, 2012). Rap, especially, has emerged as a potent medium for contesting suppression, articulating exile, and narrating lived realities. Syrian rap in exile is characterised by the urgency of displacement and the struggle to preserve memory while forging new identities abroad, and it is rooted in the global tradition of hip-hop as a voice for marginalized communities (Totah, 2020; Isherwood, 2014).

In 2015, Germany emerged as one of the leading locations for this cultural production when a large number of Syrian refugees arrived. German cities, including Berlin, Cologne, and Munich, have been the sites of significant artistic activities, including the growth of a vibrant rap culture (Abbani, 2022). Within these diasporic spaces, Syrian rappers engage in transnational and local identity negotiation processes, establishing themselves

within German society while maintaining connections to the broader Arab diaspora and their homeland, Syria. Their lyrics frequently integrate themes of loss and belonging, reflecting what ethnomusicologists have referred to as "soundscapes of exile"^{1.)} (Schafer, 1977; Stokes, 1994; Bohlman, 2004; Eidsheim & Kun, 2019) — sonic worlds that provide texture to displacement and the pursuit of belonging.

This paper examines Syrian rap in exile through the lens of digital ethnography, focusing on rappers based in Germany who utilise digital platforms such as YouTube and Instagram to disseminate their music, construct their identities, and engage with their audiences. By merging online observations with interviews and lyrical analysis, digital ethnography enables us to trace how rap functions as both a form of cultural resistance and a means of community-building in the diasporic context. This method also emphasises how digital platforms can serve as sites of struggle, spaces of visibility, solidarity, and occasionally censorship.

The argument advanced here is that Syrian rap in exile should be understood not only as a form of cultural production but as a practice of transnational resistance. Through their music, rappers serve as witnesses to war and displacement, while also challenging dominant narratives that marginalise the voices of refugees (SyriaUntold, 2024). Their work demonstrates how art becomes a mode of survival and a resource for diasporic identity (Hall, 1990; Gilroy, 1993; Clifford, 1997).

2. Methodology: Digital Ethnography

This study follows a digital ethnographic approach to explore how Syrian rappers in exile use music to articulate transnational resistance and construct a sense of identity. Digital ethnography expands traditional fieldwork into online spaces, allowing researchers to observe cultural practices as they move across platforms like YouTube and Instagram (Pink et al., 2016). For displaced artists whose lives are dispersed across countries, these digital arenas are vital sites of artistic production, interaction, and visibility.

My fieldwork combined online and offline engagement between 2022 and 2024. I conducted systematic observations of YouTube channels, Instagram accounts, and other social media platforms where Syrian rappers in Germany publish their work and engage with audiences online. These environments offered access to audience discourse, as well as the music itself, including remark threads, visual presentations, and circulation practices within diasporic networks. Offline, I conducted semi-structured interviews (via Zoom and in-person) and took field notes during the studios or workplaces of rappers in Germany. Live performances were not happening during my fieldwork for solidarity with Gaza, Palestine (Topping, 2024). Taken together, this multi-sited approach enabled me to trace the interconnections between digital circulation, physical presence, and transnational belonging.

