POLITICAL ELEMENTS IN THE MUSIC OF M.I.A.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Popular music has often reflected the politics of its time, whether emphasizing or disregarding those politics, they have played an important role in such music's development. Although the gatekeepers of music, the record labels, still control their artists and the music business, alternative ways to make and promote music have challenged this power structure. During the last few decades the development of digital technologies has had an enormous impact on how people are making, distributing and listening to music. The latest hit songs can reach wider audiences faster than ever and one only needs an Internet connection to have access to an endless amount of different types of music. One musician who has reached fame and success through such new mediums is an artist who calls herself M.I.A. and whose song 'Paper Planes' from her album Kala (2007f) became one of the biggest hits in 2008.\(^1\)

Since her first album M.I.A. has taken an active role commenting on what is going on in the developing world, and strongly criticizing western governments such as the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Even though she is breaking the many existing norms of the music business and purposely provoking audiences, M.I.A. has managed to reach fame and make her voice heard. The main purpose of this thesis is to analyze and interpret the various political elements in M.I.A.’s multicultural music and how they are decoded by the listeners and media. By approaching M.I.A. from different perspectives, from technological to cultural, while not forgetting the meaning of gender and race, this study attempts to examine how she has been able to turn politically inspired material into hit songs, reached audiences all over the world and managed to avoid the stereotypes attached to women in popular music. To be able to fully understand the connotations in her music, visual images, such as music videos and cover art, have also been included as a part of this study.

\(^1\) ‘Paper Planes’ (2007h) peaked at the position 19 making it M.I.A.’s first top 20 hit in the UK as well as her first song in Billboard Hot 100. It was nominated for the Record of the Year at the Grammy Awards in 2009 and has sold over 3 million copies in the United States. (Acharts 2010.)
The structure of this thesis is not linear but can be more seen as a circular form, where three different perspectives, technology, culture and gender, are overlapping and interacting with each other. Each chapter will reveal a new aspect to M.I.A.’s music and her political narrative. As her refugee background plays an important role both in M.I.A.’s life and in her art, chapter two presents her personal and political history. In the third chapter M.I.A.’s music and her career are examined through the perspective of technology by understanding the importance of the Internet in the development of her career as well as the new digital ways of making music. The fourth chapter is dedicated to culture and different cultural approaches introducing the global/local dichotomy, the issue of race and style, the use and meaning of hip hop, the connective marginalities and cultural resistance. Censorship and the role of media are also examined at the end of the chapter. In chapter five the focus is on gender and sexual representation and how M.I.A.’s politics are also related to feminism and the women's movement. Supporting the previous chapters, in chapter seven a number of M.I.A.’s songs and their associated music videos are analyzed.

Because M.I.A. has been making music for less than ten years, there is not much previous study made of her besides academic papers and theses such as this one. For this reason the theoretical base of the thesis relies in part on the writings of academically distinguished scholars together with the many interviews of M.I.A. to be able to combine the social and technological as well as the cultural and gender aspects of her career and music. In chapter three Timothy D. Taylor's (1997, 2001) and Sanna Rojola's (2007) ideas are combined to examine M.I.A.'s relationship to technology. In the culture chapter, to cite a few references, globalization is viewed by Roland Robertson (1992), race and hip hop by Marcyliena Morgan (2009) and Halifu Osumare (2007), and cultural resistance by Stephen Duncombe (2002). Gender and sexual representations in chapter five follow the ideas of Tricia Rose (1994, 2008), Kimberlé W. Crenshaw (1989), Patricia Hill Collins (2000), Norma Coates (1997), Teresa de Lauretis (1987), Chris Weedon (1999) and bell hooks (1986 [1981], 1998).

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2 WHO IS M.I.A.?

M.I.A. is a singer, rapper, songwriter, director, artist, and producer who has been making unique electronic music for the last decade. She has made three albums *Arular* (2005b) *Kala* (2007f) and *MAYA* (2010e) and collaborated with many other artists. Her music is a mixture of different genres some of which are hip hop, Jamaican dance hall, pop, rock, bhangra, electro and grime, and the samples she uses in her music can come from an old Bollywood track as well as from the late 1970’s British punk bands such as the Clash. All these elements in her music come together in an interesting and unconventional way, forming an innovative sound that is faintly familiar but does not neatly fall within one specific culture or genre.

2.1 Becoming M.I.A.

Mathangi “Maya” Arulpragasam, better known as M.I.A., was born in London in 1976, but her family returned to Sri Lanka when she was still a baby. The reason for the family's return to Sri Lanka was Maya’s father's intense desire to participate in the uprising of the Tamil minority. Growing up in an unstable and war torn environment, where air raids, kidnappings and murders were part of everyday life, has left its mark on Maya and on her music. Her guerrilla father devoted himself to the Tamil movement and remained distant to the family. In 1986 Maya’s mother, with her three children, decided to escape from the growing violence of Sri Lanka while Maya’s father was left behind to fight for the rights of the Tamils. The family was granted asylum in England and were now refugees relegated to the tough borough of Merton on the outskirts of London. She was brought up in South London, in an area with a diverse ethnic mix, high unemployment levels, and high levels of crime and drug abuse. Maya learned English from other children of the neighborhood and she was in a special school class to improve her language skills. (Durbin 2007, Wheaton 2005.)
This tough environment was nevertheless full of eager and talented young people who explored the various underground cultures. Especially the hip hop culture and its aesthetics had a major influence on Maya, and she grew up listening to groups like N.W.A. and Public Enemy. However at that point her interests were primarily in making visual art than music. Therefore she applied and was granted a scholarship for the Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design from where she graduated with a film degree in 1998. Maya was nominated for an alternative Turner Prize for an art book, which presented her spray-painted art that combined candy-colored camouflage with graffiti-like palm trees and Tamil iconography. Her work also caught the eye of the band Elastica who wanted her to make a documentary of their tour and the cover graphics for their record. During this tour with the band she came across a drum machine Roland MC 505 and became interested in making music. (McKinnon 2005, Wheaton 2005.)

The material for the first album was composed in a short period of time at Maya’s home with the help of the drum machine, a cheap microphone and a four-track tape deck. During the songwriting process Maya became M.I.A., an artistic name designed to reflect both Missing In Acton, the tough London neighborhood where she was living at the time, as well as Missing In Action – a term used in warfare. Her first single 'Galang' (2005e, earlier version in 2003) which was pressed by a tiny label, turned out to be popular and in spite of the small number of copies, it caught the attention of the music world. The Rolling Stone magazine named it one of the year’s best singles. Her music was available online where anyone could download it for free and her music was played in small clubs and on college radio stations. Although she had never performed live or recorded an album, the online music communities were building a name for her and file sharing her music, and gradually M.I.A. became more and more popular. Finally she was signed by the XL recordings to make her debut album Arular which came out in 2005. (Harrington 2005, McKinnon 2005.)

The album was named after M.I.A.’s father whom she had not seen in more then ten years and she hoped with that to catch his attention. But the only contact she received was his wish to change the title, which she determinedly refused to do. However Arular
was more successful than expected and was critically acclaimed for the experimental sound of it. In the album popular music was mixed up with world beats and lyrics that reflected MIA’s own experiences of politics, war poverty and the tamil movement, and she brought all of it together in an unusual and exciting way. Videos of the songs such as 'Galang' (2005f), 'Bucky Done Gun' (2005d) and 'Sunshowers' (2005h) appeared on music channels and programs with political and contradictory imagery that was rarely seen before. (Harrington 2005, Wheaton 2005.)

Her second album Kala (2007f) was in turn named after M.I.A.’s mother, and it was originally planned to be recorded in the U.S.A. together with the famous hip hop producer Timbaland. The plan had to be changed when in the post-9/11 world M.I.A. was denied the visa to enter America. Instead of going to a big studio in Los Angeles, M.I.A. came up with another idea; she decided to make the album on the road and ended up traveling in India, Trinidad and Tobago, Liberia, Jamaica, Australia and Japan. Kala was even a bigger success than Arular and it took her multicultural and political dance mix to a whole new level. M.I.A. added real instruments beside the electronic sounds such as Tamil drums, “urumee melam”, which are heard in the song 'Boyz' and traditional styles such as the “soca” which is Trinidadian soul calypso. Kala provided a possibility to hear the voices from the developing world which are hardly ever heard in the western world; in the song 'Mango Pickle Down River' (2007) a group of young aboriginal children named The Wilcannia Mob sing and rap alongside M.I.A. (Bidder 2009, Lindsay 2007, Sung 2007.)

In 2008 she founded her own record label N.E.E.T. whose first release was the soundtrack for the movie Slumdog Millionaire (2008). M.I.A. was nominated for an Oscar in 2009 for the soundtrack’s song 'O...Saya' which she made together with an Indian musician A.R. Rahman. The same year she was also nominated in two categories at the Grammy awards and right after this Grammy performance in February 2009 she and her partner Benjamin Bronfman received their first child (Herndon & Jones 2009).
M.I.A. released a third album *MAYA*[^1] in June 2010 that was thematically focused on the Internet and new social medias. The album sounded more industrial, cynical and cold with the different use of sound effects such as fighter planes, sirens, and gun sounds, but has also lighter moments like 'Teqkilla' (2010f) and 'It Takes a Muscle' (2010c) which is build around a laid-back reggae beat. Her fourth album will be released in summer 2012 and the first single 'Bad Girls' (2012) seems to continue with the same style as M.I.A.’s previous releases, mixing different genres and styles, and portraying M.I.A. in the video driving cars with men dressed in traditional Saudi Arabian outfits in a desert somewhere in the Middle East (Murray, 2012).

2.2 Political background

Even though some of the reasons for M.I.A.’s political activity have been presented in the previous section, here the kinds of connections her music makes on a political level will be more closely examined. It is important for this study to be able to analyze and understand all the cultural, political and social aspects of her music.

The reason for M.I.A.’s political activity is not so much in her will to be political or to preach for a certain message, but in the fact that she was raised in an environment where everything was politically charged. The Sri Lankan civil war started in 1983 and it didn’t end until 2009 when the government troops finally managed to besiege and defeat the LTTE forces. The war was between two ethnic groups: the Sinhalese, who formed the majority of the Sri Lankan people and the Tamil, who were the minority located primarily on the north and east of the island. Her father worked for the EROS, (Eelam Revolutionary Organization of Students) which was an organization connected to the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) better known as the Tamil Tigers, which has been proscribed as a terrorist organization by 32 countries and the European

[^1]: The official title of the album is written using forward and backwards strikes in a following way "\A\A\A\A\A\A". Throughout this paper I am using a more reader and writer friendly version of the title, *MAYA*, used widely also by the media when referring to M.I.A.’s third album.
Union. (Paljakka 2009.) Growing up in the middle of a civil war with a guerrilla father had an enormous effect on M.I.A.’s political views, but instead of idealizing or sympathizing with the Tamil Tigers, she is supporting the Tamil civilians, the women and children who are still suffering from the Sri Lankan civil war (Wheaton 2005).

However her “real” political awakening happened when she went back to Sri Lanka in 2001 to make a documentary about the young people living there. When she came back to London the world was shocked by the 9/11 terrorist attack on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York. M.I.A. has said in an interview made by Richard Harrington (2005) for the Washington Post that before the terrorist attack she had been living her life in London, feeling that she was equal to the others and that she had the same possibilities as any young person. When the accusations and denigrations of the non-western people, mostly Muslims, started in the press and in everyday speech, she realized that she was different from the others; she knew the world where the terrorists came from (Harrington 2005).

M.I.A. has said that she represents the feelings and thoughts of a large group of people rather than just herself. As an artist she can represent the people of the developing world who are not getting their voices heard and she can speak on behalf of those who have been going through similar experiences and emotions as she has. Although M.I.A. has received a lot of criticism for her violent and provocative lyrics and images, and has been accused of supporting terrorism, her main purpose has always been to raise awareness and conversation on various political topics as she has stated in a 2005 interview:

> There's so much confusion about what I stand for and what I'm saying that that's the whole point: there have to be discussions; there has to be people talking, and there has to be young people talking about politics if they want. They have to have a chance to hear different opinions. And that's really what it's about. (Wheaton 2005.)

Especially in America M.I.A.’s strong opinions of the war on terrorism and its global effects have resulted in a lot of negative reactions. In 2009 M.I.A. made a public statement that the Sri Lankan government was perpetrating genocide against the
country's ethnic Tamil minority, which stirred a lot of conversation and got even the Foreig...er Secretary of Sri Lanka to tell M.I.A. to keep out of the country’s politics (Baron 2009a, 2009b). However the statement turned attention to what was going on in the aftermath of the cruel civil war, where many of the Tamil civilians had been gathered up in camps and held there against their will. The government had also denied the access of international humanitarian aid organizations, such as the Human Right Watch and Amnesty International, which made it difficult to know what was really going on in Sri Lanka (Paljakka 2009, Paakkanen 2010). For M.I.A., being the only Tamil in the Western media has given her the opportunity to bring out what is going on in Sri Lanka (Fuller 2009); a rare chance she will not leave unused whether it is to promote herself or the actual issue at hand. However M.I.A.’s background has molded her into one of the few artists in the popular music scene who actually say what they think and keep challenging the limits of pop music and the stereotypes associated with it.
3 TECHNOLOGY: MAKING AND SELLING BEATS

The rise of digital technology from the 1980’s to present day has dramatically changed the way music is made, produced and distributed, but it has been the Internet that has completely changed the possibilities how to store, download and access music. The various portable MP3 players and smart phones have brought music everywhere and fundamentally changed how the music industry operates. Listeners can pick up whatever track they want from any recording and the value of owning a complete album has been replaced with the idea of downloading specific tracks. In some way this new technology resembles the early age of the popular music industry where the hit singles drove sales, for there was not yet the capacity to make a full album. Although these new technologies have changed the music markets, the industry has also gained from the various possibilities the Internet has to offer from niche marketing to special previews, interviews and music clips. In this chapter the focus will be on the technology M.I.A. has used and how that technology has helped her in her musical career. M.I.A.’s active role on the Internet as well as her attitude towards music ownership has marked her as a true digital age artist.

3.1 Portable world

Timothy D. Taylor has in his book Strange Sounds (2001) presented different views on how the digital revolution has affected the music scene. The fast, and often free, circulation of music in the Internet makes it possible to have access to music that before was only known and distributed by a small group of people (Taylor 2001, 4). One of the most important features that technology has brought with it is the democratization of art. As Taylor (2001, 6) has noted: “Suddenly, all the world’s art will be available to all the world’s people.” Although Taylor himself knows very well that it is not this simple, the possibilities that modern technology can provide are countless. With a working Internet access and a computer everyone could in theory participate in making music on
a broadly equivalent basis. However to state that the change is already here would be naive since only about 32 percent of the population of the world uses and has access to the Internet (Internet World Stats 2011). The possibility nevertheless exists and has already impacted the global music scene.

This degree of eclecticism, this notion of reflexive accumulation facilitated by the digital distribution of music, is related to an increasingly technologized social life. The IFPI⁴ Digital Music Report 2011 statistics show that the trade value of the digital music market worldwide is 4,6 billion US dollars and that there was a 1000 percent increase in the value of the digital music market from 2004 to 2010 while the value of the global recorded music industry declined 31 percent in between 2004 and 2010. The new technology has in turn brought new legal issues; there is an estimated cumulative loss of 4240 billion euros in retail revenues to the European creative industries from piracy between 2008 and 2015. These numbers show clearly how the online music markets have taken over the old music markets. (IFPI Digital Music Report 2011.)

Today's music fan can find fellow music lovers on the Internet by visiting sites devoted to particular musicians or music styles (Taylor 2001, 20). Technology does not only relate to M.I.A.'s ways of making music which will be further examined in the following chapter, but plays also an important role in how she distributes her music. Her first singles such as the 2003 versions of 'Galang' and 'Sunshowers' were published on her web page where all her music was available to be downloaded for free (Orlov 2005, Pytlik 2005). File sharing, downloading and pirate copies have all been important tools when building M.I.A.'s career and it was through these channels that she slowly gained a wider audience and acknowledgment in music circles. “Giving” her music away for “free” has not bothered her in the sense that M.I.A.’s philosophy is to interact with other people as much as possible and she did not want to set any rules concerning her music. In a way MIA’s use of the Internet as a main platform to promote her music predates the way many record labels work now when hunting talents from places like YouTube and MySpace. M.I.A. had control over her own music from the very beginning and perhaps

⁴ IFPI stands for the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry that represents the interests of the recording industry worldwide.
because she had already by herself promoted her music, this power stayed with her even when she singed to XL Recordings in 2004. (Pytlik 2005.)

