Navigating Neoliberalism: Sounds, Spaces, and Success in Kuala Lumpur's Underground Rap Scene

Helen Gypsy McMillian

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NAVIGATING NEOLIBERALISM:

SOUNDS, SPACES, AND SUCCESS IN KUALA LUMPUR’S UNDERGROUND RAP SCENE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology from The College of William & Mary

by

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ABSTRACT:

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia serves as a stronghold of Southeast Asia’s commercially successful hip-hop music industry, and is also home to a thriving underground scene. Concurrent with the growth of hip-hop are the significant urban redevelopments that the city has undergone since the 1990s (Fujita 2010). These notable developments, such as the Petronas Twin Towers and the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, are part of the broader pattern of constructing “global cities” – cities that market distinct urban brand images on a global scale to attract tourism and international investment (Ong 2011). This particular type of urbanism exists within the political economic structure of neoliberalism, which operates as a hegemonic discourse that finds its way into the “commonsense way we interpret, live in, and understand the world” (Harvey 2007, 22), promoting privatization and commodification and structuring our social relations in a distinctly entrepreneurial way (Harvey 2007, Lemke 2001). From May 2019 until the present, I have conducted ethnographic fieldwork on underground hip-hop in Kuala Lumpur, both through participant observation and digital fieldwork. As my research shows, the hip-hop scene is intimately intertwined with neoliberal urbanism. I focus on the types of spaces that the underground rap scene occupies, constructs, and modifies, and how practices of performance, marketing, and self-identification weave in and out of accordance with established neoliberal narratives about success. I argue that the ways that people make, perform, consume, and engage with this scene are extremely complex, and cannot be classified neatly into categories of resistance or cooperation with capitalism, offer new avenues for approaching the materiality and spatiality of rap music, and complicate our understanding of how the discourse of neoliberalism functions.

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not be afraid of critiquing established academics. Sibel Zandi-Sayek, who changed my entire way of thinking about the world, and showed me ways of doing academic work that combined my love of theory with my love of the real, tangible environment that surrounds me. Tomoyuki Sasaki, who really helped me understand neoliberalism and never take any concept for granted. Negar Razavi, who helped me be more confident in my ability to understand hard concepts and how to actually navigate the field of anthropology and all it demands of us. Chinua Thelwell, for introducing me to much of the scholarship that has shaped this project and, through his class, reminding me of why I loved doing this research so much in the first place. And last but certainly not least, Adela Amaral, who completely changed the entire way I approach the world and temporality, and has completely ruined any hope I may have had about enjoying anything without thinking about the broader material implications and inequalities present in every material object and interaction I have, right down to a piece of trash laying on the ground. These professors are all the greatest teachers I could’ve ever hoped for, and I can never fully express the impact they have had on me.

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Everyone who helped me make this project happen, with all its unforeseen challenges, knows how close this thesis is to my heart – even if just for the music I always play. Rather than being another piece of academic work, this thesis has become a vision, a life-consuming effort, my hobby, what I think about when I’m bored. The research I did resulted in me meeting some of the people closest to my heart. This underground scene inspires me, I feel invested in what happens, I am excited to see what occurs in the future between me and all my friends and acquaintances currently doing amazing work in Malaysia. I want to thank every person, circumstance, and moment of pure chance that led me on this path – sometimes I look back on this research process and am truly amazed at what weird incidents I’ve encountered and all the cool, crazy, and talented people I’ve gotten to know.

This zine goes out to the world with the hope that one day, no one will have to suffer and we will all have enough to sustain ourselves and those we love without fear. To the success of every artist interviewed in this project, to Southeast Asian rap making its mark on the hip-hop map, and to a world where we can play rap music at work without our bosses getting mad. “Be brave and be smart,” as Kimjackz says.
PREFACE: WHY A ZINE?

Or, why zines are important for anthropology & the world.

Though you are reading this in the format of a traditional thesis, when I release it for public readership it will be in the format of a zine. For those who may not be familiar with the format of the zine, it’s a small self-published magazine associated with musical subcultures like punk and hip-hop, with both musical and political themes. Born in London’s punk scene during the 1970s, the zine is a great and accessible way to spread ideas, information, and opinions amongst people, and continues to be utilized by anarchists and leftists across the world today. After interviewing so many rappers and seeing the level of creativity within their work, I felt motivated to learn from them and apply that creativity to my own research, in a format that I already have experience with and that has significance in regards to my own politics.

I have two reasons behind my choice to put this thesis in the format of a zine. First, it is important to me to try and continue the do-it-yourself, knowledge-sharing philosophies and methods of hip-hop culture. Second, it’s of utmost importance to me to shake up how we “do anthropology” as “academics.” Who are we writing for, and where is our writing being read? Are we looking for “academic clout” or are we trying to actually make knowledge accessible and shareable? I’ll admit, nothing can ever be one or the other - the very fact I am writing a senior thesis is an act of searching for “academic clout.” But perhaps we also need to focus more time and energy on changing the formats we publish in, taking our writing away from the fancy institutions and make it something ourselves, our friends, and our families would enjoy reading. I also find that the format of a zine helps get my point across as to what my goals are and what I’m trying to say. My academic work isn’t just “academic work,” at least to me. It influences, and is influenced by, everything I do, say, and see, by everyone I talk to - by how I move through the world.

The use of the zine as a material form also ties to the broader ideas I talk about regarding space, materials, and music – the zine is itself a spatial agent, or to say it slightly differently, it influences the space and social context around it. During my second visit to Kuala Lumpur in December, I brought about two hundred copies of zines I had self-published about rap music-related topics, and I handed them out freely at any event I attended. This practice was met with approval, as artists seemed to enjoy seeing their names in print format, and the materiality of the zine gave tangible explanation to what my research really was. The zine proved to possess agency – it was passed from hand to hand, it shaped how people interacted with me and it gave me immediate reason to interact with strangers. The format of the zine allows space for the confusing complexity that accompanies people who create things, such as rappers, and it facilitates social interaction. Though I’m showing relationships, patterns, similarities, and specificities in my discussion of underground rap music in KL, these things will not always connect, for the very basic fact that existence is never coherent - it’s complicated, sometimes it doesn’t make sense.
It is through this material form that I state my “call to action” for anthropology. Anthropologists love to have calls to action – for example, Ferguson and Gupta’s (2002) call for an ethnography of neoliberal governmentality. But my call isn’t theoretical – it’s material, it’s tangible. Scholars both within and outside of academic institutions need to make creative and accessible distillations of important theoretical work, and distribute them in ways that are appealing to the communities that we “study.” This was particularly important for me, as someone who has a deep love and regard for the underground scene in Malaysia, and who wanted my research to not only serve as a reflection of the scene, but also serve as a way of participating and contributing. Like a zine, moving from hand to hand, sitting on a coffee table, rotting in a trash can, the academic work we produce has ripples that spread through broader contexts – why not focus our knowledge-sharing immediately on the communities with which we work, in tangible ways that disrupt the traditional structures of academic knowledge that circulates primarily amongst the same community of researchers? I think that we can come to a better understanding of the world we live in if we consciously work on not just our theory, not just our “research,” but also the materials we use, the ways we tangibly share our research, and how we work with the people we “research.” Rather than public anthropology being one aspect of anthropology, I think that the entirety of the field should be practiced in this manner. People are already doing excellent work within public anthropology, and I want to be part of these efforts to point towards the flaws of academia. Doing good ethnographic work isn’t just about methods, the ethical principles we’re given, and how good we are at writing – it’s about taking a political, social, and material position that may not always be accepted, and just trying to be a thoughtful person. I hope to convey an appreciation for the material implications and messiness of ethnography within this zine, and open new possibilities for approaching public engagement in anthropology as someone who seeks to be an active participant in this scene.

WHO’S ON THE MIC?
An introduction to the artists I interviewed for this project.

→ F. Rider & Qiba – Reapergang: F. Rider and Qiba are both prolific artists who come together to form part of Reapergang. Qiba, with his RnB influenced vocals, and F. Rider, with his experimental production and rapping style, make a dynamic duo with an impressive stage presence. Based in Kuala Lumpur, they’ve made waves in the underground scene, performing at many gigs including Hoax Vision-associated shows as well as shows at the now-closed Transit Mart (RIP) in SS15, Subang Jaya. Pairing their attention to marketing + social media presence with a close alliance to an underground ethos of home studio recording, collaboration, and musical authenticity, Reapergang played a formative role in this research. Songs to check out: “Eyes” by Qiba, “Mugen” by F. Rider, and “Guava” by Reapergang.

→ A-Kid Cina: Both as part of the collective Krayziesoundz as well as in solo work, A-Kid Cina has shown us the absolute definition of what it means to have a good flow. Combining several languages in his lyrics
with his distinctive voice, A-Kid is one of the rappers pushing the scene forward, bringing others up with him through collaborations and features. 

**Songs to check out:** “Gaji Masuk” and “Inferno.”

→ **Confucius:** One of Kuala Lumpur’s most underrated rappers, Confucius doesn’t just bring skill to the mic – he also brings a depth of knowledge about the scene and everyone in it that most people might not have. As part of the group/collective Bedidu, he has a plan and a vision not just for his own career, but everyone in his circle. He’s skilled at production as well! These talents landed him a spot at Good Vibes Fest 2019, which was a great success.  

**Songs to check out:** “We The Mob” and “Move Em Quick.”

→ **Kimjackz:** With his roots in Kuala Lumpur’s punk scene, Kimjackz brings his passion for words, self-love, and energy into both solo upbeat rap tracks as well as in collaboration with Mueizeizzy in their duo MuQeem. He also releases RnB tracks on his Instagram page. Hailing from Bukit Beruntung in Rawang, he’s part of the crew that has created “Rawland.” Subtly infusing his anti-capitalist politics into his creative life, Kimjackz is always okay with just doing his own thing.  

**Songs to check out:** “Jarang Ah Tak Ngam” and “I’m So Good.”

→ **Sisson:** Also coming from Rawang, Sisson is always on top of his social media marketing. A man of many skills, as well as an aspiring leader, Sisson not only raps, but is always seeking new business ideas and opportunities for community work. He’s made a spot for himself on the bridge between underground and mainstream, working with producers such as DJ Fuzz, who is well known in Malaysia’s hip-hop scene.  

**Songs to check out:** “Kena Buat” and “Barang Jadi.”

→ **Mshn:** Mshn is an artist from Subang Jaya who embodies the idea of bending genres. He, like Confucius, is associated with Bedidu. His EP project Morningstar, which was released last summer, is forward-thinking and shows a lot of attention to detail, strong hip-hop influences, and introspection. Very much oriented in the underground, Mshn has proved himself to be one of Kuala Lumpur’s greatest underrated acts. You’ll never see him hanging around in the club – he does his own thing, seeking to perfect his musical craft while chilling with those he’s closest to.  

