

A room moderately one's own The negotiation of place through stories of authenticity construction among an artist and her musical followers

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This article is based on an ethnographic study consisted mainly of interviews and observations conducted during five months in the second half of 2010 and the first half of 2011. The focus of the study is the artist Hanouneh, an independent reggae and hip-hop artist from Sweden and her audience. By examining the dialogically constructed authenticity between the artist and her audience referred to as musical followers¹ which takes place on a stage oscillating between web-based and non web-based contexts, this study investigates how this authenticity informs and influences the processes of music creation, art production and artist identity.²This article discusses a part of the study focusing on the negotiation of place through stories of authenticity construction. It starts with a short discussion of the relationship between Hanna and the meaning of the name Hanouneh. I then continue by arguing the interplay between the double-naming of Hanouneh and the appropriation of different dimensions of performer personas. Finally, I analyze the importance of emotions used in the storytelling about Hanouneh's cultural link to the Middle East and the role her Swedish ethnic background plays.

BEING HANOUNEH

Hanouneh means caring, considerate, thoughtful and pleasant in Arabic. Hanna, who learned Arabic during the periods when she lived in the Middle East and continued to study the language at university upon her return to Sweden, adds that the word is often used in the context of a mother's care, tenderness and affection

1 I initially used the term fan and fans when referring to the participants in the study but 'fans' as a concept turned out to be more complex and loaded with meaning I was not aware of in the beginning. Therefore, I have decided to use the collective term musical followers when referring to the participants who are in some way interested in taking part of Hanouneh as an artist by listening to her music, going to her live performances, following her on various social networking sites such as Facebook or showing her support in some other way. See Dankić 2012:70-87 for a further discussion on this topic.

2 See Dankić 2012 for more information on the study.

(Interviews and fieldnotes c. Hanna Hanouneh). Henry Diab, a lecturer in Arabic at Lund University in Sweden, agrees with this description of the word. Diab states it as a very positive word and explains that it comes from the Arabic word hanun (masculine) and hanuna (feminine) and claims the spelling of hanouneh to be the way he would transcribe the word (personal communication, April 27, 2011). Hanna got the nickname Hanouneh during the years she lived with a Palestinian family in Jerusalem where she traveled in her late teens.

For Aisha, one of her musical followers, the meaning of Hanouneh is tightly woven into who Hanna is as a person. Ethnologist Charlotte Hagström (2006) argues that names contain notions of identity for who the person who carries it is, how s/he thinks, acts and views life (p. 12). Hagström has researched the connection between names and cultural identity with a focus on how cultural identity is created, maintained and changed (2006, p. 24). Names play an important role in social and cultural classification and are a vital aspect of the personal and cultural identity for many people. It is thus difficult to separate the person from the name (Hagström, 2006, p. 13, 16), which is what happens when Aisha argues that Hanna *is* hanouneh because she views her as a caring and thoughtful person who always puts others first (Interviews and fieldnotes i. Aisha).

DOUBLE-NAMING INTO BEING ME

Nicknames can function as ways of integrating in a certain setting or community (Holland 2006:101). Hanna has told me on several occasions that the Palestinian family she lived with in Jerusalem gave her the nickname Hanouneh among the rest of the family members. By being called Hanouneh she is constantly reminded of her connection to the family she lived with. The fact that the name Hanouneh was given to her by the family can be viewed as a symbolic act – a new beginning in a new geographical place as a part of a new community represented by the Palestinian family (Hagström 2006:84).



Claiming stories and experiences connected to place through imagery. The cover of Hanouneh's debut album released in spring 2011. © Jenny Bäcklin

After years of having Hanouneh as her nickname within the Arabic context and community, Hanna decided to pursue her music career and therefore she had to choose an artist name. The person whom she acknowledges as having chosen her artist name is DJ Lethal Skillz. She got in contact with him through MySpace in 2005 resulting in her becoming a part of the 961 Underground, an international hip-hop crew with roots in Lebanon of which Skillz is a member. Hanna describes the naming ritual as Lethal Skillz saying: "Ah, well, we need to call you something so why not call you Hanouneh?!" and in that moment her Palestinian family-affiliated nickname became her artist name as well (Interviews and fieldnotes c. Hanna Hanouneh).

