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### **Made in *Almanya*: the birth of Turkish rap<sup>1</sup>**

Thomas Solomon

Turkish rap was born in the late 1980s in the transnational meeting of two mobile groups of people: African-American soldiers stationed in Germany during the waning days of the Cold War and the period immediately after its end, and second-generation Turks in Germany, the children of economic migrants.<sup>2</sup> In this way the crucible of Turkish rap was found not in Turkey itself, but in the Turkish diaspora in German cities such as Berlin and Frankfurt, home to both large Turkish populations and American military bases. It is thus the unique historical juxtaposition of the Cold War presence of the American military in West Germany and West Berlin—including the high number of African-American soldiers stationed in those places during the late 1980s and early 1990s—with the post-war labor shortages in Germany that led to its recruitment of Turkish “guest workers” (*Gastarbeiter*)—primarily unskilled laborers recruited to work in factories—beginning in 1961, that created the conditions for the emergence of Turkish rap music and hip-hop youth culture in Germany.

This chapter explores the early history of Turkish hip-hop in Germany, showing how second-generation Turkish migrant youth used rap music as a vehicle for constructing a sense of identity in the context of systematic marginalization within German society. Finding themselves in the situation of being *in* Germany, but not *of* Germany, Turkish youth in cities like Berlin and Frankfurt used hip-hop as a way of commenting on and working through their experiences via their engagement with a

cultural form originating in the United States (Brown 2006, 158). While Turkish rap made in Germany beginning in the early 1990s explored various themes, including gender and party culture (A. Kaya 2001), an ongoing concern of rappers of Turkish origin was to document and respond to their ongoing experience of racism and social exclusion. Turkish migrant youth were keenly aware of the key role they, along with other foreign “guest workers,” were playing in the postwar rise of the (West) German economy, while otherwise being locked out of participation in Germanness. Turkish rap is thus a productive lens through which to hear how young people of Turkish background living in Germany worked through issues of identity and belonging.

### **Social and cultural context of Turkish rap in Germany**

By the mid-1990s there were nearly two million people of Turkish origin living in Germany, a significant portion of them being youth (Elflein 1998, 255). Already by the mid-1980s a new generation of migrant youth had reached critical mass, growing up in a socially liminal space between the Turkish culture and social norms of their parents, those of the host country Germany, and internationally circulating popular culture that originated in the expressive forms of black Americans (Elflein 1998, 261). As Robins and Morley put it, second-generation migrant youth were caught between not two cultures, but *three* (1996, 249).

The first wave of hip-hop culture came to Germany in the mid-1980s with the American films *Wild Style* (1983), *Style Wars* (1983), and *Beat Street* (1984), shown in theaters and on television, and (especially) circulated on VHS tapes. The popularity of these films spawned a rather short-lived breakdance craze and some interest in graffiti street art (Elflein 1998, 256; Loh and Güngör 2002, 23; Verlan and Loh 2002, 92–99). Among Turkish migrant youth, however, the musical arts of hip-hop—

rapping, turntablism, and DJing—did not take root until the end of the decade, and emerged from more direct contact with American participants in the culture.

As in youth cultures of leisure throughout the world, music and dance played significant roles in the lives of migrant youth. Feeling unwelcome in local German-operated discotheques, many young second-generation Turks gravitated toward discotheques operated by and for American soldiers near the military bases Rhein-Main Air Base near Frankfurt and Tempelhof Airport, West Berlin. At these discotheques young German Turks met and developed friendships with African-American servicemen, and first heard and learned about the rap music popular with African-American soldiers at the time and often played from recordings or performed live in the form of freestyle (improvised raps) in these discos (interview with Frankfurt-based DJ Mahmut, Istanbul, November 6, 2006). Rap music could also be heard in parts of Germany on radio broadcasts by the American Forces Network (AFN), produced by and for American servicemen, but also available for listening by other people living in the areas the broadcasts reached.

Migrants in Germany during this period—including the second generation born and raised or brought there as young children by their parents—were subject to enforced structural social marginalization as a result of the German state's (at that time) restrictive naturalization policies (A. Kaya 2001, 58–72). The German citizenship regime relegated Turkish labor migrants to a marginal place within German society, the assumption being that as “guest workers” they would eventually “go home” back to Turkey once their labor was no longer required (Greve 2009, 118; Perchinig 2008, 11).