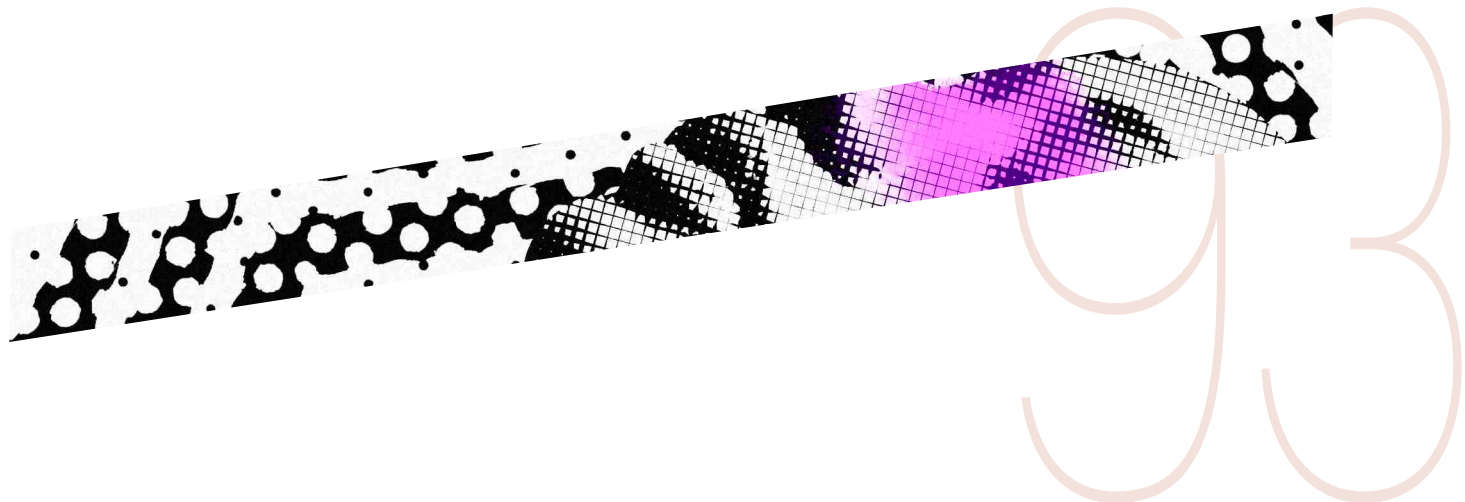
^{1.)} The expression "soundscapes of exile" is used here descriptively, in line with ethnomusicological work that links R. Murray Schafer's notion of the soundscape to experiences of migration and displacement.

Digital ethnography's main strength lies in its ability to capture dispersed publics (Delli Paoli & D'Auria, 2021). Listeners of Syrian rap in exile include Syrians inside the country and across the global diaspora. Comments and direct messages reveal how artists' voices travel and how audiences articulate recognition, often calling the rappers as "our voice" or "the memory of the revolution." Although scholarship on Syrian rap remains scarce, studies of digital publics and diasporic art (Papacharissi, 2014; Totah, 2020; Leurs, 2015) help explain how online engagement becomes a form of affective solidarity and transnational belonging. These affective interactions illuminate how rap becomes both testimony and connective tissue in the diaspora.

Nevertheless, digital ethnography presents challenges. The online presence raises concerns about the way artists choose to represent themselves and what may remain invisible in digital spaces. Therefore, I conducted interviews and triangulated online observations, requesting that artists reflect on their self-presentation, audience strategies, and experiences of exile. This facilitated the contextualisation of the digital traces within the context of broader life histories.

2.1. Reflexivity and Researcher Positionality

As a Syrian researcher fluent in Arabic yet trained within European academia, my positionality shaped every stage of this research. Here, I occupied a dual position of insider and outsider at the same time. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) argue, researchers often inhabit an "in-between" position, trying to navigate both insider familiarity and outsider distance. This duality has long been discussed in sociological theory (Merton, 1972) and shapes access, interpretation, also reflexivity in ethnographic fieldwork. Linguistic and cultural familiarity facilitated access and rapport with participants. Despite the fact that my linguistic and cultural familiarity facilitated access and rapport with participants, my academic background and geographical distance also distinguished me as external to their lived experiences. My interactions were further impacted by gendered expectations and the dynamics of access, as a woman conducting research in a predominantly male rap community. Consequently, the ongoing negotiation of trust and boundaries was inevitable. In digital environments, these complexities were exacerbated by interactions that frequently obscured the distinction between professional researcher and community participant (Hine, 2015). To interpret the data and my role in its production, it was therefore essential to maintain a reflexive stance. I engaged with feminist and postcolonial perspectives on situated knowledge, approaching reflexivity as a methodological practice rather than a personal confession (Haraway, 1988; England, 1994; Rose, 1997). My objective was to maintain awareness of the impact of my position on the content, interpretation, and, ultimately, the incorporation of Syrian rap in exile into this research, which was achieved through field notes, critical self-questioning, and an emphasis on power relations in representation.



2.2. Ethical Considerations

Ethical sensitivity was central to this project. All interviews were conducted with informed consent, and participants were given the option to remain anonymous. However, because the rappers – studied here – are public figures whose work circulates widely under their stage names, and because they explicitly granted permission for their identification, this paper uses their artist names (e.g., Amouri, Murder Eyez, Abu Hajar). This approach shows both their preference and the conventions of the cultural field, where the stage name is the primary identity through which they engage audiences. To prevent the disclosure of private identities, legal names are withheld.

