“Keeping it Real: Arabs, Blackness and Racial Politics”

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This paper addresses contemporary intersections of US racial politics and foreign policy as it has found expression in the cultural production of Arab musicians and writers. For example, in Suheir Hammad’s 1996 Born Palestinian, Born Black, Palestinian Arabness is aligned with Blackness through a form of political and poetic kinship that is set against Israeli and US racism. Working from the other side of the global perspective, this specific form of Arab Black kinship is further explored by Jackie Salloum, in her 2008 documentary Slingshot Hip Hop, which follows several Palestinian Hip Hop artists in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza Strip as they seek to come together in opposition to Israel’s partition of historic Palestine. More recently, Omar Offendum’s 2011 Arab translation of Langston Hughes’ “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” for his debut solo album SyrianamericanA creates a more general alignment of Arab and Black cultural expression, as he identifies a coming together of Arabness and Blackness in the rivers named in Hughes’ poem. But these positive alignments, built around the rhythmic flows of hip hop and the violent ruptures of racism, are complicated by other intersections of race and foreign policy that do not lend themselves to easy idealization, as is the case in Busta Ryhmes 2008 track “Arab Money” and Narcyist’s response track “Real Arab Money.” If Busta Ryhmes’ rap was a critique of Arab opulence, one can observe its Arab counterpart in “Obama Nation,” a track by Lowkey—the Iraqi British rapper—that condemns the violence of US foreign policy under the Obama administration. Like Vijay Prashad’s Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting, which illustrates a history of cultural and political solidarities between Asians and Blacks, I begin here to explore the positive cultural alignments between Arabs and Blacks and the complexities of racial politics produced by the war on terror.