Hip Hop from Gaza to Goma.

Notes on Cultural Work during Hard Times.

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Cold, cold eyes upon me they stare

People all around me and they're all in fear

They don't seem to want me but they won't admit

I must be some kind of creature up here having fits

Hard Times by Baby Huey

On February 23, 2024, a rocket blast pulverized the CampsBreakerz dance school in Gaza City, Palestine. In video reels on social media, you see the perforated graffiti wall and the hubris filling up the dance studio, what used to be the living room of a family home.[1] With Israeli fighter jets flying overhead and dropping bombs, Palestinian dancers remove the rocks and dust at the studios and resume their classes the next day. CampsBreakerz Crew, a crew founded in 2004 in Gaza City by the brothers Mohammed and Ahmed Alghariz, has continued to organize classes and jam sessions since October 7th, 2023. Barefoot top-rocks, go-downs and footwork sessions continue in the sand and on linoleum mats in a land where explosions sound louder than music.

Travel a few thousand kilometers to Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo, dancing takes place amidst the violence in the eastern regions of the country. In similar video reels, you see children displaced by the wars of Lushalaga/Mugunga joining circle activities of Vijana Up.[2] Vijana Up - *vijana* meaning youth in Swahili - is a Goma-based collective of hip hop dancers that organize dance classes and the Goma Street Dance festival. Under the sounds of the portable boombox, the crowd grooves rhythmically in unison, connected through moving shoulders, arms in the air, and pumping fists. In face of decades-long human and environmental instrumentalized violence, dance circles become places of education and connection.

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[1] *CampsBreakerz,* October 7, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/reel/DA0WZj9oBdL/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==.

[2] *Projet Kongo,* April 22, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/reel/C6EHU9Nt_9B/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==.

Hip hop is born and grows during hard times. While hip hop is sometimes proclaimed dead for failing its original Black communities, it thrives in Gaza and Goma.[1] These are places where genocides actively unfold and where the erasure of life is normalized and invisibilized. It has been more than a year since the Israeli government under the direction of Benjamin Netanyahu escalated its genocide in the history of 76 years of occupation of the Palestinians in Palestine. The continued onslaught has reached immediate 42,000 deaths and potentially 186,000 people counting the indirect casualties and missing.[2] The scales of violence in the DRC in numbers and time scales are hard to fathom. With 6 *million* deaths since 1996, one report describes how "mass killing, extrajudicial executions, kidnapping of children, mass rape, other gender-based violence, torture by militias and government forces, and ethnic discrimination have become endemic in the eastern DRC."[3] Yet, hip hop from Gaza to Goma has endured and lived up to its original mission: to unite and tell stories from invisiblized places and people.

To amplify and support the work of hip hop cultural workers on the ground, we spoke to Ahmed Algһariz from Gaza City, Palestine and Faraja Batumike from Goma, DRC through Zoom from Brussels. Brussels, notoriously, has deep historical connections to both regions—through its colonial legacy in Central Africa and the European Union's ongoing support of Israel's actions of the Palestinians. Alghariz is one of the dancing founders of the CampsBreakerz crew in the Gaza Strip, an educator and trauma councilor, and an activist from his current residence in Germany. Batumike was born and raised in Goma, where he still lives most of the time. Dancing since his childhood, he is now a professional performer and choreographer, working both locally and internationally. He is also the founder of Vijana Up and the organizer of the Goma Dance Festival, the first street dance festival in the DRC. The themes of resilience and repair run through the homelands, lives, and works of Alghariz and Batumike. This led us to ask what the history and significance is of hip hop for Palestinians and Congolese. And what can global communities learn and build bridges of understanding with Gaza and Goma?

We have connected the common experiences and divergences in Alghariz' and Batumike's stories. As such, we talked about the history of hip hop, their successes and challenges, and the role of global diasporas in supporting cultural work on the ground. We hope our reflections on this conversation will lead to open-ended conclusions that will continue the much-necessary dialogues and community building across borders of death, division, and destruction. The power to unite is ours.

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Decades after its birth in the south Bronx, hip hop in Palestine and DR Congo emerged from a variety of sources since the early 1990s. "Hip hop culture was not around as a culture," reflects Batumike on his discovery of the art in the early 2000s. Contrary to Europe or Japan, hip hop in DR Congo and Africa generally arrived often at a slower pace through fragmentary and under-recognized means while the Black US culture proliferated globally.[4] It made its headways into the African continent through diasporas with connections to New York City and Paris during the 1980s. Rather than TV or the radio, cassette tapes, vinyl records, and VHS tapes primarily distributed the new sounds while "City Breakers" crews were founded in major cities such as

Bamako, Dakar, and Cape Town.[5] Unlike Kinshasa, the capital of the DRC, there were few opportunities and inspirations available for Batumike in Goma. There was certainly nightlife as DJs played in clubs and a few artists experimented with rhyming and blending local sounds into rap tracks. Yet, few understood that "all those elements [were] connected into one culture, which was called hip hop," Batumike emphasizes.