Besides the structurally determined marginality of their position in German society, migrants of Turkish origin in Germany also experienced racism and xenophobia in their everyday lives. The rising tide of anti-Turkish xenophobia

culminated in a series of violent physical and psychological attacks by neo-Nazis, skinheads, and other far-right groups beginning in the late 1980s, infamously including a series of fatal arson attacks on Turkish homes in various German cities and towns.

It is in this context of social marginalization and the experience of racist attacks that many Turkish youths in Germany found in the rap music popular with African-American soldiers an idiom in which they could express their perceptions of themselves as having a similar place in German society to that of black people in the USA (interview with Kiel-based rapper İnce Efe, Istanbul, November 3, 2006). Many veteran German-Turkish hiphoppers who came to hip-hop during this period in the late 1980s to early 1990s cite the classic 1982 song “The Message” by Grand Master Flash & the Furious Five<sup>3</sup> as being the catalyst that helped them understand the potential of rap music for giving them a voice with which to express themselves and talk about their experiences as second-class non-citizens in Germany. Perceiving that the idiom of rap music, which they associated with protest and social commentary, would be an appropriate vehicle with which to respond to the everyday racism and the wave of racist attacks they were experiencing during the 1990s (Solomon 2008, 2011a), Turkish youths in Germany themselves began making rap songs, first largely in English, and later in Turkish and German.

Turkish rap in Germany can be seen as a subcategory within the broader genre of migrant rap that emerged in the late 1980s, including other significant groups such as Advanced Chemistry (which included members of Ghanaian, Haitian, and Italian background). But Turkish rap quickly emerged as a separate and coherent sphere, characterized by the use of the Turkish language itself and by the use of Turkish musical samples and motifs in the “oriental rap” subgenre, and enabled

demographically by the sheer number of Turks that could potentially form an audience.

### **Migrant rap: The life of a foreigner**

The song “Bir yabancının hayati” (The Life of a Foreigner) is generally recognized as the first commercially released rap song using the Turkish language (Elflein 1998, 257; Loh and Güngör 2002, 172). The song was released in 1991 on the vinyl-only album *The Word is Subversion* by the Nuremberg-based group King Size Terror. This group was at that time a duo consisting of the Turkish-born rapper Alpertunga Köksal (credited on the album jacket as The Incredible Al) and the Peruvian-German DJ/producer Michael Huber, known under his artist name Chill Fresh. King Size Terror rapped primarily in English, and while the title of the song “Bir Yabancının Hayati” is in Turkish, the song itself is actually bilingual. It begins and ends with verses rapped in English, bracketing the middle verse in Turkish, all over a musical track that combines funk rhythms on drum kit with a jazzy saxophone sample. The first verse in English begins by explaining “This is about the life of a foreigner in Germany / Many people don’t want to see the reality.” The song then considers the rapper’s existential crisis in lines like “I’m asking myself / Where the hell are you goin’, Al? / And what the hell are you goin’ to tell my people?” The text also describes various aspects of the Turkish experience of racism in Germany, for example being chased by skinheads on the street. The rapper explicitly acknowledges the change in language from English to Turkish in the middle of the song by rapping, at the end of the first verse in English, the lines “Now let me kick it in my own language / So my Turkish brothers can understand my message.” The verse that follows in Turkish is sonically marked by electronic distortion added to the vocal, giving the rapper’s voice a harder, more aggressive edge. The verse addresses the

contradictions of coming to Germany ostensibly as a temporary “guest worker” with plans to work a few years, save some money, and eventually return to Turkey, but then being seduced by the money to be made and the lifestyle and status that money enables (exemplified by owning an expensive car such as a Mercedes), and ending up deferring the return indefinitely.

“Bir yabancının hayatı,” with its one verse in Turkish, appeared on an album that was otherwise all in English. But the track paved the way for an entirely Turkish-language side project which then developed in its own right and continued under the name Karakan (Blackblood) after King Size Terror eventually disbanded.

The first full-length rap album entirely in Turkish was released in 1994 by the Frankfurt-based collective Looptown, consisting of DJ Mahmut and the rappers Volkan T, Murat G, and KMR (Figure 1). The songs on this album elaborated further on the themes explored in “Bir yabancının hayatı,” solidifying Turkish-language migrant rap as a genre. The lyrics refer to the drudgery of factory jobs, the seductions of money and the consumer goods it can buy, the impact of drugs on migrant communities, and the arson attacks on Turkish homes mentioned above. Collectively, the songs on the album constitute and perform an oral history of Turkish labor migration to Germany and the experience of Turkish migrants there, as told by youth based on their personal experiences.