I would argue that this double-naming of Hanouneh in the two contexts of the Palestinian family and hip-hop culture in the Middle East works as a confirmation of officially becoming a part of several new communities (Hagström 2006:84-85) which becomes a part of the construction of authenticity by granting her the

possibility of representing these communities through membership. The fact that the name was given to her by other people in the Middle East is another part of the authenticity production. This is not a name she made up on her own in any way, which is the case for many artists, and I believe this is an important aspect since it adds to the impression of being more real and authentic. One example of this is when Hanna describes Hanouneh as "moderately her own":

The name chose me which is good since I've never thought of myself as an artist... It would have been weird to call myself by my first name and Hanna Cinthio feels very associated with the family, so it's really nice to have a name which is moderately my own... I'm very happy it turned out this way because it would have been really tough being forced to pick an artist name.

(Interviews and fieldnotes c. Hanna Hanouneh)

Claiming the name to have chosen her points to the relationship between the name-givers and the agency

of the name which is based on the abovementioned symbolic act. By being “moderately her own”, Hanouneh becomes, with an inherent element of an artist persona, a part of her self-identity. Hanna describes this artist persona as something almost forced upon her. She mentions several times in the interviews that she never dreamed about performing on stage, and compares herself with the many people who do that throughout their upbringing as well as later in life. The expressed resistance to dreams of performing on stage as well as the ambivalent relationship to the idea of an artist persona are parts of the authenticity production by being references to the idea of the artist role as something that chose *her* - not the other way around.

Performance scholar Philip Auslander (2006:4) discusses three layers of a popular performer: the real person (the performer as a human being), the performance persona (on- and off-stage presentation, how the performer presents her/himself) and the character (a figure portrayed in a song). Auslander states that these different layers are often hard to separate from one another, which I would argue is the case with Hanna. She tries hard to argue that she simply *is being* the real person and not the performance persona, to use Auslander’s terms. The complexity of constantly having to refer to and put herself in relation to this performance persona is articulated here:

Hanna: (chuckles) “*Come on, over act!*” “*But what do you mean, I’m not acting!*” It’s not a role, it’s an extension of myself which might sound extremely pretentious now when I say it, but I have really never thought of it in any other way and it becomes so obvious when I’m expected to do these typical posing things. It’s still me and how am I supposed to, if it doesn’t feel natural to me, how am I supposed to do it? And that it also could be more like the more attention it generates, the more people more or less take me as an individual into consideration. There is an exposure in that which in a way would be easier if... I feel that if I have to think through some kind of reference you have on the one hand artists such as Lady Gaga for example with the special creations, half a meter long false eyelashes and really spectacular productions. She’s probably living another kind of life when she’s not on stage, I have to almost assume that, when she’s not this artist (...) I can imagine that Amy Winehouse, for example (chuckles). She feels as if she is the same person on stage, off-stage or at a rehab clinic. I think that she behaves the same and says the same things, which leads to a certain vulnerability since you can’t say “*But that’s not me!*”

Andrea: Mmm...

Hanna: ...I can also imagine that you get more sensitive to criticism when you’re more accessible as a person who is not always so uncomplicated... Because I notice it in people who contact me and

who don’t know me personally and are writing to the artist Hanouneh and that it might come as a surprise that I am like this, that I have this way of addressing people in a more personal way, but how else would I go about? (laughs). It gets weird and that’s when I start to think that it would be different if I had a very separated artist persona/role that I had to step into and out of every time... Like “*Now I become this person, now I become this alterego*” and later on jump back to being me. It might have been more convenient in a way but I think that you either are that way or not... It’s difficult to create it.