The author provides translations of the lyrics quoted in this paper, which are presented in both original Arabic alongside an English translation. This guarantees both the original artistic expression and accessibility for non-Arabic readers. Translations are designed to provide meaning rather than literal verbatim equivalence, in accordance with the most effective ethnographic practices.

The following section explores how Syrian rap operates as a form of cultural resistance in exile, tracing its evolution from underground expression to a transnational testimony of dissent and identity.

3. Rap as a Form of Cultural Resistance in Exile

Syrian exiles employed rap in aid of their political and patriotic plight.

3.1 From Margin to Testimony

Hip-hop has been acknowledged as a cultural form that enables marginalised communities to express themselves for an extended period (Rose, 1994; Forman, 2002). Syrian rap adheres to this requisite; however, it is significantly impacted by the politics of exile, displacement, and authoritarian repression. The Syrian regime rigorously regulated cultural production before 2011, resulting in a restricted space for independent or oppositional expression. In Damascus, Aleppo, and even the coastal region of Latakia, from where dictator Bashar al-Assad's clan belongs²⁾, rap was frequently disseminated informally among the youth as a means of expressing social critique and frustration, and it emerged underground. The foundation for what scholars refers to as "conscious rap" was established during this period, which is music that is required to recount lived experiences rather than merely entertain (Perry, 2004).

²⁾ Latakia, located on Syria's Mediterranean coast, is widely viewed as the heartland of regime support and the historical base of the Assad family, whose rule has shaped the region's political and economic landscape (RFI, 2024).

The 2011 rebellion had a substantial impact on this landscape. Rap became explicitly political as young individuals endeavoured to document their experiences of repression and protest, serving as a medium of testimony and mobilisation. This cultural practice was extended into exile because of the ensuing displacement of millions of Syrians. Rappers who emigrated from Syria ferried their art with them, reshaping it in dialogue with host societies while maintaining their connection to Syrian struggles. In exile, rap is employed as a tool for cultural survival, political resistance, and memory work (Cooper, 2020).

3.2 Exile as Opportunity and Rupture

Exile is a rupture and an asset. Syrian rappers were compelled to forsake their networks, audiences, and cultural comfort zones as a result of their displacement to Germany. Nevertheless, this experience also provided them with access to new infrastructures, such as studios, festivals, and digital connectivity. Germany's comparatively open cultural sphere created opportunities for collaboration and exposure that were unavailable in Syria. Nevertheless, exile also led to prejudice, linguistic barriers, and alienation (Totah, 2020) Syrian rappers' lyrical themes in Germany essentially address these anxieties.

In interviews, artists frequently referenced rap as a method of managing exile. One participant declared, "The beat is where I feel at home, even if the streets are strange" (Interview, Cologne, 2024)³⁾. These statements emphasise the use of rap as a way of establishing a sense of affiliation in environments where exiles are frequently marginalised, a method of place-making in displacement (Bennett, 2000).

3.3 Themes of Resistance

In both interviews and lyrics, three interrelated motifs of resistance are apparent:

1. Survival and Resilience

Rappers frequently present survival in exile as an accomplishment in and of itself. The challenges of re-establishing oneself in unfamiliar environments, navigating bureaucracies, and confronting discrimination are illustrated in tunes. The act of continuing to compose music in the face of marginalisation is a declaration of perseverance, as these narratives affirm endurance as resistance.

2. Memory and Testimony

The experiences of exile, loss, and conflict are reflected in a multitude of recordings. The lyrics invoke memories of neighbourhoods that have been bombed, lost companions, and families that have been fractured. In this sense, rap functions as an oral archive of the Syrian conflict, preserving experiences that are at risk of being disregarded or neglected in global media narratives. Rap testimony is not only descriptive but also performative; by speaking, artists resist silencing and affirm collective memory.

³⁾ This quote is drawn from the author's fieldwork with Syrian rappers in Cologne, conducted in 2024 as part of my PhD thesis on diasporic hip-hop. All participants were interviewed under conditions of anonymity; pseudonyms are used throughout the thesis, except where artists are referred to by their established stage names.

3. Diaspora Identity and Belonging

Syrian rappers in Germany negotiate identities that are simultaneously Syrian, Arab, diasporic, and hybrid. Their songs often integrate Arabic, German, or English, which suggests a global perspective and a sense of stability. Rappers utilise their music to mediate their identity as members of the Syrian diaspora, and as contributors to Germany's multicultural hip-hop scene.

