

“Karabakh or Death, no other Way!”: Hip Hop and War in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan

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Abstract

In post-Soviet Azerbaijan, hip hop is one of the main musical genres that articulates the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that escalated into two wars (1992-94; 2020). Creativity of hip hop artists is a prime example of intertextuality as they reference, quote, and remake texts of previous Azerbaijani hip hop songs, thus offering accounts of the way the conflict unfolded throughout history. Yet their creativity goes further than providing narratives: it becomes a powerful tool to promote nationalist imagery and inspire patriotism. In this paper, I rely on fieldwork in Azerbaijani during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, and analyse popular hip hop songs, focusing on discourses that arise as part of hip hop's generic intertextuality. Specifically, I focus on the figure of the martyr that continuously reappears and foregrounds the topic of sacrifice, triggering affects at the core of mobilization and patriotism.

KEYWORDS: hip hop, Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh, intertextuality, chronotope, affect, martyr

Introduction

The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War began on September 27, 2020: a usual day that started as any other, with its routines and familiar obligations. Then suddenly Baku streets filled with tremor, shock, and uncertainty, as the president announced total war and counterattack on Armenian forces in his special address. I sat in a taxi, my mind clinging to habitual errands, desperately seeking a sense of normalcy, but all I could do was listen to the special coverage on the radio, interspersed with war songs and marches. The sky outside my window was clogged with grey, threatening horizons, ready to collapse and squash all life. *Has it really started?* The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was the most frequent conversation topic I heard in the field both in private and public contexts. Recognized internationally as Azerbaijani territory, though inhabited by both Azerbaijanis and Armenians historically, the region witnessed territorial and ethnic disputes between the two neighbours. The conflict escalated to a war (First Nagorno-Karabakh War, 1987-1994) resulting in an appalling loss of human life, the occupation of the Nagorno-Karabakh region by Armenian forces, and a vast displacement of people. The war started in the winter of 1987-88 with outbreaks of violence inflicted on the populations living in Karabakh. Today, the events are continuously recalled and portrayed on Azerbaijani media channels, with special calendar dates marked as days of collective mourning to commemorate the lost lives. The conflict has become a national wound, a collective trauma at the core of Azerbaijani selfhood.

Next to our car, one lane was open exclusively for military cars going to the front. Soldiers solemnly responded to agitated honks from all around. "That's who they are really going for", the taxi driver yelled, pointing at a small crowd of children who watched the military vehicles passing by, "Our fathers fought and died, now we must battle and put an end to this. This is the only way. Then our children won't be on the front again thirty years later". Suddenly I remembered that one friend was in military training and would surely have to take part in the fighting. I swiped through my contact list as the radio blasted out, "If I show courage, it is in my steps, if I am a martyr, it shall be in your name!" (*Şücaət göstərsəm adım sanımdır, Əgər şəhid olsam sənın adındır*) from the famous Azerbaijani march "I'm Going to War, Mother" (*Döyüşə Gedirəm, Ana*). (1) My attempts to reach him failed as all social platforms were down.

When I finally heard from him a few months later, my sense of relief was boundless. In addition to recounting his harrowing experiences, he told me about the paramount place of music for the soldiers, especially the genre of hip hop. At the time, I was conducting postdoctoral fieldwork research focused on traditional *muğam* music. Throughout my ethnographic research (2014–2015, 2017, 2019–2020), I developed extensive networks among local musicians and audiences. During the war, I noticed hip hop receiving increasing attention among my interlocutors. While creativity of Azerbaijani musicians across all genres spiked during the war, it was the latest hip hop tracks that many found especially moving, often quoting lyrics and describing their transformational impact. Some even emphasized hip hop's powerful effect to "convey the meaning of this war so profoundly that it causes shaking, crying, and even falling to the ground" (interview, Elshad Babayev, 30 October 2020). (2) I decided to investigate this genre and

conducted interviews with Azerbaijanis in their 20s and 30s, knowing that enthusiasm for the genre is especially pronounced among members of the younger generations. Four of my eight interlocutors were musicians, and three out of these eight served as enlisted soldiers. Most of my interviews took place during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War (27 September 2020 - 10 November 2020) and the following months while I lived in Azerbaijan. In addition to structured interviews with prepared questions, I had informal conversations with friends and acquaintances about the role of hip hop. Taking advantage of my situatedness in Azerbaijan during the war, I constantly tuned in to the radio and television, observing the discourses and their impact. I did additional interviewing online in 2024, while preparing the current article and confirming my data. In order to supplement my ethnographic findings, I relied on published interviews with Azerbaijani rappers and undertook analysis of hip hop song texts, presented below. The strong ethnographic angle that underpins this work reveals itself in the article’s emotional tone, through which I want to convey the intensity that characterizes how Azerbaijanis experience and perceive the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict; the intensity that certainly resonates throughout the hip hop genre as well.

Undertaking research on Azerbaijani music, I also met locals who were indifferent to hip hop. Moreover, some soldiers I wanted to interview declined to answer my questions on the basis that music was a dangerous distraction on the front. For the majority of young people, however, hip hop was remarkably impactful. Those who did listen to hip hop attributed immense power to its songs, an effect I did not observe with other genres of popular music. As I propose below, the potency of hip hop lay in how the genre united younger generations with those who suffered and perished decades earlier into the same narrative. This connection shaped their views on the conflict and imbued Azerbaijan’s involvement in war with feelings of truth and obligation. For many, hip hop articulated their demand for justice, and furthered their readiness for sacrifice. First, hip hop’s impressive intertextual reach—which encompasses stories, speeches, names of fallen heroes, other previously-created songs, and different genres—provided narratives about the conflict, documenting it collectively across generations. Yet the creativity of hip hop artists went further than providing narratives: it became a powerful tool to promote nationalist imagery and inspire patriotism. Specifically, its texts highlighted the names of Azerbaijani martyrs and through repetition in various tracks, the deaths came to constitute the temporality of the conflict and a call for action today. Hermeneutics based on hip hop lyrics, as such, led to the affirmation “truth is on our side” (“*bizim işimiz haqq işidir*”) that became so pervasive both in private conversations and public speeches by political leaders.