**Songs to check out:** “Motives” and “Animewhip.”

→ **Dato Maw:** Always on his grind, Dato Maw presents himself as the future not only of Malaysian Chinese (Cina) hip-hop, but hip-hop in Malaysia as a whole. He brings both hardcore influences and more “chill” vibes into his music, combining his love for the hip-hop culture and community with his familiarity with the feng tau and punk scenes of his hometown, Penang. Aided by his label Ban Huat, which seeks to promote Cina music and creativity in the scene and includes producers Kaiote (from Ver2.k), Saucie J, and Franco.$, he’s released several EPs. Dato Maw performs at distinctly underground events, had a very successful tour for the release of his EP Cari Makan last summer, and also performs at larger-scale shows and festivals such as Good Vibes and The Culture.  

**Songs to check out:** “Feng Tau” and “Cari Makan”

→ **Ver2.k:** This intense duo, made up of twin brothers Kaiote and KZ, is one of the best upcoming acts in the underground scene. With extreme hardcore influences, similar to Dato Maw, Ver2.k is closely aligned with Hoax Vision, and recently joined Ban Huat. Having just released their debut album KHON$U, they’ve found a distinct niche for themselves as the “Malaysian Suicide Boys,” except their music is actually way better than Suicide Boys.
**Songs to check out: their collab with Azlers “Wuttoh,” “RUN!” and “Kill Myself.”**

- **IJ:** People know him through Budak Belakang, an education-centered rap music project for youth in Kuala Lumpur. Starting out as one of the Budak Belakang youth, IJ has since made a path for himself not only as a rapper, but as an aspiring producer. With talent and vision, IJ serves as an important part of the Malaysian underground scene, representing a different vein of creativity than Hoax.

- **PFTD:** PFTD, or Muhammad Zami, is a producer, DJ, and all-around friendly guy – he’s always smiling and talking to someone he knows, or hardly knows. He’s recognizable by his shiny gold grilles (a flex) and his signature Blackpink t-shirt, because, as he puts it, he’s into all types of music – not just hip-hop. Though not Cina himself, PFTD has worked closely with individuals in Ban Huat, including Dato Maw and Ver2.k, and is also the DJ for Abubakarxli.

- **Abubakarxli:** Abubakarxli is a prolific young rapper, signed to Def Jam Southeast Asia. He works with commercially successful rappers in Def Jam SEA such as Sonaone and Fariz Jabba. Abubakarxli’s sharp lyricism is paired with trap-type beats and striking music video visuals. He is on the track to the mainstream, but still shows up for the underground, performing at a wide variety of events.

  *Songs to check out: “Korek Blok,” “NiNiNi,” and his verse on “Ijangankeluar.”*

- **Pele L:** Another artist who occupies the role of bridging the underground and mainstream is Pele L. Lyrically talented and beginning to see the fruits of commercial success, Pele L consistently shows up for the hip-hop community by performing at a variety of shows and collaborating with many artists.

  *Songs to check out: “SHE” and “On the Low.”*

- **K-Main:** Skilled at both freestyling and writing, K-Main has released both solo projects as well as collaborations with underground cult icons such as Gard. With a distinctive voice and style, K-Main brings a more classic hip-hop tone to the experimental trends of the underground scene.

  *Songs to check out: “Childrenofcarti” and “Ducati.”*

- **Aesop Cash:** As Singapore’s finest yet most underrated rapper, Aesop Cash has made space for himself in the underground scenes of both Singapore and Malaysia. His flow is impeccable as he raps about a variety of tough topics that all relate to his own personal experiences in life. It’s obvious that he has a vision – and he’s always one step ahead.

  *Songs to check out: “Hella Nice” and “KILT.”*

- **BDK Nip:** As a member of Unknown Radicals, Nip has proven to be a talented lyricist with an ability to put a lot into just a few words. Bringing a genuine type of energy to his music, he also collaborates with his friend, Aesop Cash, as part of Unknown Radicals and as a solo artist.

  *Songs to check out: his verses on “El Pepito” and “Crowd Control!”*

- **Hizzy:** Hizzy is the third and final rapper from Singapore who was interviewed for this research. Also possessing close connections to Malaysia’s scene, Hizzy is unapologetic in his music and isn’t afraid to get on people’s nerves if it gets him where he wants to be. Music isn’t his main gig either – he’s also well versed in business and marketing what people want to see, which shows up particularly in his marketing scheme for his song “Andele.”
MAPS

Please refer to these for information regarding the locations of the events and significant places I discuss. I’ve included some information regarding how long it takes to travel from one place to another, so you can have a basic understanding of the distance between them.

Map 1: broad view of Kuala Lumpur metropolitan area/Selangor state

1. Kuala Lumpur International Airport, Sepang (1 hour drive to city center)
2. Rawang (45 minute drive from Sungai Buloh)
Map 2: closer view of KL city and surrounding metropolitan area.
1. Stadium Bukit Jalil, location of The Culture (40 minute train ride from city center with multiple connections)
2. TTDI, locality where Safehouse KL is located/where Atas Maulana was held (need car to access, but easy to find)
3. SS15 Subang Jaya, where Transit Mart was located (45 minute train ride from city center)
4. Pasar Seni, where Moutou is located (easily accessible by train)
5. Sungei Wang Plaza, Bukit Bintang, where the Projek Jahat event was held (easily accessible by train)
6. Bangsar, where many of the clubs that rappers perform or MC at are located (need to take short drive from train)
7. The locality where I lived August 2019 and December 2019 to January 2020 (relatively easy access to everything with train)
8. Setiawangsa, Ampang, where I lived May to July 2019 (far away from everything, easy but long access to everything with train)
1. INTRODUCTION

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia serves as a stronghold of Southeast Asia’s commercially successful hip-hop music industry, and has been home to some of the region’s biggest original hip-hop acts since the 1990s (Wiser 2014). In recent years, the city’s underground rap scene has also risen in prominence, aided by the use of social media and digital streaming platforms. Kuala Lumpur, also referred to as KL, has undergone significant urban redevelopments since the time that hip-hop grew to prominence in Malaysia (Fujita 2010). The notable developments, such as the Petronas Twin Towers and the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, are part of the broader pattern of constructing “global cities” – cities which scholars such as Ong characterize as marketing distinct urban brand images on a global scale to attract tourism and international investment (Ong 2011). This particular type of urbanism exists within the political economic structure of neoliberalism, which David Harvey describes as being a hegemonic discourse which finds its way into the quote “commonsense way we interpret, live in, and understand the world” (Harvey 2007, 22), promoting privatization and commodification and structuring our social relations in a distinctly entrepreneurial way (Harvey 2007, Lemke 2001).

From May 2019 until the present, I have conducted ethnographic fieldwork on underground hip-hop in Kuala Lumpur, both through participant observation and digital fieldwork. As my research shows, the underground hip-hop scene is intimately intertwined with the urban spaces and spatial relationships of neoliberal Kuala Lumpur. I focus on the types of spaces that the underground rap scene occupies, constructs, and modifies, and how practices of performance, marketing, and self-identification weave in and out of accordance with established neoliberal narratives about success. The production and consumption of music and aesthetics in the underground scene signal to and complicate larger patterns of the movement of capital, conceptions of identity, and the construction of space. I argue that the ways that people make, perform, consume, and engage with this scene are extremely complex, and cannot be classified neatly into categories of resistance or cooperation with capitalism.

Two events and what they can tell us

To begin this discussion, it is useful to highlight two distinct spaces that I encountered during my fieldwork in the summer of 2019. Cut to the middle of June, right in the midst of the city’s Hari Raya (Eid al-Fitr) celebrations. I’m on my way to attend a show called Grief Support - I don’t know much of the lineup, nor do I think I’ll know anyone there, but I reassure myself yet again that I must break through my social anxiety and attend the event in the name of my research. Grief Support took place in Moutou, in Pasar Seni, a small neighborhood in the city center historically known to be the hub of residence and business of the city’s Chinese population. The entrance to the venue is in a back alley, covered with graffiti. The place is difficult to find, so Grief Support’s Instagram page had made a detailed video of this
guy named Sheldon explaining how to find the unmarked, seemingly innocuous door in the back alley. You have to call someone to let you in, and then you ascend several flights of narrow stairs where you can find a few random cats hanging out and judging you as you climb.

Finally, you arrive to the rooftop floor, where Moutou is located. It’s a small bar type of arrangement, with a few seats and a counter for serving drinks. The majority of the venue is open roof space, with potted plants and benches. In the main central area there’s a screen projecting images onto the wall, with a mic and instruments being set up. No stage, but the space for the artists is defined by the circle that the crowd creates around the performance – which is only disrupted when people start moshing, which does occur quite frequently. There’s another set of stairs that lead up to a small higher rooftop area with no walls preventing you from the quite far drop to the ground, and it’s here where you can just drink, smoke, and survey the show below through the blue string lights. It’s from this view that you can see the Pasar Seni LRT station just in front of the modernist style National Mosque on one side, and then a large skyscraper construction project on the opposite side. Much could be said about the significance of the urban fabric that surrounds Moutou and the overlapping histories – efforts towards a postcolonial modern national identity with the mosque, and subsequent neoliberal developments in the construction project. The artists performing at Grief Support were all, to different extents, associated with the Malaysian music and art collective/label Hoax Vision, which is a driving force in the underground scene. They host events and promote artists, and Hoax-associated individuals also started a show venue and collaborative space called Safehouse that showcases underground rappers, musicians, producers, and also visual artists.

Cut to about three weeks later, and I am attending one of the largest hip-hop centered events in Kuala Lumpur that occurred that summer - The Culture 2019, a three-day festival focusing on hip-hop culture with beatbox battles, rap concerts, clothing exhibitions, food stalls, and skate comps. Attracting hundreds and hundreds of visitors, the Culture was obviously a huge success, and they prepared for this success well in advance by holding the event at the Bukit Jalil National Stadium, quite far to the south of the city center. There was a huge exhibition hall filled with small Malaysian streetwear brands such as Projek Jahat and TNTCO, and each of the three nights there was a concert with a different lineup, highlighting Malaysian hip-hop artists. Several of these artists, such as Airliftz, and Dato Maw, were associated with Hoax Vision, and they performed alongside some more “commercial” artists such as Sonaone and K-Clique. The Culture has gone on to host a few other smaller yet still quite successful events focused on clothing exhibition with rap performances.