Figure 1: DJ Mahmut, Volkan T, Murat G, and KMR, *Looptown* (1994).

The contradictions of being caught “between two cultures”—that of the Germany they grew up in and of the Turkey of their parents—and the resulting struggles to have a sense of identity and belonging are summed up in the often-evoked rhyming pair of terms *almancı/yabancı*. *Yabancı* is a common Turkish word meaning simply “foreigner” or “stranger.” *Almancı* is a newly invented word, based on the Turkish name (*Almanya*) for Germany, meaning “German-like” or “Germanized,” and used by people in Turkey to describe the behavior, lifestyles and world view of Turkish migrants who had lived many years in Germany and were perceived to have adopted German ways (V. Kaya 2015, 260–61). This pair of terms forms the organizing trope for a number of songs, including the opening track “Almancı Yabancı” on Karakan’s 1996 album *Al Sana Karakan*.

### **Oriental hip-hop**

Prominent within Turkish rap from Germany during the 1990s was a subgenre called “oriental rap” or “oriental hip-hop” which combined African-American techniques of rapping and making beats with self-consciously “Turkish”-sounding musical samples and motifs taken from Turkish folk and popular musics (Diessel 2001; A. Kaya 2001, 190–91,202). Recordings in the Turkish popular music genre from the 1960s-1970s known as *Anadolu rock* (Anatolian rock) or *Anadolu pop*—itself a hybrid of American and British rock music with traditional Turkish and Middle Eastern musics—were a particularly rich source of musical material sampled and used by producers of oriental rap tracks. Very recognizable samples from Turkish artists such as Erkin Koray, Barış Manço, and Moğollar form the basis of the genre’s sonic palette.

The Berlin-based group Islamic Force is widely recognized as a pioneer in developing the oriental rap genre. They started out as a duo in the late-1980s consisting of Boe B. and the DJ/turntablist Cut ’em T, both with Turkish backgrounds. They were soon joined by producer DJ Derezon, of German and Spanish background, thereby making the group multicultural in membership. Rapper Boe B. was born in the neighborhood of Kadıköy on the Asian side of Istanbul; he came to Germany when he was eight years old (A. Kaya 2001, 195).

The name of the group *Islamic Force* was intentionally ironic—they were not “Islamist” at all, but actually rejected fundamentalisms of all kinds. They chose their name in part as a way of thumbing their noses at racists, xenophobes, and Islamophobes in Germany, and in part as a homage to pioneering New York hip-hop musical group Afrika Bambaataa and the Soulsonic Force. In the logo for the group’s name on the front cover of their 1997 CD *Mesaj* (Message), the letters *I* and *S* in the word *Islamic* have been combined into a dollar sign \$, poking fun at the Islamic



capital behind religiously-oriented Turkish politicians (Figure 2). The group's general orientation can be described as humanist in the sense of stressing the potential value and goodness of human beings and emphasizing common human needs, rather than appealing to divine law or emphasizing difference. This attitude is manifested in the group's general open-mindedness in regard to religion, race, and ethnicity, and their explicit rejection of racism and nationalism.



Figure 2: Islamic Force, *Mesaj* (1997).

Islamic Force's first two records were entirely in English; for their third release, they switched to rapping in Turkish. The group's debut 12-inch vinyl single *My Melody*, released in 1992, is considered a founding recording of the oriental hip-hop subgenre. The main musical motif of "My Melody" is a syncopated version of the

melody of Turkish folk singer Zülfü Livaneli's well-known song "Leylim ley" played on synthesizer, topped off by a sample from famous Turkish *arabesk* singer İbrahim Tatlıses' version of the same song, all given rhythmic support via drum samples from James Brown's "Funky Drummer." The lyrics of "My Melody" place it within the boast rap genre in which the rapper calls attention to his own rapping skills.

Understanding intuitively that the track would constitute something new within the landscape of hip-hop in Germany, Boe B. uses the boast rap genre's meta conventions to point out the self-consciously "Turkish style" of the track while explicitly referring to himself as a "Turkish MC."

Islamic Force's second release was the 12-inch EP *The Whole World is Your Home* (1993) (Figure 3). The musical track of the EP's title song is built around a sample of the primary melodic hook from *Anadolu pop* artist Barış Manço's 1976 track "Ölüm Allahın emri" (Death is God's Command). The English-language lyrics of the song riff on another track by Manço, "Hemşerim memleket nire" (Fellow Countryman, Where Are You From?) from 1992, which includes the line "Bu dünya benim memleket" (This world is my country). In the third verse of the song, Boe B. raps about racism, making an explicit historical connection between racism in Germany during the Third Reich and the racism that migrants were experiencing in Germany 60 years later, suggesting that some people had forgotten the lessons of history.



