

Embodying the Urban Poor

‘Ayoun al-Ḥak (عيون الحق, “eyes of truth”) wanders through deserted downtown Rabat in the middle of the night. A slight man lurks nearby, hunched in an oversize T-shirt and shorts, a cap pulled low over his face. As he walks, al-Ḥak tugs at the lapels of his crisp black suit and perfectly knotted tie and shoves his hands in his neatly tailored pockets. The camera closes in on his face as he describes the life of the homeless from an empty park bench; it pans out as he shuffles down familiar sidewalks. Finally, after six lines in a rhythmically compelling pattern beginning with the phrase “I saw (*shuft*),” he stares directly into the camera for the punch-line: “I saw my life in that long boulevard full of hurrying people / People don’t recognize others, I will befriend [them]: one of them am I.”¹ In the next shot, the other denizen of the night—the R & B vocalist Toxi—bursts into the hook, arms outstretched in the empty street.

In “Boulevard” (2013), ‘Ayoun al-Ḥak interprets hip hop’s charge to represent the street quite seriously. Though born and raised in a middle-income neighborhood in Rabat (interview, Rabat, July 31, 2015), he speaks both *as* and *to* the most impoverished in his city, taking responsibility while playing a character who struggles to understand himself “class passing” as a professional (“I’m one of them,” he reminds us, jabbing a finger at his chest). Listeners who have seen al-Ḥak’s other music videos or read his public statements will likely recognize that al-Ḥak hasn’t actually experienced homelessness. They also expect to accept his narrative as “real”—an aesthetically appropriate expression of his own observations, intentions, analyses, and politics (Jackson 2005: 192). Throughout the piece, lyrics, musical choices, and visuals underscore the conflation of truth, sincerity, and realness, all in the service of sensitizing al-Ḥak’s listeners to the struggles of the urban poor.

This chapter demonstrates how Moroccan hip hop practitioners, across varied socioeconomic positions, depict poor and powerless citizens as objects of governance in concert with the state. By deploying long-held assumptions about the *oulad sha'ab*, or “children of the people,” as an authentic source of national identity, musicians claim the authority to speak for the politically and economically disenfranchised. At the same time, their actions align with the state’s views of the urban and rural poor, aiding in framing these citizens as a category of concern and a target for action.

The first section explores how the idea of the *oulad sha'ab* has changed over time. As generations of rural migrants arrived to Morocco’s major cities, the postindependence celebration of traditional identities originally indicated by the term has been tempered by the increasing association of new migrants with abject poverty and state-sanctioned dispossession. Next, I move to contrasting ways leading artists speak for and about poor, isolated, or marginalized subjects in their music. While these examples use divergent tactics, they perform similar assumptions about “the people” and intervene in similar ways. Finally, I describe a recent, significant outcome of this discourse: a hip hop training program that encourages “resilience” among poor youths in Sidi Moumen, home of the suicide bombers of the nation’s worst terrorist attack, in 2003.

Even when artists critique state corruption and its abandonment of poor citizens, the narratives and initiatives described in this chapter discursively—sometimes materially—reinforce policies and effects that target the poor. These interventions institutionalize an empathetic response that expresses deeply held attitudes about the relationship between poverty and authenticity. As in other examples throughout this book, such interventions accomplish this reinforcement precisely because the practitioners involved sincerely believe in their work’s potential for good. As a whole, then, this chapter asks: Can hip hop artists’ attempts to humanize the urban poor escape the complicities that shape them and in which they intervene?

WHO ARE THE *OULAD SHA'AB*?

In *sha'abiyya* (lit. “popularity”) discourse, poverty must be ameliorated, but it also keeps people closer to their core values and to an idealized Moroccan character. As the emcee Amine Snoop mused, “The poor people . . . they have the pure inspiration” (personal communication [p.c.], May 9, 2018).

The noun *al-sha'ab* (“the people”) has signaled a political constituency since the beginning of modern Moroccan nationhood. While those who wield the term often claim to be using it inclusively, its effects are often exclusionary. The definition of *al-sha'ab*—who is hailed by the term and who most properly represents the Moroccan nation—has been contested throughout recent history, whether by nationalists in the 1920s and '30s, Marxist-Leninist artists in the 1960s, Ghiwanien

bands of the 1970s, or the leadership of today's political parties. Prior to the end of the French protectorate in 1956, nationalists invoked the people in rhetoric "that emphasized Morocco's Arabo-Islamic dynastic history as evidence of long-standing national unity," refusing colonial insistence on cultural and ethnic difference between Arabs and Berbers (Wyrzten 2015: 137). In the mid-twentieth century, political actors frequently adopted a populist discourse, similar to that of other Arab nations, in which *al-sha'ab* continually progressed toward greater unity and prosperity (e.g., Sabry 2010: 55). Following his father's and grandfather's practice, King Mohamed VI continues to address citizens as *sha'abi al-'aziz* ("my dear people") in his speeches. The related words used to describe people, practices, and musical genres still reverberate with some of the rhetorical grandeur they absorbed during the heyday of the pan-Arabist and Moroccan independence movements, but they can also evoke intersecting distinctions by class, origin, education, or income.

Today, the adjective *sha'abi* ("popular") is potent precisely because it can celebrate authenticity and index the lower classes at the same time. A valued traditional item, practice, or person can be called *sha'abi*, but the term can also evoke rural and urban poverty that is associated with isolation, backwardness, lack of education, and narrow tastes. Regardless of the positive or negative valence, *sha'abi* practices "contribute to the definition of . . . Moroccanness and Moroccan identity" (Simour 2016: 7).

As a noun, *sha'abi* identifies interrelated indigenous popular musics. Applied to popular musics from the 1940s, *sha'abi* genres have been associated with rurality since the 1970s. This remained true even as urbanization continued to intensify and even as the leading practitioners of *sha'abi* genres have routinely come from urban backgrounds (Callen 2006: 337; Aydoun 2014 [1992]: 161). Until the advent of private commercial radio and television in the early 2000s, state-controlled media preferred to play more prestigious genres, contributing to the discursive association of *sha'abi* with rurality, poverty, and lower classness. At the same time, urban and rural performances of *sha'abi* styles flourished on cassette. Musicologist Ahmed Aydoun argues that urban migration birthed contemporary *sha'abi*, writing, "In the . . . popular quarters situated in the medina or on the periphery [of major cities], the music you will hear most often is *sha'abi [le cha'bi]*. . . . This population comes from different regions [and] consumes, in addition to folklore [*folklore*], a middle genre drawing on all the popular styles and exclusively privileging rhythms for dancing" (Aydoun 2014 [1992]: 161–62).

The negative associations with migrants, cultural stasis, and pastness surrounding *sha'abi* as both a term and a genre are echoed by musicians across genres and socioeconomic locations. Writing in 2006, Jeffrey Callen noted many 1990s fusion bands participated in this discourse, viewing *sha'abi* as "mediocre and conservative music" (2006: 5). Throughout the earliest years of my research, in 2008–10,

hip hop artists often positioned their music as a response to sha‘abi, complaining the genres were meaningless, repetitive, or simply boring.

In recent decades the increasing immiseration of rural migrants in Morocco’s major cities has transformed the figure of the *oulad sha‘ab* in popular discourse. Unable to afford city housing, many settle in *bidonvilles* (lit. “oil-drum towns” or “tin towns”), informal homes on the urban edge.² Others move to the *medina* (“city”), the preprotectorate sections of major cities, which often lack the services and amenities of the French-built or postindependence *villes nouvelles*.³

Elite perspectives on rural migrants have colored the available meanings of *oulad sha‘ab* over time. A professor and former minister of culture voiced the prevailing sentiment: “At the level of mental structures, the inhabitants of the *medina* still occupy the countryside. . . . New arrivals to the city use inappropriate mental structures—tribal, traditional, and rural—to cope with urban reality” (Haddad 2001: 105). In interviews, Koen Bogaert learned that “public officials generally seem to believe that the slum dweller is not capable of engaging in public life, that he needs to be re-educated, and that he himself is responsible for his situation” (2011: 726). Such responses fold descriptions of slum dwellers, and the assumptions of their economic and moral deviance (Zaki 2007), into the meanings evoked by sha‘abiyya discourse. In this telling, uprooted rural Moroccans are unable to transform themselves into successful urbanites as much because of their mentalities as their poverty.

