



STEFANIA TAVIANO

CITIZEN JOURNALISM AND HIP-HOP IN THE ARAB WORLD: A CASE STUDY

This paper is the result of work in progress designed to examine the relationship between forms of language appropriation and acts of identity involved in two different forms of globalization, i.e. blogging and citizen journalism on the one hand, and hip-hop in English on the other. Its goal is to show that both bloggers/citizen journalists and hip-hop musicians perform an act of identity through their specific use of language, in this case English as a language of international communication, and it is through this tool that they try to stand out as part of a global community made up of local identities.

As Alastair Pennycook argues,

languages are no more pre-given entities that pre-exist our linguistic performances than are gendered or ethnic identities. Rather they are sedimented products of repeated acts of identity. [...] we can start to consider the language not so much in terms of an underlying set of structures but rather as a social, ideological, historical and discursive construction, the product of ritualized social performatives that become sedimented into temporary subsystems.¹

It is precisely these ritualized social performatives carried out by bloggers/citizen journalists and rappers that I am interested in. Rather than focusing on their language use in terms of competence, my research project is designed to examine their use of language in its socio-cultural connotations. To put it in Pennycook's words, if «we are as we are because of how we speak»², we should try to understand the key role that their specific use of English plays in constructing their identity.

Moreover, in Pennycook's view, we need to go beyond both the «globalization-as-imperialism theses», according to which American cultural and financial imperialism dominates the entire world and everything is reduced to a

¹ A. PENNYCOOK, *Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows*, Routledge, London and New York, 2007, p.73. See also Hopper's view of sedimentation, P. Hopper, *Emergent Grammar*, in M. TOMASELLO (ed.) *The New Psychology of Language*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, 2007.

² A. PENNYCOOK, *Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows*, cit., p.71.



common denominator through English, and the world Englishes framework, which emphasizes the identity of local varieties of English. We need instead to get to an understanding of the role of Englishes today based on a critical approach of globalization and a challenging view of language. While both approaches put forward valid arguments about the predominance of English around the world at the expense of other languages on the one hand, and the peculiarities of each variety of English determined by individual cultural and social contexts, it is much more interesting and challenging to focus on the «multiple investments that people bring to their acts, desires and performances in ‘English’»³. The goal of this paper is precisely to analyse these performances, to contextualize them and to show the complex nature of the identities they reveal, which are much more than mere acts of transfer and repetition.

According to Connell and Gibson, «transnational cultural products in whatever direction they appear to be traveling, do not simply replace local ones, but are refashioned and given new meaning»⁴. It is by taking into account notions of the transcultural and the transnational that we can go beyond a simple opposition between global and local and reconsider how they overlap. Hip-hop is a clear example of the interaction between global and local, in which the use of the language (and music of course) should be considered as «enactment rather than copying».⁵ Tony Mitchell’s analysis of hip-hop in five countries shows that rappers throughout the world combine the language of African American hip-hop, that is to say English, with a variety of other languages in a creative and unique way that creates local identities and fights against the predominance of dominant languages. Furthermore, as Harris Berger explains in his introduction to *Global Pop, Local Language*,

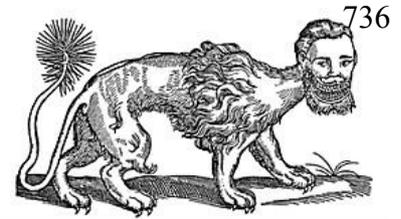
Mitchell finds related cultural dynamics, not identical music styles. In all five scenes, African American hip-hop is indigenized (combined with local musics and languages to create a unique local style), and neither Mitchell nor any other author in the collection subscribes to the view that the global media are producing a planetary musical homogeneity.⁶

³ A. PENNYCOOK, *Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows*, cit., p.73.

⁴ J. CONNELL, C. Gibson, *Sound Tracks: Popular Music, Identity and Place*, Routledge, London, 2003, p.191.

⁵ A. PENNYCOOK, *Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows*, cit., p.111.