These events, when talked about together, seem quite different. One is small, intimate, underground, very interactive, and is held in a nondescript space that has been repurposed for musical performance. The other is large, commercial, quite public, and the space was built to serve this type of
large-scale performance. However, as my research shows, these two events aren’t that different at all, despite one being “commercial” and one being “underground.” Both of these events highlight hip-hop musical performance through the marketing of real-life spaces and events, and both are deeply situated within their contexts, as we can see by the types of buildings and urban fabrics that surround them. Embedded in the neoliberal urbanism of contemporary Kuala Lumpur, these two aspects of the hip-hop scene, and particularly the relationship between them, can tell us something quite pertinent about how neoliberalism functions in Kuala Lumpur within everyday life and artistic practices, and how this influences the construction of the social self and what it means to be “underground.”

Where events take place is important, and space influences everything – but people also influence space, simultaneously constructing and being constructed by their surroundings, as spatial theorists such as Lefebvre (1991), de Certeau (1984), and others have shown us. It may seem like an obvious thing to state, but that is part of what I seek to do - state the obvious, and then complicate it, complicate our idea of what is taken for granted. All the stuff that happens with a space - the way a crowd forms, the way the artists interact with the crowd, the way the sound system is set up, the presence or absence of a stage, the lighting, the broader spatial context of a venue - these all can tell us something about how underground hip-hop manifests, creates identities and social scenes, and makes movements. For example, why is it so significant that from the venue Moutou, you can see a giant skyscraper being built? Why is it so significant that people always talk about highway tolls and construction everywhere? Why do people wear certain brands and perform in certain spaces? Why are there so many abandoned buildings in Rawang? These things are all related to the process of constructing the city under neoliberal capitalism, and how the creation of music, events, and materials in the underground scene exist within this space. Music, shows, clothes, and conversations all reflect upon this specific context.

2. FOR THE “ACADEMICS”: A SCHOLARLY REVIEW

Who am I in conversation with, and why is their work important?

My work is strongly influenced by anthropological approaches to neoliberalism, namely the Comaroffs (2000) and Coronil (2000). I am also in conversation with authors whose work is situated in the anthropology of the state, particularly Trouillot (2001), Ferguson and Gupta (2002), and Mitchell (2006). Key to mention is also Laura Ann Stoler (2016), Aihwa Ong (2011), and Erin Huang (2012, 2018, 2020), whose work played a formative role in how I approach an analysis of space, debris, ruination, media, and the city. Within hip-hop studies, J. Griffith Rollefson (2017), Russell Potter (1995), Kembrew McLeod (1999), Anthony Kwame Harrison (2014), Robin Kelley (2008), and Geoff Harkness (2012) are of utmost importance due to their work on notions of postcoloniality, the underground, capitalism, and authenticity. In this section, I go briefly into the work of only a few authors mentioned above, who are of
particular importance in how I situate my work within anthropological theory in particular. However, my scholarly influences have accumulated throughout my three years at university, and I would like to briefly note that outside of anthropology, scholars within urban studies, hip-hop studies, and contemporary writers and thinkers within the anarchist ultra-left have greatly influenced the way I do my research and view the world.

This ethnography of underground rap music is based on the work of several key anthropological approaches to neoliberalism. Particularly important in this effort is the work of the Comaroffs, who provide a strong theoretical basis for ethnographic work that focuses on neoliberal capitalism. In “Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming,” they interrogate the changing conceptions and nature of production and consumption under capitalism at the turn of the century – “millennial capitalism,” as they call it. They argue that the techniques and ideologies of neoliberalism work to “intensify the abstractions inherent in capitalism itself: to separate labor power from its human context, to replace society with the market, to build a universe out of aggregated transactions” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000, 305). Neoliberalism builds subjectivities, reimagining people “not as producers from a particular community, but as consumers in a planetary marketplace” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000, 303). And as people are constructed as primarily consumers rather than producers, the experiential contradictions within neoliberalism emerge through the all-too-obvious processes of marginalization and increased instability and insecurity occurring globally.

Aihwa Ong’s introduction to Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global offers some intriguing discussions regarding neoliberalism and urban development processes occurring in cities across Asia. The Comaroffs wrote that global processes emerge in national territories, and “may be transformed in the process, but they remain perceptibly national in their location and operation” (2000, 324). Ong’s work highlights how national spaces, such as capital cities in Asia, are deeply implicated in global processes of neoliberal development that are aiming to create “global cities” – cities that attract foreign investment, tourism, and market national identity and development to a “global” audience – while simultaneously reinforcing the value of the nation. These projects create complex and varied effects across their contexts. As Ong argues, when we study these urban processes occurring in Asia “through a lens that understands them as singular moments in a unified and integrated global process,” we “lose sight of complex urban situations as particular engagements with the global” (2011, 2). This is a valuable perspective to maintain while dealing with a particular local context of a global creative form such as hip-hop.

Ong also provides us with a strong understanding of how neoliberalism manifests itself in relationship to urban projects and social movements, as it embeds the logic of entrepreneurialism within countless domains (2011, 4). She argues that it is necessary to study even supposedly opposed ideological
positions in relation to each other through the social norms that link them (Ong 2011, 5), complicating notions of power and staying away from mapping practices and people onto sides of “resistance” versus “power” (Ong 2011, 9). Her conceptions of power and how to study neoliberalism within the context of the city fits well with Ferguson and Gupta’s call for an ethnography of neoliberal governmentality. We are seeing new modalities of government, which work through a variety of mechanisms that move risk and responsibility onto “individuals” who are motivated to discipline themselves due to this ideology and logic of the market that rationalizes each individual as the “entrepreneur of his or her own ‘firm’” (Ferguson and Gupta 2002, 989). We must understand the shifting spatiality of states and how people conceive of the state, and need to take an ethnographic approach that “would take as its central problem the understanding of processes through which governmentality (by state and nonstate actors) is both legitimated and undermined by reference to claims of superior spatial reach and vertical height” (2002, 995).

Akhil Gupta’s article “Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State” offers some insightful analysis and methods for an ethnography of the state, which also helps to methodologically highlight what he and Ferguson proposed a few years later in their call for writing ethnographies of neoliberal governmentality. He brings our attention to the striking “degree to which the state has become implicated in the minute texture of everyday life” (Gupta 1995, 375) through his ethnography of the discourses surrounding corruption in Northern India. Particularly important for my analysis is his discussion of the importance of media in studying the state. Through analyzing public culture, a “zone of cultural debate conducted through the mass media, other mechanical modes of reproduction, and the visible practices of institutions such as the state” (Gupta 1995, 385), one can map the ways in which ideas about the state are made manifest in the minutiae of everyday life, and how people are interacting with broader structures and ideologies. This is an approach that I hope to bring into my analysis of how people within the underground rap scene interact with the broader structure urban development and space and the subtle ideologies of neoliberalism.

Michel Rolph Trouillot is another key scholar within the anthropology of the state, offering a call-to-action for anthropologists to increasingly engage in ethnographies of the state while paying close attention to the minute ways in which governmental processes are made manifest in everyday life, much as Gupta does in his analysis. He argues that the specific moment we are in, namely, a period of increased globalization, “authenticates a particular approach to the anthropology of the state, one that allows for a dual emphasis on theory and ethnography” (Trouillot 2001, 126). Because in this age of globalization “state practices, functions, and effects increasingly obtain in sites other than the national but never entirely bypass the national order” (Trouillot 2001, 131), we must turn our ethnographic attention towards the presence of the state in places that are not initially thought of as “the state,” while also being careful to
not fall into a discourse of globalization that erases boundaries and perpetuates an ideology of unrestricted connectivity.

Additionally, due to the fact that my argument is strongly situated within visual anthropology in both my medium and my focus of study, I draw upon the work of Erin Huang, a scholar in media and cultural studies who focuses on post-socialist cinema in Hong Kong and among the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia. Her work, which pays close attention to the structure of the urban environment, aligns well with Ong’s discussion of neoliberalism, and has been very influential to my perspective. Erin Huang’s approaches to visual media that she outlined in a lecture she delivered in 2018 on Hong Kong cinema and “urban horror,” as well as her 2012 PhD dissertation on the same topic and 2020 monograph, are quite useful in this context, particularly when I discuss the case of Rawang (chapter 7). She uses the term “urban horror” to denote an “an emergent horizon of affects indicating a communicative network of emotions, where accumulative intensities of feelings that are searching for new forms of expression, travel and disseminate through mediated informational and sensory channels” (“CCCI: Erin Huang,” 2018, Huang 2020). Huang’s work considers how, in the context of urbanization, “a body would not exist without making multiple connections with the urban network” (Huang 2012, 200), and how bodies interact with and reimagine this urban network in a variety of contexts. The body “can no longer exist in isolation but as a set of spatial relations that one establishes with the lived environment” (Huang 2012, 200), and thus, can also be used to “reimagine a new mode of embodiment” (Huang 2012, 200), which she argues can be analyzed through media, specifically cinema. This particular approach, used in conjunction with the anthropological theory outlined previously, of utmost importance when analyzing how broader the political and economic structure of neoliberal capitalism is made manifest in small-scale media outputs such as rap music, and how individuals are navigating the urban environment through concrete creative production.
3. SITUATING OURSELVES:

Kuala Lumpur, urban redevelopment, and major players in the rap scene.

Following an introduction to my scholarly influences, it is of key importance to provide a short introduction to the history of the city of Kuala Lumpur and a brief overview of hip-hop culture in Malaysia, particularly for those who may not be as familiar with the context of this project. Baxstrom (2008) offers an excellent and concise urban history of the capital city that focuses on the production of urban space in relationship to migration, colonization, and the marginalization of Malaysia’s Tamil Indian population. This critical perspective he offers makes his research very useful in my own research context, which also focuses on the textured implications of urban space though from a slightly different lens, so I will briefly summarize some of his points here. Many important events and specificities will be left out,
however it is useful to provide some historical context – the context that Baxstrom discusses, regarding colonialism and postcolonial migration, is embedded within the neoliberal context that I focus on.

The city is located at the center of the Klang Valley larger urban planning entity, a strategic center of authority for planning the metropolitan area (Morshidi 2000, 2221), within the state of Selangor in peninsular Malaysia. Kuala Lumpur was founded in the 1870s as a mining town under the control of the British Empire, and has since then been inhabited by Malays and Chinese and Indian diaspora communities (Baxstrom 2008, 26), and has served as the capital of Malaysia since independence in 1957. From the 1880s to the beginning of the 20th century, colonial authorities concentrated their energy on redeveloping the still-young city of Kuala Lumpur so as to encourage ethnic Malays to become proper urban residents living within planned localities, thus identifiable and understandable to the colonial government – a “civilizing” mission as well as a project of governmentality (Baxstrom 2008, 34). As the 20th century proceeded, the city continued to expand its railway and road network, however did not undergo many major urban transformations until the Japanese occupied the city in 1941-42 (Baxstrom 2008, 43-44). The Japanese occupation set the precedent and provided the governmental apparatus for a more centralized and authoritarian method of urban planning (Baxstrom 2008, 49). These apparatuses were further solidified during the Emergency, 1948-60 (both before and after Malaysia’s 1957 independence) as the government engaged in a sustained military campaign against the Malaysian Communist Party’s armed rebellion – a campaign that affected countless aspects of urban space and social life within the newly-forming postcolonial nation (Baxstrom 2008, 57-63). Transitioning to the late 1960s and early 1970s, we see growing significance placed upon distinctive structure plans for the Kuala Lumpur urban area, to manage the rapid population growth, infrastructural improvement projects, and increasing migration from rural areas (Baxstrom 2008, 67-70).

