Theories and Methodologies

# Strait Flow

ERIC CALDERWOOD

In the field of hip hop studies, it has become a commonplace for scholars to refer to hip hop as a shared language that unites artists and enthusiasts around the world in an imagined community known as the "Hip Hop Nation."[1] And indeed, as hip hop has spread around the world in recent decades, it has developed into an intensely intertextual and metareferential practice, where artists use shout-outs and allusions (both lyrical and visual) to signal their connections to artists and audiences in other parts of the globe. Yet, as often happens with global phenomena, hip hop's movements across the globe are uneven and, at times, unreciprocated. For example, it is quite common for rappers in Tangier or Dar es Salaam to allude to Tupac Shakur or other hip hop luminaries from the United States, whereas it is much less common for rappers from, say, Atlanta or Houston to pay deference to their hip hop colleagues in Morocco and Tanzania. We might say, then, that hip hop is a global language that, like all languages, has centers and peripheries, dominant variants and minor variants. Put differently, we could say that hip hop culture is a singular phenomenon that contains multitudes. Noting this tension, H. Samy Alim has observed, "While 'Hip Hop Culture' is still valuable in its broad usage (at a particular level of abstraction), engagement with specific sites of Hip Hop cultural practice, production, and performance demands a perspective that favors the plurality of *Hip Hop Cultures* over the singular and monolithic 'Hip Hop Culture'" (3).

Alim's call for scholars to heed the plurality of hip hop cultures bears a surprising resemblance to recent work on monolingualism—and to many of the essays in our cluster "Monolingualism and Its Discontents." After all, one of the cluster's guiding premises is that the *mono-* in monolingualism is deceptive and that careful attention to any language often reveals the differences that reside within it.[2] Like hip hop, monolingualism contains multitudes. Monolingual

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categories bind communities while also encoding important differences of location, ethnicity, class, gender, and so on. In this sense, the study of monolingualism is not dissimilar from the study of hip hop; some of the same tensions haunt the two objects of study. In both cases, the challenge is to get an analytic hold on a phenomenon that is both singular and heterogeneous. After all, if concepts like the Spanish language or hip hop had no internal coherence or legibility, then no one would identify as "a Spanish speaker" or "a hip hop artist." At the same time, if these concepts were monolithic and homogeneous, then all Spanish and all hip hop would sound the same and would do the same cultural work, regardless of context. Thus, I propose to take up two questions in this essay: How do we listen to the languages of global hip hop, tuning our ears to hip hop artists' movements between global and local modes of expression?[3] And what insights are revealed when we think of hip hop as a global form of expression that is shared unevenly across different cultural contexts?

In what follows, I address these questions by turning my attention to a context that has been relatively marginal to hip hop scholarship: the area around the Strait of Gibraltar, the narrow stretch of water that separates Spain from Morocco and Africa from Europe.[4] In particular, I focus on hip hop artists whose lives and work straddle the two shores of the Strait of Gibraltar. To describe their lyrical practice, I have coined the phrase "Strait flow," a play on the much more common phrase "street flow."[5] Rappers around the world boast of having street flow, and rappers from the Strait of Gibraltar region are no strangers to this trope. In fact, one of the pioneers of the Moroccan rap scene in the 1990s and early 2000s was the Tangier-based group Zanka Flow, whose name combines the English word "flow" with the Moroccan Arabic word for "street" (*zanqa*). Like Zanka Flow, the artists I discuss in this essay claim to draw inspiration and authority from their lived experiences in the street, *zanqa*, *calle*, or *rue* (often combining these words in the same song). These words index both places and ideas: they often refer to specific locations (a street or neighborhood in a specific city) while also evoking imagined networks of solidarity between the urban poor in various locations, from North Africa to Europe and beyond. Building on the trope of street flow, Strait flow refers to a lyrical practice that draws its energy from the movement of people, languages, and sounds across the Strait of Gibraltar. This practice not only playfully mixes languages from the region but also throws into question the presumed borders between them. Strait flow is a variant of code-switching, but it is one that ultimately challenges the premise that the codes at work were ever discrete entities to begin with. Strait flow thus revolves around a lingering doubt about what it means to speak "in" a language. This doubt leads to some intriguing, but paradoxical, questions, such as: What if speaking in Arabic is one way of speaking in Spanish? This and similar paradoxes are at the center of this essay.