Despite its centrality for the younger generations, there are no scholarly works about Azerbaijani hip hop, with research by Salida Sharifova (2021) being the only exception. Local music scholars, wary of hip hop’s marginal position, prefer to specialize in state-endorsed classical *muğam* or folk *aşiq* music. (3) This article fills an important gap by providing a detailed account of the history of Azerbaijani rap. Moreover, the case of hip hop and war in Azerbaijan shows how hip hop could be used to reinforce the message of war, instigate conflict and inspire its listeners to fight, whereas much recent scholarship in global hip hop studies underlines the genre’s tendency to resolve conflict (Balandina 2017), build interracial alliances (Lorenz 2013), and trigger creativity across cultures (Betz 2014).

Hip Hop in Azerbaijan

The process whereby hip hop as a globalized genre originating in Black America transforms to become “new cultural territory” elsewhere has often been termed as “reterritorialization” in academic literature (Androutsopoulos and Scholz 2003: 467). In a similar vein, the appropriation of hip hop in Azerbaijan results in a local variant marked by unique structural and semantic features. For example, the lyrics are full of aphorisms, metaphors, sayings, and imaginative play with native terminology, becoming a philosophical discourse not unlike the traditional poetic genres in the region. Indeed, poetical discourse is the principal and most esteemed medium for message production in Azerbaijan, similar to neighbouring regions such as Tajikistan (Gatling 2018) and Iran (Manoukian 2011; Olszewska 2015) where it becomes “the form in which Iranians experience themselves as subjects endowed with the power to act and live in the world” (Manoukian 2011: 205). Among the average citizens, intelligentsia, and the elites, everyone is a fan of prose: some recite at meal gatherings, others contribute daily posts of inspiring poetic excerpts on their social media accounts, and many are amateur poets themselves.⁽⁴⁾ There is even an entire poetic tradition of “folk rap” in Azerbaijan called *meyxana*, which originated in the Absheron region and spread across the nation in the last two decades (Strzemzalska 2020: 323). In hip hop, the imaginative use of language allows for multiple layers of meanings, encoded hidden transcripts, and it connects the genre to the beloved world of local literature. Moreover, whilst Azerbaijani rap songs are composed on a variety of topics ranging from critiques of social reality to ruminations on love, the theme of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains primary. Since its inception in the 1980s, the hip hop genre has been foregrounding the conflict—its history, losses and experiences—and revealing how this ongoing political circumstance is at the core of Azerbaijani selfhood.

The very first song that inaugurated the rap genre in Azerbaijan was called “Yesterday is Past” (“*Dünənkı Keçdi*”) performed by a well-known journalist Chingiz Mustafayev (1960-1992) in 1983. The performer muses on the passing nature of time with witty scenarios, but the text can also be read as a reflection of his own revolutionizing attitude and social activism. Credited for introducing the rap tradition and opening first discos not only in Azerbaijan but in the entire USSR (Mustafayev 1999), Chingiz Mustafayev is better known for his unparalleled contribution in the field of Azerbaijani journalism. He filmed the war happening in Nagorno-Karabakh, daring to capture the town of Khojaly the morning after it was attacked in February 1992. His output includes the most viewed scenes of the conflict in Azerbaijan, and I have witnessed how the scenes consistently bring tears to the eyes of Azerbaijanis. Chingiz Mustafayev became a martyr and a national hero for Azerbaijanis, killed while filming a fire exchange between Azerbaijani and Armenian forces. His perceived heroism in the conflict has been inscribed into many rap songs to the present day. Furthermore, as the first performer of hip hop and as a journalist documenting the conflict, he embodied the link between hip hop and the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, thus ensuring that the genre itself remains inextricably tied to the Karabakh war and its hostilities.

Anar Nagilbaz (1976-2018), hailed as the "father of Azerbaijani rap", also distinguished himself by addressing the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as the genre was just emerging in its early days in Azerbaijan. As a twelve-year-old schoolboy he recited his poetry about the Karabakh circumstances in front of thousands of people who gathered in Baku's Freedom Square (*Azadlıq Meydanı*) to protest the separatist Armenian activity in Nagorno-Karabakh. Gaining media attention, he subsequently published his "Karabakh-Karabakh" essay (Soltan 2017). His artistic output, moreover, entails the composition of texts according to the syllable weight, which is similar to traditional poetry (Sharifova 2021: 88). Highlighting the Nagorno-Karabakh issue and integrating features of traditional poetry have become two key characteristics of Azerbaijani hip hop.