The current urban moment that I focus on has its roots in the years between the 1970s and the present day. When I first came to KL in May 2019, I was surprised by the sheer amount of construction projects, which I noticed as soon as I traveled from the airport into the city – see the image at the beginning of this section and you will see many construction cranes atop many buildings, and several new development projects. At first, I figured I was probably just being foolish – I hadn’t spent much time in cities before other than Singapore and Richmond, Virginia, so maybe this was just what every city was like and I was clueless. However, as I grew to understand, the construction projects – though “normalized” – were in no way “regular” or “normal,” and were not perceived as such by the residents who brought it up in conversation. My friends and Grab drivers would always complain about construction: the noise, the inconvenience, how the old KL was disappearing. The wide variety of construction projects occurring across the city that serve as the backdrop for countless everyday lives, from high-rise skyscrapers to new public transit lines to new apartment buildings, are implicated in a
process of expansion and redevelopment that the city has been undergoing since the 1990s, which was rooted in the initial promotion of structure plans in the 1970s.

The construction projects that I noticed, including my personal favorite landmark – the construction of the Menara PNB 118 tower, which will overtake the Petronas Twin Towers for the highest point in the city’s skyline – are part of the process of developing Kuala Lumpur into a world-class global city that attracts both tourists as well as foreign investment and business. As of 2010, the metropolitan Kuala Lumpur area is the eighth largest urban area in Asia in terms of area, though it has a relatively small population compared to cities such as Jakarta (Ujang 2016, 2). With its growth, Kuala Lumpur has systematically branded itself as a global city through development plans such as Wawasan 2020 (Vision 2020) and tourism marketing slogans such as “Malaysia Truly Asia.” Bouchon provides a useful definition of a “global city,” saying that it is a “metropolis with economic, political, cultural influence deployed through multiscalar relationships. A global city’s status is a synonym for efficiency, quality of life, development and attractiveness, and this label receives a positive response” (Bouchon 2014, 8).

Kuala Lumpur, as of 2011, receives more than 10 million international visitors a year, and is ranked as a top world urban destination (Bouchon 2014, 9). To reference Bouchon again, incorporating the goal of becoming a “global city” (e.g. Wawasan 2020) into official urban planning and national branding “focuses on the city’s functionality and competitiveness and gives it a chance to be recognized per se” (Bouchon 2014, 16). Cities become competitors with one another on a global arena, in line with fundamental neoliberal ideologies of competition, individualism, maximization, and measurement.

But these expansive, seemingly limitless plans and projects cause changes that continue to affect people’s everyday lives in ways that are not compatible with the vision of the global city. In addition to construction projects and branding strategies and slogans, Kuala Lumpur has also engaged in systematic efforts to eradicate squatter settlements that directly contrast the desired “global city” image (Bunnell 2002, Baxstrom 2008). One of the results of this have been the rise of countless modernist public housing apartment blocks within the city, part of systematic governmental efforts to socialize citizens into being “proper” urban subjects (Bunnell 2002, 1686). As mentioned above with the techniques of colonial planning, this use of Kuala Lumpur as a method of control and socialization dates back to the 19th century (Baxstrom 2008, 34). The older iterations of these modernist apartment blocks are oftentimes themselves surrounded by more current construction projects – roads, overpasses, more apartment buildings, or, in the case of the building where I stayed for the second part of my research, the development of a comprehensive miniature “city within a city” that centers on a commercial mall.

It is within this environment that hip-hop in Malaysia was born. It started in the 1990s with various underground tapes that were met with some censorship and government control, but didn’t really get popular until the early 2000s with the legendary duo Too Phat, comprised of members Joe Flizzow
and Malique (Sumayao 2018). After Too Phat broke apart, Joe Flizzow went on to become the unofficial “leader” of Malaysian rap currently, running Kartel Records (which has now rebranded to Def Jam Southeast Asia) and hosting the massively successful cypher show on YouTube, 16 Baris. Malique, however, went into obscurity – no one sees him anymore, and he has not released any music, but he still reigns supreme as a mythical figure of Malaysian hip-hop’s OG days and as a master of the complexities and beauty of the Malay language.

Up to the present moment, Joe Flizzow’s 16 Baris platform aided aspiring underground rappers in their quest for success, and the show’s popularity continued to grow. Several artists interviewed for this research have featured on it, including Abubakarxli, Aesop Cash, K-Main, and Pele L. 16 Baris is merely one major example of the explosion of Malaysian hip-hop. Acts such as the group K-Clique are massively popular, with their songs played in every club and hundreds of fans descending upon their shows. Hip-hop has had spots on the Record Industry Association of Malaysia’s top ten domestic song charts since at least the end of 2018, with K-Clique occupying a significant number of these weeks since they released “Sah Tu Satu” in November 2018 (“RIM Charts,” 2017-2020).

But alongside this proliferation of popular talent, influential platforms, and industry success is the underground scene. Intimately connected to the mainstream, it has many different “areas” – the more experimental, genre-bending area, the “boombap” more classic hip-hop area, the “new school,” etc. Venues, events, and clothing brands related to the underground scene have popped up across the city, with people putting on events and filming videos and freestyling and creating within the buildings and on the streets of an everyday Kuala Lumpur that is constantly shifting to accommodate the material realities of the “global city vision.” It is on this aspect of Malaysian rap music that I focus, specifically on the more “genre-bending” variety associated with the collective/label Hoax Vision. Rather than being “formally part of Hoax,” Hoax serves as more of a loose gathering of creative individuals including designers, producers, videographers, photographers, and, of course, a lot of rappers. Putting on live shows, for example Grief Support (not officially Hoax, but Hoax-adjacent – it is difficult to determine sometimes) and Atas Maulana, Hoax is a driving force within the underground scene, highlighting music of very high quality and providing a platform and fostering community and artistic experimentation within the underground.

However, before I delve into this scene, I must provide some definitions.

4. WHAT IS NEOLIBERAL CAPITALISM?

The construction of a value system, the perpetuation of structural inequality

To put it simply, it refers to the structure of the political and economic systems we currently live under. In the “Scholarly Review” I outlined some of the great academic work that has been done on
neoliberalism, but we must distill this into a workable definition that we can use to navigate this zine and expand upon. It is key to emphasize that the idea of “governing” is not strictly confined to the “political sphere” – rather, processes of governing and control reach into all aspects of life, including cultural production and the way we consume media, something which several scholars I reference highlight in their work (Lemke 2001, Stoler 2016, Ong 2011, Gupta 2006, Ferguson and Gupta 2002, Comaroff and Comaroff 2011, Baxstrom 2011). Social, economic, and political, neoliberal capitalism spans across borders. Though it has a myriad of manifestations, neoliberalism across many contexts shares a set of identifiable techniques, effects, and processes. Due to this, neoliberal capitalism is an important structure to understand not just for the purposes of this thesis, but also for understanding certain aspects of why our lives are structured the way they are.

Neoliberal capitalism is both an economic structure that emphasizes private industries – decreased state oversight and control – as well as a “market-oriented” ideology. As the Comaroffs show, neoliberalism seeks to replace society with a market, where all social relations are inherently transactional (2000, 305). Our identities are primarily based on what we consume (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000, 303) – as Lemke writes, “Neoliberalism encourages individuals to give their lives a specific entrepreneurial form” (2001, 202). Neoliberal capitalism consistently pushes the responsibility of finding solutions to political, economic, and social problems onto individuals (Lemke 2001, 202), who are consistently constructed as rational and responsible actors in the economy of life (Lemke 2001). The market logic is applied to all aspects of society, which of course include art, creative production, aesthetics, and the creative dissemination of political sentiments. All aspects of existence are potential entrepreneurial opportunities.

A few examples from everyday life show how neoliberalism operates socially: first, the idea of friendships and relationships as “investments.” This takes our intimate personal relationships and adds a distinctly economic tone, and many people believe that you should get something out of someone in return or investing your time in them. Second, the idea that all of our interests, passions, and talents can be possible avenues for making money – if you are good at music, art, sewing, taking photos, etc., it is seen as strange if you don’t use these talents for monetary gain. And oftentimes, people need to use their talents for money, because well-paying and stable jobs have become increasingly difficult to find. Money is seen as one of the key factors (of course not the only one however) determining the validity of your talents.

I will also provide a definition I wrote in one of my previous zines (written for non-academic purposes so I have edited it slightly for content, but this is how I normally explain neoliberalism to other people, and I’ve found it be the most useful explanation when trying to apply it to our own lives):
“Neoliberalism, as a term for the current capitalist age we live in, basically focuses on the free market, deregulation, the state backing off (but not really), and the privatization of like... everything. The idea of the “individual” is promoted – you’re responsible for your own wellbeing (self-care) and your own success. We define ourselves as individuals through what we consume – feeding into the capitalist economy as we build identities, communities, and life paths. As job security decreases and systematic wealth inequality increases, we do whatever we can to survive, which means we take everything in our lives and make it marketable. Our personalities are an opportunity for marketing, our interests and creativity are to make money. Basically, neoliberalism installs the logic of the market into our brains, like a very sophisticated social algorithm influencing all of our decisions in repeated patterns that reinforce the system. What makes us people is now what “sets us apart from the crowd,” thus making us more marketable or less marketable, more worthy or less worthy of social investment from our peers, companies, and strangers. We “invest” in our futures. At the same time that neoliberalism structures our personalities, it also operates with power structures such as wealth inequality, racism, the systematic exploitation of the “global south,” uneven development, and manufactured scarcity.” (Mck 2019, 2)

Understanding neoliberalism is key in any discussion of underground hip-hop, because values expressed by artists through the language of “the grind,” “investing time,” success being determined by making money and how skilled at “marketing” an individual is, and the significance placed upon individual responsibility for their own talent and journey to “success.”