⁶ H. M. BERGER, *Introduction, The Politics and Aesthetics of Language Choice and Dialect in Popular Music*, in ID, M. T. CARROLL (ed.) *Global Pop Local Language*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2003, p. XIX.



Going beyond the rhetoric of globalization, as Stuart Allan and Einar Thorsen have done in their volume *Citizen Journalism, Global Perspectives*⁷, I will try to show how, despite inevitable differences, bloggers/citizen journalists and hip-hop artists share a common tool, that is English as an international language, while customizing it so as to construct their own identity as individuals and members of a global community fighting for peace, freedom of speech and the overcoming of racial barriers.

As Simon Cottle argues, citizen journalism has evolved rapidly since it is based on «highly portable, low-cost, discreet, digitized communication technologies», which are now a vital part of our life and a medium for social relations. More precisely, he states:

Animated by differing conceptions of both ‘citizenship’ and ‘journalism’, and practiced under very different political regimes around the world, ‘citizen journalism(s)’ now assert their presence outside, through, and within today’s mainstream media. [...] Today’s world news ecology also incorporates established and emergent non-Western news formations and a plethora of alternative news forms and outlets generating news contra-flows and/or circulating oppositional views and voices – from the ‘rest to the West’, the local to the global.⁸

Stuart Allan and Einar Thorsen’s claim in 2009 that «bloggers have often paid a very high personal price for challenging the interests of the powerful and the privileged with alternative forms of news reporting»⁹ and that repressive governments have tried to censor their voices is now common knowledge, as is the fact that empowerment is a crucial aspect of blogging and citizen journalism in countries, such as India, where it draws attention to social problems¹⁰.

The most recent instance of the key role played by citizen journalism in our global world is testified to by the countless blogs documenting the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions. To give one example, the website <http://iamjan25.com/> is a collection of heart-breaking videos and pictures taken during the demonstrations in Tahrir Square, as well as a link to *Egypt Remembers*, «an online memorial to

⁷ S. ALLAN, E. THORSEN, *Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives*, Peter Lang, New York, 2009.

⁸ S. COTTLE, *Preface*, in *Citizen Journalism*, cit., p. XI.

⁹ S. ALLAN, E. THORSEN, *Citizen Journalism*, cit., p. 5.

¹⁰ S. P. SONWALKAR, *Citizen Journalism in India: The Politics of Recognition*, in *Citizen Journalism*, cit., pp.75-84.



remember those killed in the protest for a free Egypt»¹¹ providing us with a photo and the name of the revolution's victims. The website's title shows how English is appropriated by revolutionaries and citizen journalists. By claiming «I am January 25», they create an indissoluble link between their identity as free citizens and the beginning of the uprising.

While my overall project is a large-scale one aimed at analyzing a wide variety of bloggers, examining citizen journalism (including those mentioned above) and hip-hop groups in the Arab world, this paper will inevitably draw on a few examples: an English language news website *Electronic Intifada* (EI) with its blogs, *Diaries: Live from Palestine*; another blogger site, *Bethlehem Bloggers*; and an Arab hip-hop group from the United Arab Emirates.

EI was founded in 2001 by four activists to provide an alternative source of information from a Palestinian perspective as opposed to pro-Israel Western news coverage. It defines itself as «Palestine's Weapon of Mass Instruction» and also functions inter alia as a «cyber-clearinghouse» providing links to websites on human rights and UN resolutions. Its citizen journalism section, *Diaries: Live from Palestine*, is written by local residents offering dramatic accounts of what life in Palestine is like, as well as by volunteers. One of them is Ameer Makhoul, who was arrested charged with espionage and giving the enemy assistance, for which he was sentenced to life imprisonment (though after agreeing to a plea deal he now faces a sentence of seven to ten years). In his letter from Gilboa prison dated 29 November 2010, he explains that the court does not allow a prisoner to be proven innocent and that no Palestinian has ever been released as innocent. In his words,

Palestinians are guilty, it is the only option. [...] The state's role is to blame and the victim's role is to explain, even to prove that he or she is innocent. I have so many friends and partners all around the Arab world and among people in the homeland and diaspora. I have no illusions, but I have a lot of energy to struggle for freedom and dignity.¹²

Ameer Makhoul's blog confirms Zayyan and Carter's claim that «authors often declare that, by writing in English, it is their hope that their reporting will prove to

¹¹ <http://1000memories.com/egypt>.