The use of digital technologies does not separate music from the social aspects it has always evoked. Music technology is not just an artifact or a collection of artifacts, but rather is always seamlessly bound up in a social system (Taylor 2001, 7). With the help of online communities, people who share the same interests in music can find each other and share their mutual passion. M.I.A. plays an active role on her websites and often shares the latest news first online to her fans and only after that in the public media. Her official website offers information about her music, has her music videos and photos as well as a link to her MySpace page where she keeps her blog. For her fans or someone who is interested in her music, these pages serve a possibility to get a little more information about the artist but at the same time offer a false sense of intimacy. False in the sense that what may seem like an open way to present oneself, is still calculated and controlled by the artist to serve his or hers purposes. Similarly, M.I.A.’s web page and blog reflect a lot of how she represents herself in the public media. In her blog she has talked about the Sri Lankan civil war and brought up other political subjects, for example MTV’s censorship policies in addition to promoting her latest singles and videos. (Harrington 2005, Meer 2010) It seems that taking action and communicating online are a very natural way for M.I.A. to reach and connect with her audience.

3.2 Electronics and the drum machine

If the Internet for M.I.A. is an important tool, so is the technology she is using to create music. Various music softwares allow anyone to make music and to be a "musician". This is how many artists nowadays have started their careers, playing with drum machines, creating new sounds, and simply expressing their own artistic talent. The line separating “amateurs” from professional musicians can be vague, but looking at the phenomenon from M.I.A.’s point of view, it was the message that came strongly through in her music that made her more and more famous as well as the fearless attitude of
mixing various elements together. New technologies provide a more simple way to access the world of music but they do not come “pre-wired” with artistic ideas, having something new to say, or the taste and imagination to create an interesting musical puzzle.

The main reason M.I.A. started to make music was not so much the desire to compose songs, but the fact that she got to know and play with a drum machine. Through this sequencer she could express herself musically without knowing how to transcribe notes and rhythms, or read music at all. In other words the drum machine made it possible for her to start making music without actually knowing how to make music, at least from the traditional point of view. M.I.A.’s use of this technology is apparent from the very first time her music is heard. The electric soundscape is evident; rough beats, deep basses and video game-like effects make the sound untraceable and futuristic, but at the same time there are organic elements such as “real” drums and vocals that give the music a more familiar tone.

One of the most important aspects of the technology that M.I.A. uses in her music is the endless resource of different effects and samples that can be added into the music. The use of samples from all over the world mixed with club beats is what makes M.I.A.’s sound original. M.I.A.’s kaleidoscopic way of making music brings out also the question of authenticity; who has the right to borrow from whom? Throughout music history, composers have been inspired by others and borrowed material to make something new out of it. This seems to be a very natural part of how music evolves, but somehow in an era that emphasizes the primacy of private ownership rights over assets, including intellectual assets, have become more and more important. Especially samples used in hip hop and rap music have challenged and pushed the limits of ownership. New technologies which have made borrowing easier than ever before have marked the rise of legal cases about royalty payments and copyright issues.

When observing how M.I.A. uses samples one can find a clear connection to everything she has been exposed to. In other words there is a meaning behind the samples she uses, whether it is a reference to the history of popular music, such as the Clash sample used
in 'Paper Planes' (2007h) or a reference to a different music culture, like the old Bollywood hit sampled in her song 'Jimmy' (2007d). Her songs have multiple conceptual layers, musical information and lyrical self-references, which are all presented within a three-minute pop song form. She has described in the following way how people are currently affected by different music styles:

Everybody has access to all kinds of genres of music every day when you wake up. So why not reflect that? It's way more realistic than me saying 'I only hear dancehall when I walk down the street. I only hear dancehall for eight years of my life walking around in this city.' That's wrong. Because that's not the case. Every day I wake up in this city, the cosmopolitan Westernized fast first-world amazing foreign land that's got amazing technology, amazing information access, speedway, highway -- let's not kid ourselves: we do hear everything at once, so whether it's through television, on the radio, on people's CDs, people's cars going past you -- so why not reflect that in what you do? (Wheaton, 2005.)

The same equality that exists in the way M.I.A. treats her samples applies also to the way she treats other musical elements, such as beats, rhythms, instruments and sound effects. Everything, from the persistent beat to the out of tune vocals, has significance and a well intended reason to exist in her music.

M.I.A.’s use of samples is similar to that used in hip hop: to pay homage to an artist or to make connections to certain communities (Taylor 2001, 152). What M.I.A. adds is the actual way she treats different elements in her music; to her it is not about gluing something on top of an already existing pop music corpus, but rather equal parts of a musical patchwork where all the elements have the same value. By mixing up samples with different origins, M.I.A. is able to create a web of political connotations. It is important to take notice of what she borrows and from where she borrows musical material. Often she seems to be able to use samples that in some other artists’ musical context would be considered inappropriate or would not be given the same meaning as in her music. For example, samples from groups and artists such as Pixies, The Clash, Suicide and Jonathan Richman connect her to punk, post punk, and early electronic music, to their attitude and messages as well as to their musical intonation. M.I.A. has used her refugee background and her coming from “nowhere” to her advantage: she
does not have a stable cultural background that she could refer to or mirror other cultures against. Unlike a person raised in one specific culture, M.I.A. has been at the same time deprived and freed by that limitation. Therefore she can borrow musical styles and samples from everywhere without preconceptions.

Sanna Rojola (2007) has in her essay “Envisioning the future: technology, futurism and the politics of race in Detroit techno”, examined how the futuristic sound of techno made it possible to represent one’s race in a new non-human way by connecting the futuristic sound of techno with sci-fi imagery. When listening to electric music it is impossible to tell the ethnicity or the background of the maker. Through the alien aesthetics of the new form of electronic music, black artists could process their own feelings of “otherness”, and being the ”other”, by identifying with an unknown alien race. (Rojola 2007, 368–369, 376.) Thus the question of race was simultaneously emphasized and hidden, making it invisible to the listeners (Rojola 2007, 372). M.I.A. has taken quite a different approach to the use and meaning of technology in her music. Instead of hiding her ethnicity she is making it clearly audible in her music, so it is filled with hints of her being something “other” than a westerner. Her “otherness” is real flesh and blood; she is a refugee from a war zone, not from a galaxy far away. M.I.A.’s use of samples and electronics allows her to make a collage of sounds from all over the world, which all together create an alien soundscape. Unlike in techno music where new sounds come through hours of work with different amps and distortions, M.I.A.’s new sound comes from already existing material that she compresses through her musical preferences. In a way she is not creating new material, but using technology to mutilate, cut and distort music that already exists out there.

Regarding Rojola's idea of “otherness” that is based on diminishing the importance of race and ethnicity with technology, another kind of “otherness”, based on sex, can also be unsexed through technology. The rise of new technologies such as portable drum machines and synthesizers have made creating music possible for a larger group of people, and women especially have taken advantage of them. While the techno scene has used electronic sounds to hide ethnicity, M.I.A. has used them to diminish her sex. When listening to her music it is not evident that the music is made by a woman, only
that it is performed by one. Many women in pop music are not performing their own material but songs made by other people or a song-making team provided by the record label. M.I.A. on the other hand is making, producing and performing her own music. The technology she uses is making it possible for her to create her music by herself by sampling other music, layering vocals and adding various elements. She is not dependent on other band members or musicians and uses other people only when needed, when touring or recording specific instruments. However, she is the maestro of all the sounds heard in her music.
4 WHOSE CULTURE, WHOSE RULES?

In this chapter M.I.A.’s cultural background and her use of different cultural elements will be studied from different points of views starting with the dichotomy of local and global elements and continuing all the way to the issues concerning race, ethnicity, style and the role of hip hop in her music. The chapter ends with a discussion of the cultural resistance and media interpretation that have had a great impact on her career. Through M.I.A.’s quotations the presented ideas will be viewed in the context of her own views of her music, and the intention is to provide a certain dialogue in between her and the referred popular music writings.

4.1 Local becomes global

The intensity of various cultural influences on M.I.A. is what makes her hard to classify and fit into any existing music genre. Her art contains not only her music and the performance of it but also visual art, video, and fashion. She also has a kind of “meta Internet presence” (Grandy, 2007) which means that she is actively online on her webpage, twitter and her blog, creating an illusion of being present all the time to her audiences. All of these forms of self-expression are absorbed seamlessly into her artistic persona, which is also heavily loaded with political symbols and pop iconography, giving her multiple ways to express herself through different channels.

What is interesting about the way M.I.A. treats the various cultural references she uses, is that they seem to have the same priority for her; there are no high or low hierarchies, just material that can be put together to create new meanings. Western pop music and hip hop are not more influential or valuable to her than Bollywood music, bhangra or West African rhythms. With her reshaping and breaking of the common rules, music genres and styles loose their individuality and self-governance. Her mixture of styles brings up questions referring to the power structures within one specific culture or
genre, say amongst the dominant culture and the subcultures, or between different cultures on a national and ethnic level.

Although globalization as a term has somewhat lost its value due to its overuse, it is still the most convenient way to examine how new ideas travel around the world through social, political, economical and cultural channels. Roland Robertson defines globalization in his book *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (1992) as “the compression of the world and the intensification of the consciousness of the world as a whole”. In popular music globalization can be seen in the increasingly homogenized, post-modernization process where people throughout the planet are listening to the same kinds of music, hip hop, pop, rock, metal, indie rock, and are embracing the universal rules within these genres. However, when these different styles, which mostly originally come from the United States or Britain, are mixed with local cultures, music acquires new meanings and adjusts itself to the new environment. In M.I.A.’s case, since she came to London as an immigrant at a young age, hip hop and pop never really reached her in Sri Lanka in the same way these styles usually enter an area or a nation from outside. Instead, M.I.A. suddenly had access to all the various music styles present in London as she was now living inside these existing styles. This might be one of the reasons why her style became so diverse; instead of living in one place and mixing local elements with global pop, being a refugee caused her to loose her “localness” and made it possible for her to mix up all kinds of musical elements together, crossing even into the bigger genres like hip hop and punk.

As been mentioned before M.I.A.’s musical elements and genres are all in an equal position, but the important role and status of hip hop cannot be overlooked in her music. Hip hop gave her the platform from which her music grew both mentally and aurally. The history of hip hop and also how it has spread around the world show that hip hop is used as a channel for people who feel discriminated against, oppressed and put down by society to speak their mind and fight against the dominating powers. The “emancipatory effect” (Osumare 2007, 68) that hip hop has brought to African Americans in the United States translates also to other nationalities and has become a global signifier for many who are marginalized. The socio-cultural meanings of hip hop will be more thoroughly
Robertson (1992) has also used the terms “glocal” and “glocalizations” to look at the global-local dichotomy from a different and not so polarized point of view. Through these terms the local culture which in globalization is traditionally seen as something that gets run over by the “new” global culture, is now seen as something much more persistent and stable. When a certain style of popular music spreads around the globe, it cannot survive by people just imitating the original style, but it also has to adjust and adapt to a new environment. It is not until the local styles have mixed with the global style that it can persist in the new territory. Hence globalization is not destroying the original cultures but reconstructing the key elements of them and representing them in a new context.

By seeing globalization or glocalization in a two-dimensional way, the local population is also having a more active and important role. Andy Bennett in *Popular Music & Youth Culture* (2000) has further studied the meaning of local audiences in a globalized world. The local population is not seen merely as passive and mindless consumers but as proactive participants who bring their own values and meanings to the imported music (Bennett 2000, 55). The MTV generation is not only imitating what they see or hear on television but also examining the grievances of their nation and speaking up on local issues inside a globalized style.

The music scene in England, and especially in London at the time when M.I.A. moved there, was a true melting pot of styles and cultures. By the early 1990's hip hop had integrated into the British pop music scene by not imitating its African American role models, but by making it sound like their own. The hip hop in England reflected the country's unique mix of Afro-Caribbean, white British working class, and Indian Asian cultures which gave the United States' rival in pop music a new take on hip hop. England's indigenous hip hop culture brought up issues of racism, class hierarchy, drug use and social dissatisfaction through Jamaican, West and East Indian music cultures and thus created the original sound of British hip hop. (Osumare 2007, 79–81.) Especially the large minority of Indian immigrants had an impact on the pop music
scene with bhangra music, which is a combination of Punjabi folk and western pop music. To many Indian immigrants bhangra was the way to express their marginalized status and talk about their hybrid British-Asian identities. (Taylor 1997, 156.) Another style that had a great influence on the British and on M.I.A.'s music was trip hop that began in the early 1990's in Bristol. Trip hop is a fusion of hip hop and electronica and often crosses over into several different genres of pop music, but common to all trip hop is a slow bass-heavy drumbeat and vocals that create harmonious atmospheres (Osumare 2007, 83). M.I.A., whose music setting had mostly been a mixture of Bollywood hits and Tamil traditional music as well as international 1980's superstars such as Michael Jackson, found this new terrain a fertile ground to absorb all the influences on her multicultural neighborhood (Orlov 2005). Instead of having her “localness” based on a national identity created in a certain place and time, her “localness” was the already global and multicultural surroundings of London.

In her interviews (for example Pytlik, 2005, Orlov 2005) M.I.A. has talked about her identity or in fact the lack of one. Being raised between two contrary cultures and nations enforced the way M.I.A. built her identity out of overlapping elements of various cultures. This mixture of different cultures, styles and genres is audible in her music and in the way she treats these elements in it. Again her refugee background, plus the fact that she is a western in Asia and an immigrant in England, in a way liberated her from the local-global dichotomy. As she states in a Pitchfork interview by Mark Pytlik (2005):

I mean maybe that’s the future. [Being a global citizen] I don’t think anyone thinks about the nation like that anyway. That’s the whole point of our generation. We create things like virtual cyber world and we can exist and create communities in cyberspace that link us. ---And it’s brilliant, because instead of being depressed about not having a home, you can embrace it and turn it into freedom. It frees me from having any cultural connections.

Not coming from anywhere and being exposed to a multicultural London made her a “world citizen”; who was not bound by one's identity, national heritage, religious or political background but who could still draw upon all of them. This maybe an
exaggerated way to express it, since no one can fully detach oneself from the socio-cultural background and setting in which one lives in. In an interview by Piotr Orlov (2005) she sums up how her complicated and heterogeneous identity has been shaped:

I’m political and I’m pop and I’m this and I’m that, because my entire Western cultural identity is totally made up from what I’ve come across. So when I go into a particular direction, come across things and internalize things, they all make up who I am. They all go into my work. I can’t really be streamline my thought. The only thing I could do is be whoever I’ve become, have the strength to stick to it and portray it. And if who I am is confused and the portrayals are all about having or not having an identity because of where I come from, that’s kind of an all right state to reflect in my work.

The paradox of M.I.A.’s “not coming from anywhere, yet everywhere” identity is that it does not really exist. It is not an alternative identity to other possible identities floating around; in fact it is not an identity at all. The way M.I.A. has constructed her identity creates an illusion of something out of nothings. In the same way that globalization does not exist but reflects the realities of the world, M.I.A. does not exist like a person but more like a group of people who have used symbolic and political values to create an image that reflects all of them. M.I.A. is not just one but she has united all her possible identities into one big artistic persona. Nevertheless, to M.I.A. and to her music, this playing with identities and building up her “identity” from shattered pieces of cultural imitations, have given her the competence to express herself how she wants, both in her music and in her videos, reaching out to many people who can relate to her “imperfect” identity.

4.2 Ethnicity, race and style

As summed up in the previous section, M.I.A. has used her refugee background to free herself from a fixed and stable nationality. By introducing different cultural elements in her music and bringing up issues concerning immigration, warfare and capitalism, she has enabled a larger group of people to embrace and reinforce similar hybrid and
overlapping cultural identities. In the West the next generation, the children of the immigrants, are looking forward to express their new postcolonial and transnational identities that are challenging traditional identities based mostly on a certain ethnicity (Taylor 1997, 156).

M.I.A. speaks to her listeners, especially the young immigrants as mentioned above, by creating a colorful mix of different cultural styles and stirring them up together so that one cannot point out which element comes from where. The musical infusion she creates, allows her to borrow material from everywhere and manipulate it to fit her needs. Because there are so many cultural and stylistic elements in her music, the question of authenticity that often bothers the world music and musicians who combine non-pop elements in their music, loses its importance. M.I.A.'s use of certain material, such as African, Indian and aboriginal music, is in such balance with the other (western) musical elements that it becomes almost irrelevant to try discuss one element's true origins and whether she has the right to use it. Instead she makes her music authentic by letting go of all the presumptions of what different “authentic” elements should sound like, while combining these with popular music samples that are easier to track and recognize.