(Interviews and fieldnotes a. Hanna Hanouneh)

In the excerpt above Hanna provides two concrete examples of various degrees of the performer persona by referencing Lady Gaga and Amy Winehouse, two popular contemporary artists. Lady Gaga is described as the artist with a distinct performance persona referred to by Hanna as an artist persona while Amy Winehouse is described as lacking this persona and instead representing “the real” Amy whether on stage or not. Hanna identifies herself with the Amy kind of performer and points out one of the disadvantages with this kind of position: the lack of freedom to deny something about oneself as a person when you have no clearly defined performer persona such as Lady Gaga. When there is no clear definition of who you are it gets difficult to claim that something is “not me”.

I would argue that Hanouneh is a performance persona since it differs from her real person dimension which includes among other things being an entrepreneur, lecturer, consultant, PhD student, mother of three and a wife. Her real person dimension is the one of the three dimensions to which “the audience has the least direct access, since the audience generally infers what performers are like as real people from their performance personae and the characters they portray.” (Auslander 2006:5). I agree with Schechner that performance is something inbetween the performers not being themselves and not not being themselves (as cited in Auslander 2006:5). Auslander claims the logic of the double negative to be represented by the names used by pop music artists which at first designate their persona and are later associated with the real person (2006:5). Hanna’s Hanna Hanouneh Cinthio Facebook account is an example of this double negative. Hanouneh belongs to Hanna, the real person, as much as it belongs to the performance persona making her Hanna Hanouneh. This conjunction of Hanna Hanouneh is a part of the authenticity production in the sense that Hanna through Hanouneh speaks of the abovementioned Middle Eastern cultural identity. Therefore, the musical followers who contact her on Facebook, through email, YouTube, MySpace and in person at live shows are talking to her performer persona since that is what they know about her and are familiar with. The ones who know her real person dimension might have another

approach to her and also other expectations. Aisha is an example of this since she got to know Hanna as an expert in issues surrounding honor-based violence. Her music is something that came along much later and this has constructed a specific view of Hanna as a real person and Hanouneh as the performer persona - the dimensions of her identity which according to Aisha should not be mixed. (Interviews and fieldnotes i. Aisha).

CLAIMING PLACE THROUGH AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCES AND EMOTIONS

Hanna remembers the early beginning of MySpace in 2005 as a time when there were not that many profiles making it easy to surf around the social media site which is how she discovered DJ Lethal Skillz from Beirut. She added him as a MySpace friend and they started collaborating through the internet by him sending her a lot of beats to write lyrics and record vocals for. This is when the internet collaborations started off for Hanna. She got beats from producers to which she recorded vocals. She says that she initially did not know how to go about the home recordings on her own computer but that she taught herself by trial and error. (Fieldnotes, October 18, 2011).

With time DJ Lethal Skillz introduced her to his hip-hop crew 961 Underground³ which consists of eight other members who are geographically located in Lebanon, other parts of the Middle East and Europe. Hanna tells that it all began in late 2006 when she got the beat to the song that later was named "Lost at midnight". At the time there was no song title and he did not tell her what it was about. The only instruction she got was to interpret it on her own and write lyrics from there.

It felt as if everything clicked between us when I [Hanna] a couple of days later sent him [DJ Lethal Skillz] my recorded lyrics: he told me that the beat came about in the midst of Israel's heaviest bombing of Beirut, that the war made him feel despondent and desparate, and that I had completely captured his feelings in my lyrics (...) In 2007, Skillz entered the song to a Polish competition, but it reached them too late and could therefore not be accepted in the competition, but one of the members of the jury who listened to the song was so fascinated by it that he invited the crew to perform at Vena Festival in Lodz, Poland, that year. The guy told us that he was willing to pay living and travel expences for all the members of the crew despite the fact that we had to travel from Lebanon, Cyprus and Sweden. At first we didn't think it was for real, but in October we ended up meeting at Warszawa

airport for the first time and had a couple of days festival and performance ahead of us. I became an official member of the crew the following year when I went to Lebanon.