5. DEFINING THE UNDERGROUND:

The relationship between the commercial and the underground is difficult to delineate. Seeing as hip-hop has had an intimate relationship to capitalism since its inception in 1970s New York (Kelley 2008, Chang 2005), you cannot simply define it as a “consumer” versus “anti-consumer” situation. As I briefly brought up in the introduction, both the underground and the “mainstream” operate within neoliberal capitalist market conditions and the spaces implicated in these conditions. However though they operate within the same structures, the differences between the underground and mainstream should not be erased, as these are differences oftentimes brought up and reinforced by artists themselves. This is part and parcel of the sticky and seemingly inescapable web of neoliberal capitalism – difference being established, navigated, and reinforced even when the circumstances seem contradictory. So before I get into anything concrete, I want to establish what the “underground” even means.

Building upon the idea of “difference” I just brought up, I wish to highlight what Appiah (1991) discusses. He argues that in order to “sell oneself and one’s products as art in the marketplace, one must, above all, clear a space in which one is distinguished from other producers and products - and one does this by the construction and the marking of differences” (Appiah 1991, 342). He talks about how this
marking of difference really intensifies individualism, causing art, in the current age we live in, to represent an individual – the artist’s life is absorbed and reflected in the artwork (visual and auditory, as well as digital media in the context of this research), and used in the process of marketing artistic production (Appiah 1991).

Within the underground in rap music specifically, one of the ways of marking difference is laying claims to “authenticity.” One of the key ways that authenticity is claimed in the underground is through “racial” authenticity – Harrison (2009) talks about the importance of this in the context of the United States, and in Malaysia, you can see certain rappers within the underground scene laying claims to “authenticity” by expressing identification with black American culture through clothing, design, and modes of speech. Though the globalization of rap, an African American popular cultural form, has resulted in problematic appropriations of blackness (or preconceived notions of it), as scholars such as Condry (2006) show, there is conscious work within Malaysia (as far as I observed) to eliminate the problematic actions of some people within the underground scene, such as appropriative hairstyles and the use of the n-word. When discussing rap music and its relationship to neoliberalism, it is also of key importance to highlight that this type of “value system” that is created under neoliberal capitalism, as I outline in the previous section, works in relationship with other important systemic inequalities perpetuated with capitalism. Of critical importance here is race – inequalities under capitalism perpetuate their imperial origins, with class divisions oftentimes being distinctly racialized (Krieger and Bassett 1993). Class differences do not supersede issues of racism, rather these inequalities work to build one another.

Harrison offers a brief yet helpful description of the underground in his book *Hip Hop Underground: The Integrity and Ethics of Racial Identification*, writing that “the general pattern seems to be that as artists grow popular, and their underground hip hop fan base extends outside their more-or-less intimate circle of friends, audiences have tended to grow increasingly more white” (2009, 11). This specific racial aspect of the underground within Malaysia is not applicable, as the underground scene is not particular to a specific ethnic group (though Malay artists make up the majority). However it can be said that a key identifying factor of the underground scene is the fact that it is an “intimate circle” of people – throughout my time doing this research, I became increasingly familiar with people who attended underground rap shows, and everyone in the scene knows each other. This is in contrast to the mainstream, where wider audiences in Southeast Asia increasingly consume the music and the shows do not have the same few familiar faces.

To offer a connection between Harrison’s discussion of race and my own work in Malaysia, I think it is useful to offer a brief reflection on my own position. During my research, one of the most interesting observations was how I was received as a white American woman – I was immediately
accepted as having a claim to familiarity with hip-hop culture and an authentic position within it as an American, while simultaneously experiencing a different type of privilege in social settings and everyday life as a white woman. When I first arrived in Malaysia, my research proposal, with no name attached, was posted on the Instagram account @malaysianhustler, a popular account that spreads information about Malaysian hip-hop culture to more than 80 thousand followers. After meeting with people in real life weeks later, I was told that I was unexpected: the assumption was that I was a white man. This instance encapsulates the way that three factors of my identity (race, gender, and nationality) were perceived to interact with hip-hop, knowledge production, and authenticity: an American researcher was assumed to be white yet simultaneously belong to hip-hop culture, and a researcher on hip-hop was assumed to be male. In the comments section of this Instagram post, there was much support, with people thinking it was cool that an American would do research on Malaysian hip-hop – but there was still the implicit assumption that academic knowledge production was from a white person, and it was assumed that the research would be done by a man. I found it of striking importance that in order to claim authenticity as a participant in hip-hop culture, you laid claim to blackness, while simultaneously, knowledge production about hip-hop culture was associated with whiteness. I think that this offers some important discussions for future research that are beyond the scopes of this thesis, regarding the pervasiveness of whiteness within academia and the continuing imperial patterns of white people “going to Asia” to do research, as well as further discussions of how anti-black racism functions in hip-hop scenes outside of the United States in contexts with very different histories regarding racism and imperialism.

Though this research does not specifically delve into issues of race and racism in Malaysia, it is by no means irrelevant. There is much research that shows how racism and religious and ethnic discrimination function in contemporary Malaysia that acknowledges the British colonial project’s spearheading role in instituting racial classification as a method of control (Reddy and Gleibs 2019, Gabriel 2015, Nah 2006). You will notice within my research that I have not mentioned any Tamil rappers – the exclusion of Malaysia’s Tamil ethnic minority is a phenomena that is not confined to the hip-hop scene, as scholars such as Baxstrom (2008), who I cited above, illustrate in depth. The construction of “racial” differences has spatial implications and very material resulting inequalities (Baxstrom 2008, Bunnell 2002). The idea of racial/ethnic/religious/linguistic “diversity” and “harmony” has also been enshrined in official Malaysian national discourse, even while structural discrimination continue.

To bring it from these broader observations back to a concrete and usable working definition of the “underground” for the limited scope of this research, I observed that the most prevalent feature of the underground was claiming the identity of “belonging” to the underground – not the mainstream. This
works in line with Harrison’s definition. Hip-hop studies has offered some insightful analysis of these underground claims to authenticity, and how going “mainstream” oftentimes supposes a level of inauthenticity due to having to make music that is considered marketable to wider audiences (Harkness 2012, 261). Practices that claim authenticity and belonging within Malaysia’s underground scene include explicit support of local streetwear brands, support of certain venues and stores, and visible interaction with certain respected members in the “underground community.” Returning to what I said above regarding seeing many of the same people at different events, we can conceptualize the underground rap scene as a specific social group that is connected through musical production, performance, identification with local brands, and a shared knowledge regarding people, spaces, aesthetics, and hip-hop’s history in Malaysia (informally, I would add that the practice of moshing also unites the underground scene). This community is strengthened through connection and collaboration with other scenes such as skating, street art, fashion, and photography, with many rappers either participating in or being closely involved with these practices. And finally, as my research focuses on, the underground is defined through specific spatial practices in relationship to the urban environment and neoliberal capitalism.

6. SPACES OF CONSUMPTION & PERFORMANCE:
Building identity, making movements, and making money.

Let’s go back to my discussion of Grief Support and the Culture for a moment. I talked about how these two events possessed some key similarities in how both sought to create community through marketing musical performance. However, these two events also provided some frameworks that I use throughout this zine to discuss space – where events are held, where things are sold, etc. First, we have the more “underground” scene that occurs in smaller spaces that are oftentimes repurposed to fit the needs of a musical performance. Second, we have the more “mainstream” scene that oftentimes takes place in larger venues that can more easily accommodate shows.

I seek to examine the complexities that arise in the underground scene by situating it in its spatial context. I find it useful to highlight my specific approach to urban space through a quote from Hogan et. al’s 2011 paper: “If ‘public’ is understood as urban social interaction with strangers and casual acquaintances rather than as state ownership of land, private-sector development may be said to provide the possibility of expanding participation in public life” (Hogan et. al 2011, 61). Though in this statement the authors suggest that the ways in which private development has taken precedence in urbanism in Southeast Asia provides new ways of creating public engagement that isn’t based on state control, I take this observation one step further. By this, I mean that people will engage with space, whether private or public, in ways that create community and connection regardless of whether it is technically private or public. Privatized spaces such as shops, houses, and venues are perhaps changing the ways that “public”
events and occasions take shape. As will be discussed later in greater detail, the underground hip-hop scene demonstrates this multifaceted utilization and definition of public/private through how stores such as Tranit Mart, a small streetwear shop that had a storefront in Subang Jaya, market themselves not just as spaces of consumption, but also as “community” spaces for hosting shows and events and fostering creativity and connection. We also see this in how the Malaysian streetwear brand Projek Jahat used the storefront of Boundlezz in the Jumpa @ Sungei Wang mall as an event space for a rap show. This event promoted Projek Jahat’s latest collection, however it also subtly came into conflict with the space of the mall as the music reverberated throughout the level and crowds of rap music fans descended upon the whole mall area surrounding the store. Brands, stores, individuals, and material objects such as clothing, microphones, and sound equipment are all involved in this everyday redefinition of spatial purpose.

As mentioned above, there were several events I attended that were held in businesses or technically “private” spaces – stores such as Transit Mart and Boundlezz, and venues such as Moutou and Safehouse. Several shows I went to, such as the Projek Jahat event, were centered around the promotion and consumption of products, or were in some way tied to the promotion of a commodity (oftentimes clothing). In contrast, I went to a few events, namely the Culture 2019 and The Judgment Day 2019, that were held in more technically “public” spaces. The Culture was held at the Bukit Jalil National Stadium, and The Judgment Day was held at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre, which is run by a non-profit. An important aspect of the spaces where shows occurred lies in the fact that both the “public” spaces I just mentioned were more out of the way and difficult to get to than the events in smaller spaces that may have been more “entrepreneurial” in nature. Perhaps the use of storefronts and other spaces that are technically private arises out of convenience and necessity, and serve as examples of how the neoliberal restructuring of Kuala Lumpur has affected the smallest of interactions. As is the case of Transit Mart and Safehouse in particular, these private spaces actively seek to market themselves as spaces for community and public artistic engagement within the underground scene, exemplifying what Hogan et. al’s idea implies: that neoliberal urban development and the individuals implicated within it are restructuring and redefining the basic understanding of “public” versus “private.”

Where Consumption & Performance Intersect:

So as you have turned the pages of this zine, and perhaps (hopefully) read it, you can see that I really care a lot about the material - what I can touch, feel, exist within (like spaces!). And so it is important that we focus on a very notable type of space that exists in relationship to other important material objects - the clothing store. Stores serve as venues for musical performance, something that I was

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1 This was written for readers reading my research in its final zine format, so this material aspect of engaging with my work is not applicable in this format.
mildly surprised by when I first started doing this research. And what makes stores, as venues for rap performance, so interesting to me is not only are they spaces for showcasing and consuming the auditory and visual aesthetics of music, but they are also spaces for consuming the materials and markers of belonging to a particular scene or movement - clothing.

I find it useful to focus on several key aspects of clothing, as a material, when thinking about its relationship to spaces, rap music, the underground, and social belonging.

