Aidi, Hisham


Caught in the crosshairs of the War on Terror, Muslim youth in the metropole of the United States and Western Europe face a reality of being both criminalized and courted as the “enemy within.” In _Rebel Music: Race, Empire, and the New Muslim Youth Culture_, Hisham Aidi follows urban Muslim youth from São Paolo to Paris who reject both liberal assimilation and Islamist quietism and instead work from “the Black Atlantic, Islam, and anticolonial struggles” to create an alternative future (xxiii). To demonstrate the transnational quality of this new Muslim youth culture, Aidi takes the reader on a breakneck tour of Atlantic and Mediterranean history. He uses using a mixed methodology of ethnography, history, and political science while refining his discography of musical resistance. Central to the cultural production of Muslim youth dissent is the use and creation of music. Beyond a debate about the permissibility of music in Islam –which is addressed– Aidi sees music as a “powerful lens” through which to view the claims to genealogies, exchange of ideas, and expression of a shared struggle among post-colonial Muslim youth. The African American-rooted genres of jazz and hip-hop are foundational to this scene because they represent “an alternative idea of modernity and cosmopolitanism, as well as a different relationship to the West” (xxii). Building on Sohail Daulatzai’s _Black Star, Crescent Moon_ (2012), Aidi shows more generally the crucial role that African American Muslims play in the creation of Muslim internationalist identity.

_Rebel Music_ is at the same time an analysis of soft power counterterrorism strategies by Western governments as young Muslims’ musical critiques of empire are often vulnerable to cooption by state actors bent on “moderating” Muslim populations at home and placating those abroad. Aidi includes the long history of Western cultural diplomacy campaigns for “hearts and minds” in Muslim majority countries, but then he ties it to recent domestic music outreach programs that target Muslim youth as potential threats to democratic society. As a cruel irony, Western powers typically mine music produced by systematically marginalized people of color to display their commitment to diversity and freedom. By focusing on state propaganda in these efforts, Aidi reveals the unpredictable life of art in the age of digital reproduction: today’s “songs of liberation” are tomorrow’s Homeland Security-sponsored “concert for freedom.”

The twelve chapters of _Rebel Music_ function as interrelated vignettes in Aidi’s argument on the interplay between Muslim internationalist music and
cultural politicking by the United States and Western Europe. By attempting to cover transnational mobilization in both local and international contexts, Aidi is understandably challenged at times to maintain a cohesive narrative. Ultimately, however, he does communicate clearly the thematic ties of race, empire, and Muslim youth culture between various movements. The book begins in the Bronx, New York as the venerated birthplace of hip-hop in the 1980s. While hip-hop is not the sole source for Rebel Music, it marks the emergence in the late twentieth century of a global style of music for voices typically pushed to the margins: young and urban people of color. And from its beginnings, its language has been rich with Islamicate culture and symbols. Chapters one and two are focused in Brazil, a rising world power whose solidarity with its Muslim citizens stands in stark opposition to American counter-terrorism policy. The Brazilian government's ideology of “racial democracy” is nonetheless rose-colored, skipping uncomfortable memories of gendered violence and rampant inequalities. In São Paolo, Aidi finds activists educating young people about the contentious history of Muslims in Brazil: “We have problems that go all the way back to the plantation. And honestly those who die young in Brazil are those who never knew their history” (31). Shifting north, in the third and fourth chapters Aidi explores the presence of Salafism in American and British cities and the anxiety it creates for governments whose leaders conflate Muslim conservatism with a propensity for terrorism. In addition to their religious message, Aidi explains that Salafis “tap into [Muslims’] deep ambivalence about the nation state” and provide a program of moral and economic uplift for blighted city neighborhoods, following in the footsteps of the Nation of Islam – referred to problematically as “quasi”-Islamic (65). While their strict moral code alienates Muslims invested in progressive politics, Aidi notes that their aesthetics have been absorbed into Philadelphia’s hip-hop sartorial vocabulary. This has led British and American governments to attempt to counter Salafi influence through the use of Sufi music and designated “moderate” theologians who represent an interpretation of Islam that is “compatible with democracy.”

Employing a strategy that extends back through European colonialism, it is not surprising that these government-sponsored concerts lack credibility among Muslim youth who find the music irrelevant or insulting in its attempt to placate outrage in regard to the devastation caused by American military intervention in Muslim-majority countries. Large scale radical protests movements of the last decade in Western Europe, the United States, and the Middle East led by people of color have made prolific use of rap and graffiti —two modes of hip-hop—to challenge the interconnected issues of racism, military occupation, and police brutality. In this way, activists make visible the links