(Hanna, personal communication, Jan 13, 2012)

In her description of how she became a part of 961 Underground there is also a story about how Hanna passes something similar to a test as a songwriter and a musician by "hearing" war and pain in the beat Lethal Skillz made in the midst of war in Beirut years after her own experiences of Israeli attacks of Gaza City. She writes the words that Lethal Skillz felt when he made the beat, which is the beginning of the musical bond between them. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), Sara Ahmed, professor in Race and Cultural Studies, examines how emotions move between, "get stuck" on and shape the surfaces of both individual and collective bodies. Ahmed suggests that "while the experience of pain may be solitary, it is never private. A truly private pain would be one ended by a suicide without a note." (2004:29). I interpret this as pain being something that is always shared with other people. Ahmed discusses a sociality of pain based on an ethics that starts with your pain but most importantly "acts about that which I cannot know, rather than act insofar as I know" (2004:31). Hanna's ability of "hearing" war and pain in the musical piece by Skillz is connected to Ahmed's sociality of pain in the sense that Hanna did not know exactly what the pain was about but she felt it conveyed in the music. She acted on that which she did not know, with the difference that she once *did know* having lived through similar experiences during her time in Gaza. I would describe this as applying a recollection of previously experienced pain in a new situation.

Hip-hop scholar Imani Perry (2004:6) argues that artists within hip-hop culture should be understood within the context of a community. I claim that situatedness is of the essence not only for me as a scholar, but also for Hanna because she does not exist in a vacuum (Perry 2004:6). Through the name Hanouneh, the Palestinian family she lived with for years, membership in the Lebanese-oriented hip-hop crew, and her own experiences of war and destruction in a specific geographical place her music often focuses on, Hanna becomes a part of a particular community through which she is understood.

This situated community in a Middle Eastern context is the reason why most of the musical followers either were not quite sure of Hanouneh's ethnic background or simply assumed that she has a Middle Eastern background. Her ethnic background is Swedish and Sweden is the country where she was born and raised except for her late teenage years spent in the Middle East. Yet on her Hanna Hanouneh Cinthio Facebook profile (Cinthio 2011) it says that she is from East Jerusalem, which Hanna explains as being an expression

³ 961 is the Lebanese country code for telephones and mobile phones.

of her longing for the place. She mentions several times that the years she spent there shaped her as an individual (Interviews and fieldnotes c. Hanna Hanouneh). Perry (2004:21) argues that the origin of an artist is important in hip-hop, but “more so as a symbolic affiliation rather than as a clear and specific historical truth” which is the case here.

Swedishness as a national identity is not viewed as something worthy of bringing forth in Hanna’s storytelling about struggle, war and pain. I claim one reason for this to be the strong association between Swedishness and “a hegemonic white ethnicity that never speaks its presense” (Mirza as cited in Lundström 2007:89) which in a Swedish context is expressed by the term “anti-cultural” coined by ethnologist Karl-Olov Arnstberg (1989) and refers to culture as being something found in other countries but not in Sweden where “everyone is normal”. For Hanna this normality was associated with boredom when graduating high school which was the reason why she decided to travel abroad and ended up in the Middle East (Feghali 2011). This view of culture as abnormal (and boring) has resulted in the right-wing extremist political parties’ claim to fill this lack of culture with meaning based on xenophobia⁴, which is another reason why the link between Swedishness and a storytelling about the struggle Hanna brings forth in her music becomes problematic. These reasons make it difficult for Hanouneh to claim an expressed Swedish national identity. As a result, Swedishness in the context of Hanouneh and her music becomes something unspoken and replaced by something else which in this case is the struggle in the Middle East where she has lived (cf. Bäckman 2009:104).