As elsewhere, however, Congolese hip hop did not emerge in a social and political vacuum. Under the long reign of Mobutu Sese Seko (1965-1997) popular music culture played a crucial role in the politics of *authenticité,* which sought to combat the European-produced colonial mentality of denigrating African culture and language. "In practice, however, it was harnessed to building Mobutu's personality cult."[6] As Kazadi Wa Mukuna writes, "music was a vital tool for the success and survival of his Cultural Revolution" that produced a prolific music recording landscape oriented toward capturing the indigenous sounds of Central Africa, such as soukous, rumba, and ndombolo.[7] The inherited musical tradition continued in the post-Mobutu era: music production dissipated through new FM radio stations, the Congolese diaspora, and the cultural exchange with neighboring East-African countries.

Ahmed Alghariz was born in Saudi Arabia before he moved with his family to Gaza City. There, he and his brother discovered the crystals of hip hop culture—in graffiti sprayed on walls and in the emerging rap scenes—while they practiced handstands and acrobatic moves. Whereas Palestinian and Arab-American rap experienced a quicker take-off since the late 1990s, dance as a separate hip hop element was hard to find. Unlike breaking, Palestinian rap artists like DAM, MWR, and Saz quickly gained visibility by exposing the apartheid regime in Israel and global anti-Arab racism. Their work resonates with the political rap of 1990s U.S. groups like NWA and Public Enemy.[8] According to Joseph Massad, "the political rap produced by Palestinian youth [puts them] in a longer tradition of revolutionary, underground Arabic music and political songs that have supported the Palestinian liberation movement since the 1950s and that mixed nationalist poetry with hybrid Arab-Western musical instrumentation."[3]

Thus, Alghariz explains, "We heard about something called funky [...] They didn't know any of the terms. Or, that this dance was called break dance or breaking and that it was a branch of the hip hop elements." Only around 2007 and 2008 was the idea of hip hop as a coherent cultural form coming together. The slow arrival of internet connectivity and platforms such as YouTube around the mid-2000s and early 2010s proved to be a game-changer because they broadened the exposure of Alghariz to their hip hop interests. Knowledge of hip hop fundamentals was facilitated either through digital access or personal travel and connections. After all, NYC hip hop pioneers such as the Rock Steady Crew, MOPTOP and Elite Force rarely, if ever, visited places as far as DR Congo and Palestine. These perspectives remind us that hip hop has evolved along different timescales and speeds. It speaks against uniform and universal chronologies. The lack of digital infrastructure development and military occupation produce different realities for hip hop learning in Gaza and Goma.

[3] As cited in: Sunaina Maira and Magid Shihade, "Hip Hop from '48 Palestine: Youth, Music, and the Present/Absent," *Social Text* 30, no. 3 (112) (September 1, 2012): 9.

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Yet for all its novelty, breaking and hip hop were not seen in a positive light. In both places, the unseen uniqueness of breaking, its association as an American and/or Western cultural import, and stereotypes such as sexually promiscuousness and gangsterism were launched at Alghariz and Batumike from their personal and social milieus. For Alghariz and his crew, they had to emphasize that they were "doing break or breakdance" to dissociate themselves from the onto-them-projected image of "disco dancers." You could be seen as "a bad guy that is dancing" in nightclubs and getting drunk. The term "disco" was seen as an insult implying the lack of good societal morals. The experiences of Alghariz resonate with earlier disco and hip hop communities in the US that were often categorized along gendered, sexual, and racial lines. Alice Echols has recently noted how disco culture and its associated images of "escapism, elevation of the feminine, and facelessness" was often contrasted with "hip hop's evocation of the "real" - i.e. the street - its reconfiguring of black masculinity as tough, hard, even violent [...] [9]

Alghariz explained how they even changed their names from CampsBreakers to avoid outsiders reading the acronym "b-boys" as "bad-boys."[4] Instead, "we had to call it break because it breaks the gravity. This is how we started to explain it to the community." Others warned and criticized Alghariz by complaining to their respective families. "They said that this was a Western culture. [It is] our tradition of dance [i.e. the Palestinian dance *Dabke*] that you're supposed to dance, not this Western thing." Looking for a solution to make their art forms socially respected, Alghariz and his crew mates created a distinct style that incorporated elements from modern and contemporary techniques – dubbed Gazan Style.

Likewise, some people in Goma looked at Batumike as a member of gangs with guns engaged in criminal activity and drugs-use. "So when you said that you wanted to become a dancer, people would always say and treat you as if you were becoming a bad person, becoming a gang member, [and that] you were losing your future." The social prejudice towards men and women dancing came from religiously conservative circles, both Christian and Muslim. "I was not allowed to dance," says Batumike. "So, if I wanted to dance just to dance, okay that was accepted. But if I wanted to become a dancer, mostly in hip hop, that was a big problem for me."

The path towards acceptance has been long and is still underway as dancers in both places have been trying to change the narrative. "So it was like a real fight we've been having, and it hasn't stopped for people to accept and understand except for what I've been doing," as he continues. It was only after he was personally able to make his dance career financially viable through international tours in Africa and Europe that he could demonstrate that dance *was* a respected income that could uplift young people in his community.