1. **Functional material use:** Firstly, an item of clothing is something that we, as individuals, wear. We pair clothing with different other pieces of clothing, for functional purposes (protection, modesty, etc.). These functional purposes are deeply intertwined with, and perhaps inseparable from, the social and cultural contexts that we’ve each grown up in or come to know.

2. **Material economic relations:** Secondly, within each piece of clothing are specific relationships: who makes the clothes in the factories? From where are these t-shirts coming from? Who makes the design? Where are the materials being manufactured? What types of energy are used in transforming “raw” materials into a spatially bounded, packaged, ready-made product that watches over us from shelves and hangers as we watch rappers perform while secretly eyeing what other people in the audience have chosen to wear to this specific event? Take the “From the Thread” podcast, released by Masses MY, as an example. As the hosts were speaking with the owners of Transit Mart, Transit KL, and NeoKL (the two brands associated with Transit Mart), the conversation addressed how the clothing and streetwear scene in Jakarta had a lot more local brands and creativity than KL had – because of the fact that in Indonesia, you have closer access to the line of production (Masses 2019). This second aspect of “clothing” and this example from the conversation with the Transit Mart crew raises an important set of questions that I haven’t been able to address as much in this thesis, so I hope you all will bear with me in the future as I potentially do further research on this.

3. **Social meaning, purpose, & clothing as a spatial actor:** Thirdly, the functional purposes of clothing, combined with the economic relations embedded in the production of an item of clothing, are intertwined with the meanings that we attribute to clothing, under the specific context of neoliberal capitalism. This specific point is something that I found to be very important to my research, because I kept seeing all these different specific brands crop up in relationship to underground rap music, and I kept seeing people wear specific things, and then I realized that real life shows were being held in spaces where these brands were being sold.

Perhaps one of the most important spaces in this research related to the above points is Transit Mart. T-Mart succinctly illustrates what I’ve been talking about regarding the connections between the
neoliberal capitalist economy, physical spaces, music, and the underground in Malaysia. T-Mart was a small storefront in SS15, Subang Jaya, just a few minutes walk from the SS15 LRT station. They showcased a variety of more underground streetwear brands including NeoKL, QuitKL, AgainstLab, and Sheepskin, and the owners actually either owned or were part of the design team for a number of these brands. T-Mart also hosted shows and recording sessions for their Soundcloud mix series T-Mart Radio, as well as hosting events for each new collection or brand they carried in store. They presented themselves not just as a store, but as a community space and a space of collaboration and performance in the scene, and spatially signaled to this as well. Welcoming benches, tables, and ashtrays sat out front, and there was almost always some chilling outside whenever I went.

However in late March 2019, T-Mart announced they were closing their brick-and-mortar operations for good. Their business had steadily decreased as thrifting and “upcycling” became more and more trendy within KL in the past year, and they couldn’t sustain their operations during the immediate crisis of COVID-19. We see again how the underground scene is deeply implicated within the broader structures of neoliberal capitalism – from the utilization of clothing designs as commodified signifiers of social belonging, to the fact that economic crisis results in the closure of important physical spaces for creation and collaboration. T-Mart, with its facilitation of musical production and performance paired with its careful curating of Malaysian brands and its very explicit interconnections with attitudes towards clothing production (growing disavowal of new clothing items due to their environmental impact and increasing consumption of thrifting or vintage items), is a concise example of how these three key aspects of clothing interact. Changing attitudes towards consumption made it economically impossible for T-Mart to survive COVID-19, and show how these spaces of consumption that also serve as spaces of community engagement are strikingly precarious. As I will show in the later section on success, this notion of precarity structures spaces as well as the lives and careers of rappers engaged in this creative economy.
IN IMAGES: AN ARRAY OF BRAND SPONSORSHIPS AND COLLABORATIONS WITHIN THE UNDERGROUND

An array of brand sponsorships and collaborations in the underground.

All images are followed by Instagram account that the image is taken from. From top left: 1) Ver2.k wearing TNTCO at their album launch party/show (from @ver2k on Instagram). 2) Qiba wearing Transit KL and NeoKL at Ver2.k release (@moktang__). Next page from top left: 3) Arabyrd performing at Projek Jahat event at Sungei Wang Plaza (@iamarabyrd). 4) Reapersgang and NeoKL (@moktang__). 5) Dato Maw wearing GUESS x 88rising at the brand popup shop.
lamarabyd Thank you, Projek Jahat for switching to “FLIGHT MODE”. Congratulations on the new drop. We need to talk about the “ART of DOing noTHING” soon 🚀។

View all 50 comments

38 likes

moktang_@thereapergang - KHONSU PARTY at @safehouse.kl

View all 2 comments

pftdmusic Thank you for the picture! 🤗

March 8

dato_maw

APW Bangsar

Liked by ver2.k and 473 others
dato_maw thanks #GUESS 🇲🇾 @guess @88rising for having us 🤌

@yungk41 @jakenam.jpg
PROMOTIONAL FLYERS FOR KEY EVENTS IN THIS PROJECT

Posters for key events that this project focuses on.

THIS IS A PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT FROM T-MART!

SATURDAY
15.6.2019

1-2pm  SPIRIT WORLD  
w/ YOHEI ABARAFAT

2-3pm  TYPE-F RALLY  
w/ F.RIDER

3-4pm  LONELY SPACE PILOT  
LOOKS EARTH-WARD  
w/ LURKGURL

4-5pm  GUEST MIX  
w/ ICHE

5-6pm  MAGIC CARPET STORE  
w/ CRONY

contact @TRANSIT.KL  
No.22, Ss15/8B, Subang Jaya

JOY IS IN THE PRESENT

pro·jek /jå hat/  
public presentation | verse 1: 2020

SUPPORTED BY:

DATE : 11.1.2020  
TIME : 2PM-FM6' GUARD HALAU

FREE ENTRY (ALL AGES AND RACES)

POWERED BY:
BOUNDLEZZ

BERSAHAT UNTUK LEbih JAHAT
7. REFLECTING SPACES:

The case of Rawang.

There is one particular case within the underground scene that sharply highlights the connections between underground rap music, urban space, and neoliberalism in Kuala Lumpur. I spoke with two rappers, Kimjackz and Sisson, who are from Rawang, a locality to the northwest of Kuala Lumpur. As Sisson drove around, he showed me a variety of different places in Rawang and gave me a bit of information about every place we stopped. He showed me the blocks of abandoned buildings, constructed when Kuala Lumpur’s airport was being planned to be built there in the hopes that the economy and population of Rawang would explode. In the 1990s, as Kuala Lumpur was at the beginning of its large redevelopment projects aiming to bring economic prosperity and futuristic qualities to the city, the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) was originally planned to be built in Rawang, specifically Bukit Beruntung, where Kim and Sisson both live. From this point, land speculation skyrocketed, and investors began buying up much of the land and building blocks for commercial and residential use. These buildings all look quite similar - three or four story rectangular blocks arranged in square shapes, with the lowest floor dedicated to storefront space.

But in reality, KLIA was actually built far to the south of KL in the Sepang District, as part of an urban plan for Kuala Lumpur that imagined a type of "corridor" that connected the airport to the city center (KLCC). In this corridor are the meticulously planned new localities of Putrajaya and Cyberjaya. Putrajaya and Cyberjaya embody architectural visions of an intelligent, technological, yet markedly Islamic Malaysia (Fujita 2010), and the main highway to where KLIA currently stands, as of 1998, runs directly through them from the city center. Driving on the highway itself is an experience, as you look out the window to see countless billboard advertisements for new developments, and as you stop several times to pay the notoriously expensive tolls (highway tolls and construction projects ended up being the main point of conversation with most Grab drivers I ever talked to).

So Rawang was left behind, to the periphery of this vision - of course, it didn't fit into the image of Kuala Lumpur that city planning authorities were constructing, namely an image of a high-tech and "world class" global destination. Additionally, much of the area between KL city and Rawang was either already built up or incredibly mountainous – Sisson said that the highway to Rawang was the highest highway in Malaysia. And Rawang already existed, with buildings, roads, and residents. It wasn’t the “clean slate” that the land in Sepang was perceived to be. And so these countless building blocks throughout Rawang were left with no one to inhabit them or open stores in them. Instead they began to crumble, with plants growing throughout, showing that a city plan and a vision of the future can be changed and forces others to be “left behind,” so to say. Plans for development and the accompanying ideologies necessitate some to be left behind while others advance - whether that is people, places, or
entire countries. F. Rider spoke about how even the music scene operates in this structure, talking about how you can’t deny the importance of radio and assume that people have access to phones or internet to find new music – the underground needs to be able to reach a wider audience (Sisson, conversation with author, 2020).

And so we come to the present, and we see Kimjackz, Sisson, and other rappers in their circle utilizing these abandoned buildings for aesthetic purposes in music videos, quite similarly to how the first venue I described, Moutou, was entirely repurposed space embedded in an urban fabric with multiple layers and meanings. These buildings show up in numerous rap music videos, namely Kena Buat by Sisson and Hidup by Kimjackz, Sisson, and a few other rappers. When I asked Sisson about this, he explained to me that he and the other rappers have been working to “rebrand” Rawang, calling it Rawland instead. They’ve been taking Rawang from a locale associated with biker gangs, rural lifestyles, and a variety of negative stereotypes connected to being “left behind” to a place where hip-hop and the youth are thriving and innovating: “We are representing Rawang, and we rebrand Rawang as Rawland. Why Rawland you can see, you already came here.” He and Kimjackz both laugh. Sisson continues: “Before this, if you were from Rawang, you are ‘Rawang Fly.’ Because there’s one bike group called Rawang Fly. So we tried to rebrand, taking Rawang from a biker city to a hip-hop city” (Sisson, conversation with author, 2020).

And so they take the abandoned buildings of Rawang, or Rawland, and use them as music video locations – which makes them stand out. Who else in the scene has such easy access to so many abandoned buildings? The videos that rappers from Rawang have made show us quite interesting aspects of how the underground hip-hop scene interacts and reflects upon urban space. They are taking the ruins of prospective neoliberal urban growth and land speculation and using them in the project of “rebranding” Rawang, which in practice does not contradict Kuala Lumpur’s efforts to brand itself into a destination worthy of attention and investment (Bouchon 2014).