3.4 Situating within the context of diaspora and transnationalism

Diaspora theory provides a valuable perspective for understanding these dynamics. It is the contention of Clifford (1994) that diasporas are not exclusively defined by dispersal, but also by the preservation of connections across borders. Syrian rappers in Germany embody this principle, as their music is disseminated digitally to audiences in Syria, Europe, and far beyond. The dissemination of rap on YouTube, Spotify, and Instagram maintains the illusion of a dispersed but interconnected community.

At the same time, their work is indicative of what Faist (2000) refers to as "transnational social spaces," in which migrants establish practices that connect their place of origin and their new home. Syrian rap in exile is not merely a form of nostalgia for the homeland; it is also a means of establishing new cultural forms that have been influenced by German society and global hip-hop. This hybridity is apparent in the collaborations with local and international performers, the use of multilingual lyrics, and the participation in festivals throughout Europe.

4. Case Snapshots: Continuities and Ruptures in Germany's Diasporic Soundscape

This section provides case studies of Syrian rappers in Germany, illustrating how their artistic journeys expose both continuity and discontinuity within the diasporic soundscape. It emphasises how exile transforms creative practice, reshaping notions of authenticity, belonging, and resistance across generations of artists, through a selection of profiles.

4.1 Murder Eyez – Memory, Principle, and the Politics of Integrity in Exile

Among the first Syrian rappers to relocate to Germany, Murder Eyez represents the older generation of artists who shaped their voices during the revolutionary years and later re-rooted their practice in exile. Living in Cologne, he articulates an ethos of rap grounded in *memory*, *principle*, and *integrity* rather than visibility or market success. His trajectory captures the exhaustion of prolonged displacement and the moral burden of remaining truthful to one's message.

He describes rap as both therapy and trauma: after the initial euphoria of revolutionary expression, exile brought “a long silence—no passion, no will, no joy” (Murder Eyez, personal communication, July 13, 2024). Writing again became an act of healing but also of re-opening wounds. For Murder Eyez, even a single listener carries ethical weight: “If one person listens, you can either lift them or destroy them” (Murder Eyez, personal communication, July 13, 2024). This transforms rap into a moral practice rather than a commercial one. His insistence on sincerity recalls Tricia Rose’s (1994) notion of hip-hop as a site of critical literacy and ethical witnessing.

As he rejects the label “refugee artist,” he also criticises the cultural institutions that instrumentalize Syrian trauma for visibility. He distinguishes between solidarity and spectacle, arguing that Western empathy often masks unequal power relations. His lyrical universe songs, such as “*Syrian Speech*” and “*Arab Mud*”, return to the memory of uprising through dense Arabic metaphors and minimalist, self-produced beats. The microphone becomes, in his words, “*a mirror for conscience.*” In this sense, Cologne is not merely a host city but a moral terrain where authenticity and compromise are daily negotiated.

While skeptical of social-media performance culture: “People post the revolution with filters” (Murder Eyez, personal communication, July 13, 2024), he nonetheless uses platforms to maintain presence, embodying the paradox of the soundscape of exile: creation as both survival and burden. Through community initiatives such as the Peace Festival and Syrian Hip-Hop Unity, besides his studio Groovy, he promotes inter-Arab and cross-cultural collaboration, yet notes how funding conditions can depoliticize art: “They want us to be political but polite” (Murder Eyez, personal communication, July 13, 2024). His refusal to conform anchors what might be called a politics of integrity: art as moral endurance amid commodified solidarity. In his words, “Rap saved me, but it also keeps reminding me why I’m angry” (Murder Eyez, personal communication, July 13, 2024). His sound embodies memory as resistance within Cologne’s diasporic soundscape.

In songs such as *Tanhida Ḥalabiyya - تنهيدة حلبية* (Sigh of Aleppo), released in 2014, Murder Eyez transforms collective despair into lyrical testimony. He raps:

يا بلدي صرتي لقمة تنهضم قبل البلع
والتاجر فيكي صار عالبسطة عم يبيع شمع
انزرع الشك والتخوين حتى بين الأب وابنو
ومن الخوف اشتغل الانفصام بين البني آدم ونفسو

My country was swallowed whole, before it could be chewed.
You sell candles now, where once you traded light.
Doubt grew between a father and his son, till fear tore man apart from himself
(Murder Eyez, 2014, author’s translation).