Figure 3: Islamic Force, *The Whole World is Your Home* (1993).

Another German-Turkish artist working in the oriental hip-hop genre is the female rapper Aziza-A, who was born in Berlin and based there throughout the 1990s. Her 1997 album *Es ist Zeit* (It's About Time) announces its genre affiliation prominently with the phrase "Oriental hip hop" across the top of the front cover (Figure 4). The album's musical production eschews samples from recordings, using instead live musicians playing various Turkish folk instruments in the studio, including for example *bağlama* (long-necked lute), *kaval* (end-blown reed flute), and *zurna* (double reed wind instrument), as well as Middle Eastern percussion such as *zils* (finger cymbals) and *darabuka* (ceramic goblet drum). The CD includes songs in both German and Turkish. Several of the songs use melodies from Turkish folk songs in the chorus to frame the rapped verses; for example, the title track's chorus quotes

from the central Anatolian song “Misket” (Marbles), while “Kendi yolun” (“Your Own Road”) draws on the Turkish and Kurdish folk song “Kara üzüm habbesi” (Black Grape Seed).

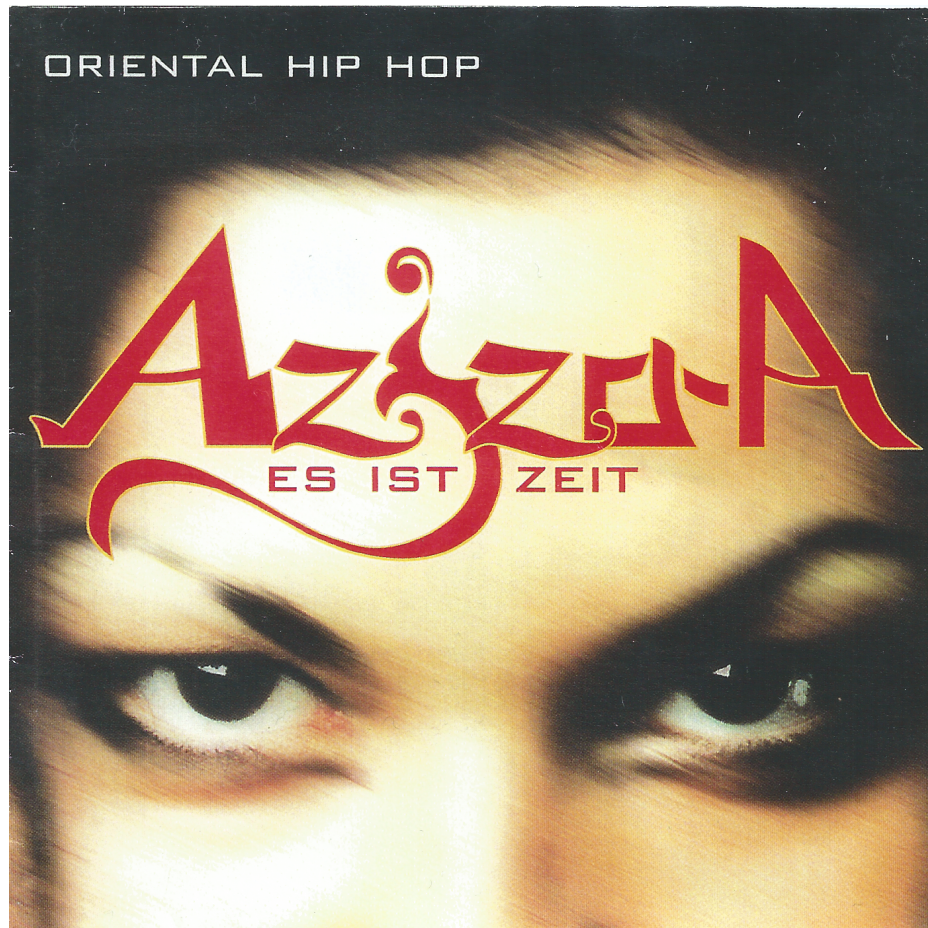


Figure 4: Aziza-A, *Es ist Zeit* (1997).

