“Resistance Fetish in New York City’s World Music”

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Arabic rap performed live in New York City is largely imported. Unlike Detroit, Michigan, which hosts a considerable local rap scene in Arabic or Los Angeles, which boasts lively production of rap in Farsi, performance of el rap el ‘arabi [Arabic rap] in New York is largely by artists with international profiles. Frequently billed as “World Music” or held at venues which specialize in this market, these performances almost without exception capitalize on a cache of “resistant” politics. I argue that this billing of “resistance” is used as proof of “authenticity,” which effectively exoticizes the performers. And I suggest that this process of repackaging the performances for specific (white, middle/upper-middle class, “liberal”) New York audiences often mollifies the existing political critiques in the work. In exploring the cultural curiosity in hosting examples of “resistant” or “political” cultural performers from the Arab world, I posit the performing Arab rapper’s body as a political medium through which to read a specific, transnational exchange of cultural capital. I ask: how has “world music”’s continual quest for “authenticity” helped to frame “resistance” and/or political engagement as a central component of aesthetic practice for artists coming from the Middle East? And how is the rapper’s body billed to play into perceptions and assumptions about the “Other” Arab rapper?