The musical influences of M.I.A. come from various cultural and stylistic realms, but she has a strong connection to urban Western styles such as hip hop, electro, grime, dancehall, punk and pop. However it is the aesthetics of hip hop that M.I.A. uses as a template to pull together those influences and interests. Just like the black youth in the United States (the hip hop youth), M.I.A. also grew up between two cultural contexts where one was a dominant culture, white, British, looking down on immigrants, and the other a shattered culture of a refugee, that has a tradition of confronting prejudice and injustice (Morgan 2009, 48). In several interviews (Durbin 2007, Forrest 2005, Pytlik 2005 to name few) M.I.A. has told of the impact that moving in to the housing project of London had on her and on her musical career. Through the children of her neighbors she got introduced to hip hop which at the time sounded totally different to M.I.A. who was listening mostly popular western music. By idolizing the local hip hop youth she begin to “act black” and look up to them. In her own words: “Within a year and a half
of returning to England, me and my sister were both as black as you can get. My mom was like, ‘Oh my god, what’s happening?’” (Orlov 2005). M.I.A. found understanding hip hop an universal thing; not just because of the rhythm, dance, style or attitude, but because there was something deeper in it that connected her to hip hop followers all around the world. To her hip hop worked on a few basic human principles, in terms of what stimulation buttons to push and felt that hip hop offered her something that other forms of art did not, it had content and struggle behind it. In her own words:

--and because I was able to adapt to it, hip-hop gave me a home, an identity. Before, people looked at me and thought ‘Oh, she’s a Paki refugee kid who doesn’t know how to speak English.’ Now they looked and said, ‘Her trousers are so baggy, she’s got bleach in her hair, her Walkman’s on too loud.’ These kinds of [bigotries] were easier to deal with. (Orlov, 2005)

Even though hip hop alienated M.I.A. from other school friends, it also connected her to “a tribe of people” who understood it and knew that they were connected through the music. Hip hop was an outsider culture for those who didn’t have a sense of belonging to the mainstream, and M.I.A. was already used to that way of thinking, being a Tamil, a guerrilla. To her hip hop was the most guerrilla thing happening in England at the time. (Orlov, 2005.)

M.I.A. connects with hip hop through her music in three ways. First, how she expresses herself ranges from singing to talking aka rapping where what she says is more important than achieving the perfect pitch. She also uses a lot of African-American hip hop language mixed with common and more local slang and gangsta expressions. The way M.I.A. uses the language of hip hop, although not a “true” member of the group, shows respect and connects her to the genre. By using phrases, words, citations, she shows that she knows the cultural history, knows what she is borrowing, and through the shared linguistic ideology binds herself to the politics, culture, social conditions and norms, values and attitude of hip hop. Secondly she uses the hip hop's way of sampling different music into her own and thus shows her respect to those artists and marks her place in the historical continuum of popular music. The third reason connects her to the very roots of hip hop which has been a channel for those who are oppressed to speak out
for themselves. M.I.A. uses the emancipatory tradition of hip hop to bring forward her own political views on immigration, social inequalities and economic deprivation.

4.2.1 Connective marginalities

In her book *The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip-Hop* (2007) Halifu Osumare introduces her theory of connective marginality to study how hip hop moves and adapts globally. Osumare forms the connective marginalities of global hip hop with four social realms that links and connects youth cultures across the world and hip hop's origins in the U.S. In the heart of the hip hop's origins in the U.S. Osumare points out youthful rebellion, historical oppression, class and culture. All these spheres interconnect and overlap in both the United States and in other geographies, and therefore make it possible for the hip hop culture to expand so rapidly around the world.

The smallest circle around the Africanist aesthetic, the key element of Osumare's theory, is culture that connects U.S. African American and Latino center together and can be found only where the Africanist aesthetic is predominant. In the U.S. this culture has always been associated with marginal peoples and resides in the relationship between race, class and culture. The next largest sphere is class that around the globe binds together people from different ethnic and immigrant groups who are seen as second-class citizens and share a marginalized status in the society. In some countries lower class status that stays unchanged over several generations can border historical oppression. The third largest circle is historical oppression that brings together different groups who can identify with a long history of purposeful subjugation and can relate to the African American experience as a model of overt oppression. ”Youth” makes the largest connective marginality and is itself a marginal status that represents a discursive construction of a large segment of any society's population often in tension with the adult ruling authorities. (Osumare 2007, 69–72.)

In Osumare's theory all these spheres are explaining how and why hip hop has become a global style that is being made and heard all over the world. All four connections—
culture, class, historical oppression, and youth rebellion—are often uniting and linking together many hip hop communities who share similar kind of experiences. Osumare points out how hip hop has its variations in Africa, France, Poland and Brazil and whether these places have historical connections to Africanist aesthetic or not, hip hop's revision of the Africanist signifying tradition provides the right to “brag” about one's specific community, neighborhood or district. Often the global poor who are living in similar kinds of rough neighborhoods and come from the same conditions of poverty use hip hop as a protest voice and as a platform for revealing the sociopolitical inequities. (Osumare 2007, 72–73.)

What is interesting in Osumare's theory is that is manages to see and bring together the many sides of global hip hop and explain why it has become so popular globally. Although in the U.S. hip hop nowadays has become more commercial, its global version is still mostly used as a tool to challenge the dominating authorities and to give a voice to those who are not heard in the society, like the early American hip hop from the 1980's and 1990's. As pointed out previously though M.I.A. is not hip hop in its true sense, she shares a strong stylistic connection to it and can be linked with hip hop, and to Osumare's theory of connective marginalities. Because of M.I.A.'s background and her status as a "world citizen" she is in all these spheres but in a very different way than Osumare's examples of artists from France and Japan. M.I.A. has experienced the historical oppression and second-class citizenship both in Sri Lanka and in England where in the first one she was a member of the Tamil minority and in the latter a refugee, and even in her mid-30's she shares the rebellious attitude that Osumare links only to "youth" as listeners of hip hop rather than makers of it. However M.I.A. lacks the connection to a certain place and does not have a specific ethnic group whose agenda she would constantly refer to. Instead M.I.A. has created her own global style where she can speak for anyone who has been oppressed or has experienced social or political injustice anywhere in the world. In her lyrics she often refers to immigrants and refugees in a general way, binding together people from all over the world with very different backgrounds who are fighting to be heard. This is how she uses the tradition of hip hop and at the same time breaks the mold of hip hop by integrating it to a vast collection of styles and meanings.
The main characters in M.I.A.'s lyrics are often referred to as *people, I, we, they* and *you* and sometimes in a more caricaturist way like *china girl, lolita, yorkshire banker* and *hombre*. When she actually refers to a specific group it really stands out like when she is mentioning PLO and Muslims in 'Sunshowers' (2005g) and Talibans in 'Lovalot' (2010d). The places mentioned in M.I.A.'s lyrics, even though giving a specific location, might still leave a vague feeling to the listener. In many of her songs several cities and countries are mentioned in one song linking up the whole globe in a way that makes it hard to tell where the action takes place. Most of the time big western cities such as London (mentioned more often than others), New York and Miami are paired up with Kingston, Brazil, Colombo, Darfur and Acton and countries and places like Congo, Somalia, Africa, North Korea, Ethiopia, Slovakia, Angola, Ghana, India, Burma, Rwanda, Sri Lanka and the Amazon. Sometimes M.I.A. refers to places with no names such as "from a town/That's all you need to know" in '10 Dollar' (2005a) and "In a far away land we got shit made” in 'Come Around' (2010b).

By not identifying directly to any specific group, nationality or ethnicity M.I.A. gives the residents of the third world, refugees and immigrants a voice they have not had before. As she sings in 'World Town' (2007j):"Hands up, guns out/Represent the world town.” M.I.A. is in a very new way speaking for a large group of people from several different countries and continents. In her songs the overall atmosphere of poor neighborhoods, war-torn countries and places with the constant fear of terrorism are universal for people to share. The metalanguage of hip hop is universally understood and binds together people who reinterpreted its meanings. In a way M.I.A. brings a whole new sphere to Osumare's connecting marginalities: a circle of the world, not only the youth in the world. With the help of hip hop she has managed to bring together people and a form a unique style that not only connects Osumare's four original spheres but sets them into an interactive role with the whole globe. As M.I.A. has said in many interviews she is speaking for the people of the third world who have no voice and wants to challenge the false silence of those people:

> Why don't we ever get to like, actually hear people talk on TV? Why don't we ever get to hear the starving African kids say something or do something or sing something or express something? We show them but they don't have a voice. (Sung 2007)
Although M.I.A. speaks for the third world and brings forward their voices in the West she herself is not heard in the third world. Despite her global hits, her music has not found its way to those people whose sufferings she is constantly expressing. Her dialogue between the West and the third world is not really a dialogue since it is only moving one way; from the third world to West. In the third world music markets it is her “non-localness” that is working against her. When the markets are divided by international pop stars and more local talents, it is hard for her as an outsider to promote her political agenda even if it would be relevant for many people in many countries. For her to able to bring these two worlds together, she has to find a way to grab the attention of the third world as well as she has grabbed the attention of the western pop markets.

4.2.2 “Can’t stereotype my thing yo”

The mélange of cultures and sounds represent well M.I.A.’s background and indicate her vast knowledge of different genres in popular western music as well as the different genres in Indian and Sri Lankan popular and classical music. The use of all these diverse music styles and cultures however emphasize M.I.A’s cultural otherness: none of these music styles belong to her and they are all something different to her. This otherness makes her an outsider to the Western popular culture as well as to the Sri Lankan one where her heritage comes from and no matter how hard she tries she can never be inside either one of these cultures. As someone coming from Sri Lanka but having a British accent and education, she is somewhat hard to categorize and has been playing this otherness as her advantage in the music business.

Because of her Sri Lankan looks she is not easily placed on the black/white dichotomy that some of the genres she uses are so deeply connected with such as reggae, hip hop and rap. M.I.A.’s hybrid immigrant identity allows her to observe the history of these styles but does not weigh her down as it would someone who comes from inside those traditions. The narratives of race in the origins of these styles are directly intersecting with the ”blackness” that they carry globally as well. However in M.I.A.’s case the ”blackness” begins to signify parallel issues of marginality and difference that she and
the people who she is speaking for (the third world) have witnessed. The question of race also brings forward the question of authenticity: who has the right to use these styles and who is “black” enough to ”keep it real”? The authenticity of these black styles in the global arena fulfills when there is an understanding to the racial history of the U.S. and the artist are speaking for each society's constructed conceptions of ”blackness” (Osumare 2007, 171–172). Although M.I.A. does not come from the African-American or Afro-Caribbean tradition she has through listening and studying to it earned her status to use it the way she does, in other words she is qualified to both critique and legitimately signify artistically on hip hop and its origins (Osumare 2007, 27). M.I.A. speaks the universal language of these styles but being an outsider she recreates new meanings and new ways of understanding what is said.

One of the key elements of M.I.A.'s music are her beats and samples and how she constructs them. Her mixture of electro, hip hop, punk and pop creates interesting beats that are often layered and in a polyrhythmic structure against the song she is sampling. The bits and pieces she creates her beats from give her music a somewhat cacophonous atmosphere that is still well structured and organized. In many songs M.I.A. is using a song in a fast loop so that the beat is for a while created only from this one fragment of music before another beat or rhythmic figure is being introduced. The samples she uses in her songs can come from any genre but they all reflect M.I.A.'s own past, from Bollywood to British punk like Clash. If hip hop had a great influence on M.I.A. so did the British punk scene from the 1980's that combined music, dancing and visual style to signify chaos and noise at various levels. In M.I.A.'s music and visual image this post punk attitude of interrupting and disrupting conventional values is a way to challenge the dominant culture.

Although the recurring themes that her music revolves around are politics concerning the third world, harsh economic realities and immigration, the way M.I.A. delivers her message has changed between the three albums. If the first one Arular (2005b) was a straight forward statement of an international refugee, with comparisons of using beats as bombs and sample piracy as terrorism, then the second album Kala (2007f) is a more mature and darker sounding with more daring conversations with popular music through
samples that sampled bands like New Order, Pixies and The Clash (Grandy 2007). The latest album *MAYA* (2010e) is more industrial sounding and borrows material also from rock music with heavy guitar riffs such as The Suicide, Sleigh Bells but has also the electro and reggae sounds that are connected to the artist's style. To her already political lyrics, these samples give a more profound level to the music, an intertextuality that ties her also to the messages of these groups she is sampling from.

The way M.I.A. collaborates with other artists is also a way to bring forward people that before have not had the chance to be heard in the market of global popular music. In *Kala* (2007f) she worked together with a Nigerian-born rapper Afrikan Boy and a group of young aboriginal children called The Wilcannia Mob that she had come across during her visit to Australia. The fact that these two acts are featured in an album next to a song that collaborates with a multi-millionaire producer Timbaland is what makes them even more significant. To M.I.A. it is not about what sells the most or who is more famous but what sounds right to her and what inspires her; whether it is an unknown rapper or a famous producer.

By putting together a collage of her own musical past she manages to point out how artificial the division of music to different genres is and how one can identify to several various music styles without overruling the others. M.I.A. encourages her audience not to stick to only certain types of identities but to see the possibilities beyond established social boundaries. As an “other” to both British (Western) and Sri Lankan (Oriental) cultures she challenges the usual dichotomy of us and them, and turns the attention into defining who are the people in these two categories and from whose point of view the world is being seen. In a way M.I.A. becomes an observer of the cultural west and east division and can more freely comment on it without anyone really noticing it. She has adapted herself to these different cultures but does not have the nationalistic pride that often overshadows peoples’ understanding of the world. Nation and nationalities have become secondary in the globalized world M.I.A. lives in.
4.3 The domination of the markets

M.I.A.’s way to mix up different cultures can also be seen as a sort of a cultural manipulation where she forces, bends and breaks the norms of certain music styles to better make them fit her purposes. By doing so she not only reconstructs these cultures but also forces her audience to rethink the status and hierarchies of these cultures. Today's postmodern capitalism still exploits the postcolonial countries, as well as those who decent of former slave labor who have played such an important social, political, and cultural role in the United States as well as in other Western countries (Osumare 2007, 156). When the dominant highly capitalized Western music business is put next to a third world pirate CD and cassette market and illegal Internet downloading the double standards of making music as well as what cultures are being appreciated for are highly exposed.

4.3.1 Cultural resistance

Stephen Duncombe (2002) has written about the structures of cultural resistance, and how cultural resistance can provide a sort of “free space” for developing certain ideas and practices that are not embraced by the dominant culture. For Duncombe (2002) the term cultural resistance means ways to either consciously or unconsciously, effectively or not, resist or change the dominant political, economic and social structures. The free space that has been gained from resisting the main culture is used to experiment with new ways of seeing, being and developing tools and resources for resistance; all of what will be useful later when the community becomes politically active. Cultural resistance can be seen simultaneously as a political resistance as well as an escape from the politics and a way to express discontent. The cultural resistance is however a paradox by its very nature; it does not and cannot exist without sooner or later being repackaged and transformed into a component of the dominating culture. (Duncombe 2002, 5–6.)

An efficient way to spread the politics of resistance is to choose the form they are transmitted in the culture (Duncombe 2002, 6). M.I.A.’s political messages are laid over
danceable yet aggressive beats and wrapped up in colorful visual images that catch the attention of the audience. How the message is interpreted by the public determines its politics as well. Some react to M.I.A.’s music in a very negative way and see her as someone who promotes terrorism and violence, while others see her as someone who is not afraid to present controversial and contradictory opinions in public. To most people these subcultures and underground cultures that exist within the dominant culture are a way to put up with the prevalent system, and a method to challenge its policies by acting in a rebellious way. Instead of alienating the dominant culture and the subculture from each other, M.I.A. is continuously mixing them up and bringing them closer to one another. Putting a song that has a strong political message into the field of pop music that is more often linked with more artificial and meaningless songs, gives a chance to rethink what pop music can offer at its best. Her music appeals to both to those who resist the dominant culture and those who embrace it. In other words M.I.A. speaks the “language” of different cultural levels and therefore can be popular on a larger scale.

The cultural power hierarchies that exist also in the music business are dictating what kind of music gets to be heard and often music with a political agenda is not the one that is going to bring profit for the record labels. For any artist who wants to get certain group's oppression or a certain issue heard, it is a true struggle to overcome the global capitalist pop culture machinery (Osumare 2007, 144). When the markets rule what is heard in the mass media it becomes evident that one must start exploring other possibilities to reach out to people. The audiences that are fed with the commercial pop music are often underestimated in the music business or as M.I.A. puts it:

"There's only so much controlled generic brainwashing you can do. And the thing is it would be fine if the audience weren't reduced to being so dumb. I feel like they constantly think that we're just stupid and that all we can handle is more songs about champagne and Bentleys ... We don't all have access to millions of pounds and Bentleys and £50,000 diamond necklaces. Where do those people go to be content with how they live, if constantly we're being fed images of 'this is what you need to aspire to be; this is what you need to aspire to be?'” (Wheaton, 2005)
Unlike fulfilling Theodor Adorno's somewhat despairing views of the “mass culture” consumers where the listeners regress to the level of children when listening to unchallenging music (Adorno 1991, 44), the audience today is capable to search into music outside the commercial channels through different kind of alternative media. It is also important to recognize that the large quantity of various subcultures are as commercialized and well marketed as the most popular pop music, to the extent that media names new subcultures just to specify and pre-select audiences for them (Thornton 1995, 162).