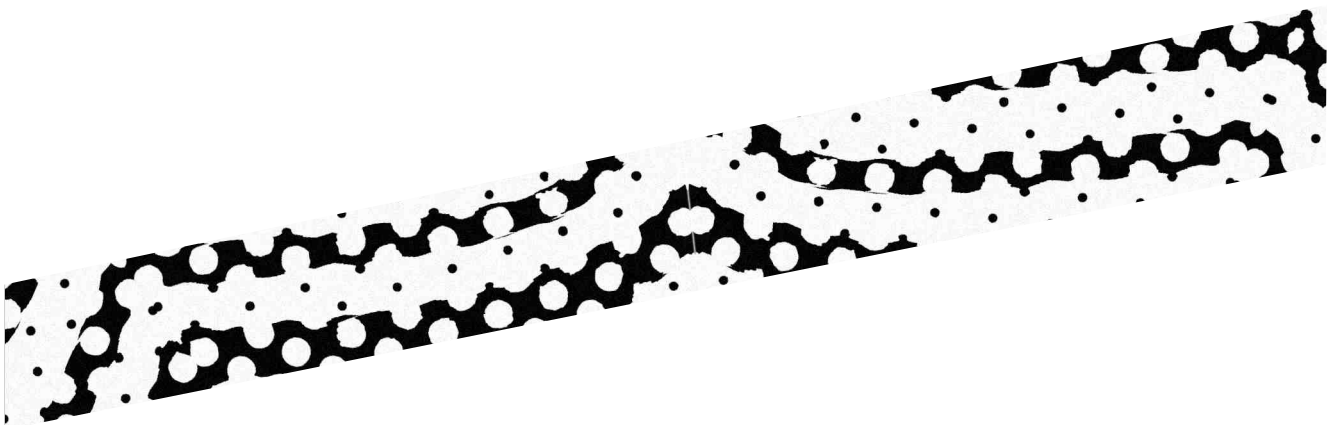
These verses compress the moral disintegration of war into visceral imagery turning the loss of Aleppo into a broader meditation on social collapse. Murder Eyez's use of everyday speech and biting irony illustrates what De Nora (2000) calls music's capacity to frame experience, translating structural violence into sonic emotion. His lament that "neutrality is a crime, silence a crime, even complaint a crime" (Murder Eyez, personal communication, 2024), indicts both authoritarian control and global indifference. By closing the song with an invocation "Lord, ease our pain... with the Syrian crown, Aleppo completes the picture" (Murder Eyez, personal communication, 2024), he reclaims faith as resilience rather than resignation. Through such lyrics, the artist crafts an aural archive of conscience where rap becomes a civic language of memory and endurance.

4.2. Rapping Between Worlds: Glocal Voices of Amouri

Belonging to a younger generation, Amouri arrived in Germany in 2015 at the age of 17 and quickly entered Cologne's multicultural music circuits. His story captures the transformation of Syrian rap from street battles and online forums in Syria to professionalised, multilingual performance in exile.

In Germany, opportunities expanded, large stages, institutional support, and technical resources, but so did alienation. He recalls his first concert twenty days after arrival, performing before thousands without speaking German, turning embarrassment into confidence. Yet linguistic adaptation soon became necessary: "At first my audience was Arab; later Germans began to listen, so I had to write verses in German too" (Amouri, personal communication, June 27, 2024). This bilingualism exemplifies what Robertson (1995) calls glocalization: the adjustment of global forms to local realities. His audience, he explains, consists of "people like me... lost in identity," echoing Hall's (1990) vision of diaspora as a process of becoming rather than belonging.

Amouri's career also reflects the neoliberal metrics of visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Concert organizers, he notes, ask first for "numbers": followers, views, and engagement rates. "If you have half a million followers, you're safe" (Amouri, personal communication, June 27, 2024), he jokes, capturing Banet-Weiser's (2012) argument that authenticity is increasingly quantified. Social-media presence becomes both gatekeeper and identity, replacing the communal validation that once defined Syrian hip-hop forums. The shift from posse culture to algorithmic performance parallels broader transformations in creative labour under digital capitalism.