As sha‘abiyya discourses became more firmly associated with low- and working-class Moroccans in the 1980s and ’90s, they were rhetorically opposed to Westernization and affluence. Yet because *oulad al-sha‘ab* also index tradition, the concept also valorizes when used by, or between, Moroccans of greater social standing. While from the 1960s to ’90s, calling someone *would sha‘ab* (“child of the people”; *would* is the singular of *oulad*) emphasized his patriotism, today its use often reflects a belief that “traditional” populations possess the greatest cultural authenticity and the least ability to succeed at “modern” life.

HIP HOP ARTISTS AS OULAD SHA‘AB

Hip hop artists draw on the positive and negative resonances of sha‘abiyya discourse to discuss political belonging. In “Bladi Blad (My Country Is the Country of)” —a 2006 track from Don Bigg feat. Kolonel—Rabat emcee Kolonel calls out corruption among the Makhzen with the line, “They ate the people’s money until you shook as they passed.”⁴ In the song that precipitated his first arrest, “Klab al-Dowla (Dogs of the State [2011]),” Mouad “al-Haqed” Belghouat uses a formal tone to indict the government: “In the name of the people who are in my heart, I pour it out to you, you infidels.”⁵ That same year, Don Bigg responded to the February 20 protest movement with “Ma Bghitch (I Don’t Want It).” While he

uses “al-sha‘ab” in a traditionally political way in the line “They give beans to the people so they can’t sharpen their teeth,” he also complains that “the people don’t exist, they don’t look out for themselves,” perhaps using the term to question the assumptions of coherent social class and mass solidarity.⁶

In her song “35.28,” Soultana makes a similar move, naming “the people” but refusing to celebrate them:

Stop being so cold, the whole world is saying it
My silence and your silence leaves those responsible to the people insolent
My voice and your voice count, but my point is in the final line
Whether one speaks or not, they buy [us] with flour, oil, and sugar⁷

Here, the punchline depends in part on Soultana making the legacy of nationalist uses of al-sha‘ab explicit through her denunciation.

The phrase, and figure, of *oulad al-sha‘ab* can also make a point by its absence. For example, in “The Tears of the Neighborhood (Dmou3 al-Houma [2016]),” Muslim uses *would al-houma* (“child of the neighborhood”) throughout. When one expects to hear “would al-sha‘ab” instead, this emphasizes that poor neighborhoods where young men are inevitably drawn into drug use and crime are isolated from sources of power, dislocated from the supposed political force of the people.

The subject defined through hip hop artists’ use and deformation of *oulad sha‘ab* is also depicted visually. Artists position themselves as, or as speaking for, *oulad sha‘ab* by visualizing themselves within terrains of authenticity in their videos. They also evoke *sha‘abiyya* discourses when repurposing traditional musics. Pro-state pop and hip hop artists like Fnaire⁸ celebrate the diverse sounds and figures of Moroccan cultures while aligning with the goals of the state. Their oeuvre depends on a powerful strand of *sha‘abiyya* discourse in which rural lifeways are the source of shared Moroccan identity and values. Few artists defend state policies as explicitly or consistently as Fnaire, but many use this dimension of *sha‘abiyya* discourse to legitimize their own narratives and critiques.

In the 2015 track “T-JR feat. Ahmed Soultan” (“Toujours” or “Toufik Jr.,” 2015), Don Bigg and his son leave for the countryside so Bigg can clear his head, reflect on his life, and return to moral certainty.⁹ Throughout, shots of Bigg and Ahmed Soultan, who sings the chorus in the Tashelhit language, interweave with the visual story of a man growing up in a tiny rural hamlet.¹⁰ In the first verse, Bigg raps the story of his son’s birth as the camera pans over mud-walled buildings. Outside one door, a father-to-be waits anxiously while his laboring wife moans. Then an elderly woman ululates, signaling a baby boy’s arrival. In the second verse, the baby becomes a curious child learning to read while, in the lyrics, Bigg recites his hopes for his own son’s future.

In the third verse, the child becomes a man with a small daughter of his own. “Bring me a pen and paper,” says Bigg to his son. “I’ll record for you the seven

things I'll remind you of every day that I live."¹¹ As Bigg enumerates his fundamental lessons, both protagonists—he and the rural man—take the children to pray at their grandparents' graves. Soultan's chorus underscores the idea that across cultural, economic, and linguistic differences, Moroccan parents believe in passing on elders' wisdom. Mixing Tashelhit and Derija, he concludes, "I hope that your children will see your parents / and your path."¹²

Throughout, the camera frames the rural family's faces and interactions tightly, focusing viewers' attention on the warmth and strength of generational ties. We see that the paint is peeling and the sparse furnishings are worn, but the family is portrayed as simple and dignified rather than deprived. Though Bigg visits a grave topped by a marble headstone in a graveyard at the edge of a modern town, and the rural protagonist visits a grave marked with rocks in a field, their understandings of a vital form of identification—how to raise Moroccan children—are the same.

In other videos, artists travel through the countryside to find themselves, presenting its inhabitants as authentic Moroccans to learn from. In "Kue Passa" (2015), Mr. Crazy rhymes about his dissatisfaction with his life as he hikes alone through mountains. "I'm watching my life passing by like it's going on sale [*gha promo*]," he laments. "I found myself, I'm one of the ugly ones, my life needs some Omo [a popular laundry detergent]."¹³ His backpack and bedroll suggest this character faces a long journey, perhaps to the Mediterranean. Together, the lyrics and visuals extend the metaphor of the countryside as a place that reveals truths, and of migration as a search for personal transformation and fulfillment.

While hip hop musicians claim cultural authenticity via rural landscapes and impoverished rural citizens in these examples, a separate video trend explores the flip side of sha'abiyya discourse. 'Ayoun al-Hak's "Boulevard" is one of many videos that demonstrate musicians' commitment to the urban poor by placing emcees in or adjacent to visible poverty. Al-Hak goes further than most, empathizing onscreen through his character's homelessness.¹⁴ More commonly, emcees use Morocco's crumbling urban infrastructure and bleak shots of citizens experiencing hardship to assert their critical acuity and willingness to take a hard look at inequality. Through these tactics, artists claim the moral authority to speak for, and less often with, the urban poor.

In SiSimo's "'Eid al-Faqr (The Poor Person's Holiday [2013])," he and codirector Mehdi Ouldsoulem open poignantly with a man and a woman—perhaps a father and his adult daughter—in happy times.¹⁵ They are superimposed over a scrolling shot of the elegant apartment buildings lining Boulevard Zerktouni near the Twin Center mall, located in the most famously upscale neighborhood in Casablanca. As a single 'oud concludes a meandering melody, hinting at the chords of the chorus with a sound linked to both tradition and power, the man gives the woman a beautiful necklace and kisses her on the forehead. The screen fades to black on the woman's smile. Next, a wailing infant and a reprise of the 'oud melody

accompany the camera, panning from feet on Zerktouni's crowded sidewalk to that same woman—now in a modest traditional robe—huddled against a streetlamp. Nearby, the man lurks. Though he is drunk and desolate, he keeps a tearful eye on her as she begs from passersby.

SiSimo expands out, lyrically and visually, from one family to the stunning economic disparity on display in Casablanca. Shots of the city's bidonvilles are intercut with gleaming buildings; luxury cars pass garbage collectors steering donkey-driven carts down major thoroughfares. Close-ups of indigent individuals of all ages pair with repetitive statements in the chorus. Each mouths the beginning of each line: *hna al-fuqara* ("here are the poor"). Yet SiSimo is not a character in this narrative, but the narrator. Though his voice emanates from their faces, he is only seen with his hard rock band. Though SiSimo is from Fez, his use of Casablanca's architectural signatures signals to Moroccans the simultaneity of concentrated wealth with the social and political abandonment of the poor.

Like SiSimo, in "Anti" (2018), trap artist LBenj acts as a keen observer rather than a participant.¹⁶ The opening shots closely track a distraught, hoarse-voiced man shouting incoherently in what appears to be the dead of night. His ranting contrasts with the delicate electronic timbres and high ranges characteristic of Moroccan trap, shading the autotuned falsetto voice in the background with a sense of foreboding. He gesticulates and stumbles as he crosses Avenue des F.A.R. (the Royal Armed Forces), a four-lane road separating Casablanca's tiny medina from the imposing protectorate-built structures downtown. His face is pixelated, giving the impression that he is a real person and not an actor.