To be able to reach the big audiences in today's music business the artists have to have their music played in the radio and their videos shown on television even at the expense of limiting artistic freedom. Russell A. Potter has written in *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* (1995) about how through the lens of hip hop one can confront the contradictions of contemporary culture. Potter uses the term “hijacking the media” to illustrate how for example in music videos artists are taking a new kind of stand and representing themselves as they really want to. In Potter's opinion music videos are powerful “spectacularizations” where U.S. rappers manipulate the old signs of blackness; sometimes self-parodying while at other times critiquing those limiting stereotypes (Potter 1995, 13). When applying Potter's term of “hijacking the media” to M.I.A. and how she represents herself in the media once again her “otherness” gives her a certain freedom that not many artists share. While the black people in the U.S. have been subjected under the white gaze for centuries and are playing with the highly problematic caricaturist images of hip hop, such as playa-pimp, gangsta-thug and queen bitch (Osumare 2007, 157), M.I.A. has negotiated her image without the burden of a specific suppressed history.

The many elements that make M.I.A. “other” to a majority are letting her more freely explore the field of popular music and its subcultures as well as allowing her to play with different kinds of images and roles. She has a peculiar and colorful style of her own that mixes up 1980's hip hop style, wild patterns, patched items such as T-Shirts to represent the “official refugee uniform” with contemporary elements. In her videos such as 'Jimmy' (2007e) she plays with the traditional Indian look with bindis and saris while
in other videos 'Galang' (2005f), she is dressed up on baggy clothes and sneakers. These different styles let her also explore and represent her sexuality in more versatile ways (more about M.I.A.'s gender and sexual representations in chapter 5). Although her “not coming from anywhere” has given her more room to express herself in the media it would be naive to think that M.I.A. would be living in a vacuum where no external presumptions exist: she knows how the industry works and manipulates the pop genre from inside by wrapping her politics into a seductive, exotic and visually expressive bundle to gain success.

4.3.2 Power moves

As mentioned in the previous chapter one important reason for M.I.A.'s global success is that she knows how to use the mass media for her own purposes, how to play from within the popular culture to reinforce her free status in the music business. The balance between being popular and independent at the same time means that M.I.A. has had to learn when to compromise and when to pursue her values. The music industry along with the media are often supporting the artists that will bring in the most profit instead of someone who criticizes the whole business and challenges the way the industry works. However M.I.A herself is part of the music industry and has to adjust to the rules of capitalism to make her music heard. In an interview by Michael Roberts (2008) she says:

> It was definitely freeing financially, and the creativity part, I fight for it everyday. I fight so that I don’t lose my attachment to that creative place. And that’s the difficulty. You just have to realize that the business side is purely about funding, and it’s not about creative control over what you do. And I think I’ve been really lucky that they’ve left me alone.

The other issue she had to deal with the industry was her ethnicity. M.I.A. had to question whether she was western enough “in order to get Western music across on Western television” and wondered if she brought to England what she knew, all the things she had seen, could she communicate them through what she does. (Pytlik,
2005.) Even though M.I.A. enjoys her artistic freedom the gap between making music and making great deal of money out of it by marketing and commercializing herself has been one of the issues that she is constantly overcoming in her career.

M.I.A.’s encounters with the media project an interesting overview of how the media treats artists and how big of a role they have as an opinion leader. Without going too deep to the state of music journalism, it is often issues of the style and public appearance that are highlighted in the press while the actual musical material is set aside. This has also been the case with M.I.A. who has done both intellectual interviews about her music as well as more superficial cover stories with brand clothing and expensive jewelry. However even in these more fashion oriented articles she has still managed to talk about her music and her politics instead of taking up a more commercial and non-offending role. It is also important to remember that M.I.A.’s public image also benefits from the discourse the media uses of her; she is constantly referred to as a rebel, revolutionary, political, and a terrorist supporter that over and over again reinforce the image of a political outcast she wants to be. It is however interesting to see how someone like M.I.A. gets denigrated by the media by saying something when other artists are often embraced if they have a deeper political message behind their music. Somehow M.I.A.’s political utterance is more dangerous and less easy to categorize than others.

A good example of M.I.A.’s treatment in the press is an interview with Lynn Hirschberg for the New York Times in 2010. In this long and expository article Hirschberg (2010) is seeking to reveal the many contradictions of M.I.A. by writing about her everyday life and how it is unbalanced with her political message. The question is not whether one likes M.I.A. or not, believes in her politics or not, but how the media can easily paint a one-sided picture of anyone who is part of the public sphere without being challenged by the audience. Hirschberg uses separate and disconnected observation and associates them with what M.I.A. is saying during the interview to the extreme where her eating french fries while talking about her music becomes a direct indicator of how shallow she is both as an artist and as a person. It is an interesting popular culture phenomenon how someone who is taking a political stand in the popular music genre is
been put down for not knowing what she is saying, not been qualified to say something and for being superficial and a hypocrite, when most of the pop stars are saying absolutely nothing but are not criticized for their massive consumption. Hirschberg calling M.I.A. naive without taking a moment to explain why, can be seen as nothing but reassuring the pre-decided image of her to point out the lack of her political comprehension. What makes this interview even more interesting is the aftermath of it. Most of the readers, whether fans of M.I.A. or not, noticed the highly biased language used in the text and expressed their frustrations of reading yet another article describing the physical appearance and the superficial aspects of the artist rather than learning something about their music. M.I.A. herself also made a strong statement against the article because she had without Hirschberg’s knowledge recorded the interview and was able to clear up some misquotes. Her taking a strong stand against what had been written of her, resulted in the New York Times publishing a correction of the misquotes in the article and Hirschberg herself ended up in the limelight of other media questioning her approach on M.I.A.

M.I.A.’s biggest hit to date, ‘Paper Planes’ from the album Kala (2007f), is another example how her music has been received by the media. The catchy song with a sample from The Clash’s ‘Straight to Hell’ (released originally in 1982) has a surprisingly harsh refrain where M.I.A., whose vocals are dubbed by the voices of children, sings: “All I wanna do is/(gun charge then BANG BANG BANG BANG)/and/(cash register opening CLICK KA-CHING)/and take your money.” The very real sounding gun and cash register effects gives the song its power, and forces the listener to actually think what the song is all about. For M.I.A. provocation is a way to make people react and reconsider their own political views. She has said the following about ‘Paper Planes’:

--the worst thing that anyone can say [to someone these days] is some shit like: “What I wanna do is come and get your money.” People don’t really feel like immigrants or refugees contribute to culture in any way. That they’re just leeches that suck from whatever. So in the song I say All I wanna do is [sound of gun shooting and reloading, cash register opening] and take your money. I did it in sound effects. It’s up to you how you want to interpret. America is so obsessed with money, I’m sure they’ll get it.

(Wagner 2007.)
The references to violence and guns are a way to bring them to the public conversation, instead of idolizing the “gangsta”-culture or making criminal lifestyle desirable, she is through provocation trying to build a dialogue, an understanding between those on the other sides of the terrorist/victim, immigrant/white dichotomies. Although the song does not sound aggressive, quite the contrary in fact, it was still too much for some media, and the original version of the song with the gun shot effects, was censored in live shows such as the David Letterman show and music channels like MTV. M.I.A. and MTV had already clashed before when M.I.A.’s song 'Sunshowers’ from Arular (2005b) was censored due to its dubious lyrics: “you wanna go?/you wanna win a war/?Like PLO/I don’t surrender.” (Harrington 2005). With 'Paper Planes' the censorship got more evident, when the channel aired a version of the song where the gunshots were replaced by random beats, making it sound completely different. After M.I.A. had published a very distressed rant on her blog, where she called MTV’s retouch of her video as “sabotage” (Reagan 2007), some of the public media turned their attention on the politics of MTV.

The double standard of MTV shows in a way how videos of different genres are displayed. Tom Breihan (2007) sees that MTV is “playing it safe” by trying to eliminate all possible traces of violence, sex, drugs and foul language out of the videos. However, exceptions to this rule are made when the band is big enough and sells enough records, most of the time the rule applies only to rap and hip hop songs (Breihan 2007). The reason why M.I.A. was getting the rap treatment, although her music and especially 'Paper Planes' are far from being “just” rap, was according to Breihan in the color of her skin. Although this might be a hasty conclusion it still makes a good point on what kind of role MTV plays as a musical gatekeeper, and how that role affects on the whole music business since visibility on the biggest music channel is crucial for artists promoting their latest music. While MTV defends itself with high morals as protecting young audiences, it has no problems of airing video game commercials and movie trailers that have the same amount, if not even more, of violence than music videos, as long as they are getting paid for it (Breihan 2007).

These incidents with media and censorship brings us back to the concept of cultural
resistance that has to negotiate constantly where it stands within the dominant culture. Even if the outcome of resisting the main culture is not a cultural revolution, it still manages to stir attention and discussion on to the subject, and thus succeeds to keep the resistance alive. M.I.A. will always be the underdog, even though she has been relatively successful, because of the political aspects of her music that will not and should not go unnoticed by the audience. By challenging the power hierarchies, she has made it possible for more people to see the double standards of the music business and has reached a more powerful status for herself as well.
5 A REVOLUTIONARY AND A WOMAN

This chapter will examine how M.I.A. and the media have represented her sex, sexuality and gender. Unlike many other women artists, M.I.A. has been able to present her sexuality in a rather neutral way; she has neither over-sexualized herself nor tried to hide her womanhood. It seems she has, from the very beginning of her career, been first an artist, then she has been classified as a politically active artist, a Tamil origin artist and maybe only after then considered as “just” a female artist. Her controversial politics and unusual combination of different music styles have been more interesting to the media than her simply being a woman or a female artist. Somehow she has managed to get the treatment that many male artists take for granted. Gender inequality and sexual disrespect gain their power from their ability to be everywhere at once, to seem normal and inevitable, making the efforts to change them only partial and incomplete (Rose 2008, 153). M.I.A.'s ability to avoid the usual dismissing categorization of women in popular music and the way she has handled the question of gender identity have been rather exceptional and will be more closely examined in this chapter.

5.1 Making a name as an outsider

Throughout M.I.A.'s career she has been trying to combine the various elements of her multifaceted and complicated identity, and being a woman has added its own challenges to the equation. However M.I.A. has, compared to other female artists, managed to stay away from the most typical female stereotypes and is seen primarily as an artist instead of a female artist. The term 'female artist' often incorporates an idea of a passive female artist who is not making, writing nor producing her own music, someone who is just a puppet to record label executives and not capable of making her own decisions.

One factor that has helped M.I.A. to escape the label of a female artist is the many ways of being an “other” to the dominant culture. Compared to many western popular music
artists her otherness excludes her from the dominant white female as well as from the
dominant black female categories. M.I.A. brings a new dimension of otherness to the
dichotomy of black and white women, who themselves are already “other” compared to the
dominating men. Her separation from the “average” woman brings forth the
methodology of intersectionality used by many feminist sociologists such as Kimberlé
W. Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins. Intersectionality examines the cultural patterns
of oppression that are not only interrelated, but also bound together and influenced by
the intersectional systems of society, such as race, gender, class, and ethnicity (Collins
2000, 42). Black women have especially suffered from being excluded from women's
issues because the women's movement has been seen primarily as the movement led by
and for white women, often forgetting the more complex ethnic and racial imports on
the matter (Crenshaw 1989, 140). All the segregating factors mentioned above are
directly linked to M.I.A. making her different from the “average” (white) women, the
one to whom many feminist writings are based around and for, but also different from
the opposing (black) women. For M.I.A. there is no place where she could fit in without
being the other in one way or another.

By embracing and emphasizing her divergences to her advantage in the music business,
M.I.A. has managed to gain more control over her gender representation. Not being a
“pure woman” but complex, faulty and even a little dangerous makes her an “imperfect
woman” compared to the norm of a western woman (Butler 1990, 25). In the same
manner as any other male artist who uses the rebellious image to get more attention,
M.I.A. has turned her imperfectness into a resource of power. Not having a fixed
feminine role to fulfill M.I.A. has been able to promote herself and her music without
having to reject one sex for the other. In other words, she has not sacrificed her
femininity in order to be more convincing in the music business, nor has she tried to be
more masculine to gain more credibility.

Norma Coates (1997) has been studying women in rock music, and trying to understand
why the rock scene is still mostly a male territory where women have no access as an
active member. Coates (1997, 59) uses the term “low-Other” to refer to the hierarchy
that lies between the sexes and turns the female subject to an object of desire. The men
want rock to be “other” to the mainstream culture and that is why the rise of women to the rock genre has been seen as a threat to this power structure (Coates 1997, 60). This applies also to hip hop's hypermasculine style which originates from the long white supremacy. The subordination of a black man has in hip hop turned into the subjugation of a black woman. By calling women “bitches and hoes” male rappers compensate their lack of power and keep hip hop as something of their own rather than pass it to the hands of the women. (Ogbar 2007, 74–76.) What has made M.I.A.’s case different to this juxtaposition is her “otherness” to both men and women in popular music through the previously mentioned intersectionality. Her “otherness” that incorporates ethnicity, gender and culture excludes her from the women/men dichotomy of the dominant culture, and makes her an outsider to this scene. Because her gender has not been the main reason for not being accepted by the mainstream culture, in fact it has possibly been the least affecting matter, she has been concentrating on the more distinctive aspects of her identity.

The authentic style of M.I.A., both in her music and in her appearance, has in its way “protected” her from falling into the typical categorization of woman artists. Especially her relationship to hip hop has highlighted the meaning of “keeping things real” but at the same time the hip hop scene is notoriously known for its misogynist, over sexualized and sexually offending raps and visual imagery. While male rapper's social criticism has mostly contested police harassment and other means by which black men are put down by society, women rappers central dissent has been in the arena of sexual politics (Rose 1994, 147). The complex and distorted relationship between hip hop and (black) female oppression has been examined by Marcyliena Morgan (2009) and Tricia Rose (1994, 2008). In Morgan's The Real Hip Hop (2009) she exposes the double standards of hip hop when pointing out that women of color are aware that the same system that stereotypes them as promiscuous, culpable, and irresponsible actually exploits their lives and bodies to promote sexism, racism, and class privilege (ibid., 159). The Hip Hop Wars (2008) by Tricia Rose reviews the many different aspects of female discrimination in commercial hip hop and how it works against the black communities. The patriarchal mainstream masculinity that the next generation has inherited is still being treated as ideal, even when trying to stand up for women in hip
Phrases like “be respectable”, “stand by your man”, “look pretty”, and “be modest” remain a central means in which (black) women have been subordinated and patriarchal power secured. This kind of “respect” for women has nothing to do with respecting women's full equality or encouraging challenges to a society organized around male power and privilege. (Rose 2008, 118–119.)

Although M.I.A. is neither an African-American nor actually part of the American hip hop scene in the pure sense, the same double standards of how women are treated by the society apply to her as well. Unlike many other women artist in the hip hop scene, M.I.A. has managed to become successful without having to exploit her body in order to gain fame. Tricia Rose (2008) points out how many women in hip hop follow the pattern of hypersexualized and objectified terms reserved for black woman in the genre. Highly visible rappers such as Lil' Kim, Trina, and Foxy Brown use the sexually exploitative images and stories as well as sexually dominating personas similar to those expressed by many male rappers. But the true criticism towards sexual domination as legitimate power still stays intact. The highly marginalized status of female rappers has forced these women to “play the power game” of marketing powers and sexual exploitation, whether they wanted or not. To increase marketability in a man's game many women celebrate their bodies by exploiting them for publicity. (Rose 2008, 123–124 & Osumare 2007, 164.)

M.I.A., who does not fall into the stereotypical roles of black women, has used some stereotypes that apply to her for her own advantage. The role-plays of M.I.A. even when flirty and sexual still have a critical undertone or a message behind them. For example in her videos such as 'Jimmy' (2007c) and 'XXXO' (2010h) she plays the role of an exotic, mysterious, and seductive South Asian goddess, but combines her sultry looks with meaningful and provoking lyrics. In the very first verse of 'Jimmy' (2007d) M.I.A. sings about Rwanda, genocide, and Darfur, and the overall sexually dubious atmosphere of 'XXXO' (2010g) culminates to the chorus where she repeats the line: “You want me to be/somebody who I'm really not”. Using harsh slang and hip hop language and sexually charged (but not overcharged) imagery to promote her agenda, she manages to step outside of the commercial hip hop's narrow views and have true power over her
What has been essential for M.I.A.’s career is that she has been in charge of her visual art and her style. By having this power over her artistic products, she has managed to avoid becoming an object of sexual desire and has been able to remain as a self-sufficient subject. M.I.A. has escaped the traditional role of a woman artist by denying being a pop star:

I just don’t know what you’d achieve by being a pop star today. I don’t know what a pop star is in the purest sense. I think it doesn’t exist anymore. I’m not really sure what it is, especially for a woman it’s difficult because it’s so determined what a female pop star is. It doesn’t matter what kind of a twist you have on it. If you become a pop star, really, what are you gonna be? (Lindsay 2007)

Because M.I.A.'s political activity, most of the public attention on her has focused on that instead of her gender. This has allowed M.I.A. to refuse the female pop stardom and negotiate her role without being compared to anyone else. What is interesting is that while liberating herself from the woman artist status she has risen to the male-dominant category of artist who are not determined by their sex but by their music and talent.