Despite these pressures, Amouri insists on artistic responsibility and authenticity: “A respectable rap, something that represents me” (Amouri, personal communication, June 27, 2024). He distances himself from gangsta aesthetics, viewing them as alien to Syrian social reality: “We don’t have mafias; if you cause trouble in Syria, you’re seen as az’ar (thug), not respected” (Amouri, personal communication, June 27, 2024). Authenticity for him resides in lyrical depth, not mimicry of Western tropes. He praises Syrian rap’s literary quality, claiming its writers “sound like literature graduates” (Amouri, personal communication, June 27, 2024). Yet he laments the lack of community: “every rapper thinks he’s the best in the world” (Amouri, personal communication, June 27, 2024), and the dominance of cliques (shilaliyya)⁴⁾ over solidarity, illustrating how diaspora disperses what was once a tightly connected subculture.

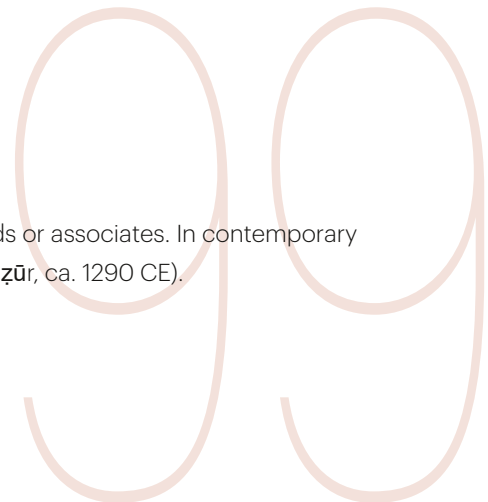
His signature track Ana Arabi- أنا عربي (“I Am Arab”), released in 2020, remains his defining performance piece, generating euphoric audience participation. The song fuses diasporic pride with political consciousness, affirming Arab cultural values of generosity, courage, solidarity as positive counter-narratives to stereotypes of Arab masculinity and extremism. Through this, Amouri transforms the stage into a site of affirmative identity politics (Fraser, 1995). Recently, his participation in pro-Palestine demonstrations and songs on racism and mental health further anchor his music within the ethics of social critique rather than commercial pursuit. As he explains, “They wish to recount our narrative on our behalf. However, we reclaim the microphone through rap” (Amouri, personal communication, June 27, 2024). This reclamation of narrative authority is why, for him, “I could have chased numbers, but I prefer songs that represent me” (Amouri, personal communication, June 27, 2024). Amouri’s journey encapsulates the dilemmas of the digital generation: unprecedented exposure coupled with exhaustion, connectivity without community, and the constant balancing of artistic integrity against algorithmic visibility.

أنا عربي أنا عربي أنا أنا عربي
أنا عربي فيكم بيكبر أملي
كل ما أطلع فيكم بلاقي فيكم سندي

I’m Arab, I’m Arab, I’m Arab, yes, I’m Arab.
Through you, my hope grows;
Whenever I look at you, I find my support (Amouri, 2020, author’s translation)

This refrain functions as a mantra of affirmation, transforming the stigmatized label of “Arab” within European discourse into a declaration of collective dignity (interview, June 2024). His verses shift between critique and celebration, addressing both internal fragmentation and external misrepresentation:

⁴⁾ The Arabic term shilaliyya (شल्लीة) derives from shilla (شلة), meaning a small group of friends or associates. In contemporary usage, it denotes clique-based behavior or exclusionary networks (Lisān al-‘Arab, Ibn Manẓūr, ca. 1290 CE).



The strong among our rulers submit to the West, violence and division weaken us, don't ask why—it comes from every side.
An artist stands on stage—they call him a failure, and we've had enough disgust (Amouri, 2020, author's translation).

Here, Amouri merges political lament with motivational rhetoric, embodying what Gilroy (1993) terms diasporic counter-narrative, an articulation of belonging forged through struggle. The repetition of “Ana Arabi” turns identity into rhythm, a collective chant that invites the audience's physical participation: “Right, left, back, front, raise your hands together, we are all the sons of Adam.” The gesture symbolises equality and unity, collapsing divisions of nation and class through shared embodiment.

The track's bilingual flow and its confident staging on YouTube mark a generational break from the underground aesthetics of the revolution-era rappers. Yet, like Murder Eyez, Amouri situates art within responsibility: “This song is a gift from MC Omar to every listener” (Amouri, personal communication, June 27, 2024). Through this affective generosity, his digital performance becomes both a sonic declaration of pride and an ethical gesture toward his dispersed community.