The words *street*, *zanqa*, *calle*, and *rue* form a constellation that points to one of the most salient features of Strait flow: its practitioners work in multiple languages, often combining Moroccan Arabic (*dārija*) and Spanish or French, with occasional flourishes in English. All the artists I consider here are multilingual, yet their multilingualism produces different meanings and effects. These differences depend, in part, on the geographic location of each artist, but also on the language hierarchies that are operative in Morocco and Spain. After all, Spanish is the official language of a nation-state (Spain), whereas Moroccan Arabic is not. Although Moroccan Arabic is one of the main languages of everyday life in Morocco, it is not recognized as one of Morocco's official languages and does not enjoy the cultural status afforded to the standard written form of Arabic (known as *fuṣḥā* or Modern Standard Arabic).[6] As a result, referring to lyrics that combine Spanish and Moroccan Arabic as "multilingual" is technically accurate, but that designation fails to take into account the different ways in which those languages operate and circulate. Spanish, largely by dint of its status as an official language, is usually considered a discrete and unitary language, whereas Moroccan Arabic is usually considered a spoken variety (or dialect) of Arabic that incorporates words from

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Arabic and other sources, including French and Spanish. Put differently, Spanish is usually understood to be monolingual, while Moroccan Arabic is usually understood to be multilingual. Yet a close look at the hip hop emerging from the Strait of Gibraltar region reveals that Spanish and Moroccan Arabic are both subject to monolingual and multilingual forces. In particular, hip hop artists, through their practice of Strait flow, have turned the Spanish language into a vessel that carries the echoes and traces of other languages, especially Arabic. At the same time, they have used Moroccan Arabic as a unifying tool to form an imagined community that includes listeners in Morocco and in the Moroccan diaspora communities in Europe. Finally, artists in this space have used hip hop to imagine connections between the struggles and experiences of marginalized groups in the western Mediterranean and the struggles of their allies and counterparts in the United States. In this last case, hip hop functions as a shared transnational language, even though that language does not flow evenly in all directions.

Hip hop artists in the Strait of Gibraltar region not only combine and flex languages but also engage in what Alim calls "language ideological combat" (12). That is, their work takes aim at powerful assumptions about language use and language hierarchies in North Africa and Europe. One of the arguments I want to make here is that hip hop lyrics do not merely reflect previously existing subject positions; rather, they produce new ones. Through Strait flow, a rapper in Barcelona produces the position of a Spanish speaker whose language carries the memory of a long history of migrations between North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula. Likewise, through Strait flow, a rapper in Casablanca produces the position of the *dārija* speaker whose language is specific to Morocco yet must also speak to Morocco's close proximity to Europe. To advance these propositions is to take seriously the idea that hip hop artists are not only creative users of language but also critical interpreters of language politics (Spady et al. 28).

I turn now to some prominent examples of Strait flow to explore what they can teach us about language practices and cultural identities in the Strait of Gibraltar region and, more broadly, in global hip hop cultures. The first artist I consider is Khaled, a Spanish rapper of Moroccan descent who was born in Granada and currently resides in Barcelona, a city that is home to one of the largest Moroccan diaspora communities in Spain.[7] Khaled rose to prominence around 2015 as a founding member of the rap collective Pxxr Gvng (pronounced "poor gang") and has since ventured out as a solo artist who is known for lyrics that playfully combine Spanish, Moroccan Arabic, and other languages.

Khaled's linguistic virtuosity is on full display in the 2016 track "Camarón," where he raps:

El que tenga problemas que se venga pa'l Raval.
Que hay famosos que no tienen ni Instagram.
Menores que se matan por cala's.
Tú no eres trap. C'est la classe.
Dīma ça va bien, kulshī mazyān!
Ana māshī barrānī, ana wld al-Marshān.
Smoking jwintas. Smaḥ lī, a yimma!
Ḥyatī msība. Ḥatta shī wāḥad ma ʿāwannī.
Mushkīla, muṣība, pena, penita.[8]

Anyone who's got a problem better come to the Raval.
There are celebrities who don't even have Instagram.
Kids who kill each other for a puff.
You're not trap. *C'est la classe.*
*Dīma ça va bien, kulshī mazyān*!
*Ana māshī barrānī, ana wld al-Marshān.*
*Smoking jwintas. Smaḥ lī, a yimma*!
*Ḥyatī msība. Ḥatta shī wāḥad ma ʿāwannī.*
*Mushkīla, muṣība*, sorrow, lil sorrows.