In the 1990s, the hip hop scene expanded while the genre's core features and motifs developed further. One exemplary case is the group Dayirman established in 1996 as a specifically patriotic hip-hop group (Alakbar and Mirzayeva 2020). (5) Dayirman's creativity involved merging patriotic rap lyrics with traditional *meyxana* elements or folk songs, thus continuing to forge a unique Azerbaijani style. Their first album "*Azərimeyk*" (2000) featured rap synthesized with folk songs, such as their hit "*Sarı Gəlin*" ("Fair Bride") based on Azerbaijan's foremost national song. (6) According to one Dayirman member, the project was inspired as a "mission" (*missiya*) to popularize ethnic music at the time when it was not interesting to young people (Alakbar and Mirzayeva 2020). Following in the footsteps of their predecessors, Dayirman used their art to comment on the political reality of Nagorno-Karabakh. Their output coincided with the aftermath of war hostilities and their track "Justice for Khojaly" was composed to tell the world about the events in Karabakh from the Azerbaijani perspective. They collaborated with Toni Blackman who rapped in English: "Justice, not tomorrow, not in a little while, but now. Till now, ignored by the world, but now, open your eyes, hear, open your ears, and see, c'mon ya'll, justice for Khojaly". (7)

In the last couple of decades, hip hop artists have continued to portray the Nagorno-Karabakh tensions, a trend that became more pronounced during periods of the conflict's intensification. Among numerous released hip hop hits are "*Ya Qarabağ Ya Ölüm*" by Dayirman (1999), "*Kör Zabit*" by Uran (2005), "*Khojaly*" by Garagan (2014), "*Ey Erməni*" by Anar Nagilbaz (2014), "*Taboo*" by Okaber (2016), "*Kör Zabit 2*" by Uran (2020), "*Ya Qarabağ Ya Ölüm*" by Miri Yusif and Natiq Group (2020), "*Torpaqdan Ev*" by Orkhan Zeynalli (2020), "*Qazi Gəlin*" by Elvin Nasir and Aqsin Fateh (2020), and many more. Famous rappers even fought in the war, for example Epi (Akbar Novruzlu), who was subsequently awarded medals by the state. "For the liberation of Khojavend", "For the liberation of Shusha" and "For the liberation of Fuzuli".

Unlike intentional nationalization of other Azerbaijani traditions, including *meyxana* (see Strzeczalska 2020), hip hop's embrace of national elements has not been a top-down process. Scholars have underlined hip hop's ability to represent, and so incorporating specific national features into their music is a way for Azerbaijani rappers to express notions of home. In other words, conveying local identities is part of authenticity in hip hop culture (Cutler 2007), which is why the idea of place and by extension, nation, as home have been very important for rappers (Decker 1993). For Azerbaijani hip hop artists, delineating the self happens via the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. As Audrey Altstadt succinctly notes, the war

between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the Karabakh lands “galvanized Azerbaijani national consciousness” (2017: 2) and Svante Cornell reports that the war is indeed the reason why “...Azerbaijan experienced a national revival to a much higher degree than its fellow Muslim republics in Central Asia” (2011: 46). Rooted in this political reality, hip hop becomes the perfect vehicle to create and express subjectivities in post-independent Azerbaijan. The songs analysed below are all about marking territorial boundaries, using these divisions and their inherent antagonisms to further define the self and represent. As such, the expressed devotion to beloved Karabakh lands and the cry to purge the enemy from the “sacred” homeland align with hip hop’s “obsessive preoccupation with place and locality” (Forman 2000: 88) as a means of spatial representation.

Despite its widespread appeal among youth and its representational prowess, the hip hop genre has not achieved a commercial form, nor has it found official support in the same way as traditional arts. Classical modal *muğam*, for instance, has been lavishly sponsored by the Heydar Aliyev Fund, with grand competitions, concerts, publications, and large-scale international festivals dedicated to this key national symbol. Even the “dissident, semi-underground” *meyxana* genre has been purified of negative associations with crime and transformed during the current Aliyev regime to become a national brand, on par with *muğam* (Strzemzalska 2020: 333). Conversely, rap artists resort to developing their art with their own financial means (Soltan 2017). Emin Ali, producer of the rap organization “Eon Liga”, explained in his interview that although there are many rappers in Azerbaijan with a wide following among young people, there is very little money and most have second jobs (Agaoglu 2015). Moreover, there is little recognition because television programs do not invite rap artists (ibid.). The genre has neither found approval nor far-reaching official popularity; almost all fans are under the age of thirty-five, and many older Azerbaijanis are “radically against” the genre, as rapper Albay Efendi reports (Hasanova 2012). My ethnographic experience confirms this data, and I often came across negative stereotypes such as equating rappers with drug addicts.

What explains this disregard and, for some Azerbaijanis, disdain for the genre? One interlocutor remarked that Azerbaijanis underrate hip hop because it is not a wedding genre: the centrality of weddings in Azerbaijani society results in a general preference for songs that could be sung at these occasions (interview, Latif Mammadov, 16 August 2022). Sharifova proposes that profane language is one reason for this, writing that, “Compared to the younger generations, the older generations do not accept rap. One of the factors behind the rejection of rap is not the accompanying music, but the text of the songs, considered to be rude and excluded from literary language” (2021: 87).

However, there are rappers who write tracks on philosophical topics, avoid indecent language, and some are practicing Muslims, such as Xpert (Shahriyar Atababayev). Perhaps, then, a bigger reason for hip hop’s marginal position lies in the rappers’ candid critique of social context. For example, the track “*Haqq ədalət*” (“Justice”) by Elshad Khose and group Dayirman from 2008 was forbidden and only available online since its lyrics target the socio-economic problems in the country. Anar Nagilbaz who helped to establish the genre in the 1990s, fell out of favour with authorities when he published the song “Come to the Elections” with Rasul Jafarov for the 2013 presidential elections. More recently in 2019, rapper Parviz

Guluzade, also known as Paster, was arrested for possession of drugs following the release of his song “Gang” in which he criticized Pasha Bank, Azerbaijan’s largest bank owned by relatives of the current first lady. Many of these rappers focused on the topic of institutional corruption, and although a critique of power structure is integral to the globalized form of hip hop, it certainly becomes problematic in places with more oppressive regimes. This factor explains the uneasy relationship between this genre and the Azerbaijani state. Even though rap artists write songs about Nagorno-Karabakh that are so effective at inspiring patriotism, the open commentary on society and politics, also part of the genre, constitutes an oppositional stance that potentially threatens the power grip of the current elites. In his interview, Emin Ali echoed this stance, noting that the real problem of rap is that it is “free speech” given the context in Azerbaijan (Agaoglu 2015).