During the verses, LBenj details the urban poor's challenges while demonstrating his distance from them. A few shots of him in rain-slicked streets late at night, when no one but the homeless and the intoxicated are out, legitimate his knowledge. Otherwise, he perches on a stool in a fancy pub, his untouched martini communicating worldliness and wealth. LBenj may be a denizen of the street, but he speaks as a *flâneur* rather than as a member of the group he characterizes.

Sha'abiyya discourse allows Moroccans across social classes to voice their belonging to the nation through their identification with the rural or urban poor. Even when hip hop artists follow the genre's visual conventions on consumption, displaying luxury cars, homes, and fashions in their videos, their texts on inequality and injustice identify their wealthy and successful characters with the social body. For some artists like Amine Snoop, who publicly claim their impoverished origins, celebrating the people in this way also recuperates his upbringing among Casablanca's working poor. For others, it legitimizes their right to critique and authenticates their moral arguments.

Emcees' texts on poverty encourage listeners to feel responsible for themselves and others without promoting specific policies to redress inequality. First-generation and younger artists frequently envision a society where individuals care more for each other not only because they see this as morally correct, but because they

expect change to flow from individuals rather than from a government perceived as having abandoned the poor. Today, musicians participate in or even design diverse efforts to help poor youths, including the workshops in the next section.

THE STARS OF SIDI MOUMEN

On a scorching day in August 2016, I sat alone outside just after Friday prayer at a musty midcentury cafe on the rondpoint Mers Sultan in downtown Casablanca. As I waited for Anas, I plucked my espresso from its saucer from above to avoid the table's baking surface.

Anas had agreed to travel together to his workplace, the Centre Culturel les Étoiles de Sidi Moumen. Universally referred to as Noujoum Sidi Moumen or simply Noujoum ("stars"), the center opened in 2013 in the neighborhood of Sidi Moumen on the outskirts of Casablanca. Anas, a baby-faced emcee in his late twenties, was Noujoum's first full-time hip hop specialist. That summer, he taught its first workshop on emceeing known as "Positive School." This day, the twelve students, aged twelve to twenty-two, would hold their closing concert for family and friends.

Once I spotted Anas, I met him at the corner trying to flag an empty taxi. His younger brother Abdou nodded companionably at me without removing his headphones. In the taxi, I handed Anas books I had brought at his request.

"I . . . want some [books] that I can read to have more knowledge about hip hop and DVDs [and] videos about hip hop story . . . that I can show to my students," he had explained over Facebook when we got back in touch the previous month (p.c., July 8, 2016). He was delighted at the foreword by DJ Kool Herc in Jeff Chang's germinal *Can't Stop Won't Stop*. "I'm happy to know I'm teaching them the right things," he told me in his careful English. He'd already delivered a lecture about the founders, he said, including Herc and Afrika Bambaataa. I mentioned Grandmaster Flash's appearance in the book, too, casually referencing the legend-driven history Americans and Moroccans often retell.

"And Grandwizzard Theodore," Abdou piped up from the front seat. "His little brother who invented scratching by accident."¹⁷ I could hear the overdriven bass from the buds still firmly lodged in his ears. Anas beamed and high-fived his brother for remembering the lecture.

As we maneuvered toward the southwest edge of the city, Anas explained how much he enjoyed teaching, telling a new generation about hip hop's founders and what he believed they stood for. Like other artists I worked with, he relied on occasionally fictionalized depictions of places like the Bronx or Compton to understand what influenced his favorite emcees. I recalled how the previous year, he diligently followed news of the NWA biopic *Straight Outta Compton* and Dr. Dre's album *Compton: A Soundtrack*, scoring digital bootlegs the same weeks they were released.

Anas was fond of telling the “something from nothing” origin stories of his favorite American artists.¹⁸ Although these biographies seemed to contrast with his own life—he and his brother grew up with their parents in a comfortable apartment in downtown Rabat, and both had some postsecondary education—he often returned to how hard emcees worked before fame, how inner resources and dedication carried them when they were just long-shot amateurs.

His emphasis on transformation was well suited to Positive School and the goals of Noujoum Sidi Moumen. Founded shortly after the tenth anniversary of the May 2003 suicide bombings in central Casablanca, Noujoum was established to provide youths in the bombers’ home neighborhood with alternatives to Islamist extremism. Anas’s story was rapidly becoming one of the testimonials to hard work and commitment he enjoyed sharing. The previous summer, he assured me that “if we have a good spirit and clean mind . . . no one can stop us” (July 30, 2015). Now, he coached underprivileged children to deliver uplifting rhymes. As he said during my visit that day, “I never expected to make a salary doing rap music.”

My visit to Noujoum Sidi Moumen, and the performances of Positive School No. 1 that I witnessed, demonstrate how narratives about the relationship between poverty and extremism have transformed the neighborhood of Sidi Moumen, Casablanca’s nonprofit sector, and sha’abiyya discourse. Hip hop artists have contributed to these narratives since shortly after the bombings occurred, releasing songs that, like the vast majority of Moroccans, refused the moral and geopolitical ideologies the bombers are believed to have held. Volunteering—or in rare cases like Anas’s, getting paid—to share both their musical expertise and their ‘aqliyya has also given practitioners legitimacy in a new arena.

As I discuss below, Anas and his coworkers embraced resilience as a goal for their young students. As a desirable result of personal responsibility and self-care, resilience depicts poverty as an individual challenge to be overcome rather than an injustice to be fought. Today, resilience-building projects are a significant response to the national and international understanding of suicide bombers. In what follows, I discuss Moroccan responses to the attacks that killed dozens in Casablanca on May 16, 2003. I contextualize Positive School No. 1 and Noujoum Sidi Moumen as part of an outpouring of concern for “slum dwellers” after 2003, and I discuss how Positive School No. 1’s curriculum replaced hip hop’s tradition of critique with “positivity.” This promoted resilience discourses already shared across local, national, and international state and private agencies. Finally, I return to Anas’s and others’ attraction to stories of resilience when discussing *‘Ali Sawtek* (Fr. *Haut et Fort*, En. *Casablanca Beats*), the 2021 full-length fiction film based on Positive School directed by Noujoum cofounder Nabil Ayouch.

The multiple assumptions in sha’abiyya discourse ground Positive School, with its aim of training young people to be resilient despite generational poverty and systemic inequality, in Moroccan culture. The energy and sincerity with which young cultural workers like Anas promote resilience, the

degree to which this value aligns with the kind of person they encourage themselves and others to become, is just as important to the workshop and students' flourishing.

May 16, 2003

On May 16, 2003, fourteen young men staged a coordinated suicide bombing in Casablanca. Targets included a Spanish restaurant, a branch of the Golden Tulip hotel chain, and a Jewish cultural center. Thirty-four bystanders and eleven attackers died.¹⁹

The attacks were the first suicide bombings against Moroccan targets (Alonso and Rey 2007: 572). They generated instantaneous condemnation across the mainstream political spectrum, from the Francophone press to the Islamist Justice and Development Party's newspaper.²⁰ Postattack demonstrators adopted the slogan "Matqish Bladi," or "Don't touch my country," shown in a hand of Fatima symbol (Rogers 2012: 458).

While it is not clear who trained or bankrolled the bombers, national press and historians alike have highlighted the role of "foreign" Wahhabist doctrine in inspiring the attacks. According to Pierre Vermeren, the royal prosecutor alleged that two Saudi-trained Moroccan imams "were the inciters" of the attacks; they were subsequently jailed (2009: 173). Moroccan security forces have accused al-Qaeda of ultimately ordering the attacks and similar foiled plots (Alonso and Rey 2007: 581).

At the same time, astute observers noted seeds of the attacks were planted decades earlier. Alonso and Rey point out that foreign-trained imams led increasing numbers of mosques across Morocco from the 1970s through 2003, explaining the influx of Islamists through the monarchy's "very close ties to the Wahhabi regime in Saudi Arabia . . . [it] was accepting financial support in return for fostering Wahhabism" (Alonso and Rey 2007: 573). They argue that an "endogenous" Salafism, loyal to neither the Moroccans nor the Saudis, grew among Moroccan followers after both states cooperated with the United States during the first Gulf War (Alonso and Rey 2007).

Editor and journalist Abdellah Tourabi, by contrast, dates Moroccan strains of extremism from the independence movement, arguing that early nationalists borrowed from Mashreqi Salafism to build rank-and-file support (2008: 214). In this view, Saudi-trained Moroccan imams of the 1970s and '80s merely heightened existing strands of extremism. Tourabi and others argue that in the late twentieth century, the state leveraged Wahhabist or Salafist imams against native antimonarchy groups, and only sought to reestablish control over the popularity of these doctrines after the 2003 attacks.