¹² <http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article11693.shtml>, accessed on 2 March 2011.



have a greater international impact on global public opinion about Palestine»¹³. Ameer Makhoul's account of his experience as a Palestinian prisoner represents a unique opportunity to let everyone know about Israel's illegal methods of conducting trials, whereby they use so-called «secret evidence» and present it to the judges, without allowing either the suspect or his lawyers to know what it is about, as Ameer Makhoul explains.

Bloggers on another website, *Bethlehem Bloggers: Voices from the Bethlehem Ghetto*, launched in 2005, welcome readers in Arabic with «Ahlan Wa-Sahlan» (welcome) and introduce themselves as follows: «So: Who are we? And what is the point of a Bethlehem Blog?»

This site is a portal for us to communicate to the outside world and tell the stories of our lives in Bethlehem, occupied Palestine. It is also a window for you to look in; to see past the walls, barbed wire fences, and the media distortions; to hear from the people in Bethlehem themselves.

We are Palestinians and internationals who are living in the Bethlehem region (see Map), and who want to tell the world what it is like to be living in occupied territory, under an economic siege, encircled by a wall and military checkpoints: what it is like to live in a Palestinian Ghetto.

We invite you to come to see Bethlehem—to meet the people who live here and witness the occupied land of Palestine for yourselves. For those who cannot come, we provide you with this 'weblog' so you can at least hear our stories: voices from the Bethlehem Ghetto.

Though some of us are working with organizations in the area, the Bethlehem Blog is not affiliated with any party, NGO or organization in any way (the links bar is purely for information sharing). We are simply like-minded individuals who share a need to show the world the effects of the Israeli occupation of Palestine and in particular, Bethlehem.

We welcome comments and suggestions, but we have a strict policy for our comments. Any form of racism, discrimination of any kind or abuse in general will not be tolerated.¹⁴

As Zayyan and Carter emphasise,

¹³ H. ZAYYAN, C. CARTER, *Human Rights and Wrongs: Blogging News of Everyday Life in Palestine*, in *Citizen Journalism*, cit., pp.85-94, p.89.

¹⁴ <http://www.bethlehemghetto.blogspot.com/>, accessed on 26 February 2011.



many Palestinian bloggers, most of whom are in their 20s and 30s, see themselves as free speech and human rights activists. As such, they believe that they have social responsibility to openly engage with global audiences in order to tell them how ordinary Palestinians are experiencing the conflict.¹⁵

More precisely, as Jessica Dheere (journalist and citizen journalism lecturer) puts it, they see themselves as having «a more active role in the news than simply reporting it. They are often instigators of change in the first place».¹⁶

Like the bloggers from *Bethlehem Bloggers*, Zayyan explains her reasons for using English on her blog, *Contemplating from Gaza*, as follows:

I decided to write in English because I thought that it was important that the wider world should know what is happening in Gaza. It was no use writing in Arabic where I would be talking to fellow Palestinians and other Arabs about (what) we already know. My citizen journalism was to be about reaching the 'Other'. I wanted to advance international awareness that Palestinians do not just exist as images in the news. The more I write about Palestinians, the more I will help change worldwide misconceptions and stereotypes in the media that label us as 'terrorists'.¹⁷

What Zayyan does with her blog is appropriate English as a language for international communication in order to reach a *glocal* goal: fighting against world prejudices about Palestinians by describing their everyday life. It is through her use of English that her identity as a Palestinian is created in her dialogue with her readers and at the same time the language identity that she performs through her posts is what makes her English unique. English for her is a vital means «to reach the 'Other'» and to go beyond the racial, social and political barriers created by mass media. Moreover, as she further explains,

¹⁵ H. ZAYYAN, C. CARTER, *Human Rights and Wrongs*, cit., p.90.