The open social criticism in hip hop is both a blessing and a curse: in the same way that hip hop among young ethnic minorities in Germany “opens up the possibility for new forms of local expression” (Bennett 1999: 78), Azerbaijani youth are attracted to the genre’s authentic way of representing social and political reality. Both truthful and complex, hip-hop discourses offer alternative frames in comparison to the official, hegemonic narratives. Indeed, much scholarship on rap music presents it as a tool of social observation and criticism, comprised of grassroots dialogues and interventions that often oppose the standard national norms (see Alim 2009). Its importance for youth in the conflict-ridden post-socialist space is therefore especially crucial, as noted by the editors of *Hip Hop at Europe’s Edge: Music, Agency, and Social Change*, who argue that “with its roots in impoverished urban landscapes, [hip-hop] reverberated strongly among a generation whose opportunities for safety, stability, and success seemed to shift and close at a moment’s notice” (Miszczmyński and Helbig 2017: 2). In my case study, hip hop has been about representing Azerbaijanis in times of ethnic conflict. It circulates narratives about the social reality at the heart of which lies the Nagorno-Karabakh wars. Below I will discuss how hip hop’s intertextuality is highly instrumental for representing and uniting its fans into one affective narrative across generations.

Intertextuality of Azerbaijani Rap

Rap performance can be analysed as a form of intertextuality, a framework inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogism (1981), the idea that different textual surfaces intersect and interact to create new meanings. The intertextual reach of hip hop is impressive, since artists create links not only between different rap song texts but between different genres, stories, speeches, sayings, and discourses. In October 2020, as people in towns across Azerbaijan woke daily to announcements of more martyrs arriving for burial, an article in analytical magazine *RegionPlus* discussed the rap song “*Ya Qarabağ Ya Ölüm*”:

Every word of this song is a reference to history: Gorbachev turning a blind eye to Armenian separatism, turning off the microphones at the congress of Soviet deputies and Azerbaijani public figures, Black January, tanks crushing cars with people inside, terrorist attacks by Armenians in Baku, the crying man in the background—Chingiz Mustafayev, Khojaly, Shusha, Lachin, refugees and

IDPs, thousands of destroyed lives, children of war, unfulfilled international resolutions... The list continues. Today Ganja.
(Alakbar and Mirzayeva 2020). (8)

The authors quoted above recounted their interview with Malik Kalantarli, a member of Dayirman who first performed this song in the 1990s. Kalantarli then confirmed the interviewee's remark above: "We have all our problems here, in this performance, in the words of Ozan Arif, in the sad replicas of Chingiz Mustafayev, in his cries, in the children who died during the First Karabakh War" (ibid.). As a true palimpsest, the hit contains references to all the different pages of the conflict's history. This history continues today, and the quote reveals how the chain of events extends to the present with the missile attacks on the city of Ganja in October 2020. Hip hop artists conveyed this unbroken sequence with the release of a new version of the same song "*Ya Qarabağ Ya Ölüm*" by Miri Yusif and Natig group, reviving the narratives with new force for subjectivities emerging in the midst of the second war.

Citation practices in rap are common and are usually comprised of excerpts from movies, commercials, and TV programs that are aligned to create a charged polyvocal pastiche (Androutsopoulos and Scholz 2003; Potter 1995). This intertextuality, as experienced by listeners, makes rap locally meaningful and is one way that "rap lyrics are full of lyrics of home" (Elezi and Toska 2017: 11). Azerbaijani rap involves a similar kind of incorporation of multiple genres and texts, including political speeches, stories, *meyxana*, *aşiq* art, *muğam*, folk songs, local aphorisms, and others. For example, a noteworthy milestone in the history of Azerbaijani hip hop is the premiere of a hip-hop musical "Leyli and Majnun" on December 17, 2011, at the Heydar Aliyev Palace in Baku. This ancient legend about two lovers and their tragic fate is at the heart of classical *muğam* and *qəzəl* traditions, having inspired poet Nizami Ganjavi's poetic masterpiece in the twelfth century and composer Uzeyir Hajibeyli's very first Muslim opera in 1908. The hip hop adaptation featured renowned musicians from across musical genres, including rapper Elshad Khose, pop and R&B singer Natavan Habibi, *muğam* singer Alim Qasimov, and *meyxana* master Agamirza. Hip hop's intertextual remake of this classical tale was quickly sold out. Making intertextual connections to traditional arts is how Azerbaijani rap artists have been writing their "lyrics of home" throughout decades. As that rich heritage is brought into the present, the genres are assimilated into a modern and cool medium. This attributes new relevance to them and makes them more meaningful for younger generations.

When it comes to the theme of Nagorno-Karabakh in hip hop, intertextuality greatly enhances its affective potency. As noted above, the conflict has been one of the most crucial factors shaping identities in post-independence Azerbaijan. Hip hop's myriad of references to the conflict enlivens that history and gives it a new immediacy. Like hip hop's use of place, or city, to have "audible presence" (Forman 2000: 67), Azerbaijani rappers reiterate the conflict's past events. These recollections constitute a process of remembering that provides building blocks for present-day subjectivities. In other words, experiencing hip hop becomes a way to re-imagine the self, based on Nagorno-Karabakh's specific historical circumstances.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, the founder of philosophical hermeneutics, explained that hermeneutics is the art of understanding texts, and the meaning that arises through this activity is ultimately the interpretation of self within concurrent cultural and historical contexts (2004: 157-159). He calls the experience of understanding as an encounter with "truth", especially given texts that belong to the spheres of art and poetry (ibid.: 483). In my discussions with hip hop fans, they described how songs engendered powerful, even transformational, experiences because they spoke truth, and fuelled their desire for justice. Those who fought on the front asserted that while hip hop gave them adrenaline, it also made them realize that taking part in the fight was their duty. When asked about the most stirring element in the lyrics, they underlined the texts with chronicled circumstances and names of perished individuals.