As more information emerged, it became clear that all of the suicide bombers were from the same place—*Karian Thomas* (or *Toma*), a bidonville within Sidi Moumen.²¹ Formed by waves of rural migrants, the karians of Sidi Moumen were

at the time cut off from the rest of Casablanca geographically, culturally, and economically, with few or no services provided by the state.

From at least the 1990s, Islamic charities have filled gaps left in housing, public health and hygiene, education, and even security. According to Lamia Zaki, “The state is at once absent from the *kariens*, since they refuse to introduce to them the most elementary forms of infrastructure . . . (running water, electricity, sewers, trash collection, public transport stops, maintenance of order . . .). Yet it is still present, since it attempts to maintain every day the precarity of the site” (2006). Tourabi offers shocking, unverified numbers: “In a city—Casablanca—where more police surveil the American consulate than assure the order and security of neighborhoods filled with more than 100,000 inhabitants, the state had de facto delegated its responsibilities in policing to . . . groups of zealots” (2008: 220).

In the years after the attacks, the Moroccan state, national press, and international counterterrorism commentators aligned around what I call the “vulnerability narrative”: that economic and political disenfranchisement leave the poor *as a group* vulnerable to radicalization. Implied within this emphasis on inequality is an exclusion of other explanations. In other words, one could readily withstand the internal consistency and claims to authority in jihadist doctrines were one not already broken down by poverty and discrimination, which disables critical faculties people would otherwise deploy. The state’s response to its own diagnosis has been an array of reforms safeguarding affluent public places and the state’s reputation, secondly, if at all, alleviating the suffering of its poorest citizens.

After May 16, journalism, commentary, and artistic reflections across the political spectrum cemented the vulnerability narrative as the way to understand how deeply deprived youths could kill themselves and others. The monarchy’s widely publicized counterterrorism efforts promoted assumptions that radicalization was primarily a problem of inequality, not discourse, even as the state quietly arrested thousands and launched extensive surveillance efforts. According to Mustapha Hamil, “Two weeks after the ‘May 16 attacks,’ King Mohamed VI visited Sidi Moumen and promised to improve its housing conditions but nothing concrete on the ground was accomplished, except perhaps that Sidi Moumen got the reputation as a hotbed of fanatic kamikazes” (2010: 566). In a sweep, about five thousand Moroccans “were arrested and interrogated in subsequent days [after May 16 and] . . . eighty-seven were accused of complicity” (Park and Boum 2005: 334).²² The National Human Development Initiative “was launched ‘with the aim of combating poverty as a means to combat radicalism and terrorism’” by the end of 2003 (Bartolucci 2010: 127).

Morocco’s national and regional governments used the attacks to launch an ambitious urban renewal program known as *Villes Sans Bidonvilles* (Cities without Slums). Karian residents were induced with low-cost loans to move to apartments in new high-rises far from their homes (Bogaert 2011; Atia 2019). Alongside existing assumptions that karian residents could not assimilate to urban life,

“the bombings of 2003 reinforced the objectification of the slum *population* itself as a calculable target for a general strategy of government, trying to convert the slum dweller into a responsible citizen” (Bogaert 2011: 712, italics in original).

One could invoke the vulnerability narrative whether discussing individual responsibility or state policy. Former Minister of the Interior Driss Basri, infamous overseer of King Hassan II’s surveillance and repression during the Years of Lead, described karian residents as “poor people with very little who can easily get entangled in the mysticism around Islam, which makes them willing to do anything in order to get to paradise” (quoted in Alonso and Rey 2007: 575). At the same time, leading liberal commentators like the editor of independent *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* held that “the suicide bombers are a home product . . . the inevitable consequence of ‘specific socioeconomic conditions, an inadequate education system, wrongful religious policy, the failure of political parties, an obsolete system of government and an inappropriate media policy’ [Jamai 2004]” (quoted in Hamil 2010: 557). In this way, commentators from opposite sides of the political spectrum appeared to agree on the credulity of the very poor.²³

Conditioned on the negative dimensions of sha’biyya discourse, the vulnerability narrative displayed commentators’ unwillingness to engage the attackers as unique individuals with considered moral, political, or intellectual positions.²⁴ This narrative allowed Moroccans to understand the state’s post-2003 policies of forced resettlement and counterterrorism policing as protecting, rather than abusing, the urban poor.²⁵

Attempts to prevent or provide alternatives to radicalization assumed that economic and cultural deprivation mutually reinforced each other. These attempts sought to address the perceived lack of education, exposure, and urbanization of karian residents. For those who saw Casablanca’s disparities as a temporary consequence of Morocco’s global market integration—rather than failure to redress the permanent effects of that integration—the answer lay in expanding that integration by bringing new opportunities to the karians.

The Centre Culturel les Étoiles de Sidi Moumen, opened in 2013 by painter and novelist Mahi Binebine and filmmaker Nabil Ayouch, follows through on the responses implied by the vulnerability narrative. As leading figures in Morocco’s national and international arts scenes, Binebine and Ayouch both encapsulated and led elite opinion on Sidi Moumen in the years after the May 16 attacks. In 2010, Binebine published *Les Étoiles de Sidi Moumen* (The Stars of Sidi Moumen), a novel that focuses on four young men’s trajectory toward martyrdom. Ayouch released *Les Chevaux de Dieu* (Horses of God), a film based on the novel, in 2012. Each depicts political and economic inequality as inescapably intertwined.

The Centre, also known as *Noujoum* (“stars” in Arabic), is a project of the Ali Zaoua Foundation, a nonprofit incorporated in London. Ayouch created the foundation in 2009, naming it after the titular character in his 2000 film. Ayouch had already been working in Sidi Moumen, “in the streets, in the slums,” to film

Ali Zaoua (p.c., April 2023).²⁶ In several different interviews, Ayouch described his shock in 2003 upon learning the suicide bombers were from a place he had spent years making documentary films. This realization changed his relationship to the neighborhood. “I investigated in the bidonvilles [over] two years in an almost anthropological fashion. I informed myself by meeting sociologists [and] political scientists who were interested in radical Islam,” he told one interviewer (Aubel 2013).

Noujoum offers classes and workshops in several genres of music and dance, photography, foreign languages, and other skills. According to Sophia Akhmisse, the director of Noujoum and manager of the Ali Zaoua Foundation, preparation for the permanent cultural center began in 2013 when Ayouch and Binebine screened *Horses of God* in Sidi Moumen. They arranged for families of victims and suicide bombers to watch the film together (interview, August 5, 2016). A cover story on Noujoum from 2017 set the scene: “[*Horses of God*] was shown throughout Morocco, except in Sidi Moumen, which lacked a cinema. Nabil Ayouch contacted the governor. . . . The showing took place on May 16, 2013, ten years to the day after the attacks. Ayouch invited the families of the victims and two mothers of the kamikazes, in niqab, were present in the hall that night. There were a lot of tears” (Charon 2017). After this profound encounter, Ayouch and Binebine rented the building in which they showed the film. Through their relationships with Moroccan artists, sixty of whom donated paintings for an auction, they raised enough for a cultural center (Akhmisse, quoted in Bouithy 2014). They continue to fund through donations and a partnership with the municipality (Fondation Ali Zaoua; interview with Akhmisse, August 5, 2016).²⁷

According to Akhmisse, when she was hired to create programming in 2014, she visited neighborhood homes asking what people would like the center to offer. An overarching theme emerged: instead of one-time workshops that left attendees with no way to apply their new knowledge, people wanted structured classes that built toward mastery in domains—foreign languages and music—that required extensive practice and increasing skill. In response, Noujoum offers more than one level of each language. Courses in instruments, singing, dance, and visual arts range from a month to three or four months each.

Just as the state and municipality moved quickly to build formal infrastructure for the neighborhood after 2003, nonprofit associations showed much interest in Sidi Moumen shortly after the attacks. By 2014, some residents characterized the associations’ typical behaviors and funding models as exploitative. As Akhmisse described it, residents saw the same short-term interventions over and over again. These yielded photos with which associations could fundraise, but little concrete change for residents themselves (interview, August 5, 2016). Noujoum’s permanent physical presence and longer classes were not only more effective teaching, but communicated respect for residents’ needs and desires.