Perhaps the most obvious observation I can make about this verse is that it moves between different languages. Here (and in much of Khaled's work), Spanish is syntactically dominant, but the artist also incorporates long phrases in Moroccan Arabic and scattered words and phrases in French and English. Khaled's movements between these languages are agile, blurring the lines between them. Take, for example, the following couplet: "Tú no eres trap. C'est la classe. / Dīma ça va bien, kulshī mazyān!" In this example, Khaled begins a line in Spanish ("Tú no eres"), inserts an English hip hop

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term ("trap"), pivots to a boast in French ("C'est la classe," that is, "this is high class"), uses the Moroccan Arabic adverb *dīma* ("always"), switches back to French ("ça va bien"), and then concludes with the Moroccan Arabic phrase *kulshī mazyān* ("everything's great"). One of the practical challenges I face in analyzing this couplet (and Khaled's lyrics in general) is the question of translation. If I translate all the words into English (or, for that matter, Spanish or Arabic), then I neutralize one of the most potent qualities of Khaled's lyrics: their surprising and creative shifts between languages. My provisional response to this problem has been to translate Khaled's dominant language (Spanish) into English while leaving his other languages untranslated.

At first glance, Khaled's multilingual artistry might appear to be a clear rebuke of monolingual categories like "Spanish" or "Arabic." (After all, could we really say that Khaled "raps in Spanish" or "raps in Arabic"?) Nevertheless, I think that Khaled's work raises some thorny questions about monolingualism and about the dialectical relationship between language and identity in the Strait of Gibraltar region. In particular, it sheds light on the heterogeneity that exists (and has always existed) in the Spanish and Arabic languages. That is, Khaled's work is multilingual, but, at the same time, it highlights the multiple in the monolingual. One of Khaled's strategies for drawing attention to this issue is to allude to the heritage of al-Andalus (Muslim Iberia) and to the traces it has left on present-day Spanish language and culture. The most forceful example of this strategy comes in the 2015 track "Los Foreign," where Khaled proudly declares, "Al-Andalus es mi raza!" ("Al-Andalus is my race!"). While this allusion to al-Andalus is quite explicit, the legacy of al-Andalus also exerts more subtle influences on Khaled's lyrics. For instance, at the beginning of the previously quoted verse from "Camarón," Khaled challenges his rivals to come and face him in Barcelona's Raval neighborhood, whose name derives from the Arabic word for "outskirts" (*al-rabaḍ*). The Raval is just one of many toponyms in Spain with Arabic roots, and we could say that it is a word that points to an Arabic "outside" (*al-rabaḍ*) that is, in fact, inside Spanish (and, in this case, Catalan).

This tension between outside and inside also pertains to Khaled's use of Moroccan Arabic. In the same verse from "Camarón," Khaled raps in Moroccan Arabic, "*Ana māshī barrānī, ana wld al-Marshān*" ("I'm not an outsider; I'm a kid from the Marshan"). The adjective that Khaled uses in this line is *barrānī*, which derives from the adverb *barra* ("outside") and means "foreigner" or "outsider." Khaled's movement from Spanish into Moroccan Arabic places him temporarily outside the standard uses of the Spanish language, yet the shift does not place him inside Moroccan Arabic (or Morocco). Speaking in Moroccan Arabic and, presumably, to Moroccan Arabic speakers in Morocco and the diaspora, Khaled must still assert that he is not a *barrānī*, but is a "kid from the Marshan" (the Tangier neighborhood where Khaled's mother is from). As often happens with multilingual and multicultural subjects, Khaled finds himself in a double bind: his multilingualism allows him to straddle multiple language communities without being able to occupy a secure position in any of them. His use of Moroccan Arabic locates him at the *rabaḍ* of Spanish identity but also evokes the long-standing presence of the Arabic language in what is today Spain. At the same time, his location in Spain and his preferential use of Spanish point to the centrifugal forces that recent migratory movements have placed on the languages and locations of Moroccan identity. In other words, Khaled uses Spanish and Moroccan Arabic to speak to cultural forces that unsettle these seemingly monolingual categories.