As Bouchon describes, it’s more difficult to define a city as a “destination brand” than it is to create a brand of a good or service (2014, 7). Cities are complex places, with lots of diversity, inconsistencies, and things outside of the brand control. The difficulty in branding a destination lies in how you have to consolidate identity in this - branding “adds attributes to the place… in other words its identity and connotation… help the city to be recognized as a place of civilization and culture” (Bouchon 2014, 7). Bouchon is talking specifically about the city of Kuala Lumpur’s concerted branding efforts since the 1990s, and we see how this type of ideology has manifested itself from these large-scale branding efforts to the ways in which individuals are branding and marketing their own efforts in the rap music industry.
Though these practices are mirrored from the city-level to the rap-group-level, it is interesting to note how rappers in Rawang are not necessarily marketing or branding an image that would be palatable or desirable to the “global city” image. Sisson, Kimjackz, Mueizeizzy, and others in their circle are putting the “undesirable” effects of neoliberal urban growth – namely, the “periphery” ruination that occurred due to the construction of KLIA – into circulation for a relatively wide audience. “We start our movement actually,” Kimjackz said when I asked them what they do. They’ve started their movement, and they are marketing, networking, and connecting with people in order to make their vision known.

8. THE QUESTION OF SUCCESS:

Self-promotion and authenticity in an entrepreneurial age.

Cossu and Wing-Fai (2019) did research on the rise of the “creative worker” in Thailand and Taiwan, and I think we can see this occurring throughout much of the world. This discourse of a “creative worker,” who relies upon self-promotion, the gig economy, and less structured modes of getting a paycheck, encapsulates certain neoliberal ideals such as free markets, flexibility, and individualism within their daily economic practices (Cossu and Wing-Fai 2019, 276). Rappers engage, as a producers of “creative” products – namely music and videos – in this type of discourse every day, seeking sponsorships, brand and song collaborations, and potential shows and events. As Harkness describes, there has been much scholarly research on the relationship between creativity and capital, but not much work has been done on rappers – though rappers are deeply implicated in this creative entrepreneurial labor (2012, 253). Unless signed to a major label with a salary guaranteed through contract, rappers, producers, and other creatives in the underground scene occupy quite precarious positions (something which has been notably pronounced since the COVID-19 crisis has caused events in Malaysia to be cancelled or postponed well into 2020, and has reduced opportunities for brand sponsorship, and going out to collaborate or create content). If making money through music, rappers oftentimes must devote all of their free time to the work of being an artist (Harkness 2012, 258). Sisson described some of the difficulties that artists face – namely, being paid in “exposure,” only being paid for gas money and parking. In his opinion, the industry needs to appreciate artists. Because, as he put it, “It’s work, it’s work as well. And we’re doing a service” (Sisson, conversation with author, 2020).

Mshn also highlighted the amount of sheer labor that goes into being an artist, specifically regarding promotion:

Mshn: I’m learning how to interact with people. Because I feel like having social skills is really important as an artist. Because in the music industry, connecting is what it’s all about. You knowing that person too. It’s a very flawed system, but that’s just how it is. Nobody is like “oh you’re very talented” if you’re hiding yourself. Nobody’s going to know who the fuck you are. So
yeah, in the sense of what you asked, I’m learning how to interact. And Jo’s (Confucius) helped me a lot, because Jo knows a lot about the industry. So I think in my sense, in my position, I’m a bit lucky, because all I gotta do is walk through and talk. But even that itself is really hard. Talking in general and being social is very hard, because you have to deal with… people. *He laughs.*

Me: And sometimes it’s awkward!

Mshn: Exactly, it’s awkward! So I’m learning on that part. And Joanna (his girlfriend, who is a model, content creator, and student), she’s teaching me, because she’s very social. She’s my PR. She’s been telling me “you know you have to talk to people if you wanna get somewhere, if you wanna get to have shows.” So I’m learning that skill. I’m learning how to use that skill.

The fact that social skills are important in creative industries isn’t any type of new or insightful analysis to bring to this discussion – but it is, nonetheless, important. When your livelihood and success depends on intricate networks of people, interacting with lots of different types of people in different spaces and settings, there is a certain level of precarity that accompanies this work. Neoliberalism assumes that the responsibility for health, safety, prosperity, and survival falls upon the individual, and the underground scene assumes individual responsibility for finding opportunities, networking, getting booked for shows, and getting your music out there. Though oftentimes free from the restrictions a record label might place upon them, underground artists are not free from the set of conditions and social relations that neoliberal capitalism necessitates.

Due to the precarious nature of rap-music-as-work, my favorite question to ask during interviews was “how would you define success, and do you think it’s possible to achieve success?” I want to present the responses people gave in a slightly different way, offering each entire response, as transcribed, before I attempt to provide any analysis. For sections where there’s a lot of back-and-forth between speakers, I provide the name of the person speaking in bold.

So how would you define success? Do you think it’s possible to achieve your definition?

Mshn: “Success… see, I’m a very simple person. I don’t like living lavish. I mean I’m not saying I don’t want a house, a sports car, I mean I do want that, but like being proud of what I’m doing… happy. Just basic shit. I feel like especially in this environment right now, happiness is something that’s really hard. What’s going on in the world, what’s going on in society and everything, just trying to find happiness is a tough job. True happiness. You can be happy just today through some things, like wow I got a car, but will you be happy in ten years? I just feel like I wanna be happy. And to me that’s success. Happy in what I’m doing, and having all my friends do the same, having all my peers, I feel as if that’s success. That’s when I can say “I made it.” It’s not having a big house, that’s just a superficial thing. My main thing is to be proud of myself. Be proud of what I did. And I’m still young. But like being proud of what I do in music, or whatever I put my mind to, like maybe in ten years I’ll be bored of music. Maybe in ten years I’ll be bored of music and I’ll be doing acting or something, or whatever I put my mind to. So to me that’s success.”

(Mshn, conversation with author, 2019)
**Kaiote Ver2.k:** I will say that it’s like, we can’t seem to like visualize what that successful vision will be like. And we wouldn’t know, like anything can happen. So for now my vision is too blank… I just hope everything can go well. It’s very hard to think of, cause most artists before they are even successful, they already have a mission, know what a successful vision will be, but ours is different. I mean we talk a lot, we talk a lot how success is, how successful it’s gonna be like, then after few times things didn’t turn out well, we just like… let it slide. See what’s going on next. See what we can do with what we have for now. (Ver2.k, conversation with author, 2019)

**LMD IJ:** Success…

**Someone in background:** Money lah.

**IJ:** Success is when… you know I get to prove to everybody that I’m someone. When I’ve managed get my own money for myself by myself doing what I do. What I like. Which they don’t agree. But now I prove to them that they are wrong, so that is successful. So I think you say if I cannot do, I think I can still do, because I know I can do. So I will do something ‘til I’ve made it. If I do my music and it’s halfway, and people say “you’re not going anywhere” you know I’m not gonna end it, because if I make music I’m gonna finish it. And if I start this career as a musician, or as a rapper, or as an artist or whatever, I’m going to finish it to the end. I’m not going to stop, though people trying to make me down…

**Me:** The haters.

**IJ:** Yeah the haters. Cause I do what I do because I know that as long as there you have one listener, or one supporter, then you should keep on doing. Because you know, they still support you, even if it’s just one person. (IJ, conversation with author, 2019)

**Reapergang:**

**F. Rider:** Success is… subjective. I feel like success, for me and for Qiba, won’t mean the same thing. For me, I see success as like… an effect. Like my job, for me, if I can affect one person to feel some type of way, or like question my music, I’ve done my job. So the rest is a bonus for me. I feel like with my music, I just wanna affect people. Experience shit that they didn’t think was possible, or something they can relate to. Cause like, I don’t know… I grew up a weird kid. I’m sure you’ve heard a lot of people say that like “oh I grew up a weird kid” but I grew up a weird kid, you know, as cheesy and as corny as it sounds, and so I want people to feel okay with being themselves. Cause I didn’t really have much friends around me. So when I made friends… I made friends with him. *looks at Qiba.* I made friends with the music people, they’re all my friends now and I’m really happy, so I just want people to feel like they’re not alone and feel good about themselves. Yeah. So success for me is just effect. And what about you? *looks at Qiba*

**Qiba:** Yeah to me, success…

**F:** I mean of course I still want a grammy. I want a fucking Grammy.

**Q:** We all do. But yeah, like he said, success is very subjective, and like to me… success is not only gonna be one type of success. Like you reach something and okay that’s it, I’m gonna stop.

**F:** It’s continuous.

**Q:** Yeah, it’s a whole process, you know? So like if you made it at some point, okay cool. But I’m gonna want to challenge myself.

**F:** Yeah that’s how people get stuck I think. Like they reach a certain point and they think “oh okay I made it” and they don’t do anything.

**Q:** So I would say for me success is an experience. So like wherever you go, it’s a whole timeline of success.

**F:** Yeah, you could say I’m successful right now. I feel like I’m affecting people, I feel like we’re affecting people already.
Q: And it feels damn good.
F: It feels great. Sometimes I see like kids walking down the street like “oh you’re F. Rider, you’re from Reapergang…” And I’m like “yeah, that’s me. Kiss my feet.” *he laughs*
Q: I feel pretty good, cause like growing up as a kid… I’ve been singing my whole life, the whole whatever singing shit and whatever, so like growing up I’d be making beats on GarageBand on iPhone, so like nobody was listening, nobody was giving a shit. Now that we’re here, the people who come to us who tell us how much our music means to them… no matter the amount of people.
F: It’s very small, but it means something. I feel like you gotta take every small victory, celebrate every small victory. You gotta appreciate those moments so you can appreciate the big moments. (Reapergang, conversation with author, 2020)

K-Main: Success to me is being able to stay true to my own path and not getting sidetracked. (K-Main, written correspondence with author, 2019)

Aesop Cash: For me, success… that’s very personal, right? Like it kinda depends on the person’s definition. So I guess success, commonly people are gonna say if you make a lot of money, right, that’s successful. Of course I think to a level that’s success, but do you compare success if you make a lot of money off it but you’re unhappy? Then, I give you another guy who hasn’t made a lot of money out of it, makes enough to get by, but he’s happy every day. I’d say that that guy is more successful than the rich guy. What’s the point of having money when you’re not happy? So there’s a lot of ways to define success. Personally for me, money is important. But cultural impact, in general like touching people, motivating people who came from tough situations, people who… cause I can relate to that, you know? I came from a tough place too, a tough environment to succeed. I read somewhere, some quote, Aman posted, that the highest human act possible is to inspire. So if I am able to do that, nobody can take that away from me. And that’s great. (Aesop Cash, conversation with author, 2019)

BDK Nip: I feel like there’s no defining moment to success. You don’t just wake up like “yeah I’m successful.” But if I had to pinpoint it to a moment, it would probably be just… to be able to provide, you know? Help. Defining moment would be to buy my mom a house. That’s like when I’m successful. Cause that’s what I set out to do. Yeah that’s really my idea of success. When you can give and never stop giving. (BDK Nip, conversation with author, 2019)

Sisson: For me, successful work is subjective. Same as music, music is subjective. But for me, successful has two different meanings – do you wanna be rich, or do you wanna be successful? I met rich people. I talked to one rich guy, he said he’s not a success yet. Like what, you’re rich! So success is subjective. In my music, I have long-term and short term. For me, success is my wish list – okay, so I put that I want to perform on this stage. So I already perform, tick, for me that’s successful. I put that I want to work with whoever, tick, I want to perform 16 Baris, tick. So for me, that’s success. Successful isn’t a big thing, it’s the small things that are also successful. It’s a process. It’s subjective. (Sisson, conversation with author, 2020)

Kimjackz: Success comes when you’ve already achieved what you’re doing. If you wanna do music, then you have to prove to all the people that you can do it. So how? In music, you have to prove to them that you have a product, your own product, and your own style. So if you are done with your product, then you are successful. If you do something for your music. (Kimjackz, conversation with author, 2020)
In all of these quotes, it is obvious that each artist has a quite well thought out perspective on success, each of which points to a variety of things. Things like money, namely, the abilities that money gives you – buying your mom a house, as BDK Nip said, or being self-sufficient, as IJ said, symbolize success. At the same time, many artists also pointed out to the non-monetary aspects as well, referencing cultural impact, the ability to inspire people, the ability to make a difference, and to be proud of ones own efforts. However a common thread that ran throughout all of my interviews was the fact that success was inherently subjective, and very much defined by the individual who was engaging in their own career, and that success was also a process, not an end goal. Though success may be subjective and up for debate, not a single rapper denied the fact that money was important. Even if it did not signify success, it was a necessity.