4.3 Abu Hajar – The Mental Cost and Self-Reflection Shift

Abu Hajar's story is rooted in the early, pre-2011 Syrian hip-hop scene, where he co-founded the group “Mazaj” and helped build the online infrastructure for a national rap community. This foundational period as a “project-bearing” artist, in his terms, was shattered by the war. His 2012 imprisonment and the subsequent “time for weaning”—a friend's warning that prompted his exile—marked a rupture that would define his later work. In Germany, this trauma manifested not just in lyrics but also in his very presence on stage. He describes a fundamental disconnect: “My performance on stage changed; it became tense, not enthusiastic... A moment of complete separation between my pain and the audience's reaction”(Abu Hajar, personal communication, July 23, 2024). He recounts a concert in Bremen where he performed his track “Zaqna,” born from his prison experience, while the front row, unaware of the lyrics' meaning, danced intoxicated. This moment crystallises the affective dissonance of the diasporic stage, where deeply political grief is consumed as a celebratory spectacle (Butler, 2004).

This psychic toll is compounded by what he theorizes as “*iḥtiwā*” احتواء (containment or co-optation). He draws a direct parallel between the fate of the Syrian revolution and the rap scene: “The first generation carried a project. Then there was a ‘co-optation’ of the scene... just as a revolutionary class in Syria was co-opted into offices and became a layer isolated from the people” (Abu Hajar, personal communication, July 23, 2024). He argues that the influx of funding, studios and platform monetization has promoted a “culture of defeat”, which replaced politically conscious rap with a discourse of merit, cars and depoliticised lifestyle content. This analysis offers a theoretical lens for understanding the instincts of artists like Murder Eyez, situating their struggle against algorithms and against the broader neoliberal system that turns dissent into a form of cultural capital (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Srnicek, 2017).

Confronted with the co-optation of dissent within both artistic and humanitarian spheres, he eventually left a non-governmental organization whose donor-driven agendas—such as depoliticized notions of “women’s empowerment”—clashed with grassroots realities. In doing so, Abu Hajar enacted a final form of resistance: refusal and metacommentary (Ticktin, 2011). He largely withdrew from active music production, finding the affective labor unsustainable. Instead, he enrolled in a PhD program to academically investigate the “impact of funding flows on depoliticizing activism.” This turn is not a surrender but a translocation of his resistance; the dissertation becomes the ultimate testimony, a forensic critique of the structures that seek to silence and contain.

In Abu Hajar, we see the potential endpoint of exile's soundscape: not a polyphonic performance, but a resonant silence, or rather, a transformation of sound into text. His journey from the underground scenes of Syria, to the dissonant stages of Germany, to the academic seminar, completes a triad of resistant practices: he embodies the critical refusal that complements Murder Eyez's mnemonic integrity and Amouri's algorithmic negotiation. Together, they illustrate that in the face of displacement and co-optation, resistance is a spectrum ranging from enduring presence to strategic adaptation to scholarly critique.

5. Digital Platforms as Sites of Struggle

For Syrian rappers in exile, digital platforms have become both lifelines and battlegrounds. They enable visibility, connect dispersed audiences, and sustain transnational creative networks; still, they also reproduce the hierarchies and silences of the broader digital economy. The cases of Murder Eyez and Amouri reveal how these artists navigate the conflicting demands of authenticity, audience metrics, and political responsibility within the algorithmic architectures of contemporary media.

From the earliest days of Syrian hip-hop, online circulation has been crucial. During the revolution, platforms such as SoundCloud and YouTube allowed underground tracks to escape censorship, transforming rap into a transnational mode of testimony. In exile, however, the same infrastructures now impose new forms of control. As Murder Eyez notes, “people post the revolution with filters” (Murder Eyez, personal communication, July 13, 2024): political messages are re-framed through the logic of shareability and aesthetic appeal. The revolution becomes content. This tension illustrates what Tufekci (2015) calls the “algorithmic public sphere,” where visibility is mediated not by collective will but by opaque recommendation systems.