5.2 Feminist approach

When evaluating M.I.A.’s career it seems that she has not really taken up a feminist approach or spoken up for women's rights through her music or in public. The political elements in her music and statements about immigration and war that she has made have been more prominently displayed than the underlying references to gender and sexuality. While these aspects have not been too widely presented in the media it does not mean that they would not exist on M.I.A.’s music and imagery. As an artist who has not exploited herself to gain success and is in so many ways “other” compared to most artists, the whole existence of M.I.A. is a feminist act in itself.
One reason why M.I.A.’s feminist side has not been brought up a lot, is that it has been hidden under the more powerful and controversial aspects of her music. Her politics have overshadowed the media’s interest in her femininity and allowed her to bring forth agendas that are most often supported by neither record companies nor the mass media. This makes an interesting comparison to the world of commercial hip hop where sexism and excessively sexist images of (black) women sell, but when artists are expressing outrage at racism, challenging government policies, speaking out against the war, or identifying whiteness as an unfair advantage, they are being censored and discouraged by the music industry (Rose 2008, 155). In M.I.A.’s case the very core of her work is based on political awareness concerning war, immigration, third world poverty, and terrorism, which sets her in a very different basis. To exaggerate this difference one could think that talking about feminism or gender equality is not as dangerous and exciting as talking about war, terrorism and violence. In other words M.I.A. knows also what sells and does not want to be pushed into an even smaller margin as someone who is publicly and strongly against sexism. Her ways to encounter gender issues are subtler and more disguised than her other issues.

M.I.A. has not discussed, or has not been asked much, about her views on feminist or women's issues. In an interview by Cam Lindsay (2007) she has revealed more about being a woman in the music industry than usual. She has found it challenging to prove her talent and capability as an artist, and how to define herself as a pop star; a role that is generally considered to be more shallow and passive than political and active. As she states:

--I felt people doubted whether I was musical or not, and whether it was a bunch of boys around me making all of this music and I was just a puppet. And so as a girl I thought, "Wow, I’m totally alone.” I have nobody in my band, I have no boys around me supporting me about what I have going on in my personal life.--That really is what the sound of Kala is: feeling like a total outsider. I just am being made to be this hard girl, whether I like it or not. It would be amazing to just bounce around in flowery dresses and think about unicorns but I just can’t because I’m a fucking threat to homeland security and I’m in Liberia, and I’m working with 30 temple drummers in India, and trying to communicate. And they’ve never had a woman talk to them or tell them what to do
especially when it came to music. So it was just real problems like that which I was dealing with. (Lindsay 2007)

The typical attitudes in the music industry towards women artist become clear on the very first sentence of M.I.A.'s quote. Even when most of the time the highly marketed pop stars, both men and women, are profit making products of record labels, the assumption of non-authenticity is more often associated with women. Women soloists are seen as just performers and singers rather than real music makers. For M.I.A. being a producer and making electronic music has taken her away from the typical singer/songwriter categorization. She has herself stated in many interviews that she is not a musician and cannot master an instrument, but rather combines different elements to create something new (Epstein 2005, Forrest 2005, Orlov 2005). To have a clear vision but not all the measures to fulfill it means that she has to be the conductor of her works, which as she says in the quote above can cause some problems when interacting with people who are not used to taking orders from a woman. When taking a more active role while making the album *Kala* (2007f) it was not without self-doubt but she used her frustration as a way to become a better composer; one who is not afraid to go after what she wants.

From her two albums M.I.A. sees *Arular* (2005b) as a masculine album and *Kala* (2007f) as a feminine one. She admits that her gender did not play an important role to her and the image of a tough girl rapping about politics was not something she chose to be. (Lindsay 2007). For M.I.A., her whole life had been about survival, and making it to the next point, but after getting the record deal, she was for the first time in her life in a situation where she could sit back and think what she actually wanted to say and sing about. (Lindsay 2007.) Although politics reign on her albums there are references to sexuality and sexual inequality. In *Arular* (2005b) the sexual references are related to human traffic ('10 Dollar'), using sex as a way to get something or get to somewhere ('Bucky Done Gun', '10 Dollar', 'Galang'), and western men using non-western women ('Hombre'). The sex and sexuality in these songs are often linked with violence making the lyrics rather disturbing like in 'Bucky Done Gun' (2005c) where she sings: “I'll hard drive your bit/I'm battered by your sumo grip/Lucky I like feeling shit/My stamina can take it” and in “Hombre’ where she states: “Take me/You can stick me/Stab me, grind
me or wind me”. Only in '10 Dollar' the rather pessimist and cynical way of picturing women using their sexuality is getting a little more positive tone by more active roles while still playing with violent connotations. Here M.I.A. sings: “Need some money?/Paid him with her knees up/Year later, started to ease up/Got her own way, shouted out 'See ya". In the same song a girl named Lolita is pictured getting anything she wants while “sucking on a lollipop”. The song ends with the only implication to the title: “Yeah, what can I get for 10 dollar?/Anything you want”

In the album *Kala* (2007f) the references to sex and sexuality get a more critical and conscious approach. While there are fewer straight mentions to sex and sexuality, these issues are wrapped more profoundly in the general protagonist of the songs who is often a woman in charge, questioning and challenging the world. In 'Bird Flu' (2007b) M.I.A. is criticizing the role of a 'gangsta' man who is “jumpin' girl to girl” and treating women as “meat like burgers”. In the same song she is also commenting on the pressures to look a certain way in the music industry when singing that her “legs hit the hurdle” when could not live up to be a “Rocawear model”5. The song 'Jimmy' although depicting a one-sided love story, has a sexually active and confident approach when singing that: “Your loving makes me crazy/I know that you hear me/Start acting like you want me". An interesting connection to '10 Dollar' (2005a) from her previous album is made in the song '20 Dollar' (2007a) where M.I.A. sings: “People judge me so hard/cause I don't floss my titty set/I was born out of dirt like I'm porn in a skirt/I was a little girl who made good with all that I blurt”. In these lyrics the Lolita-like girl is not seen as a passive objectified victim but as a strong independent woman pursuing her talent and going forward without selling her body like in '10 Dollar' (2005a).

If following her own dichotomy of dividing her two first albums as masculine and feminine her latest album *MAYA* (2010e) could be seen as a mix of these two elements. It has the harsh beats, guitar riffs, and noise effects related to more male dominant rock culture but also songs that bring forth the feminist approach. Especially the song 'XXXO' takes a stand on the Internet era sexuality that is getting more and more infused

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5 Rocawear is a clothing brand created by the Roc-A-Fella record label owned Shawn "Jay-Z" Carter, Damon Dash and Kareem "Biggs" Burke.
by the porn industry as well as the pressures of looking and appearing as a beautiful object. Although this is the only song in the album referring directly to sex and sexuality, it would however be an understatement to say that the other songs in the album did not support feminist issues. Because of 'XXXO' the lyrics on the album can be deciphered in a way that the mere fact that the songs are sung and written by a woman makes them feminist as they show a woman taking an active role and representing her opinions.

5.3 Representation and sexuality

The way M.I.A. presents herself in the visual imagery, in videos and in public photos, has an important role on how she is seen and how she represents her gender. The style of M.I.A. is very distinctive and reflects the diversity of her music; she looks the way she sounds. In her outfits she combines street style with costume-like clothes, to create a totally unique and original look. Representing oneself in public is always a role-play, but even more so to female artists who know the dichotomy between being watched and being a watcher. Women, by the western tradition, know that they are being watched and are constantly, mostly through media, made aware of their own image. (Puustinen, Ruoho, Mäkelä 2006, 32–33.) In other words the surveyor and the surveyed are within women themselves, since women are recognizing the objectifying gaze they are set under. The visual imagery used in popular culture and especially in the realm of popular music, defines how an artist represents oneself and the kind of message he or she sends through these images.

The complexity of M.I.A.'s ethnic and cultural background is strongly intertwined with her way of representing herself in public. Especially her non-western appearance has in a way become a tool for her to enhance even more the different world she comes from and recreate an alternative agent in the popular media. These elements make her feminine representations contrasting to the general feminine representations that are been made and viewed from a western-centric white female's point of view. Teresa de
Lauretis has in her book *Technologies of Gender* (1987) examined the power hierarchies between women and how the intersectionality affects the way women view themselves and each other. Since the female subject has started to include more and more various ideas of what it means to be a female subject, also the need to recreate and redistribute power has changed. de Lauretis (1987) criticizes Michael Foucault's ideas about power that are not taking into account the meaning and role of gender but sees also the trouble with heteronormative thinking that rules how the newly gained power is been distributed by women. Although de Lauretis does not consider women to be one collective group or support the idea of the universal women's movement, it does not mean that she would not believe in the politics of feminism. On the contrary she is highlighting the possibilities of different alternative subjects that are left out in the margins of the main discourse and supports the idea of taking feminist politics to the personal level where it can be molded through their own ways of representing oneself and one's subjective role. (de Lauretis 1987, 18–19.)

Viewing political as personal and personal as political has definitely been a key element of how M.I.A. has chosen to represent herself in the public. Although she is known for her extravagant and flamboyant style, she has from time to time taken up on different stereotypes and portrayed them on her outfits. In the music videos of 'Jimmy' (2007e) and 'XXXO' (2010h) she challenges the Asian exoticism and in 2010 she wore a burqa covered with her *MAYA* album prints to the Spike TV's Scream Awards. To wear the highly politicized burqa in an awards gala in the United States links M.I.A. to many performance artists who use similar ways and methods to create conversation and simply make people see things they normally do not. As a woman living in the western world she is in this case performing another (non-western, non-Christian) role and in a way combating the fear that comes with ignorance of Islam and culture in the public discourse. By wearing a burqa M.I.A. is also referring to the diversity between women in and inside different cultures, religions, and sexualities.

Taking a closer look on the two music videos mentioned above, 'Jimmy' and 'XXXO' are both playing with the role of an exotic Asian woman being set under the gaze of a western male. Chris Weedon in his book *Feminism, Theory and the Politics of*
Difference (1999) observed the ways race, racism and the idea of western as a norm are linked together when talking about women. In the primitivist discourses the non-white, the Others, are seen as closer to nature, more authentic and less contaminated by modern industrial society as well as the non-white women as more spiritual, intuitive, physical, sensual and sexual than their white Western counterparts. What this all comes down to is that the Others are defined as less rational and less sophisticated then Western people. (Weedon 1999, 153.) The spreading islamophobia has also made its mark on what kinds of stereotypes are related especially with Asian and Middle East people and add an element of violence alongside the exotic and sexual representations. M.I.A. is definitely playing with these stereotypes when she dresses up as a sultry Bollywood temptress or as an Internet era online exhibitionist. Although neither of the videos have direct violent material or references, they both also show material that represents M.I.A. as a woman with power, opinions and control that make the role of a passive objectified victim only a parody of the existing stereotypes.

One of the most important black feminists bell hooks, has written about the double oppression that women with color are facing in everyday life, sexism and racism, and keeps unmasking the racist stereotypes that persist in the present day's discourse and imagery (hooks 1986, 66). hooks also sees a direct correlation between the qualities that groups who hold more power than women with color assign to them and the fictitious representations of their identity that bombard them in mass media. In other words since many black females have not decolonized their minds in ways that enable them to break with internalized racism and/or sexism, the representations they create may actually embody stereotypes (hooks 1998, 73). What makes M.I.A.’s body politics interesting is that she has created an alternative image of herself that does not reflect the stereotypical assumptions of what she is supposed to be and through this image she role plays with the general stereotypes without reforming or recreating them in a negative way. By attacking the sexist and racist imagery from inside and using them as a tool to create more realistic and diverse imagery, M.I.A. has on her part broke the dominating view of an Asian woman and offered an alternative way for women to represent themselves. In all of her music videos, even the ones that criticize and parody the oversexualized popular culture M.I.A. has not through her clothing or movements been sexualized or
objectified as in other similar videos. In general her Sri Lankan looks are not being
exotisized quite the contrary she looks contemporary and has an urban style. When
dancing in her videos she is filmed in a way that does not eroticize her dance moves or
body language and there are no close-ups of female body parts, unless she wants it such
as in 'XXXO' (2010h).

Another interesting aspect to M.I.A.’s womanhood and to the way she represents it in
public, was her becoming pregnant in 2008. Usually for a woman to have children in
show business has meant that the career is either over for good or at least on a very long
break. Especially on the peak of one’s career it would be considered as a very unwise
thing to do from a business and marketing point of view. However M.I.A. did not
change much how she behaved and did not try to hide nor accentuate the fact that she
was pregnant. It was not until her performance at the Grammy Awards in 2009, only a
day before giving birth that confused some in the audience and stirred conversation
about her pregnant state (The Huffington Post 2009, Searcey 2009). In the western
culture pregnancy is still presented with a certain idealizing image of motherhood being
the fulfillment of womanhood; an image that definitely does not fit with the public
image of M.I.A. She showed that a pregnant woman can be active and continued touring
and working on her own record label as usual in spite of her pregnant figure. This is
similar to feminist ideas about pregnancy that consider it as something positive towards
the female body rather than a state of weakness or disease (Boston Women's Health
Collective 1976, 252). Showing that being pregnant was not something to hide, M.I.A.
represented a more modern idea about motherhood and how a woman can present
herself and her body in a way she wants and what suits her the best. Representing all
forms of womanhood in a positive and women empowering way, M.I.A. can be
considered to be not only politically active and controversial artist but also an important
feminist icon.
6 LOOKING INTO SEVEN M.I.A. SONGS

In this chapter seven songs by M.I.A. are analyzed both musically and visually. Only songs that have associated music videos have been deliberately chosen so as to present larger perspective of M.I.A.’s music and visual arts. The following sections are not seeking to be thorough musical analyses, but serve here as examples of what has been said in the previous chapters. To do a comprehensive musical study of M.I.A. could be a work to follow this study, but here the focus has been on the political and socio-cultural aspects of the music not on the profound musical analysis.

6.1 Galang (2005f)

M.I.A.’s first song 'Galang' was originally released as a single in 2003. It became an immediate Internet hit that made M.I.A. known as a new and distinctive artist who was hard to categorize. 'Galang' is based on a reggaeton beat that has a deep bass sound on the first and third beat of the bar with a clapping sound accentuating the swaying movement of the rhythm. All the drum sounds, beeps and bloops are created with a drum machine, which links M.I.A.'s way of making music to the continuum of electronic music. Although the songs base rhythm originates from reggaeton it also combines elements from electro, jungle and world music. The word 'galang' is a Jamaican patois slang word that means 'go along' as in behave oneself.

The structure of the song consists of four elements: intro, refrain, verse, and coda. However after the intro there is a longer version of the chorus that only exists that one time as an introduction to the real chorus. This is followed by a verse and a chorus, then the intro appears again and then after the final verse and chorus there is a coda. Before the coda there is a moment when all the beats stop and the only layer left in the music is a electronic sitar-like sound and this is when M.I.A. starts singing a folk style chant and finally the beat appears again. From all the other material in the song, this folk style part
is the only hint of something non-urban, non-western. The coda appears from nowhere but manages to launch a dialogue in between the hard electronic sounds and ultra-low frequencies. Even though this was the first single of M.I.A. it is already strongly marking her role in pop music. By mixing different elements and politics into the form of a three-minute pop song she created her own distinctive voice.

In the very first sentence of the song 'Galang' has a clear reference to Clash's 'London Calling' (1979): “London calling/Speak the slang now/Boys say Wha-Wha/Girls say Wha-What”. The message of the song seems to be, as in Clash's 'London Calling', how to survive in an urban jungle that is full of violence and people who can not be trusted, where young people are trying to make it but fall to drugs and criminal activities. The whole chorus of the song “Blaze a blaze...” and “Purple Haze...” are slang words that refer to smoking weed. In the first verse M.I.A. is singing about a paranoid drug dealer running from the police in the bad neighborhood: “Who the hell is huntin' you?/In the BMW/How the hell they find you/?147'd you/Feds gonna get you/Pull the strings on the hood/One paranoid you/Blazing through the Hood”\(^6\). In the next verse how get by in a big city is described even in a more desperate way: “Work is gonna save you/Pray and you will pull through/Suck-a-dick'll help you/Don't let 'em get to you/If he's got one, you've got two/Backstab your crew/Sell it out to sell you”. People all willing to do whatever, sell drugs, themselves and others just to survive and make profit. The last verse could be seen as a criticism of the music industry and its superficial values where giving sexual favors could be a quick way to get famous, no matter if one has to sell out everything one believed in.