FIGURE 6. One half of a graffiti mural in the courtyard of Noujoum Sidi Moumen, 2016. Photo by author.

Ayouch and his colleagues surveyed Sidi Moumen residents before opening Noujoum and learned that “art and culture was really the thing that was needed the most. Because lacking also the most in those neighborhoods” (p.c., Nabil Ayouch, April 2023). Yet Akhmissee indicated that the focus on the arts at Noujoum was not solely a result of its founders’ professions and beliefs. Not every Sidi Moumen resident accepted music and dance classes as appropriate for their children, but many saw the arts as a valuable way to build students’ skills and intellectual capabilities. The press booklet I received during my visit offered a typical week’s schedule filled with “nearly eighty-five hours of classes” for children, teens, and adults, including English and French, theater and fashion, guitar, drums, and piano, zumba and yoga, and classical and hip hop dance (Fondation Ali Zaoua: 7).

At the same time, I knew from years of interviews with first-generation hip hop practitioners that many felt their parents and even their peers did not respect their love of the genre in the 1990s and 2000s. I asked Akhmissee why Noujoum would run a two-month emceeing workshop alongside a full complement of instrument and dance courses. Why did she think it was valuable?

Seated behind her paper-stacked desk in the tiny office she shared with two other staff members, Akhmissee opened her eyes wide and exhaled. “I think it

builds self-confidence,” she said, after a pause. These students have already chosen to pursue hip hop, she continued. We show that we support their choice.

Given Noujoum’s founding and the role it sought to play within the neighborhood, the support of the institution and its staff could carry significant weight for students and, perhaps, their families. When I asked if they planned to hold more Positive School workshops, Akhmisse answered unequivocally: we will do them for as long as we have interest.

In August 2016, Positive School No. 1 had thirteen enrolled students—four young women and nine young men—but Anas, the young emcee hired to lead the workshop, already spoke excitedly of his plans for Positive School No. 2. Nearly forty children had already enrolled for the next class. The new, expanded version would run the entire academic year and hold a concert every three months (interview, Akhmisse, August 5, 2016). Perhaps they could even have a “level A” and a “level B” (p.c., Anas, August 5, 2016). On top of that, Noujoum hoped to expand in the coming year to Tangier, where they would run the same programs.

The Positive School project came from hip hop artists themselves, who pitched it to Noujoum leadership in the spring of 2016. According to Anas and his original collaborator, they proposed developing a hip hop musical with students at the center for its annual May 16 commemorative event. In the eventual plot, students played victims of the 2003 bombings. The concert performance, held on May 17 as the second evening in a week of events titled “Creative Explosion,” was considered such a success that Anas was hired full-time to lead the first, and then subsequent, Positive School workshops (p.c., August 5 and 7, 2016).

The first Positive School’s students ranged in age from twelve to twenty-two. Each student had paid about two hundred Moroccan dirhams (about twenty dollars) for the eight-week day-camp-style program. According to Akhmisse, the fee communicated the commitment the center expected of its students more than it covered costs. Each weekday, Anas met with his students in the classroom normally reserved for English instruction. In the corner of the whiteboard at the front of the classroom, a paper *khamisa* read “Try to speak English—Avoid speaking Arabic.”

Part of each week was dedicated to the history of US hip hop music. Since many students had little to no education in French or English, Anas would show music videos, documentaries, and movie excerpts, then summarize in Arabic. Students also developed a persona, including an artistic name, a song topic, and some lyrical and musical ideas. Anas told me that he created the beats students used, helped write the lyrics for each song, and formed ensembles by pairing the students into duets or placing a chorus singer on students’ tracks.

By July, the students were ready to record their songs. For most, it was their first introduction to studio recording equipment and interacting with a microphone. The resulting compilation was advertised along with the closing concert and handed out to attendees in exchange for their fifteen-dirham ticket to the event.

As the early August date of their closing performance drew near, Anas introduced considerations that might go into a professional performance, including the

order of songs and whether and how to provide visuals on stage. Finally, students were coached in performance practice, including how to hold the mic, listen for the onstage monitors, and move onstage in a way appropriate for their genre. Their final class sessions were spent in Noujoum's black-box theater, becoming accustomed to the proscenium stage, the lights in their faces, and their voices bouncing off the walls and concrete floor.

Throughout the course, Anas had ample opportunity to reinforce "positivity" and to implicitly ground the value of the concept in the disciplining force of sha'abiyya discourse. By their nature, the origin stories he provided of hip hop's early innovators focused on select individuals whose achievements we now frame as transcending their circumstances. When helping students identify and describe issues important to them, he offered suggestions or alternatives fitting interrelated goals: to create uplifting, family-friendly material, and to debunk misconceptions students' families might hold about hip hop.

For example, Anas told the story of a duet he coached between two students stuck on what to write about. At his suggestion, they both wrote to their mothers. The resulting song, "Yo Mama" (spelled "Yo ماما" on the compilation), included parallel verses in which the young men imagine what their parents would like to hear. In the first verse, the youngest student at Positive School begins, "Mama, don't be scared that you won't like what I'm saying." The second verse, recited by one of the oldest students, begins, "Mom, don't be scared, I understand what you're telling me."²⁸ The youngest emcee addresses fears that rap introduces children to bad words and vulgarity, while the second verse acknowledges parents' fear that young men simply ignore them as they move toward adulthood.

One important goal of the summer course was promoting social bonds and emotional health across differences of age, gender, ability, or religiosity within the group. The afternoon of their final performance, a dress rehearsal channeled the students' nervous energy and boosted more reticent students' confidence. I watched from a corner of the auditorium as the group ran through the set, with Anas urging each student to move quickly and with authority onstage. When he asked students to act like the audience they wished to see, they crowded the foot of the stage for each song, dancing jubilantly and half-jokingly cheering at the top of their lungs.

At one point, rehearsal broke down when a young girl stepped forward to perform her solo rap. This song was the only moment in the set entirely in English. A few measures in, she lapsed into silence; her small frame, draped in a pink hijab and matching long cardigan, seemed to shrink toward disappearance. Anas hoisted himself onstage and bent deep at the waist to look into her eyes. For a few bars, they rehearsed a cappella, focusing on subdividing the time between each line. Eventually, as the young girl started to nod more assertively, he gestured to the group and waved toward the sound booth at the back of the auditorium. Her fellow students careened toward the stage as the music restarted, throwing their arms in the air and shouting the last word of each line along with the soloist. By the

end, though her shoulders were still hunched forward and she clutched the mic with both hands, the girl was smiling.

All of the students I spoke to had already started singing or rapping on their own before the workshop. Anas targeted hackneyed lyrics and stereotypes about rappers as they arose, arguing these were based on his students' limited exposure to the genre. Hours before the final performance, we were greeted with respectful enthusiasm by Zeph Jo, a student in his late teens sporting a *tcharmil* hairstyle—shaved on both sides, long on the top and back, slicked down with gel—and a red and black baseball jersey. When he bounded out of the room, I noticed his jersey read “CLIQUE” across the back in large white letters outlined with metal studs.²⁹ As Kanye West's 2012 hit started up in my head, Anas looked after him fondly and shook his head. “That guy is really street,” he remarked. “But he's a real rapper.”

He was doing really typical stuff, Anas continued. “But I worked with him and I told him about how to write positive things and to give positive messages to people.” For Anas, his young charge had the dedication, passion, and temperament of a “real rapper.” He just needed to channel his energy away from the vulgarity and irrationality associated with the term “street” into work that, Anas implied, would reach more people and communicate something more valuable.

Anas made these comments in English. I didn't ask whether he was familiar with the disputed idiom opposing the Arab elite to “the Arab street” (Regier and Khalidi 2009), because I interpreted his choice as consistent with his and others' hip hop-inflected English. However, his use of “street” potentially conflates two references: the “Arab street” as a condescending term for public opinion that implies Arabs to be “volatile,” “chaotic,” and uneducated (Khalil 2009: 48), and the invocation of “the streets” in Anglophone hip hop discourse as the genre's authentic home.