The fact that Hanna has Western citizenship matters more. There is an evident awareness of the associations linked with this citizenship: Luxurious first-class treatments are made possible in the context of war and conflict enabling the one with the Western/Swedish passport to be taken to safety. This is expressed in the song “Mad respect to the 961” where Hanouneh sings:

Got brothers n sisters all over the world / but while
I ride first class they stuck in third/ Political crisis,
another attack / One step forward and two steps
back/ I try to relate to my boys and my girls /
Truth is we be living in separate worlds/ I’m a
different species / a privileged class / I know that
my passport is saving my ass

Feelings of discomfort and anger with her own “privileged class” position and experiences compared to the members of her family in the Middle East result in a double-edged sword when she is given the choice

⁴ For a discussion on the connection between contemporary Swedishness and xenophobia, see e.g. Arnstberg (2010), Mattsson (2010), Orrenius (2010), Orrenius (2012), Uvell & Meier Carlsen (2010).

to leave the conflict area while they cannot (Interviews and fieldnotes c. Hanna Hanouneh). This double-edged sword is also described in the song “Gaza N.Y.E.” where Hanna describes how “her old block gets smashed into pieces” while she is celebrating, having fun and not having to worry for her life at a New Year’s Eve party somewhere far away from Gaza. For Hanna these feelings of “privileged guilt” turned into feelings of responsibility to speak on behalf of people who are not able to speak for themselves:

I chose to be in that situation. I experienced it and lived in the middle of it, but it was my own choice. My sisters and cousins down there have never had a free choice to actually leave it as I have. I have seen up-close how some people very dear to me have suffered tremendously because of it, and this has pushed me to become involved in matters that concern structural oppression both within families but also societies, the situation in Palestine, both internally and politically, the occupation, Israel (...) These experiences cause a feeling of obligation. There is a huge privilege to view this from the outside and actually choose to leave it. I’m not subjected to the honor-norms if I don’t want to, I’m not subjected to the occupation and stuck in fucking misery like the family down there... I have the possibility of being here and then I have to speak about it. No matter if the lyrics are about girls and their situation or Palestine, no matter the level I’m convinced that the drive comes from there. Even if it’s an enormous privilege it is also a difficult feeling to be the one who can get out of there, that doesn’t feel good. It’s weird how the world works that just because I have my passport and I happen to be born here enables such an enormous freedom of choice regarding what I want to do with my life (...). This has turned into a responsibility that has come naturally. If my sister Nadja can’t rise up and say what she feels then I have to say it instead of her in a song.

(Interviews and fieldnotes c. Hanna Hanouneh)

In the case of Palestine, there are two sides to this privilege. Hanna has the freedom to leave and seek refuge whenever she wants, but also to go to Palestine whenever she chooses. According to Aisha, who has both Palestinian and Swedish citizenship, her Swedish/Western passport does not help her when traveling to Palestine because she claims that the Israeli authorities on the border to Palestine would not let her enter because of her Palestinian citizenship, despite the fact that she has never been there (Interviews and fieldnotes i. Aisha). Aisha expresses a wish to change places with Hanna in order to be granted the opportunity to travel to Palestine which she refers to as her home country. Aisha’s wish to switch places with Hanna demonstrates the power relations inbedded in this “privileged guilt”.

The guilt is also based on living with someone else’s pain, as vividly articulated by Ahmed (2004) through

her own experiences of growing up with a mother diagnosed with a serious illness:

It is my mother who has pain. She has to live with it. Yet, the experience of living with my mother was an experiencing of living with her pain, as pain was such a significant part of her life. I would look at her and see pain. I was the witness towards whom her pleas would be addressed, although her pleas would not simply be a call for action (sometimes there would be nothing for me to do). Her pleas would sometimes just be for me to bear witness, to recognise her pain. Through such witnessing, I would grant her pain the status of an event, a happening in the world, rather than just the 'something' she felt, the 'something' that would come and go with her coming and going. Through witnessing, I would give her pain a life outside the fragile borders of her vulnerable and much loved body. But her pain, despite being the event that drew us together (...) was still shrouded with mystery. I lived with what was, for me, the unliveable.