If the lyrics of the song hint at urban poverty and marginalization of young people, the video of 'Galang' sets it into a very different context. In the video, directed by Ruben Fleischer, M.I.A. is dancing to a graffiti background of her own artwork, where war associated images and Tamil imagery are being presented. There is no one else but M.I.A. in the video dancing by herself and at the end dancing with multiple duplicates of herself. Her dance moves are not overly sexualized and she is not been objectified

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\(^6\) 147 is a radio code used by the police to inform that an undercover officer is involved. Feds stand for police or any law enforcement agency in the British slang (Urban dictionary 2010).
nor exotized by her Sri Lankan looks. Her outfits are urban and mixing different patterns including patterns from past decades, creating a fresh and unique look that is impossible to track down to any specific culture or genre. The camera angle in the video stays almost the same throughout the video and, unlike in many other music videos today, there are no close-ups of feminine body parts while she is dancing. The lack of “booty shaking” does not mean that there would not be sexual connotations in the video; at first glance one can see that the girl dancing is attractive and beautiful, but the sound of the song and the pictures behind M.I.A. catches the attention soon to other things.

There are nearly 30 different images that run behind M.I.A. during the video. There are war related ones such as tanks, tigers which are the symbol of the Tamil warriors, hand grenades, dynamite, flames, explosions, helicopters, fighter planes, burning palm trees, fists, skulls and parachutes as well as icons of urban living such as taxes, bikes, high-rises with satellite dishes on the balconies, link-chain fences, loudspeakers, and a map of London. There are few stencils of people as well; two women wearing scarfs, a biking kid, and a close-up of a face that might belong to a Tamil freedom fighter. There is also some Sinhalese writing and a stencil of M.I.A.’s name and the song title. All these images are wrapped in bright colors and made to look beautiful on purpose to create a contrast to what they really signify. War is neither pretty nor stylish, but in this video it is made to look like that. The combination of the dubious lyrics and images and the cheerfully dancing M.I.A. are at the same time appealing and provocative, the viewer must take part in the content of the video to figure out what it actually stands for and what it is trying to say. By playing with these images, masking them under the “cool” layers, she found a way to get her music video aired on MTV and other music programs and managed to soften the road for her following music videos.
6.2 Bucky Done Gun (2005d)

'Bucky Done Gun' is built around a jagged horn sample that gives the song its hectic and obtrusive sound. It is the third single from M.I.A.'s first album Arular (2005b) and it is written by Maya Arulpragasam and Wesley Pentz and produced by Pentz's alter ego Diplo. The horn sample is borrowed from a Brazilian baile funk song 'Injeção' by the Brazilian singer Deise Tigrona. But it can be traced even further to Bill Conti and his theme song from the movie Rocky named 'Gonna Fly Now' (Frere-Jones, 2005).

There are four elements that create the form of the song: intro, horn sample, verse and refrain. The song begins with an intro where M.I.A. is singing, “London/Quiet down I need to make a sound...” which is followed by the loop of the song, the horn sample, and then the verse and the refrain. Altogether there are four verses and three refrains. The intro is also heard again midway through the song making it more like an intermission that leads to the third verse. The horn sample appears four times although the two last times it begins more slowly and lower before continuing to its full entity. (Intro-A-B-C-A-B-Intermission-B-A1-C-B1-C-A2)

Like a typical M.I.A. song, the main elements of 'Bucky Done Gun' are different percussive sounds with a vocal part done in a rap-like manner. Although the song is based on a common time (4/4), the use of different rhythm figures and beats creates a feeling of a more interesting and complex rhythm form. The distorted bass drum gives the song its deep electronic pulse, while the drum fills accentuate the breaks and the snare drum emphasizes the backbeat. During the intro the drums are also enhancing the first beat of the bar supporting the declarative tone of the singing. Compared to these more or less electronic sounds there is a four bar rhythm played by a bongo drum that runs throughout the song and gives the percussions a more “authentic” sound whether that is the case or not.

The lyrics of the song are a mixture of provocative war lexicon, slang words and sexually suggestive material. The title 'Bucky Done Gun' refers to a London grime slang word “Bucky” which means a gun, but as M.I.A. herself has said in an interview (Nand
she has no idea what it really stands for. The gangsta rap attitude is apparent from
the very beginning when during the intro M.I.A. is calling the world to stop and listen to
what she has to say “London/Quiet down I need to make a sound/New York/Quiet
down I need to make a sound/Kingston/ Quiet down I need to make a sound/Brazil/ Quiet
down I need to make a sound”. However the underlying references to revolution and
sexuality take the focus away from gun hailed gangsta rap and offer a different kind of
perspective to war and violence.

Lyrically 'Bucky Done Gun' is influenced by war, especially from a female point of
view. While the first verse is talking about “them” as in “they're coming through the
window” and “they're busting down the big wall”, the next verse is about an active “I”;
“I'm hot now you'll see/I'll fight you just to get peace”. The female body is sacrificed in
order to survive a war which comes across in phrases like; “Fight me in your
comforter/Let you be superior/I'm filthy with their fury ya” and “I'm battered by your
sumo grip/Lucky I like feeling shit/My stamina can take it” as well as “Can I get
control? /Do you like me vulnerable? /I'm armed and I'm equal”. In spite the obvious
gun and war references, the lyrics can also be interpreted as promoting equality between
the sexes and declaring a war against sexual discrimination. The especially tough
vocabulary culminates in the last verse where M.I.A. sings “Physical, Brute force/Steel,
lion you're the boss”. The tanks and grenades represent a blunt masculine power that
can overtake and control the physically weaker, whether they are women or some
minority.

The music video of 'Bucky Done Gun' by Anthony Mandler is filmed basically in two
locations; inside an underground club and outside in a dusty land filled with garbage
and junk and surrounded by a chain-link fence. The first scene opens with a microphone
hanging upside down from a ceiling and with a big hood covering her eyes. When the
horn sample comes in there is a shot of two loudspeakers that look like the ones used in
military, prisons or refugee camps. Along with M.I.A. there are short shots of a woman
dancing aggressively or more specific to this style, grinding, against the chain-link
fence. The next scene is M.I.A. singing in a camouflage overall in front of an audience
which is shot in the same fashion as someone who would be addressing a political
underground movement. The audience is dancing and bouncing wildly and there are fists in the air. M.I.A. herself in standing on a stage and behind her there is a big sheet with a print picture of two tanks shooting one another. When the horns get back in, the shot changes to outside by the water where a group of musicians are playing drums, some kids are playing and M.I.A. and the backup dancer are dancing on top of some junk. When the intermission comes M.I.A. is standing alone and singing into a megaphone. During the slower version of the horn sample there is a shot of a young man throwing a smoke bomb and a parallel shot where M.I.A. is imitating the same movement. There is an instant link to a movement that is similar to someone who is about to throw a hand grenade. The rest of the video is the same imagery where M.I.A. is dancing with a crowd of people and indoor shots of her starting a revolution on a stage.

What makes the video stand out is the overall roughness of it. The tight cuts and the flickering colors that keep changing from black and white or sepia to more colorful as well as the poor territory where they have filmed it are all representing a sort of an Do-It-Yourself attitude. There is nothing pretty or urban in the video, just a wasteland full of junk, obviously poor kids and musicians making ends meet. The unexpected milieu supports M.I.A's message; even though there is no visible violence or there are no guns in the video, it makes the viewers think about war, terrorism and violent slums, just because this is what people are expected to associate with this kind of environment. This is an important tool for M.I.A. because just showing non-western images she can already set herself outside the popular music scene and open ways to different kinds of representation of being woman and being a part of a minority.

This can also be seen in the dance movements of the video. Here the dance movements are as provocative and promiscuous as in other hip hop and pop videos, but they come across to the viewer in a very different way. M.I.A. and the backup dancer are moving their hips and “grinding” against the fence, wearing short shorts and tank tops, but instead of submitting their bodies to a voyeuristic male gaze, their aggressive dance moves and the way they are presented in this third world milieu changes the scene completely. They are not dancing in front of someone in the video; the dancing is more
to themselves, more uniting them together and into the milieu then objectifying them under a viewers gaze. There is no sign of the passive third world women imagery, on the contrary these active women are reforming what a woman in these countries can be and what they can do. The main purpose of the video is to show the world another kind of side of the non-western world and its residents; they are not hiding anymore.

6.3 Bird Flu (2007c)

Formed around a Tamil folk urumee drumming the song, 'Bird Flu' was the first single to be released from M.I.A.'s second record Kala (2007f) and marked a more global approach in her music. Urumee is a double-headed hourglass shaped drum that is most commonly played with sticks and it is used in the Tamil areas of Sri Lanka and India. Although the song reuses material from a song 'Thiruvizhannu Vandha' used in a tamil language film Jayam (2003), M.I.A. travelled to Chennai, India to record the temple drummers for her record. (Wagner 2007.) The yelling sounds, children's voices, and various beeping sound effects together with the intensive drumming creates an almost cacophonous sound scape on 'Bird Flu'.

The structure of the song varies from the common pop song verse-refrain form, but is still sectional. Two similar verses, only a descending bass sound and different rhythm of singing separate them, alternate throughout the song with a built up pre-chorus section sung by children. The pre-chorus does not actually lead into a real chorus but to another verse. In other words there is no chorus in the song, just a structure that seems to lead forward all the time. The descending bass sound in verse 2 supports the feeling of continuity. Both verses, verse 1 and verse 2, are heard three times during the song and so is the children's pre-chorus. In addition to these there is a short Ha-Ha-Ha-Hoo chant used twice in the song before the last verses and at the very end of the song.

Supporting the songs structure is the ongoing drum beat that gives the song its breathtaking pulse. The rhythms played by the urumee drummers are in longer cycles
then the common pulse that M.I.A. is singing to, which makes the song's beat sound more complex and interesting. While the bass drum is often emphasizing the first beats of the bars, the urumee's are starting their rhythmic figures off beat, towards the end of the four-measure bar. The drum fill heard at the very beginning of the song reappears every time with the children's pre-chorus part separating clearly that part from the two verses. The song ends with a drum outro where male voices are also heard supporting the drummers as a response to the Ha-Ha-Ha-Hoo yells of M.I.A..

The other key elements of the song, besides the drumming, are the various collections of sounds that are used throughout the song or looped to create a rhythm. Compared to the very electronic and futuristic sound of M.I.A.’s previous album Arular (2005b), these authentic sounds of children, chicken clucks, and drums create a broader sound scape not only to 'Bird Flu’ but the entire album of Kala (2007f). During the first 30 seconds of the song one has already heard the drum fill, the drum beats, a yelling sound that hits the first beat of the bar, chicken clucks on the off beats, a squeaking backbeat, and children signing a short Na-Na-Rrrah at the background. The fashion in which M.I.A. combines these small sounds and rhythms is a kind of a pop music's approachable version of cluster or noise music. Under the chaotic surface lays a well-organized pattern of rhythms and forms.

Lyrics behind the already provocative title 'Bird Flu' appear to be rather autobiographical and are written in a typical M.I.A. way from the point of view of a non-western person. The very first verse 1 sets the tone of the song by declaring: “BIG on the underground/What's the point of knocking me down?/Everybody knows/I'm already good on the ground” which then continues to “then I go on my own/Making bombs with rubber bands”. The overall attitude seems to be that since nothing matters, no one cares, one might as well become a terrorist and blow up things. The “BIG” at the beginning can also be seen as a reference to American hip hop culture and M.I.A. taking her place in that scene, if one understands the capital BIG meaning the rapper B.I.G. who was killed in a shooting in 1997.

The terrorist references can be seen as metaphors for music business and the brutality of
it. In the second verse 1 M.I.A. sings: “A protocol to be a Rocawear model?/It didn't really drop that way/My legs hit the hurdle/A protocol to be a rocker on a label?/It didn't really drop that way/My beats were too evil”. Here M.I.A. is criticizing the hypocrisy of american hip hop scene by making an example of the Rocawear fashion brand created by the owners of Roc-A-Fella Records. She would not be signed on a label that is more focused on using its beautiful artist as models than letting them speak their minds and promoting their political views. M.I.A. knew that she could not do what she wants had she signed into a major label such as Roc-A-Fella Records.

She is using the terrorist metaphor also in the third verse 1 when she states that “The village got on the phone/Said the streets is comin' to town/They wanna check my papers/See what I carry around/Credentials are boring/I burnt them at the burial ground/Don't order me about/I'm an outlaw from the badland”. By assimilating herself with a revolutionary she can both promote the third world issues and her own views as an artist in the music business. The title of the song is not revealed until the very last verse where M.I.A. sings “Bird Flu gonna get you/Made it in my stable/From the crap you drop/On my crop when they pay you”. This pretty much sums up how M.I.A. likes to provoke people by exaggerating and polarizing the dichotomy of 'us' versus 'them'.

In addition to the terrorist and war references there is also one verse that combats the women's issue. In this verse M.I.A. sings: “I have my heart down/So I need a man for romance/Streets are making 'em hard/So they selfish little roammers/Jumpin' girl to girl/Make us meat like some burgers/When I get fat/I'll pop me out some leaders”. These men are using women as “meat”, meaning they have no value to them except as sexual toys and mothers to give birth to the next generation of revolutionaries. The pressure of being a woman artist and being categorized by one's appearances can be overwhelming and offers yet another point of view how non-western women are usually seen in the cultural context.

The video for 'Bird Flu' was shot in Chennai, India by M.I.A. herself with the local people in it. The video begins with a street view where a group of men are looking seriously straight into the camera. The shots are sharp and quick with a shot of a
chicken, men beginning to dance, a night time shot of young boys dancing, close-ups of urumee drums, and several various street shots where people are walking and dancing. When M.I.A. starts to sing we see her at a stage in front of people and then with a little girl on the street. She has been styled with sunglasses and colorful prints, as is the little girl who is signing the background part. They look relatively cool compared to the other people shot in the street scenes but not too polished or styled up. In general the gestures in the video are not synchronized with the lyrics, except when M.I.A. sings that she is going to “pop out some leaders” and makes a movement with her hand that indicate a pregnant stomach. During the second verse M.I.A. is dancing with a crowd of people in a nighttime street scene, where on the stage there is a big statue of three tigers as a tamil symbol. The rest of the video is combination of the day time party scenes, the night time party scenes, shot of people going on with their everyday businesses, M.I.A. holding a chicken, fishermen walking on the beach, and numerous different children dancing on streets. One slogan has also made it into the video and presumably not by accident; there are few shots of a man wearing a T-shirt saying 'It takes immigration of millions to hold us back'.

Like the video of 'Bucky Done Gun' (2005d) this video is also showing images that are unfamiliar to western viewers. The streets scenes seem authentic; it does not look as if someone was staging certain images for a video but rather someone showing a glimpse of a village life in India. There is no bemoaning over poverty, no sign of the revolutionary violence she sings on the song, just a scene of active people dancing and looking straight at the viewer; this is who we are, here we come from. This is what M.I.A. is good at, being the insider even when coming from the outside. Her background ties her together with this imagery so that her approach never seems superficial or naïve, even when she has been away for several years and now lives in another cultural circle.
6.4 Jimmy (2007e)

The most pop-like of all the M.I.A. songs might be 'Jimmy' with its memorable violin hook, more melodic approach, and an inviting disco beat. The song is a remake of an Indian Bollywood hit song 'Jimmy Jimmy Jimmy Aaja' from a film Disco Dancer (1982). Because the original song was a huge hit in India and Southern Asia it was also familiar to M.I.A. from her childhood. While several of her songs in the album Kala (2007f) are becoming more melodic or have more melodious parts, “Jimmy” is almost completely composed out of vocal verses sung by M.I.A. with her straight forward and rough manner.

The song consists of four elements: verse, hook, bridge, and pre-chorus. The song does not have an actual chorus but the hook of the song, the eight bar violin melody, can be interpreted as the refrain of the song. When analyzing the structure of the song that way, the “Jimmy Aaja” part becomes a pre-chorus because it is always followed by the violin hook, even when it is heard under the bridge part. There are three varying verses and two bridges towards the end of the song. The first verse differs from the two other verses that share the same lyrical content. Also the melodies vary in all of the three verses, the last verse is sung a fifth higher then the second and the first verse. The song begins with a spoken “Jimmy, come back” phrase and is followed by a drum fill that introduces the disco beat. The disco beat is ornamented with different kinds of sound effects that add details to the otherwise monotonous disco beat that breaks only once at the end of the song after the last bridge. During this break M.I.A. is signing the “Jimmy Aaja” part and the violins are playing a suspensive harmonious fragment that culminates to a rapid tremolo before erupting back into the hook. After this last hook the beat stops and the song ends with M.I.A. saying in a teared-up voice: “Jimmy, I know you hear me sing”.