Khaled's attempts to straddle Moroccan Arabic and Spanish, as well as Spain and Morocco, have found many echoes and parallels in the Moroccan hip hop scene. One of the most prominent Moroccan artists to enter this arena is the Casablanca-based rapper Moro. In fact, the artist's choice of the stage name "Moro" (Spanish for "Moor") signals his desire to claim a position between the languages and cultural imaginaries of the Strait of Gibraltar. In modern usage, the term *moro* often has a pejorative connotation in

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Spanish, and its meaning is also ambiguous. As I have noted elsewhere, the term *moro* is used to refer to several distinct groups of people, including Muslims, Arabs, Imazighen (Berbers), Moroccans, and the historical inhabitants of al-Andalus (*Colonial al-Andalus* 33–35). Despite these drawbacks, Moro has reclaimed the vexed term as his artistic name. This choice could be understood, in part, as a case of "taking back," the process by which marginalized subjects appropriate derogatory terms and neutralize their violence by adopting them as badges of identity. Indeed, Moro is not the only hip hop artist to take back the term *moro*. The term also figures prominently in the work of several other Moroccan and North African diasporic artists (including Khaled and the Barcelona-based group D'Moors). But I think that the dynamics of taking back are not the only factor at play here. The word "Moro" also allows the rapper of that name to stake out a position whose temporal, physical, and cultural coordinates are diffuse. It is a name that both identifies the artist with his country of origin and, at the same time, places him within the Spanish imaginary, as if he were viewing himself from the other side of the Strait of Gibraltar.

In Moro's work, the Strait of Gibraltar looms large, as do the people and languages that move across it. For instance, in the song "Patera 2" (2020), Moro's lyrics place the listener directly in the Strait of Gibraltar, in the perspective of undocumented migrants and smugglers who cross from Morocco to Spain in a rubber dinghy (or *patera*). In other songs, Moro highlights the connections between present-day migrations to Spain and much earlier migrations between North Africa and al-Andalus. In "Ana l-maghribi" ("I'm the Moroccan" [2017]), Moro, speaking as the collective "Moroccan" of the song's title, claims to be the *ḥafīd* ("grandson" or "descendant") of Tariq b. Ziyad, the North African commander who led the Muslim conquest of al-Andalus in 711. In the same song, Moro shifts seamlessly between past and present, as when he says:

jaddī ftāḥ Isbāniya
dābā ḍārib layhā f bateau
lā huwa llī shadd shī kursī
kibghī ymsaḥ fiyyā zapato
ḥyātī cicatriz.

My ancestor conquered Spain
Now I go there in a *bateau*
The guy who grabs the position [of power]
Uses me to clean his *zapato*
My life's a *cicatriz*.

These lines open with another allusion to Tariq b. Ziyad's conquest of Spain and close with the Spanish word for "scar" (*cicatriz*). Those bookends signal the contrast between an illustrious past, in which the speaker's ancestors conquered al-Andalus, and a traumatic present, in which the speaker must migrate to Spain in search of economic opportunities. Between these bookends, Moro shows off his multilingual chops, forming a rhyme between the French word for "ship" (*bateau*) and the Spanish word for "shoe" (*zapato*). In sum, the verse evokes a flux that is both temporal and linguistic. The speaker moves between the past and the present while navigating between Moroccan Arabic and the languages of Morocco's former colonizers, France and Spain.

Even when Moro's lyrics do not depict physical movement between North Africa and Europe, they still bear the traces of a long history of cultural exchange across the Strait of Gibraltar. This quality is particularly prominent in Moro's collaborations with another star of the Moroccan rap scene: al-Kaysser. The two artists have joined forces to release three songs, which are titled, fittingly, "Los Moros" (2017), "Los Moros 2" (2018), and "Los Moros 3" (2018). These collaborations contain many allusions to US hip hop culture. For instance, the video for "Los Moros" has several shots of a graffiti image of Tupac, and Moro's lyrics in the song quote a phrase from Dr. Dre's 1992 album *The Chronic*. Such allusions illustrate Moroccan artists' attempts to situate their work in global hip hop culture—and, in particular, in a Black Atlantic imaginary that connects North Africans to Black artists in the United States. But the Black Atlantic is not the only spatial imaginary at work in Moro's collaborations with al-Kaysser. The two Moroccan artists

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also engage in language play that places them in the cultural sphere of the Strait of Gibraltar. We could say, then, that their collaborations articulate a position at the intersection of the Atlantic and the Mediterranean—and, more precisely, at the intersection of the Black Atlantic and the Strait of Gibraltar.