¹⁶ J. DHEERE, *Arab Bloggers Meet to Discuss Free Speech, Reject 'Journalist' Label*, posted on 12 September 2008, <http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2008/09/arab-bloggers-meet-to-discuss-free-speech-reject-journalist-label256.html>, accessed on 28 February 2011.

¹⁷ www.contemplating-from-gaza.blogspot.com, posted in 2008, accessed on 3 March 2011.



I prefer to put more emphasis on people; their joys and hopes; their sadness and disappointments, and first and foremost, their daily struggle to survive. I initially thought about my blogging as an opportunity to write a Gazan people's journal of events. My post ideas have become increasingly focused on giving people I meet a voice.¹⁸

English therefore is for Zayyan a tool that gives voice to people who would not otherwise be heard, at least not at an international level. As Gal Beckerman argues in his essay *The New Arab Conversation*, blogging is an opportunity to «reclaim individuality» in the Arab world where leaders claim to speak on behalf of all their citizens. As a Lebanese blogger, Abu Kais, states: «Every leader thinks they represent everyone in these countries. And I think that's something we challenge every day in our blogs. We challenge what they say, and we always show the politicians as hypocrites, really».¹⁹

Zayyan's ideals and her use of the English language is shared by bloggers and citizen journalists, as was apparent from *the First Arab Bloggers Meeting*, which took place in Beirut in 2008²⁰. As Dheere puts it,

Despite the fact that they live under repressive regimes – or perhaps because of it – these individuals may be the next iconic defenders of free speech, not just in the Arab world but around the globe. Their ideas may land them in prison, but the lessons they teach have no borders thanks to the fluidity of the Web.²¹

This movement has been defined as «digital activism» by Digiactive, which is a volunteer organization «dedicated to helping grassroots activists around the world use the Internet and mobile phones to increase their impact». As indicated on their website,

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ Quoted in G. BECKERMAN, *The New Arab Conversation* in «Columbia Journalism Review», January/February 2007.

²⁰ (<http://www.menassat.com/?q=en%2Fnews-articles%2F4496-bloggers-arab-world-unite-beirut>)

²¹ J. DHEERE, *Arab Bloggers Meet to Discuss Free Speech*, cit.



our goal is a world of activists made more powerful and more effective through the use of digital technology [...] to communicate with other people who share our concerns, to disseminate a message of change, to organize and inform ourselves, to lobby the government, to take part in activism. Together, we call these activities *digital activism: the methods by which citizens use digital tools to effect social and political change*. We founded DigiActive because we want to spread digital activism around the world.²²

A different form of digital activism is shared by hip-hoppers throughout the world. While Zayyan gives an e-voice, a digital voice so to speak, to her fellow Palestinians through the Internet, *Desert Heat*, an Arab hip-hop group from the United Arab Emirates, provides a musical voice to the Arab world, and more precisely, in the case of a song entitled *Terror Alert*, dedicated to all those Palestinians who lost their lives fighting for the Palestinian cause. *Desert Heat* argue that they are carrying out «an Arabian pop revolution»²³ and define their music as follows:

Desert Heat is hip-hop in its original form. How? Well hip-hop has its roots from adapting to its surroundings, so desert heat basically wants to create hip-hop music that reflects its surroundings. [...] Inshallah if it is written then 'we bout to make history'. Expect hip-hop at a whole other level. Most people might categorize our music into a fusion category, but ultimately good music with positive vibes will always rise to the top.

Most of their songs do emphasize their Arab roots and the desert as their environment. *Keep it Desert*, for example, from the title to the refrain, is a variation of the well-known collocation 'keep it real', a key principle of hip-hop music, and as such embodies the group's mission «to create hip-hop music that reflects its surroundings». This is an interesting example of how English is appropriated to include markers of local identity and to foreground these musicians' Arab origins. Their desert roots are brought to the fore linguistically through a unique combination of English and Arabic, and visually through Arab clothing that the musicians often wear in their videos. A song included in their first album, *The Desert Speaks* has a title in Arabic, *Inta Wislak* (what's the matter?) in which the narrator argues that he

²² <http://www.digiactive.org/about/>, accessed on 25 February 2011.