Bakhtin proposed that genres and their intertextual breadth present a world, that is, each genre sets up its own sense of time, space, and being. He called this "chronotope" (1981) to emphasize the construction of a time-space realm in accordance with each genre. The chronotope is also how personhood is conceptualized because the protagonist is intimately involved and caught up in this world that the genre (whether a novel or a hip hop song) establishes. The subject is produced by the setting, articulating truth based on the reality that the spatio-temporal world offers. Developing Bakhtin's ideas, anthropologist Karin Barber noted that intertextuality is a mode of production, where the "literary text does not depict or disclose existing social relations and subjectivities; rather it is part of the 'technology' by which they are produced" (Barber 2007: 106). The chronotope of Azerbaijani hip hop depicts the past and its connection to the present, with the resultant sense of duty arising from this link. Focused on the conflict, this genre's chronotope becomes the technology for building present-day subjectivities, giving meanings of truth and justice to those who listen and imagine themselves as part of the conflict's history.

The intertextual webs that characterize Azerbaijani hip hop foreground a particular theme of martyrdom. The names, sounds, images, and events associated with known and unknown martyrs (*şahid*) prevail in the imagination of those engrossed in hip hop texts. The chronotope of hip hop is a meeting point with the martyrs, and these events orient the subject as a successor of the martyrs' tasks and a vindicator of the martyrs' actions. The encounters become immensely affective, as I have seen my interlocutors dwell on this topic in interviews. Joseph Winters writes about hip hop motives of mourning and suffering originating in the expression of pain by Black Americans, who turned to God as they faced oppression and white supremacy (2013: 9). The centrality of martyrdom and its intense affect in Azerbaijani hip hop resonates with this original theme of mourning. Martyrdom, or sacrificing one's life in the name of protecting one's belief system, is rewarded in Islam with a direct entrance into heaven. Protecting one's family and home is also a Muslim's sacred duty, hence for Azerbaijanis, those who died in the Karabakh conflict while defending their territory are divinified. The way martyrdom is underpinned by Islam greatly contributes to the project of self-making and hermeneutical quest for truth that hip hop fans undergo. While in the field, I constantly witnessed sweeping reverberations on social media platforms that spotlighted martyrs. People across all social strata circulated their photos, often adorned with religious sayings, such as words of prophet Mohammad "*Ən şərəfli*

ölüm şəhadətdir” (The most honourable death is one of a martyr). Martyr references in hip hop are not only the means to remember them, but also to inscribe their names into art and immortalize them. They enliven the texts, uniting different generations, and infusing the experience of today’s listeners with meanings of truth, responsibility, anger, and revenge, and thereby inspiring profound patriotism. As one interlocutor who fought on the front said about martyr names in rap lyrics:

Being a martyr is a kind of superiority. The families of martyrs go through many difficulties and lots of pain and they miss them. But being a martyr is a very high stage, not everyone can reach there. In Azerbaijani families, they are proud if there is a martyr among them. For Muslims, martyr is a saint (*muqəddəs*) (interview, Aslan Bilayev, 5 June 2024).

The martyr figure is a prime example of how the specific chronotope of hip hop is created, connecting the past and the present, as well as the Nagorno-Karabakh territory to Azerbaijan. Below I focus on three popular hip hop tracks from the time of the Second Karabakh War and discuss their intertextuality. The three songs—“*Ya Qarabağ Ya Ölüm*” (“Karabakh or Death”) with the 1999 original by Dayirman and the 2020 remake by Miri Yusif and Natiq Group, “*Torpaqdan Ev*” (“A Home Made of Land”) by Orkhan Zeynalli, and “*Qazi Gəlir*” (“Veteran is Coming”) by Elvin Nasir and Aqşin Fateh—were described as most moving by the majority of my interlocutors. I contend that this effect is rooted in rich intertextuality and a pronounced theme of martyrdom in these songs.

Intertextuality and Martyrdom in Three Rap Songs

Ya Qarabağ Ya Ölüm – Dayirman

*Mənim könlüm ağlayar ağlayanla birlikdə,
Qarabağda qaralar bağlayanla birlikdə.
70 illik yaşını silə bilmir Qarabağ,
Azadlıq gəldi, lakin gülə bilmir Qarabağ.
Dünya duysun bu səsi! Bu səs şərqi səsidir,
Peyğəmbərin öydüyü nəcib irqin səsidir,
Bu səs Azərbaycanın, bu səs Türkün səsidir.
Bu erməni qəsd etdi canımıza qəsd artıq.
Ya Qarabağ Ya Ölüm Başqa Yolu Yox Artıq!*

My heart cries together with those who cry,
Together with those who are mourning in Karabakh.
Karabakh cannot erase its past seventy years,
Freedom has come, but Karabakh cannot laugh.
Let the world hear this voice! This voice is the voice of the East,
It is the voice of the noble race praised by the Prophet,
This voice is the voice of Azerbaijan, this voice is the voice of the Turk.
This Armenian has threatened us, threatened our lives.
Karabakh or death, there is no other way!

This is the first verse of a single recognized as the hymn of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War—indeed "*Ya Qarabağ Ya Ölüm*" was arguably the most popular hit in the entire history of Azerbaijani hip hop. All my interlocutors agreed that this is the main rap song about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. When rap was not part of the official war repertoire on radio and TV programs, this song was a clear exception, frequently featured on official media channels. As I read the song's text to an acquaintance, an engineer in his early thirties who, at the time, was considering enlisting, he stared into space then said after a long pause:

When I first heard this song, I realized that I must go. I have to. This is my land. I have to defend it, I have to stand up to this injustice. I listen and I know the truth...I know that truth is on our side. ...Martyrs are the chosen ones, they don't live an empty life like most people. They serve truth, they serve God (interview, Yusuf Aliyev, 15 October 2020).