Moro's verse on "Los Moros 2" illustrates this convergence of spatial imaginaries and linguistic practices. The verse begins:

Ok!
Moro, l-Kaysser . . . Los Moros Dos
Ban lik l-plan w-lā?
Marḥba bīk fi l-blād l-hiya Los Moros mala gente
ʿAqliyya Mullah Omar, Casanova, Kunta Kinte
Réseau ḥaddū saʿa, dīma [ope khū f rante][9]
Fuck l-radio wa-l-idāʿa
F zanqa jibnā ordre cante.

Ok!
Moro, al-Kaysser . . . *Los Moros Dos*
You got it?
Welcome to the country that is *Los Moros mala gente*
Mentality of Mullah Omar, Casanova, Kunta Kinte
*Réseau* barely open for an hour, always [*ope khū f rante*]
*Fuck* the *radio* and the station
In the streets, we brought the *ordre cante*.

Like Khaled, Moro uses words in Moroccan Arabic, Spanish, French, and English. To translate Moro's lyrics, I have adopted the same strategy that I used for Khaled's: namely, I have translated Moro's dominant language, Moroccan Arabic, into English while setting the words in other languages (Spanish, English, and French) in italics. Although Moroccan Arabic is syntactically dominant in "Los Moros 2," Moro draws attention to Spanish words by placing them in the rhyme position. Amid Moro's multilingual pyrotechnics, I want to highlight the translingual rhyme that he forms between "Kunta Kinte," the protagonist of Alex Haley's *Roots*, and the Spanish phrases "mala gente" ("bad people") and "cante" ("song"). With this rhyme, Moro weaves together the Black Atlantic imaginary, embodied by Kunta Kinte, and the Strait of Gibraltar imaginary, marked by the use of Spanish rhyme words and the frequent allusions, in Spanish, to *Moros*.

Moro's work comes from a place where "Kunta Kinte" rhymes with "cante" and where the street leads to the Strait. Moro illustrates the second point when, in the last line quoted above, he uses Moroccan Arabic to locate himself in the "street" (*zanqa*) and then uses a Spanish word (*cante*) to boast of his lyrical prowess. Moro's lyrics suggest a free flow across languages and continents. Yet Strait flow, like hip hop, is an art of uneven flows. It is easier for a rapper like Moro to use Spanish loanwords than it is for him to immigrate to Spain; it is easier for him to quote Dr. Dre than it is for him to find an audience in the United States. Strait flow, like the Strait of Gibraltar itself, connects disparate communities while also highlighting some of the differences that separate them. The Strait of Gibraltar is both home to a thriving hip hop community and a spatial metaphor for how hip hop, like many global languages, navigates between the shores of similarity and difference.

## Notes

1. Along these lines, Rollefson calls hip hop "a shared language" that connects hip hop artists in Paris, Berlin, London, and beyond (1; see 1–2). In a similar vein, Alim and others have written about the "Hip Hop Nation," "Hip Hop Linguistics," and "Global Hip Hop Nation Language." See, for instance, Alim 3–5; Alim and Pennycook 90, 95; Higgins.

2. I draw here on the introductory remarks that Christopher Cannon and Susan Koshy delivered at the conference Monolingualism and Its Discontents in October 2021. I take up similar questions with regard to the category of the "global Hispanophone" in Calderwood, "Spanish."

3. I follow the lead of other scholars who have explored the tension between the global and the local in hip hop culture. See, for example, Alim and Pennycook 92–95; Alim 2–4; Higgins; Rollefson 2; Salois; Guissemo.

4. Although scholarship on the hip hop from this region remains scarce, there have been some valuable contributions, including the ones by Guerrero; Moreno-Almeida.

5. I coined the phrase "Strait flow" in my forthcoming book, *On Earth or in Poems*.

6. For an introduction to the debates about the status of *dārija* in Morocco, see Elinson; Caubet.

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7. I expand here on my previous work on Khaled in Calderwood, "Spanish" 56–63.

8. For my transcriptions of lyrics in Moroccan Arabic, I have used the transliteration system of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, adapting it to the phonetic particularities of the Moroccan dialect. I would like to thank Abdelbaar Mounadi Idrissi for checking my transcriptions and translations of Moroccan Arabic throughout the essay.

9. I do not understand the last phrase in this line. The last word sounds like "rante" (which rhymes with the Spanish *cante*), but, to the best of my knowledge, "rante" is not a word in Moroccan Arabic or Spanish.

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