Yet, the birth of hip hop in Palestine and DR Congo isn't dissimilar from its birth in the south Bronx and the US for several reasons. Hip hop offered a gateway for disenfranchised youth

[4] The "b" in bgirls and bboys is conventionally referenced to the dancers going off on the "breaks"- the instrumental and energetic parts of funk and disco songs that DJs would manually extend by cutting and looping two identical vinyl records of the same song.

seeking forms of self-expression in a local environment of challenges, alienation of mainstream cultures, and physical violence. The youth's initiative to draw from their own cultural identities and cross-pollinate between local forms of dance and music (i.e. dabke, rumba, ndombolo) and hip hop. Yet over-romanticized media portrayals of hip hop in DR Congo or Palestine almost exclussively portray the culture as a unified site of resistance. Such account ignore how local communities of Goma and Gaza still engage warily and distrustful towards what is perceived as a Western cultural import.[10]

More importantly, hip hop's birth is framed as a lineair outgrowth of poverty and criminality in inner cities of predominantly Black communities. Recently, longtime bboy the Style Elements Crew and Professor of Dance Serouj Aprahamian remarked how "hip-hop's association with gangs should be understood within this broader socio-political context of criminalizing African American life and expanding the carceral state."[11] Derek Ide similarly noted in a remarkable essay on the capitalist underdevelopment of hip hop how attacks on Gangsta Rap such as N.W.A. came from both Christian fundamentalist groups that launched "anti-hip-hop campaigns under the guise of protecting morality" and also liberal, Black politicians such as C. Delores Tucker." [12]

Algharíz and Batumike have continued to expand their work despite the difficulties. As the capital of the North Kivu province, Goma has been spared the intense violence taking place just outside its municipal borders. Both dancers have explained that while dance forms their passion and livelihood, other immediate needs come first in a life of distress and occupation. Many families of their students look for food, shelter, and safety. Healing and hoping for a better future come through the work and spirits of dance communities on the ground. Hip hop and dance serve as a form of trauma therapy in its most acute sense and need, while maintaining its philosophy of empowerment and upliftment. In 2015 Batumike founded Vijana Up to offer free dance classes to mostly street kids to focus on their talent development. He also explicitly sought to mix "normal kids and street kids" to show the more privileged the difficulty of life. Some of his students were child soldiers looking for ways out of their conditions. Algharíz also walked the pedagogical track. Having left Gaza at one point, he undertook therapy counselling training in Germany, developed classes and jams for those in Gaza. Just a few days before October 7th, they would debut with their show Still Alive.

However, the support from abroad for hip hop communities in DR Congo and Palestine has been contentious and fragmentary. This comes partially from the lack of visibility and active erasure of the genocides in mainstream media narratives worldwide. One journalist pointed out that "the US daily *The New York Times* published 53 articles on the Congo, compared with 3,278 on the Ukraine" in the same time period.[13] Put plainly, people from within these communities are afraid to lose sponsorships or business opportunities. "Even Congolese people in Europe don't talk about what's happening here because they won't get money," says Batumike. "Only some people on an individual level" contribute to their support. "The people of the US and Europe live in a different environment without war and with a very individualistic mindset. We don't have the same values," he continues. In Congo, "people need the hip hop

spirit for free. They don't have money, but they need access." Batumike's observations illustrate the degree of institutionalization and commercialization of hip hop, specifically in the West.

Similarly, Alghariz found himself at odds and frustrated with the selective and superficial support given to Palestinians as opposed to Ukrainians at the time of the Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022. Clearly stating that this was not aimed at shading common Ukrainians and their plight, but why would some people employ double standards, "proclaim the hip hop mantra of Peace, Love, Unity, and Having Fun, and then forget about it the next day?," asks Alghariz. "All the time, we dance to express, to feel unity against the siege and the occupation. Our dancing is resistance," he continues.

Diasporas – whether Congolese, Palestinian, or hip hop – play a crucial role. They carry a responsibility, says Batumike. Projet Kongo is one example through which popular education and transnational community building takes place: spearheading awareness campaigns about the situation in DR Congo through dance and music, as well as creating opportunities for people to be in touch with people on the ground. Bboy Junior and bboy Lilou, two of the most iconic breakers of all time, have contributed to these causes and visited Goma to support local young dancers to gain skills and inspiration. "Local dancers need support, […] but we [must] talk about our duty." echoes Alghariz. Testament to this increasing solidarity with the Palestinians, hip hop communities from New York, Amsterdam, and Malaysia have raised funding, organized *Get Down for Gaza* jams, and led awareness campaigns within their respective hip hop communities.

In many ways, their perspectives inform us – those not directly affected by violence in which we are co-responsible – of what needs to be done. In a powerful 2011 essay titled "The Responsibility of Intellectuals," the iconic intellectual and activist Noam Chomsky wrote how "Privilege yields opportunity, and opportunity confers responsibilities. An individual then has choices."[14] Likewise, we want to extend this call for critical reflection and action to all hip hop artists and community organizers seriously committed to remembering, expanding, and fusing the Black radical origins of hip hop in their own areas of life and professional terrains. We carry the power of unity and the message of justice and peace hip hop has carried in its own legacy.

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