²³ <http://desertheatarabia.com>, accessed on 28 February 2011.



does this for his people, i.e. he sings from «the depths of the sand, from the desert»; through the following bilingual dialogue he defends his Arab ‘Otherness’ against common practices among young people, such as smoking and taking drugs:

Don't do drugs?

Inta Wislak

If I don't smoke

Inta Wislak

and I don't drink

Inta Wislak

As Pennycook argues in relation to how a Japanese hip-hop group *Rip Slyme* uses English in their lyrics, «it is both local and non local, both English and both Japanese»²⁴. Similarly, *Desert Heat's* use of English, as shown above, is a performance in Arabic and English, in which the two languages cannot be separated.

Terror Alert is a powerful attempt at revealing what goes through the mind of a Palestinian. More precisely, as the song goes: «Let's take a trip inside the mind of an Arab kid Way before you labeled him a terrorist». Like Zayyan, they aim at countering the stereotypical Western view of all Arab people as terrorists by taking us on a visual, linguistic and musical trip inside a kid's mind. The video is full of shocking images, such as politicians bathing in a swimming pool literally filled with blood, in Gaza, with the following overlays running almost like subtitles through the video: «This life is temporary» and «Why am I in prison in my fathers' land?». The second verse of the song is again based on the contrast between the Western use of labels such as «terrorist» and «insane» on the one hand, and the life of this child, who like most Palestinians has lost his entire family: his mother, father, brothers and sisters.

Desert Heat appropriate the words «terrorist» and «insane» to show how detached they are from the reality that Palestinians experience. As in the previously-quoted blogging example, it is by emphasizing the limits of categories used in

²⁴ A. PENNYCOOK, *Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows*, cit., p.114.



English and by turning such labels upside down that they assert their identity as rappers, who try to overcome stereotypes and prejudices providing an «insider's version» of Palestinians' experiences through their music.

In a short video on hip-hop in Dubai entitled *Ruff Cut*, available on YouTube, several artists are interviewed and they express their opinion about the role of hip-hop. One of them argues:

Hip-hop is such a powerful force in itself, it has literally changed the world [...] we take this powerful energy, this powerful voice.

Hip-hop is really about the message and speaking and having a voice

No matter what your religion is, what your background.²⁵

Another artist reinforces this idea of a global community as follows: «The same struggle most African Americans go through in Paris, Amsterdam, in Germany or Sweden, the same thing with every African American who has left his home»²⁶.

Similarly, a female blogger from Egypt (whose blog is entitled *One Egyptian Woman*) stresses the political role of bloggers by arguing that «most of the Egyptian bloggers are political activists and most of the bloggers use the common language of the streets, citizen media».²⁷ Allan and Thorsen's suggestion of «thinking anew the social responsibilities of the citizen as journalist while, at the same time, reconsidering those of the journalist as citizen»²⁸ similarly applies to rappers, since each of these «languages of the streets», i.e. citizen media and hip-hop music, forces us to reconsider the role of English in global political movements, through the performance of new identities in different cultural and geographical contexts. As Pennycook rightly argues, following on from Woolard²⁹, «the ways in which languages are used and thought about are never just about language but also about

²⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LQflOseYimM>, accessed on 27 February 2011.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ Quoted in J. DHEERE, *Arab Bloggers Meet to Discuss Free Speech*, cit.

²⁸ S. ALLAN, E. THORSEN, *Introduction*, in *Citizen Journalism*, cit., pp.1-14, p.13.

²⁹ K. WOOLARD, *Is the past a foreign country? Time, language origins and the nation in the early modern Spain* in «Journal of Linguistic Anthropology», 2004, 14 (1), pp.57-80.



community and society, what it means to be a person in a particular context»³⁰. English today as a language of international communication is inter alia, the English used by the citizen journalists and rappers, like those referred to in this paper. Through their own English they enact their double role as members of global communities with a common interest in freedom of expression, as well as individuals with Arab roots, who promote new identities by being citizens of the world in their own country.

³⁰ A. PENNYCOOK, *Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows*, cit., p.138.