If the disco beat and the Bollywood hook make the song sound cheerful and playful, the lyrics of 'Jimmy' are in a contradiction to all that. The song is basically a love song, or a song about one-sided love, but in the first verse the attention of the listener is caught by bringing up the genocide in Rwanda: “When you go Rwanda Congo/Take me on ya
genocide tour/Take me on a truck to Darfur/Take me where you would go”. In an interview (Breihan 2007) M.I.A. has mentioned that the song is about a journalist who asked her to come out on a date to Rwanda and promised to take her on safari and a genocide tour. The absurdity of pursuing a romantic interest, while she was witnessing the extreme poverty in Liberia and he in Rwanda, motivated M.I.A. to write the questionable lyrics to 'Jimmy'. However this backstory is not well known by the wider audiences and therefore the listeners are left with a catchy song with some disturbing lyrics.

Although the first verse mentions genocide, Rwanda, Congo, and Darfur the rest of the lyrics are just projecting the protagonist longing after someone who is keeping their distance. Still the first verse sets a certain tone for the rest of the song even if the other verses are not as shocking as the first. What adds to the mix of politically sensitive material are the openly sexual proposals of the songs protagonist. The end of the first verse is following: “Got static on ya satellite phone/Got to get you safe at home/Got to get you somewhere warm/So you get me all alone”. The other sexual reference can be found on the bridge where M.I.A. sings “You told me that you're busy/Your loving makes me crazy/I know that you hear me/Start acting like you want me”. During the time when this song was written the conflict of Darfur was still active and the “genocide tour” mentioned in the first verse is followed by a wish to take the protagonist of the song to Darfur. The “Jimmy” of the song might not be one of the “good guys” but someone who is part of the conflict and has access to satellite phones and Internet, which is mentioned in the second verse when he “hits” her “on AIM”\(^7\). On the other hand the romance in the song could also be between a reporter or someone working for a humanitarian organization and a local woman. The inequality of the lovers is anyhow evident and the protagonist is questioning; “are you coming, are you going, are you leaving, are you staying”. Either way there is an imbalance between the lovers and the two topics of the song, the genocide and romance.

The Bollywood styled video of 'Jimmy' directed by Nezar Khammal adds yet another layer to the song. M.I.A. has not emphasized her South Asian looks in her music videos

\(^7\) AIM is an Internet text messaging program.
or in her public image, but in this video she is taking on the role of an Indian goddess. She and her backup dancers are all dressed up in golden Indian style outfits with golden headpieces and jewelry. The video starts with a close-up shot of M.I.A.'s face and as the disco beat comes along we see an upper torso shot of her in front of her backup dancers who are lined up behind her and move their arms to make it seem like one person has several of them. Behind them neon glowing stars are sparkling against the black background. A few close-up shots of M.I.A.'s face are cut in between the different hand illusions the dancers are making. When she gets to the “Jimmy Aaja” section the other scene of the video is shown for a short while. Here contemporary dressed M.I.A. who is wearing her hair straight and short is shown dancing with two other women. After this the video returns to the opening scene where the background has changed from stars to dancing video game-like figures. The dancers and M.I.A. keep doing Bollywood style dance movements and amongst these shots we see shots from the white background scenes. It is not until the third verse where new material is seen. Now a close-up of M.I.A. in sunglasses is seen in several floating cubes against the same video game-like background. Until the end of the video these cubes, golden dressed M.I.A. and the dancers, and silhouettes of M.I.A. and the dancers in front of the white background are alternating.

The bright colored and glittering video is approaching the song with a more disco-like manner rather than underlining its political lyrics. Masking one thing with another is a strategy M.I.A. employs to get her videos into the music channels and programs. For example, had the video contained film material from Rwanda it most likely would not have received any airtime on television. However by hiding the genocide references under a pile of glittering gold she actually challenges some other issues. M.I.A.’s take on an Indian goddess can be seen as a stereotypical role she herself has always tried to avoid. Her own personal style never over accentuates her femininity or sexuality, but here she suddenly takes up this role of a woman goddess that plays with the exotic non-western imagery people want to attribute to her. Setting the contemporary clad M.I.A. against the golden clad M.I.A. seems to be a way to point out that the whole goddess part is nothing but parody of what she could be. In other words the Bollywood themed
song gave her a possibility to play with the western/non-western roles as well as show her sexuality in a non-exploiting way.

6.5 Paper Planes (2007i)

The most successful hit of M.I.A.’s career so far has been ‘Paper Planes’ which was the third single from her 2007 Kala album. However, wider audiences did not discover the song until it appeared on the soundtracks of two major American films: Pineapple Express (2008) and Slumdog Millionaire (2008). ‘Paper Planes’ is based on a drum and guitar riff borrowed from Clash's 'Straight to Hell' (1982) that is looped throughout the song. Another musical reference can be found in the chorus that has the same lyrical and rhythmical structure as Wreckx-N-Effect's 'Rump Shaker' (1992).

The song begins with a short intro where the Clash sample is accompanied with a bass drum pulsing steadily to quarter beats and the first verse starts with an upbeat. On top of the steady common pulse and the Clash sample that runs in eight notes the bass line, clapping backbeats, and hi-hats are building a more complex rhythmical texture. The song follows a form of A, A1, B, C, A, B, D, B with an intro and outro. The verses A and A1 are all very similar with some rhythmical and harmonious changes. The C part after the first chorus is alike the verses A and A1 but its melody alters enough for it to be its own part. Harmoniously the song is a very stable ensemble of a I-V-IV-I or D-A-G-D chord pattern and the melody remains within one octave throughout the song.

'Paper Planes' culminates into the chorus, which is a dynamic mixture of catchy lyrics and powerful sound effects. Here M.I.A. is singing “All I wanna do is/(BANG BANG BANG BANG)/and a (CLICK, KA-CHING) and take your money”. The first bang sounds are gunshots, the click is the sound of a gun being charged and the ka-ching is a sound from an opening cash machine. The harsh and arrogant refrain is also dubbed with children's voices that are backing up M.I.A.'s vocals. In general children's voices

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8 ‘Paper Planes’ has sold more than 3.6 million copies in the United States (RIAA 2012).
represent innocence and happiness but here with the brutal sound effects the resolutions is rather disturbing and sarcastic. The same kind of ironic child-like trolling is heard on the D part where M.I.A. is singing by herself "Some, some, some I, some I murder/some I, some I let go”.

As mentioned above the lyrics of 'Paper Planes' are provocative, rebellious and created to cause a stir. The main themes of the lyrics are illegal immigration, drug dealing, terrorism, and third world poverty, depending on the point of view from which one considers them. The first verse begins with M.I.A. singing: “I fly like paper, get high like planes/If you catch me at the border, I got visas in my name/If you come around here, I make ’em all day/I get one done in a second if you wait”. The following verse states: “Sometimes I like sitting on trains/Every stop I get to, I’m clocking that game/Everyone’s a winner, we're making our fame/Bona fide hustler making my name”. Already in these two first verses the dichotomy of the west and the non-western world is evident. There are the “I” and “we” of the song that make fake visas, are “clocking that game” which means to sell drugs, especially crack, and are making their name, becoming “bona fide hustlers”, well-appreciated and respected persons in the ghetto who have gained their reputation by selling guns, drugs, and/or women. The “you” in the lyrics is someone from the outside who only catches the others on the borders and is invited to watch what is going on in the world of the song's protagonist.

The infamous chorus with all its cheeky attitude can be interpreted more as an ironical view on what people supporting anti-immigration have on their minds rather than as a direct threat to rob and kill them. Also the terrorist and pirate references on the C part can be viewed differently. Here M.I.A. sings: “Pirate skulls and bones/Sticks and stones and weed and bombs/Running when we hit ’em/Lethal poison for the system”. Instead of taking it literally as a terrorist reference, one can also assimilated it with music business and big labels attitude towards illegal music sharing online.

The third verse brings attention back to the Clash sample when M.I.A. makes a clear reference to the song 'Straight to Hell'. Here she sings: “We pack and deliver like UPS trucks/Already going hell just pumping that gas”. In the chorus of 'Straight to Hell' they
sing, “go straight to hell, boys”, a place where the protagonist of M.I.A.’s song is already on her way. This reference does not just link M.I.A. with Clash but sets her into also a larger context of artist and bands that have had a political message in their music. The laconic statement of ‘going to hell’ illustrates how many people living in poverty feel about life in general: it does not matter what one does when nothing can change the situation into which one is born.

Instead of shooting a video more like 'Bird Flu' (2007c) or 'Bucky Done Gun' (2005d), M.I.A. decided to make the video for 'Paper Planes' in New York and it was her first video made in the United States. Together with the director Bernard Gourley, M.I.A. managed to make a video that did not underline the violent gun sounds heard on the track but approached the song in a more subtle and humorous way. In the video M.I.A. is seen on the streets of New York, in a grocery store, and most importantly selling sandwiches from a van which the customers are paying with either cash or with jewelry and watches.

The black and white opening shot shows paper planes floating in the air towards Manhattan over the Brooklyn Bridge. After this we see quick shots of a street scene in black and white, M.I.A. in the van, and a close-up of the van with a skull painted on the hood, the two last images in color. When M.I.A. starts singing the first verse she is seen standing on stairs, leading probably to the metro or somewhere underground combined with shots of her with the rapper Afrikan Boy (who also raps in the song 'Hustle' in Kala) in the sandwich van, making and selling sandwiches to customers. In between these two scenes there are black and white street shots with paper planes flying in the air. When the second verse starts M.I.A. is introduced in a new scene in front of a cloth store and now in between the previous scenes and the new one, are also close-up shots of an old-fashioned cash register and money disappearing and reappearing.

During the first chorus the same imagery is seen but with more interaction with the rhythm and content of the song. Sharp black and white shots of the streets of New York are seen in the same pulse with the gunshots as well as M.I.A. imitating the shoots with hand gestures. The cash register is filmed opening at the same time the cash register
sound is heard and a shot of content M.I.A. counting the money and flipping through the bills are also edited to the chorus parts. In the next verse M.I.A. and Afrikan Boy are sitting in a diner, then a quick shot of M.I.A. buying groceries in a small store and counting money, hanging in a video rental store, and when she sings “No one on the corner has swagger like us” there is a shot of M.I.A. with her “posse” walking and dancing down the streets in colorful and outrageous outfits.

As the chorus reappears there is similar imagery from the first chorus scenes, but now there are more shots of money with a shot of fake golden watches inserted in between. The gun shooting hand gestures cannot be interpreted too violent because while doing them, and in fact throughout the whole video, M.I.A. is seeing smiling and dancing around. There is no sign of actual guns or drug use. The only real reference to drug use is M.I.A.’s gesture of injecting a needle on her arm when she sings: ”Lethal poison trough their system”. The focus here is rather on making money, making profit, and the money shots are in a way making fun of the way hip hop and pop videos show money. By selling sandwiches, she is actually earning her money and working hard for it.

Towards the end of the video there is an interesting cameo of Mike D. and Ad Rock from a famous hip hop group Beastie Boys. Usually cameos are representing the artists respect for one another, but here it seems that there is a even deeper meaning behind their visit. The shot of politically active Beastie Boys paying their sandwiches to M.I.A. with a Rolex might represent that these artists never paid too much interest in making a lot of money, their musical ambitions were more important than just getting rich. This symbolic gesture reflects how money is just secondary to political ideology. The video ends with a scene of the Brooklyn Bridge with more and more paper planes flying in and M.I.A. driving the sandwich van away from the camera with all the paper planes following her. This final shot can be seen as M.I.A. leading the way to the people with “paper plane visas”, the illegal immigrants who have no voice of their own can follow her tracks.
6.6 Born Free (2010a)

'Born Free' was the first single from M.I.A.'s third album MAYA (2010e) revealing a more aggressive and manifesting sound. The song mixes elements from punk, rock, and noise music and the core of 'Born Free' is built around a distorted guitar riff from the electronic punk band Suicides' 'Ghost Rider' (1977). The rock group instrumentation of the song with bass guitars, keyboards, and heavy drums show a new side of M.I.A. that has not been heard on her previous albums.

The song begins with a bass drum beating a steady common pulse and the snare drum starting from half notes and in the next bar dividing the rhythm into eight notes, then to sixteenth notes, accelerating all the way into an intensive drum fill before the distorted guitar riff suddenly takes over the pulse. The maniac guitar riff is played throughout the song with few general pauses as exceptions. Although the song has a verse-refrain form, the continuous guitar riff at the background makes it sound like it is constantly moving and going forward. Because the drumming and the guitar riff give the song its pulsation, any breaks from this pulse stand out and the pauses are used as powerful effects to create tension before choruses or the bridge.

After introducing the guitar riff the song goes to the first verse. Throughout the song M.I.A. is singing in a voice that has been distorted and has a lot of echo. Her usually more hip hop styled delivering is now replaced with more punk-like vocals. The drums stop when M.I.A. starts singing the first verse, leaving only the guitar riff pulse to accompany her. When she gets to the second half of the first verse, there is first a beat on the first word “Got myself an interview...” which is being followed by a drum fill that introduces the drum beat again. The pre-chorus is inserted in the first verse, but as the same lyrics and same built up, happens at the end of the second verse, it can be seen as an pre-chorus. When she repeats the second last phrase of the pre-chorus, which is actually a repetition of the two previous sentences, the guitar riff pulse stops while the drums keep on beating. The pulse is then back on the last sentence of the pre-chorus and then throughout the chorus itself that follows next. This little break however tells the listener that something, in this case the chorus, is about to come.
The chorus ends with both drumming and the pulse stopping for a second. This one bar pause is not completely silent because the echoing vocals still remain and now a ticking pulse, such as from a metronome, can be heard in the background. The second verse begins with an upbeat “You can...” with the pulse and the drumming back in the picture. The pre-chorus appears in the same way from the verse but this time during the second last repetitive phrase only the bass line from the guitar riff pulse is left in the background. The last phrase is accompanied with the normal pulse and a drum fill leading to the chorus with the full power of the song. A new element is introduced when a beeping distorted horn sound appears off beat during the chorus.

Another one bar pause from the drums and the guitar pulse is heard between the second chorus and the bridge. Here the last high note on the vocals is left echoing while a bongo drum sounding rhythm pattern is leading up to the bridge. During the bridge part the vocals are accompanied with the pulse, which is cumulatively getting more distorted and louder. Also the horn element reappears in the bridge and stays until the end of the song. The drums re-enter with a drum fill similar to the very beginning of the song and lead into a different pre-chorus of only two sentences “Oh Lord...” There is a one beat pause before getting back to the chorus where M.I.A. sings “And tell 'em!” The song ends with echoing vocals lingering on top of the metronome sound that was already heard during the break after the first chorus.

If the song sounds more aggressive than M.I.A.’s previous recordings, so do the straightforward lyrics. ‘Born Free' seems to be a culmination of all the themes and views of society, immigration, and politics that she has previously promoted in her songs. The cynical and deterministic view of the world is combined with an optimistic and encouraging statement of the chorus: “I was born free”. An individual can still change the world, take part in action, and more importantly was born free to do whatever he or she wants.

The first verse criticizes the capitalistic thinking of always achieving more: “Yeah men made powers/Stood like a tower, higher, higher, hello/And the higher you go, you feel
lower, oh/I was close to the end staying undercover/Staying undercover/With a nose to the ground, I found my sound”. It also puts M.I.A. in a comparison with that world. She herself kept to the “ground”, in other words, did not sell out but found her way of doing things with her own rules. The last part of the verse can be interpreted as autobiographical or reflecting how hard people have to work in order to make it in the world. “Got myself an interview tomorrow/I got myself a jacket for a dollar/And my nails are chipped, but I'm eager/And the car doesn't work so I'm stuck here”.

The pre-chorus turns the underlying frustration into real action: “Yeah, I don't wanna live for tomorrow/I push my life today/I throw this in your face when I see ya/I got something to say/I throw this shit in your face when I see ya/Cause I got something to say”. This provocative statement is then followed with the one sentence chorus “I was born free”. Focus on the second verse is on idealistic but phlegmatic citizens who complain yet will not make a difference. “You could try to find ways to be happier/You might end up somewhere in Ethiopia/You can think big with your idea/You ain't never gonna find utopia/Take a bite out of life, make it snappier yeah/Ordinary gon' super trippier/So I check shit cause I'm lippier/And split a cheque like slovakia”. M.I.A. is referring to herself here as someone who listens to no lies and is willing to confront and question leaders and politicians. “Splitting cheques” can be seen as her not taking money to keep quiet with a clever political metaphor in it.