The deep intertextual grasp is one reason why this single has become so affective for Azerbaijani audiences. Almost a cry for mobilization, the refrain "Karabakh or Death" builds momentum as the references in the lyrics keep accumulating, and the meaning of sacrifice is thus powerfully delivered.

Ozan Arif (1949-2019), a distinguished *ashik* (tradition of travelling bards, *aşiq* in Azerbaijani) from Turkey, wrote the text of this song after feeling devastated by the events in Azerbaijan, notably the 1992 event known as "Khojaly massacre". The original poem included detail and disturbing imagery about children and women who died in these events. Ozan Arif's poem was remade by the group Dayirman, central to the emerging rap scene in the 1990s, while the composer Aytan Ismikhanova wrote the music. The rappers also chose to insert the speech of Chingiz Mustafayev "to convey the pain and horror of what happened in Khojaly to the world community" (Alakbar and Mirzayeva 2020). Chingiz Mustafayev and all others who perished in Khojaly haunt those who experience the single. Using this text by Ozan Arif, furthermore, evoked the cultural and political ties between Azerbaijan and Turkey. Via shared traditions such as the *ashik* performers, Azerbaijanis associate themselves with the Turkic world. Turkey is also regarded as Azerbaijan's "elder brother" and was the nation's main ally in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War.

The striking mentions of Islam in the original hip hop song bring out the martyrdom theme more poignantly.

Hardasan, əhli İslam?!

De, sən görmürsənmi bu zülmü, bu vəhşəti?!

Bu gün vəhdət günüdür, gerçəkləşdir vəhdəti,

"Allahu Əkbər" deyib tək yumruq ol,

Ya Qarabağ Ya Ölüm Başqa Yolu Yox Artıq.

Türkün dostu Allahdır, İslama inanmışdır,

İslamda "Hübbül vətən, minnəl iman" demişdir,

Demədi demə, dünya! Mənə "Cihad" şərt artıq.

Ya Qarabağ Ya Ölüm Başqa Yolu Yox Artıq!

Where are you, people of Islam?!
 Don't you see this oppression, this brutality?!
 Today is the day for unity, make it come true,
 Say "God is Great" and make a single fist,
 Karabakh or death, there is no other way.

Turk's friend is God, he believes in Islam,
 In Islam, it says "The love for motherland is part of faith,"
 Don't say I didn't warn you, world! "Jihad" is my duty.
 Karabakh or death, there is no other way!

Globally, many renowned rappers are Muslims, and they use the artistic medium to signal their Islamic identities, often across borders (Solomon 2006; Lohlker 2014). Ruhdiger Lohlker writes about the intimate tie between hip hop and Islam, giving the example of "jihad rap" by Arabic rappers who convey a desire to unite with uprisings in the Middle East and even die, as expressed in the language of militant Islam in their works (2014: 133). Azerbaijani rappers bring up Islam as a religion and a moral code to critique the political circumstances, to define truth, and mark out identities. As in the lyrics above, the message is that people of Islam must not ignore the "oppression" and "brutality" of the conflict and instead obey the sacred duty to defend the motherland. Islam is another solid connection to Turkish Muslims, and there is a message of uniting together in battle, similar to the mobilizing role that religion plays in Lohlker's hip hop case studies elsewhere. The paramount place of sacrifice in Islam resonates with the topic of martyrdom as well. Here, a known saying commonly attributed to prophet Mohammad "The love for motherland is part of faith" (*"Hübbül vətən, minnal iman"*) is also a familiar war phrase in Azerbaijani "To love one's motherland is part of faith" (*"Vətəni sevmək imandandır"*) that one can encounter in the media. Embedding this quote of authoritative religious speech into the text further supports and enhances the main message of mobilization and sacrifice.

During the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, decades after Dayirman's successful hit, a new version of *"Ya Qarabağ Ya Ölüm"* was released. The text was significantly shortened, and performed by rapper Miri Yusif, the Natiq Group of percussionists, and *muğam* singer Alim Qasimov. Actualizing the connection not only to the *ashik* tradition, but also to *muğam*, the remake incorporated both main national genres and thus the Turkish and Persian cultural dominions that have historically shaped local arts in Azerbaijan. In the new version of *"Ya Qarabağ Ya Ölüm"* Alim Qasimov interspersed Miri Yusif's sharp and aggressive freestyle text with the flowing soaring declamation from his song *"Durnalar"* ("Cranes"):

*A durnalar, Qarabağa gedək biz,
 Bağlı qalan yollarını açaq biz!*

Oh cranes, let's go to Karabakh,
 Let's open the closed roads!

Certainly, the lyrics brim with identity markers, such as direct statements: "Let the world hear this voice! This voice is the voice of the East, It is the voice of the noble race praised by the Prophet, This voice is the voice of Azerbaijan, this voice is the voice of the Turk" from the first verse. There are also known folk aphorisms such as the meaning of "navel" as the heart of something, found both in Turkey and in Azerbaijan.

*Azərbaycan bir gözdür, Qarabağ da bəbəyi.
Yəni Azərbaycanın tam ortası, göbəyi.*

Azerbaijani is an eye, and Karabakh is the pupil.
That is, Karabakh is Azerbaijan's core, the navel.