Despite these pressures, both artists employ tactical strategies of resistance (de Certeau, 2011). Murder Eyez posts selectively, avoiding overexposure, maintaining what he calls “silence as power.” His limited online presence asserts autonomy against the demand for constant visibility. Amouri, conversely, exploits the participatory affordances of Instagram and YouTube, inviting audience interaction and using bilingual subtitles to cross linguistic barriers. His digital persona oscillates between accessibility and self-protection—a balancing act common among displaced creators who must negotiate surveillance, racism, and burnout simultaneously.

The political economy of exile is also structured by platforms (Srnicek, 2017). Visibility is frequently contingent upon partnerships with European cultural institutions or NGOs, while streaming revenue remains negligible. These kinds of collaborations, while

providing exposure, can instrumentalise artists as representatives of “diversity.” As Murder Eyez observes, “they want us to be political but polite” (Murder Eyez, personal communication, July 13, 2024). This reflects a broader neoliberal multiculturalism that converts dissent into cultural capital (Brown, 2015). The promise of inclusion coexists with subtle depoliticization: the same platforms that amplify marginalised voices can neutralise their critique through algorithms of relevance and sponsorship.

Yet within these constraints, digital media also enable counter-public formation. As observed through digital ethnographic analysis of comment sections under songs such as “Sigh of Aleppo” and “Ana Arabi”, diasporic listeners express pride, grief, and remembrance, recalling lost cities, mourning friends, or thanking the artists for “keeping Syria’s voice alive.” These affective circuits exemplify what Papacharissi (2014) terms affective publics, networked gatherings sustained by emotion and shared listening rather than formal organisation.

Digital ethnography makes visible the uneven labour of diasporic creativity (Terranova, 2000). Producing, subtitling, promoting, and engaging online requires constant emotional and temporal investment. Artists oscillate between empowerment and fatigue, especially when algorithmic metrics undervalue politically dense or Arabic-language content. This dynamic mirrors what Terranova (2000) identified as free labor: the unpaid, affective work that sustains digital culture. For exiled rappers, this labour is doubled, maintaining both cultural identity and digital presence.

Ultimately, the digital sphere functions as an ambivalent space of resistance (Davies, 2024), which allows Syrian rappers to archive memory besides connect globally, while simultaneously exposing them to commodification and burnout, such as Ibrahim Basha NuruleZ, a prominent Syrian rapper, who quit rapping due to the negative online comments (Ibrahim Basha NuruleZ, personal communication, September 14, 2024). This paper describes these contradictions as the digital layer of the soundscape of exile, which is a blend of voices, rhythms, and interactions that displaced artists use to navigate power, belonging, and survival in the algorithmic age. Indeed, visibility is never neutral in this realm; instead, it functions both as a weapon and a wound.

6. Conclusion

This paper examined how Syrian rappers in Germany transform rap into a space of transnational resistance and belonging. Digital ethnography traced how artists such as Murder Eyez, Abu Hajar, and Amouri navigate exile; they are turning performances and online platforms into archives of survival and agency.

Across generations, these artists embody distinct strategies: testimony (Murder Eyez), negotiation (Amouri), and refusal (Abu Hajar). Collectively, they demonstrate that resistance in exile can manifest in multiple forms, all rooted in the quest for autonomy and integrity.

Key findings include

- Algorithmic discrimination: artists feel digitally marginalized as platform visibility privileges Western content.
- Commodification of pain: trauma is often aestheticized or consumed by audiences and institutions.
- Authenticity as ethics: sincerity becomes a moral stance against commercial exploitation.
- Hybrid belonging: multilingual and transnational expressions challenge fixed notions of identity.

In the algorithmic age, Syrian rap becomes both medium and method a practice of memory, critique, and endurance. As post-Assad realities unfold, these artistic voices continue to redefine belonging and resistance, keeping rap a living testimony of exile.

Finally, while this paper focuses on digital practices during exile, the recent fall of Assad inevitably reframes how these artistic voices will be read. As political realities shift, the meanings of belonging, resistance, and home are also being reimagined. Therefore, future research could explore how Syrian artists respond to this changing landscape, online and offline. However, it would also be premature to generalize about Syrian rap in the aftermath of Assad's fall. The collective political unity that once defined the scene has fragmented, giving way to more regional, ethnic, and individualized expressions. As a new layer of identity is forming, further research will be needed to understand how these artists reposition themselves in a rapidly changing post-Assad landscape.

Fundin

This research received no external funding and is part of the author's doctoral dissertation at the University of Milan.

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