Aziza-A’s artistic project on this album is specifically to give voice to the experience of Turkish migrant women in Germany. The album’s title track announces her feminist agenda, describing how the patriarchal norms for women’s behavior in Turkish society have been maintained in the diaspora in Germany and keep Turkish women down there as well. Aziza-A asserts her right to be “disobedient” in regard to these norms, calling for Turkish women in both Germany and Turkey to find their own voice and assert their own agency (Diessel 2001, 178–79).

### **Exporting Turkish rap**

A watershed in Turkish hip-hop came in 1995 with the album and tour in Turkey of the German-Turkish rap group Cartel. This group was actually a kind of German-Turkish rap “supergroup,” including the two groups Karakan (from Nuremberg, the group mentioned above which grew out of King Size Terror) and Da Crime Posse (from Kiel), as well as the Berlin-based solo rapper Erci-E. The project was put together by German-Turkish producer Ozan Sinan specifically with the idea of marketing Turkish rap in both Germany and Turkey (Diessel 2001, 170). With Cartel, Turkish rap made in Germany “came home,” so to speak.

The cover of Cartel’s CD and cassette, released both in Germany and in Turkey, featured the group’s logo, based on the design of the Turkish flag. The flag consists of a white crescent moon and star on a red background. The CD/cassette cover (Figure 5) has the group’s name in dark letters on a red background. Surrounding the C of the word *Cartel* is a white crescent shape like the crescent moon of the flag. Cartel’s CD and cassette cover thus appropriated one of the most emotionally charged symbols of the Turkish nation. Musically, Turkishness is enacted through the use of oriental hip-hop as the primary rap subgenre on the album. Three tracks, for example, are built around prominent samples from old songs by Barış Manço; other tracks include samples from 1970s recordings by Turkish *Anadolu pop* artists such as Edip Akbayram and Esin Afşar. In terms of lyrics, the songs discuss the by-now familiar themes of the experience of Turkish labor migrants in Germany.

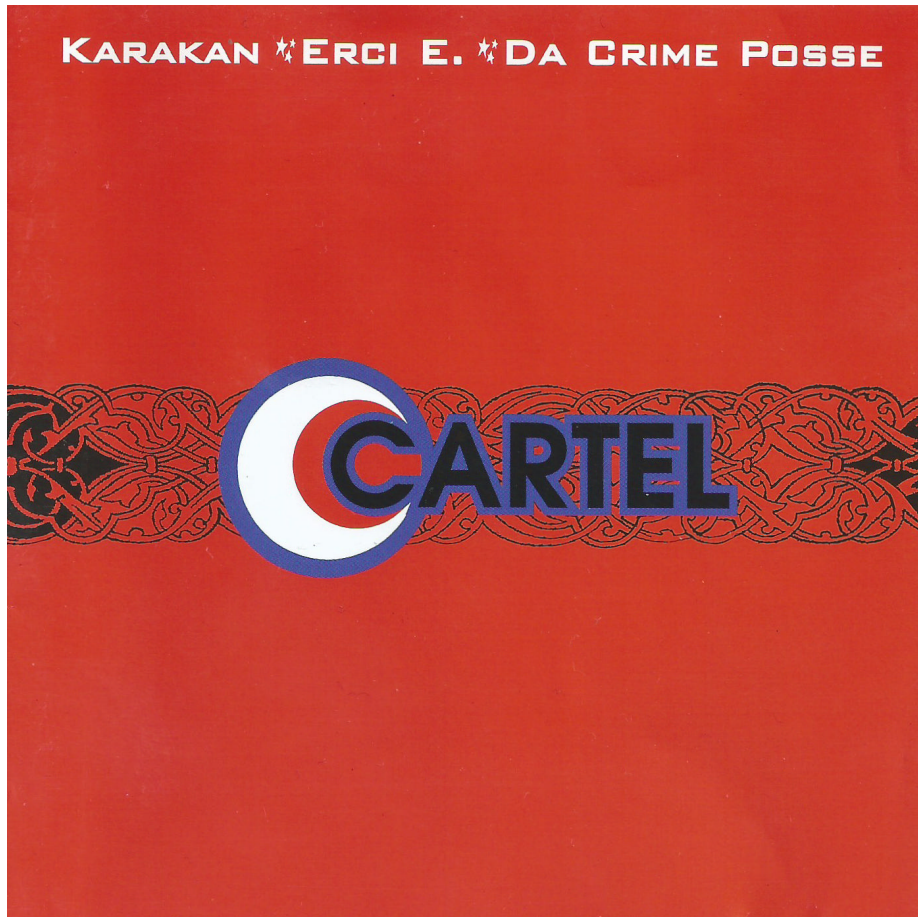


Figure 5: Cartel, *Cartel* (1995).