A journalist who authored an article about this hit, wrote about its resonance for Azerbaijanis during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War: "Although Miri Yusif sang the main text of the song alone, the voice of the heart of every Azerbaijani and Turkish child joined in its performance. This voice is the voice of the East, the voice of the Turk, the voice of the noble race praised by the Prophet" (Oxu.az 2020).

One very pronounced musical feature of the 2020 version is the continuous beat, an indirect reference to Queen's "We will Rock You". Stories about the possible Azerbaijani descent of the group's leader Freddie Mercury are generally known in Azerbaijan, therefore, this addition is perhaps also part of hip hop's agenda to represent. Queen's famous rhythmic unit, which has become popular in different events around the world, especially competitive ones, is catchy and simple. The body percussion powerfully punctuates the repeating line "Karabakh or Death, There is No Other Way!" accentuating the words and their visceral effect.

"*Torpaqdan Ev*" ("A Home Made of Land") by Orkhan Zeynalli was described to me as the most "emotional" hip hop song, especially for interlocutors who spent time on the front. Previously known as AiD, Orkhan Zeynalli is a celebrated rapper, who was part of the HOST group from 2007 until 2012 together with other recognized figures in hip hop such as ProMete and Garagan (his relative). He has been quite successful in Azerbaijan and abroad giving concerts in many countries around the world like Turkey and Switzerland. Numerous sold-out concerts evidence the general admiration for the artist that I encountered among young people. He is loved for his honesty and directness, as well as the meaningful nature of his lyrics that focus on social problems. Below is the first verse from "*Torpaqdan Ev*":

Torpaqdan Ev – Orkhan Zeynalli

*Salam, əsgər! Danışır Vətən,
Sağ ol ki, varsan!
Bünövrəsi millət olan evdə sən bil ki, divarsan.
Həm oğulsan, həm ata,
Həm qardaş, həm də ki yarsan.
Bilirdim ki, gələcəksən,
30 ildir tərki diyarsan.
Döyüşə gedir igidlər,
Gedir ömürlük yurda,*

Əmrini verir komandir,
 Qışqırır bölük burda.
 '92 fevralında qar içində qaçan körpələr,
 Əridib buzlar içində,
 Böyüyüb dönüb qurda,
 Döyüşə gedir igidlər.
 Qulaqlarında Dəyirman – "Ya Qarabağ Ya Ölüm"
 "Kor Zabit", Okaber – "Taboo"
 "Guantanamo", "Marş"
 "İgid Əsgər" - Şamistan,
 Sənə hər an can qurban.

Hello, soldier! The Motherland is speaking,
 Thank you for being there!
 In a home whose foundation is the nation, know that you are the wall.
 You are both a son and a father,
 A brother and a lover.
 I knew you will come,
 It's been thirty years that you've been away.
 The soldiers going to the battle,
 Going to the everlasting home,
 The commander gives his orders,
 And battalion responds "here!"
 '92 fleeing children through the snow,
 Melted the ice inside them,
 Growing up and becoming wolves,
 The soldiers going to the battle.
 In their ears: Dayirman "Karabakh or Death,"
 "Blind Officer", Okaber – "Taboo"
 "Guantanamo," "March,"
 "Brave Soldier" by Shamistan,
 Every moment will be a sacrifice to you.

The motherland speaks through the lyrics, directly addressing the soldiers. This affective approach is reinforced in the title, conveying the idea that Azerbaijanis' beloved Karabakh lands constitute the home to be protected and defended. The soldiers are the walls of this home, and the motherland says that they are finally returning after being gone throughout the thirty years of occupation. The following imagery of children running through the snow describes the refugees fleeing in the aftermath of killings in the region. In the lines "Growing up and becoming wolves, the soldiers going to the battle", Orkhan Zeynalli connects the history to the present, as those going to battle in 2020 are the same inhabitants expelled from their home thirty years earlier.

There is a regular rhyming scheme that suddenly breaks with the many mentions of previous songs, among which the first one is "Ya Qarabağ Ya Ölüm". The many songs mentioned here also include other genres such as patriotic songs and marches. The break is used to call attention to this point, with its multiple references to music that has been documenting the conflict's history, and its important role for today's soldiers who feel bound to that history with a sense of responsibility and duty. Later in the text, references to martyrs appear:

*Bu döyüş Mübariz'in adına layiq sonluq istər,
Yaxşı ki, var idin Çingiz,
Bu tarix sənə başladı.*

The ending of this fight should be deserving of Mubariz's name,
It's great that you were there Chingiz,
This history commenced with you.

Mubariz Ibrahimov (1988-2010), recognized officially by the state as “National Hero of Azerbaijan”, was killed during a shootout between Azerbaijan and Armenia just along the frontline, and Chingiz Mustafayev is the martyred journalist who established hip hop in Azerbaijan. The message is that only victory is the ending worth their names, implying the imperative to mobilize and unite in battle to achieve this.

Mubariz Ibrahimov and Chingiz Mustafayev are both very frequent names in rap songs about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, but they are far from the only martyrs commemorated by artists. Polad Hashimov (1975-2020), a general whose death during border clashes with Armenia caused an outcry and protest among Azerbaijanis calling for war, and Khudayar Yusifzade (1998 – 2020), a young officer who made viral videos smiling and singing Azerbaijani song “*Vətən Yaxşıdır*” (“The Motherland is Great”) on the front—are also popular embodiments of the martyr theme in hip hop. The song “*Qazi Gəlir*” (“Veteran is Coming”) by rapper Elvin Nasir and *meyxana* performer Aqsin Fateh was a popular hip hop song from the Second Karabakh War that included the names of Mubariz Ibrahimov, Polad Hashimov, and Khudayar Yusifzade.