In the bridge M.I.A. is putting herself in the spotlight and taking a self-conscious approach in what she sings about: “I don't wanna talk about money, 'cause I got it/And I don't wanna talk about hoochies, 'cause I've been it/And I don't wanna be that fake, but you can do it/And imitators, yeah, speak it”. This phrase is also said in a more speaking way than singing and the pause on the drums is supporting the statementing tone of this section. After this M.I.A. breaks into singing “Oh Lord!Whoever you are, yeah, come out wherever you are/And tell 'em!” taking a religious element as a part of the songs occurring themes. She is challenging religions, daring gods to appear, come out from hiding. Calling out for god, from any religion, to support her manifesto of been born free is a final way to reach to people. If nothing before this convinced them to believe in her statement, there is a higher power behind her now backing up her views.
What really made this song known and also created a small scandal is the short movie music video of it, which was made by Romain Gavras. Considering that 'Born Free' was M.I.A.'s first single from her new album, she made sure it did not go unnoticed and the brutal material caused it to be banned in several countries. Unlike her other videos M.I.A. herself is not starring in it and the harsh plot depicts religious, ethnic or any minority's persecution by presenting an apocalyptic scene where red haired people are all gathered together to be exterminated by a violent military. The video is filmed in the United States and the military troops shown in it are American. The concept of the video is however universal, this is what can happen and is happening all over the world, and by setting it into the western world with white people against each other, she has managed to portray the horrors of war from a point of view that also touches the western audiences.

The video opens with a street scene of a big city that looks like Los Angeles. There is a slowed down siren-like sound heard on the background before the actual song begins. A military vehicle followed by a bus are seen cruising on almost abandoned empty streets and there are a few close-ups of the army men or law enforcement officers inside the vehicle as well as on top of the roofs of buildings along the street. When the drumbeat is introduced the oppressive atmosphere of the beginning changes into full action and now guns and batons are also shown. The running steps of a S.W.A.T. team that is entering an apartment building are mixed on the soundtrack as are all the realistic screaming and banging sounds throughout the video. The guitar riffs starts when the troops seen at the beginning are pulling over and jumping out of the car in front of the same building. A woman at the lobby runs towards the police team trying to stop them but she is taken down by a single stroke and hit a few times on the ground. This surprisingly violent act at the very beginning sets the tone of the video making the viewer expect for the worst to happen.

A close-up of an old man who is sitting in his room smoking is showed when M.I.A. starts singing. The camera stays still on the man's face during the first two sentences but then zooms to the background where the S.W.A.T. team is going through his apartment.
In the next scene a middle-aged couple is making love on the bed when the police break their door, enter the room and pull them apart violently. During this scene M.I.A.’s verse breaks and only the echoing background guitar riff is left playing turning the focus more on what is going on visually then in the song. The pause continues into the following scene where the police with shields are throwing a smoke bomb or tear gas into an apartment. When they close the door with a bang M.I.A.’s vocals reappear with a crescendo. After harassing all the other neighbors the police officers finally come to an apartment where they find a young men hiding in the shower and take him with them. Between these key scenes there are several shots where the officers are hitting people with batons and shots showing the shocked expressions of people being attacked by no apparent reasons in their own homes.

The radical theme of the video does not appear until the police escort the man out of the building and into the bus that was following the military car. The shot cuts from the man’s face into the other captivates in the bus who are all young men with red hair. At this same moment the music breaks and is replaced with a high pitch note followed by the same alarm sounding effect then at the beginning of the video. To see only red haired people in the bus together with the oppressive music create a shocking and powerful image. There is also a shot of a picture painted on the wall that shows red haired people with guns and army clothes with a text saying “Our day will come”. As the bus drives through the streets a few resisting and free red haired people are throwing rocks and bottles at the cars and lifting their fists up in the air to show support for the others. When this is over the music comes back and M.I.A. repeats the pre-chorus’s last sentences and the song continues to the chorus.

The bus drives on a desert road and through gates that has a sign saying 'Danger, mines'. There are more army men waiting inside the gates and the young men are ordered aggressively to get off the bus. The song continues to the bridge and the chorus but without the drums making the song loop with an echo at the background. There is a disturbingly realistic image taken from a distance where the red haired men are on their knees in front of the army men. Images like this immediately create connections to wars and especially to the leaked images taken with cell phones at places like Guantanamo
Bay. Through the background bass riff the officer can be heard yelling at the men to cross the field but the horrified men stand still shocked and unsure what to do. While the bass gets louder the officer points the gun against the head of the youngest boy in the crowd and shoots him in cold blood right in front of the camera. At this point all the realistic yelling sounds disappear and the oppressing music with keyboards and violins take over for the rest of the song while the bass still stays at the background. The men run across the field while the army men in their jeep follow and watch the mines exploding and killing them. The man they picked up at the beginning of the video starts running away from the mine field two other officers behind him, and for a while there is a moment of hope for him to escape before he trips and the police reach him and start to hit him with the batons. The video ends with overall shots of the field where the air is filled with flying body parts, dirt and smoke, and the final cut is on the expressionless face of the other officer who just beat a man to death.

The video of 'Born Free' is disturbing, provocative and outrageous, but makes its point so well that it does not go overboard. A video like this is never shown on music television or on music programs but it shows how strong impact a music video can have. With this video M.I.A. addressed both the issues going on in Sri Lanka as well as in the world in general. War on terrorism and the civil war of Sri Lanka are a distant and far away matter to western people, something that does not happen at their countries nor affect their everyday lives. Through this video, and especially through the red haired characters, M.I.A. managed to show the madness and irrationality that comes when one minority is being oppressed. She was also able to present her shocking and morally complex idea that violent oppression can and should be met with violent resistance. Something that in the era of war on terrorism should not be stated out loud, not to mention shown in a music video. The video does not really take a stand, it just shows an episode to the viewer and it is left to them to decide what to make out of it and to further discuss it. M.I.A.'s role is to provide the first move and it is up to the audiences to respond to it.
An upbeat synth-pop song 'XXXO' is a complete opposite to the aggressive sounding 'Born Free' better representing the overall electronic and futuristic sound of the album *MAYA* (2010e). The song brings forth issues concerning worry over social media and how people represent themselves in it as well as supports a feminist point of view. Especially young people do not always realize that the things they upload online can be downloaded and used by anyone. The chorus sums out the pressures of being in the public eye whether it is the major media or any social media application: “You want me to be/Somebody who I'm really not”.

The song follows a straightforward pop song structure where first comes the verse followed by a pre-chorus which then leads to the chorus. This cycle is repeated three times and at the end the chorus lingers on with few alternations. The pulse of the song comes from various drum sounds and electronic sound effects that give the song its cold and sharp sound. Off beat rhythmic figures are adding variations to the common pulse supported by bass drum and clapping back beats. The overall synthetic and minimalist soundscape of the song consists of synthetic keyboards, distorted bass or guitar line and different electronic bloops and beeps.

The hook of the chorus is created both by M.I.A.'s repetitive and harmoniously stable singing and with the progressive melody figure of the synthesizers that rise by an octave four times together with every new sung phrase. In the second verse there is a new element when the keyboards play chords supporting the harmony. After the second chorus the highest synthesizer melody is left playing when the third verse comes in and keeps playing until the end of the song. Also the drums are lighter in the third verse leaving out the ornamenting off beats and the clapping sounding back beats, giving more room to what is been sung. The third verse could also be seen as a bridge but since the melodic and rhythmic material are so similar to the previous verses it makes more sense to classify it as a verse. After the pre-chorus and the chorus a new melody is heard while M.I.A. is still repeating the “You want me/You want me to be”. Actually the melody is heard throughout the song in the back of the choruses but is now coming
forward when the sung chorus is left out.

The lyrics of 'XXXO' are reflecting the pressures of being a pop star and a sex symbol, but in a more general way they are taking up issues related to sexual representations in social media. The title of the song 'XXXO' is a mixture of a common shortening of hugs and kisses “XOXO” and “XXX” which refers to X-Rated material such as pornography. From a phonetic point of view in the pre-chorus where M.I.A. repeats the “XXXO” several times one can hear both the words 'sex' and 'excess sex'. Especially this can be heard between the last pre-chorus and the chorus where the “XXXO” is put into a fast loop for a while, making all the X's mixed into each other. This repetitive double meaning leads then to the chorus that in a frank way states: “You want me to be/Somebody who I'm really not”. It is extremely important that a public person such as M.I.A. takes up an issue that concerns both her and her audiences. Social media is a rather new platform for people to express their emotions and show parts of their lives, but the rules for what to do and what not to do are not yet clear for everyone. Although this lack of common rules concerns everyone it is mostly young girls and women who are playing with their sexuality and testing the limits by uploading imprudent and provocative photos of themselves.

In the first verse M.I.A. sings: “Time after time/You've been coppin' mine/But can I have a good time at yours tonight/Cause everytime we try to get close/There is always something big I'm thinking about”. Coppin' means to buy something or to take something (Urban dictionary 2012), so here it can be seen as a reference of “liking” someone virtually by downloading or sharing files with them. The “something big” she's thinking about could be referring to the consequences of what would happen, if the couple met in real life. This, like the rest of the song, can be interpreted from both M.I.A.'s point of view as well as from any social media using person's point of view. Flirting with audiences is similar in both cases, when the interaction between the one who sets oneself as an object and the viewer is almost inevitably one sided and out of balance.
The second verse sets a new and more disturbing tone to the song as M.I.A. sings: “A knock at the door/Then we hit the floor/And all I know is that you leave me wanting more”. Here the couple flirting online are actually meeting which creates a reference to online prostitution, first setting up the deal on the Internet and then meeting for real. However this can also be seen as just a mutual date since the verse continues in a following way: “I don't let it show/But I think you know/Cause you're tweeting me like Tweety Bird on your iPhone”. Mentioning iPhones and 'tweeting' really connects the song with the whole smart phone and social media frenzy where everyone can be reached all the time and every single thought can be whenever shared with everyone else.

As in other M.I.A. songs it is more the mélange of different things that create a certain message or atmosphere. Here it is the ambiguous combination of the “XXXO's” of the pre-chorus and the “You want me to be/Somebody who I'm really not” of the chorus together with the verses. The third verse states the songs message most clearly: “Upload a photo/See below/If you like what you see/You can download and store/We can find ways/To expand what you know/I can be that actress, you be Tarantino”. To receive admiration and popularity online, one needs to have many 'hits' in other words many visitors at their pages and many downloads. By providing appealing images of oneself, one reaches fame in the online society. The sexually open invitation to download and store a photo of the songs protagonist gets an even more disturbing undertone when mentioning that the other part could be Tarantino. Tarantino refers to a famous director Quentin Tarantino who is known from excessively violent and harsh films. To sing that “I can be that actress, you be Tarantino” show that she is letting herself to be used in a brutal and violent way, maybe to be filmed in a pornographic way.

To support the song’s suggestive and explicit themes is the video of 'XXXO' that plays with the common imagery of different social media. In addition to this, the video also uses various images done in GIF animation, which are purposely giving the video an early Internet era look that is nowadays concerned to be outdated and tasteless. M.I.A. shot the video herself and it features her own art work, English words that are written in

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9 GIF stands out for Graphic Interchange Format, which is a bitmap image format that can also support animation.
Arabic calligraphy as well as these cartoon-like frames and flower decorations. M.I.A. is portraying herself very sensually and seductively; her long hair is open and she is wearing bright red lipstick with lots of jewelry. Because of the over the top background images, it is obvious to the viewer that she is playing a role, making an ironic statement rather than really wanting to appear that way. In spite of her more feminine looks and golden outfits, she is still not oversexualized but her passivity and blank expressions make her look like an unwilling object. This illustrates well the songs chorus of wanting to be somebody who she really is not as well as the problem of being taken as a sex symbol. As a contrast to her passive and phlegmatic appearance on the video there is a scene where a panther’s and M.I.A.’s faces are put on top of each other to affirm that there is an active and powerful person behind this cynical take on a victim of popular media.

In addition to the kitschy flickering frames, shining stars, diamonds, galloping unicorns, swans and panthers, there are a lot of images related to Arabic culture. First of all as previously mentioned there are several English words such as the title of the song, M.I.A.’s name, and words from the song written in Arabic style. Secondly there are several images of swords, which are an important symbol in the Arabic culture. On the handle of these oriental swords are M.I.A.’s initials and few times in the video these swords are also seen crossing each other like in pirate flags or some modern jihadist flags. Existing side by side with these Arabic symbols are also the corporate symbols of MySpace, YouTube and iPhones. Many of the unicorn and rose GIF’s are put on people’s MySpace pages to express liking and acceptance, a link to YouTube is made by using images of their control bar and a speech bubble similar to iPhone appears with text saying “XXXO” and then “send”.

Although there is no straightforward sexual imagery, there are several hidden sexual innuendos. Instead of using her whole body or sexy outfits, she is using her face and mouth to make sexual representations. There are several close-ups of her red lips in different frames singing along the song as well as shots of her eyes with a heavy make-up on. Among these subtle images there is also a reference to the excessive hip hop culture when M.I.A. has diamond jewelry shaped in X’s and O’s put inside her mouth.
Set into the context of the video the whole jewelry and 'bling bling' oriented hip hop scene looks rather ridiculous and sexist. Another little symbol connecting the video's material to more provocative material is a scene where M.I.A.'s eyes are covered with a black box used to hide people's identities in videos or photos. Here it immediately changes how M.I.A. is seen, suddenly, although everything else in the video stays the same, this black box that covers her identity makes the whole set seem indecent and inappropriate. The video ends with a ironic phrase taken from MySpace: “Thank you for adding me” while M.I.A. stares at the camera from behind. With little elements like these M.I.A. manages to criticize the sexist and voyeuristic aspect of the social media, the desperate need to be seen and accepted by a wider audience as well as the idea of a female pop star created by media and the music industry.
7 CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study was to investigate the role of politics in M.I.A.'s career both in her music as well as in her public representations. By dividing the research into three wider sections, technology, culture and gender, it was possible to create a versatile entity of how different elements together support and create political message and power hierarchies in M.I.A.'s music. The analyses at the end provide a direct link to M.I.A. music reflecting the ideas from the previous chapters. When asking at the beginning what makes M.I.A.'s music political, it is now obvious that there are several smaller factors, such as using new technology to challenge the ownership of music, breaking up existing norms about cultural ownership and fighting against the sexists images related to women in popular music, that all together challenge different types of assumptions that exists in the popular music. She is not only political through her music but also through her acts and the way she handles the media and the music industry. Despite sounding naïve, everything about M.I.A. can be viewed as political because she has managed through these little efforts which function as building blocks to create a public image of herself that is filled with various political connotations.

The reasons behind M.I.A.'s success also lay in these same various political elements that can be found both in her music and in her visual images. Although her lyrics and public statements are highly opinionated, the danceable and energetic music that combines different genres and styles have attracted a wide audience including listeners who do not care about her political views. The mix of different styles like hip hop, rap, pop, rock, electro, bhangra, reggae and techno, have reached specific music fans and made her an artist that has crossed over and reached people even in the opposite genres. M.I.A.'s unique and fusion style, seen in her music videos and pictures, has also appealed to people and have made her political messages look intriguing and “cool”, and has also been a good way for M.I.A. to brand herself as something different to more controversial and genre related styles. Through provocative videos, songs, and statements M.I.A. has built her political status and fame, but becoming successful has also meant promoting and selling her music under the record labels rules and terms.
Finding different kinds of political dimensions in M.I.A.'s music has been the most rewarding result of this study and one of the interesting discoveries was her relation to feminist thinking. In general M.I.A.'s music has not been viewed or referred to as feminist but through her music, lyrics and videos she can be seen representing an independent and more multifaceted images of women. In her songs she has sung about human traffic, sexism, sexual power hierarchies, and the pressures of society and music industry to look a certain way. Especially her song and the video of 'XXXO' confront the problems of sexual representations in social media and in the Internet in general. When analyzing M.I.A.'s music videos one of the essential finding was the ways she represented herself without over-sexualizing or hiding her womanhood even when parodying different female stereotypes. This is very important since women in popular music are constantly fighting against discriminating values that are objectifying and classifying women to certain stereotypes.

Since M.I.A. is a relatively new subject to examine, there was a need to try to make an overall view of all the various aspects in her music and her art. Therefore works following this thesis could concentrate on more specific details of her music like rhythms and samples, her visual imagery, or her media discourses and representations. Although her own interviews were used in this study to collect data, it would have been useful and interesting to be able to make a more serious interview with her to provide answers concerning the questions studied in this thesis.

In the evolution of popular music M.I.A. can be seen as representing a new era of musicians that are a product of the more and more globalized world. Without her refugee background, firsthand knowledge of war and experiences of racial discrimination she would not be what the artist M.I.A. she is today. The division between world music and (western) popular music has already started to fade since many musicians are borrowing and being inspired by different styles all over the world. The Internet has been an important tool to be able to access these musical materials and have also created a whole new way of distributing music. M.I.A. has also through her statements and visually through her videos showed the western audiences a side of the
third world not often presented in the public medias or in the entertainment business. The third world in her videos is seen in a positive and empowering way, not hiding the poverty but embracing it, whereas her most provocative and disturbing videos are shot in the United States of America and in the visual world of the Internet. By providing musical material as well as visual that are not heard or seen before in the popular music format, she is opening doors to other musicians and music styles that have lived in the margins of the dominating western popular music culture.
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