Consistent with the iconography of the Turkish flag used on the cover, many of the songs on the album also deploy cultural-nationalist tropes. But this is largely an inclusive nationalism based on citizenship that invokes solidarity among people from the country of Turkey in the face of racism in Germany, without necessarily insisting on Turkish ethnicity. The song “Kan kardeşler” (Blood Brothers) performed by Karakan on the Cartel album, for example, names four ethnic groups from Turkey—Turk, Kurd, Laz, and Circassian, all of which are represented in the Turkish diaspora in Germany—arguing that ethnic factionalism makes them all weaker and that they should maintain unity in the face of discrimination in Germany. The song “Yetmedi mi?” by Da Crime Posse explicitly argues against antagonism between Turks and

Kurds, suggesting that it is not the Kurds who are traitors to the Turkish state, as extreme Turkish nationalists would have it, but those who would come between them.

Cartel's arrival in Turkey in Summer 1995 became a major media event. Members of the group used interviews in the Turkish press to explain how their musical project was intended as an intervention against neo-Nazis and other fascist groups in Germany. Group member Abdurrahman, for example, was quoted in the Turkish newspaper *Sabah* as saying "we need to be like a single fist against the skinheads who are attacking our families, raiding our homes, beating up Turkish women. Now we see that music allows us to do this much better than street fights" (quoted in Çınar 1999, 43). Cartel's message denouncing racism in Germany and promoting dignity for Turks living there had, however, a contradictory reception when transplanted to the Turkish context. Cartel was received warmly by youth from the Turkish far right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) who turned up at the airport in Istanbul to greet the group upon its arrival there in August 1995 (Çınar 1999, 44; A. Kaya 2001, 183–84; Robins and Morley 1996, 252; Stokes 2003, 298–99). Cartel's assertion of Turkish identity as a positive thing in the context of anti-Turkish racism in Germany was thus misunderstood in Turkey as support for Turkish nationalism in Turkey directed against ethnic groups (particularly the Kurds) who were themselves asserting political and cultural rights denied to them by the Turkish state. As Çınar puts it, "Cartel, an expression of resentment against ultranationalism, was being cheered by ultranationalists" (Çınar 1999, 44).

While rap music was basically unknown in Turkey before 1995, Cartel's album, videoclip and tour inspired youth in Turkey to begin making rap in the Turkish language. Rappers in Turkey at first embraced the musical style and textual themes established by their German-Turkish cousins. But they soon began to argue that Turkish rap made-in-Turkey needed to respond to local realities in Turkey and find its

own modes of expression, rather than imitate German Turkish models (Solomon 2005a, 2005b).

### **Conclusions**

In his study of Turkish hip-hop youth in Berlin during the mid-1990s, Ayhan Kaya describes Turkish-origin rappers as (following Antonio Gramsci) “organic intellectuals” and (following Walter Benjamin) “storytellers.” Kaya elaborates, “the rapper is an intellectual storyteller who has counsel for his/her audience and who wishes to mobilise his/her local community against the power of the hegemonic and/or coercive group” (2001, 181). For Turkish-origin youth in Germany in the late 1980s and into the 1990s, rap music was also a way of writing and performing their own history. Rap provided Turkish youth with a vehicle for constructing a historical subjectivity around the experience of labor migration to Germany, documenting in song the challenges and frustrations of living in a society in which they were systematically marginalized, subject to everyday racism, and even became the target of violent attacks. While they may have first learned the genre from African-American soldiers stationed in Germany, Turkish youth in cities like Berlin and Frankfurt made rap music their own, describing their experiences in rhymes set to beats that drew on the Turkish musical expressions of their parents’ generation.

### **Notes**

[See end of document, where Microsoft Word automatically puts endnotes.]

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this chapter draw on previously published material (Solomon 2008, 2009, 2011a, 2011b).

<sup>2</sup> By “Turkish rap” I mean rap music created and practiced by people of Turkish background, no matter which language (Turkish, German, or English) they might use in their songs or which country they may reside or have citizenship in.

<sup>3</sup> “The Message” by Grand Master Flash & the Furious Five (first released in 1982) was one of the first politically conscious rap song recordings emanating from the early New York hip-hop scene. The song is a founding recording of the rap subgenre that would later become known as “message rap” (Allen 1996).