During the culminating performance that evening, Zeph Jo's solo was the first of the night. Anas bookended his piece by evoking the multiple meanings of street, framing hip hop arts and culture in ways that resonated with sha'abiyya discourse. In his opening remarks to the audience, Anas described Positive School's goals in a mixture of Derija, French, and English, starting with the official English name for the program:

Before we begin, here's a little for you about Positive School. In Arabic, it means *al-madrasa al-ijabiya*. . . . This training program educates the children about the history of hip hop, in general, from its first day in the 1970s in America, in New York, in the Bronx exactly, until 2016. . . . Rap is still, as you know, an art of the street [*fann dyal sh'aria*]. You don't go to your mother, and she says, “Yes, I want the truth about your life.” She describes herself—this is the art, excuse me—as *peace, love, unity and having fun*. *Donc*, today, you're going to listen to some rap, to nine songs that speak on positive topics, and we're going to show you the beautiful side of this art that comes from the street.³⁰



FIGURE 7. A poster advertising the first Positive School's closing concert is taped to a column in the atrium of Noujoum Sidi Moumen, 2016. Photo by author.

As Anas suggested, he and others claim that rap is still located close to its roots in the street. In a Moroccan context, the street connotes a public, male site opposed to one's home, a private site where one's mother presides over both what is said and how it is said. Yet Anas instructed his audience that hip hop itself claims values anyone can appreciate, citing the Zulu Nation creed of "peace, love, unity, and having fun." "The beautiful side" of this street art, then, simply needs to be uncovered and revealed. These opposing characterizations mirror the ambiguities of sha'abiyya discourse, in which the oulad sha'ab are othered yet authentic, uneducated yet honest, pitied yet celebrated.

Anas then left the stage to perform the compilation album's introduction. In twelve brief bars, he resignified much of his previous statement offstage while the audience focused on a group photo projected on the stage's back wall. The lights faded to black, coming up again on the opening measures of "Fahmni (Understand Me)." Zeph Jo strode out to center stage, his "CLIQUE" jersey hanging from one shoulder. With angular gestures and outstretched fingers, his grip on the mic, restless pacing, and frequent vocal breaks radiated urgency. In a sign of how much he had practiced, the young man stayed on or just slightly ahead of the beat throughout his performance. "Understand Me" also communicated intensity through its

lack of a chorus. Instead, the sixteen-bar loop continued unbroken throughout the song. By the end of his three verses, he was panting as he pumped his fist in the air.

Anas met Zeph Jo at the edge of the stage, gently steering him back toward the audience while taking up the microphone. “Okay,” began Anas, arm across his student’s shoulder, as the stage lights came up.

This first song was performed for you by Youssef, aka Zeph Jo. In this song, Zeph Jo tries to present to you all [about] women, his life, and everything that he’s seen. He put everything into one song in order to say . . . that the neighborhood, you all who speak with [him] every day, this is rap. *Donc*, it’s speech about everything negative and ugly in his life and sends a direct message to anyone [*ay sha ‘ab*]. This is for you if you’ve left school. This is to any ugly thing, any difficult thing in his life.

Anas stressed the aesthetic and moral relevance of Zeph Jo’s text. If “this is rap,” then rap can discuss anything, and it can have therapeutic value for performers and listeners. While Anas introduced performers throughout the evening, this was the only time he interpreted student text for his audience. Starting the set with “Fahmni” allowed Anas, as the teacher and director, to navigate both his students’ needs and his audiences’ potential concerns. Zeph Jo was able to perform a deeply felt piece that was, of the evening’s songs, closest in topics and rhetorics to recorded Moroccan hip hop. Yet by the end of the concert, family and friends in the live audience heard a series of songs on more lighthearted themes, ensuring they came away with an understanding of what Anas characterized as “the beautiful side” of the art form. Facing “reality” through Zeph Jo’s rap, often cited as a key value of the transnational hip hop tradition, was followed by explicit statements of empowerment. The evening moved from the most vulnerable and angry expressions to celebrations of children’s enthusiasm, creativity, and resilience.

FROM VULNERABLE TO RESILIENT

Since 2016, Positive School trainings have expanded with Noujoum to locations in Tangier, Agadir, and Fes. According to their advertisements, Positive School is accepted by the country’s traditional sources of arts funding, including several municipal agencies, postcolonial NGOs such as the Institut Français, and the US Embassy. Positive School pioneered the Moroccan institutionalization of hip hop as both an art form and a form of entrepreneurship. Crucially, this adaptation was not simply imposed by locally powerful institutions leveraging hip hop for existing educational goals, but enthusiastically embraced by artists who pioneered the self-entrepreneurship narrative among themselves in the 1990s. Today’s emcees, deejays, dancers, and graffiti artists share common themes of grit and initiative, of adversity and overcoming, that frame their personal narratives of learning and becoming hip hop culture. At Positive School, these frames are the lesson of Anas’s

history lectures, the model for the students' first rhymes, the currency that helps the organization find actual currency to fund its classes and workshops.

Through my visit to Noujoum, I came to understand the enterprise as grounded in the vulnerability narrative. A foundational, and seemingly unexamined, assumption of this narrative is that impoverished people equate their lack of capital with a lack of personal or inherent value. In other words, the narrative assumes that they see themselves as socioeconomic elites see them, and that this lack of self-worth is among the deepest and most intransigent of the problems caused by poverty.³¹ Thus, the response is not only or first to eradicate poverty, but to offer activities that elites believe will allow participants to recognize and express their value to themselves.

During our conversation, Sophia Akhmisse described bringing guest hip hop artists from Boultek, the offices of the Boulevard Festival described in chapter 3, to Noujoum. At the time, she hoped a partnership would provide a well-traveled path for established emcees to volunteer at Noujoum. For her, guest artists drew enthusiastic audiences and could also communicate that Sidi Moumen youths were in turn welcome at Boultek and similar creative hubs in the city. Hip hop arts training was not an end in itself, but a medium through which to convince students of their own capacities and to connect them to people, practices, and places that the staff valued.

This reminded me of Fondation Ali Zaoua's website, where Noujoum's copresident, Mahi Binebine, described the center's goal as helping youths "rediscover a reason to never let themselves be indoctrinated."³² This "reason," a sense of one's own value, would allow young people to understand influential discourses like those absorbed by the May 16 bombers as "indoctrination" rather than in other ways—as moral suasion, as rational argument, as a way to belong, or even as something to endure in exchange for social services. Binebine frames this as "rediscovering" young peoples' intrinsic worth, suggesting that to him, Sidi Moumen residents' recognition of how little they are valued by elite Moroccans undermines their own estimation of themselves.

In their introduction to Noujoum's press book, Binebine and Ayouch state:

After having passed two years on this terrain preparing to make *Horses of God* and the writing of *The Stars of Sidi Moumen*, we could see how abandoned they feel, how the tie of identity with the rest of the population has been severed. The reason is simple: in its desire to replace the bidonvilles with apartment blocks, the state has forgotten a major parameter: local culture [*la culture de proximité*]. The departments concerned and the local politicians have made the same errors as the European states in the 1950s and '60s in creating ghettos at the doors of big cities, zones without rights where violence becomes the only form of expression. However, there is a way to reverse this trend. And culture, the arts, has a fundamental role to play in that equation.

Today, we are convinced that one can help the youths of Sidi Moumen by offering them access to culture. Not an elitist culture. No, an accessible culture [*de proximité*] that they create, which tells their story, their daily lives, and which permits them to display their talents. Because talent, there is a lot of it in these neighborhoods. And we believe strongly that thanks to centers such as this one, vocations will emerge in the years to come and genuine stars will come from these neighborhoods, in the manner of France's banlieues.³³

In Ayouch's and Binebine's statements here and elsewhere, the state has failed to offer people ways to form a sense of belonging in and beyond Sidi Moumen. Nonprofits, funded by private donations, corporate foundations, and government agencies with postcolonial ties to Morocco, must fill that gap. With the exception of a point Ayouch makes frequently—that Morocco's Villes Sans Bidonvilles project repeats mistakes from mid-twentieth-century French housing policy—there is no argument that the state must return to an earlier, broader model of provisioning or create a better one. Instead, Fondation Ali Zaoua raises funds to do the work they believe needs to be done.

Ayouch described the model for his approach in a conversation with my students when he retold the story of his youth in Sarcelles, a suburb north of Paris.

In the banlieue . . . actually one place saved my life and made me become a director, it was the MJC. The *Maison des Jeunes et de la Culture*. And that's where I learned how to tap dance, to sing, to do theater, to write some books, and to change my life. . . . I observed at that time how this place, a place like that, this kind of island in the middle of the buildings, could change the destiny of many of my fellows. And the differences between those who had been in that place and those who had never been in that place and how they finally ended. And so, for me it was really obvious that's exactly what the youngsters [of Sidi Moumen] needed. So I was happy to be of service . . . so I decided that on the ground, on the ugly, I would build something beautiful (April 2023).