This “underground” definition of success, where rather than flexing with money, you flex with authenticity and individuality, appeared to me to serve a specific purpose. In a precarious and small local industry – the rap music industry generally, the underground scene/industry specifically – it is useful to have a definition of “success” for yourself and others that does not judge the inability to make a living off of your creative pursuits as an inherent individual failure. Within the particularity of each interview, we see that success is something we define for ourselves, we take our own paths and make experimental music, however we always exists in relationship to the context that surrounds us – which necessitates that we even think about “success” at all.

What is striking here is that many artists emphasized the importance of marketing, and the individual responsibility for marketing, as I briefly discussed before I went into each artist’s definition of success, while at the same time alluding to a definition of success that mitigated the idea of individual shortcomings being the reason for not being financially successful. This tension is important, as it shows that within the underground scene, there are structured ways of interacting that directly tie into neoliberalism that are constantly running alongside definitions and conceptions of the world that do not necessarily have this “economic” flavor. Kimjackz’s idea of rap music as a “product” to be marketed exists at the same time as Mshn’s idea that success is to simply be happy outside of material items. The non-economic definitions of success not only diminished the importance of money as a signifier of success, but also resisted conceptions of “progress” – rather, success was a process, and the vision of a successful end goal was “too blank,” as Kaiote of Ver2.k said.
9. CONCLUSION:

Take it back, control the crowd (or not).

Throughout my research, I was amazed by the wide variety of perspectives that rappers expressed regarding success, what it means to be underground, and why the scene works the way it does – perspectives which I seek to highlight further in the zine format of this thesis, as my readers will probably be interested to read the longer interviews with rappers that they listen to or are friends with. My interviewees showed me that within broad structures such as neoliberal capitalism, which seem to subsume the specifics, we find so much creativity and such a wide range of perspectives and experiences. What can this possibly tell us? At a basic level, it tells us that nothing can ever wholly erase the tiny particularities that oppose neoliberal capitalism - whether consciously or subconsciously - and also that even our smallest of actions simultaneously exist in relationship to this structure, working with, against, and outside of it – and sometimes all at the same time.

Take a crowd at a show, for example the crowd that attended Atas Maulana Isu 5 at Safehouse in December 2019. Within a crowded show we can see a variety of things. Firstly, the people in the crowd have oftentimes paid money to enter, money that went to artists, managers, venues, etc. Secondly, the crowd oftentimes moves as a collective, sometimes disregarding the confines that surround them. As the rapper and artist Qiba said, they’ll mosh and try to take the mic from the artist, expressing energy in an almost uncontrollable way (Reapergang, conversation with author, 2020). Thirdly, they most likely all perceive themselves to some extent as existing within, or in relation to, a specific scene or community that surrounds this music.

As scholars such as the Comaroffs (2000) and Hardt and Negri (2011) show us, neoliberal capitalism seeks to alienate us, to separate us from the collective unless it is profitable. But within the space of the rap show, we see these parallels and contradictions forming - the individual (the artist) is being highlighted and showcased, oftentimes for financial benefit, at the same time that the collective of the audience conforms to and resists structures of order, reason, and individuality. The underground show, as Dato Maw alluded to when I spoke to him, sometimes also presents a contradiction to capitalism - the artists can offer their services at a lower price for the sake of the scene and charge higher prices than usual for more commercial shows, which is a practice he consistently engages in. It is a calculated way of giving back to the scene – and of “promoting” its success.

The underground scene and the spaces it occupies, modifies, transforms, and is restricted by is deeply embedded within a deep fabric of relationships. The urban fabric of Kuala Lumpur, which is being transformed through neoliberal capitalist processes, is home to a depth of histories, particularities, and contradictions. As rappers navigate space, as clothing is worn, as buildings and roads get built by construction laborers, as materials are exchanged and transformed, the production of creative material is
embedded within this multidimensional and complex fabric of relationships. I’m not interested in arguing whether or not underground rap music in Kuala Lumpur is revolutionary, subversive, just full of sell-outs, or just another form of cultural globalization. Hip-hop studies and ethnomusicology has plenty of literature on rap music as resistance and as globalization (Condry 2006, Aidi 2014, McDonald 2008, Morgan and Bennett 2011). Instead, I am saying that the ways that people make, perform, consume, and engage with this scene are extremely complex, and weave in and out of accordance with neoliberal capitalism specifically.

I myself wondered, and you may be wondering as well, does the underground scene have the potential to ever be fully subsumed and exploited? I think that’s where what I’ve talked about in this project is of importance. We see that within the underground, there is always a wealth of new ideas and concepts to market and gain money, that will proceed in that fashion, but we also have this structural, situational, and ideological resistance to the idea of “selling out,” an adherence to an idea of “underground authenticity,” and small instances in everyday occurrences that cannot be fully subsumed by the structure of neoliberal capitalism. The underground is extremely challenging to cohesively market to an audience, and that’s part of what makes it underground in the first place, but it will always be a cultural space that has different levels of interaction with the mainstream. The underground is constructed by capitalism, yet it also subverts it. And this is important, because we have to recognize how we can never neatly classify our relationships to these structures - nothing is ever black and white. But the fact that we are deeply embedded within material relationships, histories, and structures can never be denied.

10. THE FINAL THOUGHT:

Hopes for the future.

In this final part of my thesis, I wish to honestly and directly say that I was not able to accomplish everything I had envisioned for this project – in terms of theoretical contributions, material I had wanted to write about, and excerpts from interviews I had wanted to analyze. I had too many interviews, each with excellent points, for this length of project. My hope is that rather than serving as my final end point, this thesis will serve as just the beginning of a multifaceted exploration of anthropological theory, underground rap music and its relationship to neoliberal urbanism, and how people both construct and are constructed by the material processes and assemblages they are embedded within. Even now, you are reading this thesis in its “university form,” so to say – a document on white paper that I have emailed to you or you have downloaded. But even this thesis itself is going to change shape, as I edit it to be less “academic,” include more long excerpts from interviews that would be of interest to the scene, provide more definitions for an audience unfamiliar with anthropology, and expand or reduce where necessary to
perhaps better appeal to an audience who doesn’t speak the type of English we are expected to use in academic writing. And this content will be put into the form of a zine, with expanded visuals. I had hoped to present this zine to my committee, but instead decided that due to COVID-19 spatial restrictions (inability to access printers and supplies), I would give you the written form only. I also desire to make the zine be this project’s “final product” that is created specifically for my main audience – the underground scene in Malaysia – that also incorporates the feedback I receive from all of you. And even beyond the zine, my hope is that I can expand upon this project further in the future, as it has grown very close to my heart.

For future explorations, I want to deepen my analysis of specific spaces and materials, as well as offer analysis of how where artists are from/currently live structures their relationships to the underground scene, which was a suggestion that Mshn’s girlfriend Joanna gave me (conversation with author, 2019). Again at the suggestion of Joanna, I would like to explore the issue of gender – as I alluded to before, I primarily hung out around men, and all of my interviewees were men. I think this issue is very important to address, because it also highlights again how the underground is not a space free from the broader societal forces. Gender discrimination replicates itself within the spaces of the underground, as do the values that have been normalized through neoliberal capitalism. I would also like to critique of representations of “Asian rap” in the United States, specifically regarding 88rising that myself and people I have spoken with during my research have discussed before – specifically, I seek to offer considerations of the colorist and colonial implications of only representing East Asian creativity as representatives of an entire region. I would also like to address Malay supremacy in Malaysia’s hip-hop scene and its conflict with broader Sinocentrism and colorism within SEA.

I would also like to offer considerations of virtual “spaces” such as livestream shows and Instagram communities, which have grown in popularity within the underground scene since Malaysia instituted its COVID-19 lockdown on March 18 (while keeping in mind what F. Rider said regarding access to technology). Safehouse has proven to be one of the remarkable forces in bringing musical performance to the virtual world through their weekly “From the Comfort of Ur Home” livestream shows, which have featured a variety of underground artists in the genres of rap, pop, and indie music. The growing significance of the so-called “virtual world” offer further considerations to my discussion of the changing conceptualizations of public versus private space, as well as opens up avenues for the analysis of the material infrastructure and inequalities in access that underlie the idea of virtual reality as being an “accessible” space. And finally, I would like to expand my interviews from only rappers and producers to include the other people who construct the scene – designers, managers, promoters, and “influencers,” to name a few.
So to conclude at last, I would like to thank you for your time and attention reading this work, and I look forward to working on the future iterations and transformations of this research as it continues after my time in college, deepening my analysis and constantly working towards broader accessibility.

INSTAGRAM INFO:

BRANDS, LABELS, AND PLACES THAT APPEAR IN THIS PROJECT:
@projekjahat
@tntco_official
@transit.mart
@neokualalumpur
@quit.kl
@hoaxvision
@safetotakeoff
@griefsupport2
@banhuat_sdn.bhd
@6bedidu9

ARTISTS THAT WERE INTERVIEWED:
@akidcina
@kimjackz
@reapergang
@rpgqiba
@f_rider_
@dato_maw
@confucius_confu
@mshnafq
@ver2.k
@kaiote_v2k
@kz_v2k
@lmd.ij
@pftdmusic
@pele.808
@abubakarxli
@khairilmum
@sisson.raw
@aesopcash
@bdknip
@h1zzy