(Ahmed 2004:29-30)

This description of living with someone else's pain, I would argue, contains elements of how Hanna might feel with regards to the pain of the Palestinian family she has lived with, but also the Palestinian people⁵ as a whole often associated with political struggle. By recognizing the witnessed pain through her music, Hanounch is granting their pain the status of a happening in the world. Witnessing in the sense of telling the story of ones surroundings and experiences is another important aspect of hip-hop which can be applied to Hanounch (Perry 2004:88). Hanna feels obliged to tell the suffering stories of the Palestinian people. These stories are about various kinds of oppression: Honor-based norms, war and occupation forces. This is also connected to a specific kind of representation found in hip-hop culture: "to scream for the unheard and otherwise speak the unspeakable" (Chang 2005:328). Representing others by speaking for them results in a production of authenticity by linking Hanounch to this view of authentic suffering and struggle. Gary Alan Fine states in his study on self-taught artists within the art world that "the claimed authenticity of objects rubs off on the purchaser, particularly in a society that values diversity and an expansive tolerance as expressed through commodified markers of taste" (2004:275). I believe this to be comparable with Hanounch's construction of authenticity in the context of speaking for others. The claimed authenticity associated with the specific emotions and experiences of the specific physical place "rubs" in the same way "off" on Hanounch.

Another example of this "rubbing off" of authenticity is found in Hanounch's song "Real Gaza me seh!"⁶ where

⁵ For an analysis of the Palestinian people's history, see e.g. Sayigh (2007).

a hip-hop representation is applied. 'Gaza' is in the context of Jamaican dancehall culture a reference to a 'ghetto' neighborhood of Kingston with 'Gully' being another such neighborhood⁷. There are two "groups"⁸ within Jamaican dancehall representing each area and the conflicts between them have escalated into actual gang wars with many lives wasted. Hanounch states that the aim with her song was to do a wordplay with the dancehall Gaza but also to show that there is a "genuine, deeper conflict in the real Gaza which at the time of the writing was partly overshadowed by the Jamaican and in my opinion pretty pointless conflict" (Hanna, personal communication, February 13, 2012). In the song, Hanounch sings:

No need fi count how much blood dem shed/
Cause one single drop turns the ocean red/
Dis da real Gaza me seh/
Wicked crime scene pon di Gaza mi seh/
Try to justify murder with war and strife/
But you kill all mankind when you take one life/
Dis da real Gaza me seh/
Eyes of di world pon di Gaza mi seh

The song came about in 2010 in the midst of the Ship to Gaza⁹ convoy and was Hanna's reaction to the attack of the convoy but also as a claim to have access to and knowledge about the real Gaza City in the Middle East by singing in patois together with Promoe, another Swedish hip-hop and reggae artist (Fieldnotes, October 25, 2010). During her trip to Jamaica in early 2011 she was introduced to the Jamaican musicians as "Hanounch who has lived in the real Gaza" (Karlsson, 2011). This claim of the "real" Gaza, actual life experience from the geographical place Gaza City, becomes another production of authenticity by claiming the geographical place from a musical but also another geographical place in another part of the world. The song enables Hanna to witness à la hip-hop, that is to speak about what she finds important to tell about her surroundings. Gaza was not her geographical surrounding when she wrote "Real Gaza Me Seh!" but it is a place where she has lived and has experiences from. These experiences along with the places they are linked with constitute the foundations for the stories of authenticity construction which enable the making of the room moderately Hanounch's own.

⁶ Jamaican patois for "Real Gaza, I say". Jamaican patois is the form of English spoken there.

⁷ "It is commonplace in Jamaica for impoverished urban areas to be informally named after locations known globally as war zones. Thus there are locales named 'Angola', 'Tel Aviv', 'Vietnam' and of course 'Gaza'". (Paul 2010).

⁸ Gaza (Empire) is associated with the artists VybzKartel, Popcaan, Beenie Man etc. Gully (Alliance) is linked with Bounty Killer, Mavado, Busy Signal etc. In 2009, Beenie Man released the song "Ah Gaza mi seh" which Hanounch paraphrases with her song (Hanna, personal communication, Feb 13, 2012).

⁹ Ship to Gaza is described as "an initiative for practical solidarity with the people of Gaza" with the aim of sending actual ships with necessities from Scandinavia (www.shiptogaza.se/en, accessed 5 February 2012).

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