In practice, building skills that would help enculturate young people seemed to be less about professionalization, or training for vocations that will allow "stars" to emerge, than about building a sense of self-worth that would prepare motivated students to leave their neighborhood. Noujoum's founders and staff suggested that Sidi Moumen youths lacked that sense of self-worth, but they also assumed that the way Sidi Moumen and other karians had been denied services resulted in residents' ignorance or naïveté. As Akhmisse noted in our conversation, "self-confidence" and the support of Noujoum staff themselves were just as valuable as experience in their hip hop music-making.

In interviews, Noujoum founders and staff speak of *désenclavement*, the un-enclosing and reconnecting of the neighborhood (Derville 2016; Bouithy 2014). Ayouch defines Noujoum as a tool for social mobility: "De-ghetto-ize the neighborhood. Cultivate mixing. Offer to the children transmission, knowledge, relationships" (Derville 2016). The aims of *désenclavement*, and their primacy over

more immediate, material redress, rest on a belief that the informal housing that dominated Sidi Moumen in 2003 imprisoned its residents in both space and time.³⁴

As we have seen, expectations that karian residents will fail in Casablanca's regularized urban spaces existed before the 2003 bombings and continue to be reinforced by national and regional media, municipal officials, and socioeconomic elites. However, residents of past and present karians connect to the rest of the city as workers, students, or entrepreneurs, even as their participation is conditioned by their lack of infrastructure. Residents use a variety of tactics to navigate the city and other citizens' expectations of them, including expectations that they will passively accept the City Without Slums relocation program (Atia 2019; Pieprzak 2016: 42–43).

I do not assume that every staff member at Noujoum was from an affluent or elite background, but I can note factors that would incentivize their participation in dominant discourses. The Noujoum staff whom I was able to meet were in a rare position: they did work they were educated for, that took advantage of their artistic and other skills, and they were also paid to help others. Noujoum staff were positioned as entrepreneurial through being youthful cultural workers, but also, for some, being involved in or representative of the hip hop arts (Scharff 2016: 110). Part of the role of the staff and guest teachers who lead emceeing, beatboxing, and dance workshops at the centers is demonstrating the joy and pride they feel as successful entrepreneurs, paid artists in a society where only a few artists in each genre or medium make a living wage. Valuing the determination and work ethic of the students is one way both staff and international journalists situated them as entrepreneurial subjects.

In sum, the Noujoum staff promoted students' identification with Moroccan society through tools that would help them move across class boundaries. However, those class boundaries were consistently depicted as psychological or symbolic, as located in Sidi Moumen residents' heads or in the meaning given to neighborhood structures. According to the discourse enacted during my visit, traversing such boundaries by performing practices associated with more affluent classes would in turn raise youths' valuation of themselves and fortify them against "vulnerabilities" to Islamists or other voices understood as opposed to liberal or civil society. It is here that the service Nabil Ayouch offered to Sidi Moumen's youths becomes clear, as he explains above.

Almost none of the art, commentary, or research I have seen on the May 16 bombers explores the possibility that impoverished Sidi Moumen youths might see themselves outside others' expectations of their vulnerability. When artists do push the boundaries of this discourse, the conditions under which that art is received make it difficult to sustain alternative representations. In 2021, Nabil Ayouch released *Casablanca Beats*, the first Moroccan feature film to screen in the main competition at Cannes. The main characters are students and staff from Noujoum's Positive School, who play fictionalized versions of themselves. During

one moving scene that combined scripted and improvised speech, the students discuss how others speak about them as residents of Sidi Moumen. In contextualizing this moment for my students, Ayouch explained that from the 1990s to the present, youths in the neighborhood “grew up in the idea that they are somehow a . . . second division of citizenship. . . . Most of them, as they say in the film, were not even born in 2003. But still they carried this heritage of being all considered as suicide bombers or potential suicide bombers” (April 2023).

Throughout the film, the student actors perform their own raps at moments of conflict, pausing the flow of time in sequences designed to enter the characters’ inner worlds. At the same time, *Casablanca Beats* incorporates familiar cinematic tropes into the story of Positive School’s impact on the community. The film’s climax turns on antagonism between devout parents who refuse to let their daughters emcee in public or private; Noujoum staff who seek to protect the institution; and the teacher who encourages his students to speak their minds. In Ayouch’s recollection, Anas the real-life teacher entered the school in much the same way as his character: “He came with a kind of personal history, background, saying that he was a former rapper and that he was somehow disgusted by the system, and the way hip hop turned to be year after year was somehow maybe far away from its first goal and objectives. More egocentric, more bling bling, and so on. And that’s why he decided to quit hip hop, and that’s why he decided, as he said at that time, to give back” (p.c., April 2023).

At the end of the film, after an altercation between Anas and other men that threatens to shut down Noujoum on the day of the school’s performance, viewers surmise that the iconoclastic teacher has been asked to leave. As he packs up his car and prepares to journey on, his students thank him with a jubilant farewell song.

It is difficult to avoid reading *Casablanca Beats*’s teacher as a hero with ostensibly universal values who offers multiply disadvantaged students a form of freedom—the liberty to believe in themselves despite the constraints of poverty, marginalization, and religious dogma. Set alongside the ways the real-life Sidi Moumen and the center have been sensationalized in European, American, and Moroccan narratives, *Casablanca Beats* may reinforce framing around “good” and “bad” Muslims (Mamdani 2004) even as it portrays the teens’ interiority. When I asked Ayouch how he thought about his films’ potential reception in and beyond Morocco, he responded in, perhaps, the only way possible: “I believe that my only duty is to be sincere and to express what I want to express with this sincerity. And not being a representative of Morocco, or the ministry of tourism, or whatever. What is important to me is that people see us as we are. And that they understand . . . what those youngsters express in this film. I mean, wherever they live, and wherever they are . . . they are facing the same topics, you know, the same obstacles” (April 2023). By moving immediately from his desire to portray realistic, everyday Moroccan life to the universality of adolescent struggles, Ayouch suggests that seeing Moroccans as they are requires seeing versions of ourselves.

The implication that viewers unfamiliar with Morocco may see what Ayouch sees, rather than their own frames of reference, strikes me as both a generous, hopeful statement and an economically necessary belief.

Outreach from any source is inevitably accompanied by ideologies about who is being helped and why. Rather than negating the sincerity of outreach efforts, ideologies about poverty, social models, or success help shape the effects of that sincerity. In their statements about the real-life Noujoum, Ayouch and Binebine imagine that a successful future for the neighborhood is powered by individuals—the few who might, somehow, transcend the limits of their environment, perhaps competing in the rarefied world of international film, music, or television. Once such talents understand their own value, they can develop their human capital and pursue economic value for themselves and others.

Anas Basbousi, the real-life emcee turned teacher turned actor, did not grow up in Sidi Moumen, but he nonetheless exemplifies this trajectory. After his successful debut in *Casablanca Beats*, he has taken roles in Moroccan and international projects (p.c. with Ayouch [April 2023] and Basbousi [March 2023]). It is not surprising that economic value is here framed as expressive of internal value. What is critical to note is how this belief feels to some, and how it is constructed for others, as right, just, and natural, so that assisting young people to develop within the frame of this belief is widely accepted as a good and meaningful act.

Though I did not record anyone using the term “resilience,” the values and practices I observed at Noujoum correspond to that idea. A core term in the interrelated domains of counterterrorism, security, and state-building, resilience was initially adapted from ecological studies to describe the ability to withstand intended and unintended harms (Neocleous 2013: 3). It quickly became “an operational strategy of risk management” (Walker and Cooper 2011: 143) and, like other techniques of neoliberal governmentality, was soon applied to oversight of individuals who in turn adopted the concept for their own self-management. Resilient individuals are considered to have “autonomy, self-efficacy, and self-esteem . . . along with environmental factors such as socioeconomic advantage” (Hutcheon and Lashewicz 2014: 1384). The characteristics and values of resilient people track neatly with those identified by critics of neoliberal governmentality as the means of individualizing risk and failure, minimizing belief in the efficacy of collective actions, and investing entrepreneurship and responsibility with moral worth (e.g., Brown 2015; Gershon 2011; McNay 2009).