Qazi Gəlir – Elvin Nasir and Aqsin Fateh

*Mübarizin Poladın yerini yağıya verməyəcək,
Qulağında Xudayarın səsi səsi var sönməyəcək.
Bəlkədə günəş nuru birdə gözü görməyəcək,
Xarı-Bülbül gülünün xəyalında nazı gəlir,
Vətən uğrunda ölənlər ölü olmaz, diridir,
Çün şəhadət kişinin qəyrətinin təsiridir.
Qarabağ məmləkəti, möcüzələrdən biridir,
Görməyənlər daha görmək üçün o ecazi gəlir,
Çəkilin qazi gəlir.*

He won't give the positions of Mubariz and Polad to the enemy,
Khudayar's voice is in his ear and won't fade away.
Maybe his eyes won't ever see the sunlight,
But in his dream the flower of Karabakh will appear,
Those who perished for the motherland are not dead, but alive,
Because martyrdom is the outcome of a person's bravery.
The country of Karabakh is one of the wonders,
Those who haven't seen it come to see its beauty,
Make way, the veteran is coming.

Elvin Nasir shares his main goal with many rappers before him; seeking to promote Azerbaijani traditional heritage, he transforms works of famous Azerbaijani poets into rap songs. In addition, he collaborates with *meyxana* musicians as in “*Qazi Galir*”, relying on local traditions as part of his goal to represent. His creativity is also a commentary on the political circumstances, and he pursues specifically the motif of martyrdom such as in the song above and another one titled “My Dear Martyr” (“*Can ay Şəhid*”). The story he presented here is about a veteran who loses his eyesight in battle for the homeland, and who is intimately connected to Azerbaijani martyrs in space, time, and sound. In fact, the rapper discussed his pledge to put the veterans “in trend”:

I would very much like it if our artists touch on these topics and we can increase the number of songs about veterans. I am not a selfish person who would say, “I did it first, no one else can repeat it”. When it comes to veterans and patriotism, being an example in this matter can only bring a sense of pride. I wish everyone would address these issues. If only our veterans would always be in the centre of attention (Maftun 2021).

There are numerous groups and organizations which have been formed to commemorate veterans and martyrs who took part in Azerbaijan’s Nagorno-Karabakh wars. They hold regular meetings and concerts where rapper Elvin Nasir has been performing.

In his writing, Bakhtin stressed the inseparability of time and space in the chronotope as “... spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully through-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history” (Bakhtin 1981: 84). The rap songs above feature texts and genres that transport listeners temporally to the 1990s and spatially to the beloved Karabakh lands. Lyrics such as “92 fleeing children through the snow, Melted the ice inside them, growing up and becoming wolves, The soldiers going to the battle” (*Torpaqdan Ev*) or Dayirman’s use of a Turkish *ashik* poem about Khojaly deaths in 1992 fuse time and space into one. The names and stories of martyrs are fundamental to the chronotope for the same reason: they are individuals from that history who were killed in Karabakh, hence they are embodiments of the same time-space intersection. Through hip hop songs, martyrs are mourned as heroes and that time-space configuration transforms into truth and duty. It is the way the songs give new immediacy to the chronotope and make today’s listeners experience their lives and obligations as a continuation of that chronotope that triggers ardent patriotism among younger generations of Azerbaijanis today.

Conclusions

In all three songs discussed above, intertextuality is one of the main tools toward creativity for hip hop artists. While the music is a juxtaposition of ethnic musical traditions, the lyrics feature speeches, different poetic genres, stories, voice of the motherland, and local aphorisms. All these various genres and texts document

events and mention individuals who took part in the wars, offering distinct stories and making this genre authentic, local, Azerbaijani, much more than official discourses. Moreover, the intertextuality effectively highlights the martyr figure, and erects a chronotope that emplaces hip hop listeners into the conflict's history. The time-space world of hip hop becomes a journey into the meanings of truth, a technology for producing present-day subjectivities. In its message of martyrdom and mourning also lies hope: the fissures and pains are marked as the social reality of the present and near past to provoke reimagination and ultimately create hope. This kind of mission has in fact been highlighted by most hip hop artists, who in their interviews describe their creativity as a vehicle for not just representing but telling truth and leading to change. This is why perhaps the genre has been so inspirational at the grassroots level, where it showed a promise for better future to the youth thrown into the abyss of war.

Endnotes

1. Translation of all lyrics in this article was done by the author.
2. In accordance with the ethical standards of research, the identity of individual interlocutors is disguised with fictitious names.
3. All indigenous terminology and texts of songs are italicized and presented in the current Azerbaijani alphabet adopted in 1992. Exceptions to this are translated excerpts and names of individuals and entities for which a conventional English transliteration already exists.
4. Mehrangiz Najafizadeh (2015), for example, describes how children in Azerbaijan are acquainted with different types of poetry from early age and for many it serves as the basis for subjectivity formation.
5. Following a trend that started in US rap scene, artists Miri Yusif, ABD Malik (Malik Kalantarli), L-Mir (Elmir Maharramov), and Anar Abdulla united into a group, akin to formations in Europe. These alliances signaled both "tribal togetherness" and a strategy for success because one fortunate and successful member would benefit all (Androutsopoulos and Scholz 2003:465).
6. This song is found in many regions including Iran, Armenia, and Turkey. There is much debate about its country of origin, and in Azerbaijan there are very strong convictions that this is a Turkic song. The song is performed very frequently in Azerbaijan and becomes a prominent point for cultural dispute. Many believe that other ethnic groups, especially Armenians, are wrongfully trying to claim the song as theirs. Therefore, rap artists choosing this song is a declaration that it belongs to Azerbaijani and Turkic heritage.
7. Toni Blackman became the first U.S. Hip Hop Cultural Envoy for the U.S. Department of State.
8. The mention of Ganja here refers to the missile attacks that resulted in deaths of many civilians during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War.

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