Not surprisingly, the relationship between the positively valued notion of resilience and the negatively valued notion of vulnerability has drawn critique from a variety of voices, all of whom note that resilience reinscribes value on normative bodies and obscures structural factors that preclude it. Writing from within Disability Studies, Hutcheon and Lashewicz argue that “notions of vulnerability portray diversity as pathological to self and society . . . while equating an individual’s value with their usefulness or utility” (2014: 1391). Jan Grue identifies the

underlying dynamic as “inspiration porn”: “the representation of disability as a form of disadvantage that can be overcome for the titillation of other people/observers” (2016: 838).

William Cheng and Robin James separately address this dynamic within US popular musics. Cheng focuses on the work that insisting upon resilience for non-normative bodies does in popular culture. While musical competitions like *American Idol* or *The Voice* often highlight perceived disabilities to highlight their participants’ “overcoming” (2017), the same characteristics—a superhuman ability to absorb pain and suffering and to keep achieving—were and are routinely evoked to dehumanize Black Americans and to stereotype their sonic and musical preferences (2018). James argues that women, people of color, and LGBTQIA individuals are encouraged to “overcome” and “recycle” affronts to their humanity in ways that consumers can appreciate: “Resilience is designed to generate human capital, and this capital *circulates*—in the market, as a means of social interaction—as *spectacle*” (James 2015: 106, italics in original).

As a whole, Noujoum appeared to treat poverty like a disability. Recall that sha’abiyya discourse frames recent migrants to the city and their children as afflicted with naïveté, unwilling or unable to outgrow their rural culture and customs to integrate into urban life. This discourse feeds into assumptions about karian residents’ abilities to succeed in or out of the karian environment. Songs and performances by young Positive School students made art out of personal experiences. Journalists’ narratives and founders’ artwork assume trauma, not just from poverty but the psychological and social degradation accompanying it. In the ways Positive School students were encouraged to perform, and the ways discourse around Noujoum expressed simultaneous appreciation for and exoticization of poor youths’ desire to make music and dance, I see a valuation of difference similar to those discussed by James and Cheng. In this case, stories told of Sidi Moumen maintain the assumption that young people are always-already potential Islamists—and potential Islamists are “potential terrorists,” as Moroccan sociologist Abdessamad Dialmy concludes (2005: 68). In turn, cultivating youths’ artistic potential is not only a way to support individual self-worth and self-expression, but to offer pathways out of poverty that are, by definition, for exceptional individuals rather than a whole group.

The children and youths who thrive in Noujoum’s classes inspire deep appreciation, including a desire to serve, among those whose beliefs support the conditions that the students must transcend. In turn, staff and students at Noujoum accept and work toward a capability central to both neoliberal subjects and citizens of authoritarian regimes: the resilience to not only live in but “exploit . . . situations of radical uncertainty” (Joseph 2013: 40). Like subjects of neoliberal governance more broadly, resilient subjects accept the “idea that debasement, destitution, and poverty are not the collective responsibility of states and political institutions, but the responsibility of deficient subjects” (Mavelli 2019: 2). The touchstone concepts

powering all the discourses at work in this chapter—including narratives about personal responsibility, the *oulad sha‘ab*, vulnerability, and resilience—relate them to one another in a complex that serves many projects, assigning value to diverse forms of financial, social, and human capital.

HIP HOP: A *MISSION CIVILISATRICE*?

The universal condemnation of the 2003 suicide bombings among hip hop artists, including several songs rejecting violence and the perpetrators, helped legitimize the genre at a moment in the mid-2000s when it was just reaching bigger audiences. As prior chapters note, Moroccan hip hop music and dance were never exclusively performed by the urban poor, but they were associated with stereotypes of Black American criminality. Artists’ responses to the 2003 attacks helped to demonstrate to a skeptical public that hip hop practitioners shared core values with most Moroccans. They also differentiated hip hop practitioners from the very poor, and especially from *karian* residents, who generally did not have the resources to participate in the formation of Moroccan hip hop in its first twenty years. Additionally, they provided a way of agreeing with elite narratives that people who did not identify with elites could still accept.

Under terrorism discourse in Morocco as elsewhere, “radical” serves less as a descriptor of culture (like “radical art”) and more as a discursive link to or eventual stand-in for “terrorist” (Bartolucci 2010: 126). As hip hop became more mainstream—not just by appearing on state-sponsored stages, but by stating consensus positions on major political concerns—it was perceived to shed its “radical” potential in both senses of the term. However, there was still a long distance from artists’ own small-scale volunteer efforts to the hip hop arts appearing at a prestigious NGO with the explicit mission of bringing cultural and employment opportunities to Sidi Moumen youths. Hip hop’s use at Noujoum signified more than the acceptance of individual artists into the slice of Casablanca’s artistic sector that benefited from state patronage; that had been happening for over a decade. Instead, it signified acceptance that the multimedia art form had value as a vehicle of self-improvement, beyond the messages and fan bases of exceptional individual artists.

In 2019, ‘Ayoun al-Ḥak returned to earlier narrative terrain with a song titled after his nickname from his 2013 hit—“Mr. Boulevard.” This piece tells a different angle of the same story: young people trapped in a preprotectorate *medina*, with no opportunities to make a living, who feel forced to attempt migration. The visuals toggle between hopeful children crowded into a one-room, cinder-block classroom and shots of listless and traumatized young adults. The chorus compresses the hopelessness of poverty and the danger of the Gibraltar crossing into a few lines, and like SiSimo’s “‘Eid al-Faqr,” features closely cropped shots of young men mouthing the words:

The train has left and I'm just watching
 People are dying, you know the Lord sees [them]
 [They take a] bullet or they trouble the fish
 Oulad sha'ab risking death on the boat³⁵

In conjunction with his 2013 song, "Mr. Boulevard" perhaps depicts the cyclical failures and immobility of poverty. One imagines this piece as a prequel to "Boulevard," and the video's subjects as the same people who were unable to avoid homelessness in the future. Six years after the release of that song, the needs and challenges 'Ayoun al-Hak describes, the imagery and musical semiotics he uses, have not changed. Neither have the reactions of fans, hundreds of whom celebrated his return to form with YouTube comments like "God, 'Ayoun returns to his own style" and "that's the 'Ayoun that we know."³⁶

This chapter has explored hip hop artists' embrace of dominant discourses about the urban poor, treating finished songs, professional performances, and student workshops as processes that confirm and recirculate those discourses. "Mr. Boulevard" and the many songs like it do not simply sensationalize mundane contours of urban poverty. Instead, artists promote identification with the poor by simultaneously reproducing and flipping commonplace representations of them.³⁷ The expectation of sincerity makes possible an unironic identification with the poor that nonetheless distances the emcee precisely because (usually) he can exert the power of choosing to identify, choosing to speak.³⁸

The structural inequalities between different actors in this chapter are vital to understanding the continuing power of sha'abiyya discourse and its relationship to the vulnerability narrative underpinning international counterterrorist efforts. Pursuing the shared values and beliefs that powered post-2003 actions toward Sidi Moumen and its residents reveals how coming to share a discourse can itself be an aspirational act. While Anas and other staff, as well as many of their guest teachers, were generally better off socioeconomically than their students, I have avoided flatly characterizing anyone in this discussion as affluent. Such labels can occlude the ways particular individuals, knowingly or unknowingly, wield their class status. Yet the staff of Noujoum, its founders, and the journalists who covered it between 2013–20 do appear to share a perspective that centers elite frames of reference and does not acknowledge the possibility of alternate discourses on Moroccan poverty, including any generated by impoverished Moroccans themselves. In the absence of the political will to accept poverty and disenfranchisement as a structural problem with known solutions, they become something to individually transcend. But transcending something is not the same as exiting it—the underlying state itself may, in fact must, continue so that individuals may continue to be exceptions to social, political, and economic limits.

Songs and interventions in this chapter do not give targets of sha'abiyya discourse the tools to combat it, no matter how explicitly they address the discourse and its material outcomes in state policies and nonprofit projects. Of course,

Moroccan hip hop artists can and do recognize the immaterial richness of poor people's lives. Yet their performances often participate in framing the poor in ways that align with the state's goals, even as they dispute its tactics. Some have the effect of reinforcing discourses that, ultimately, maintain more affluent Moroccans' role in mediating poor citizens' access to resources. Those explored in this chapter can be read as challenging the discourse from within it rather than undermining its core assumptions by successfully delinking personal and economic value. As in other examples throughout this book, such interventions accomplish this reinforcement precisely because the practitioners believe in their work.