

“To Congo, To Colombo, can’t stereotype my thing yo:”

M.I.A.’s Politics of Difference

A Senior Honors Thesis

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Introduction

Nearly four years ago, I sat in my dorm room struggling with homework while the television provided some background noise. Tuned to MTV's college sibling station, "MTV-U" I dismissed most of the uninteresting indie-rock. Then a new song came on, starting with a simple rhythm, a single drum tap, soon followed by a female vocal. Rapping in unrefined couplets, the voice was gritty with a slight British twang. The song intensified with a dance-y electronic loop. It was not like anything I had recently heard, what was this music? The screen offered equally interesting visuals; a woman of South-East Asian descent roaming the jungle and dancing. The song was "Sunshowers," and the artist, Mathangi (Maya) Arulpragasam, better known as M.I.A. Since then I have been following the journey of M.I.A. as she occupies a unique space in popular music. I soon discovered she was an art school grad, and the war-inspired graphics in the following video for "Galang" were in fact created by her. I soon started to notice the stories of her revolutionary father along with numerous rumors about her love life and radical opinions. Her sound perplexed music journalists—it's not quite hip hop, not quite electronic—and after recognizing her Sri Lankan heritage, it most frequently got thrown under the vast umbrella of the "world music" category. However, with her certain *hyperindividualism*, M.I.A. caught the attention of my ears, as well as those of many others. This innate characteristic is reflective of trends of a "growing Western fascination with 'world' (largely non-Western) music...[and] given the advance of Green politics, New Age-ism, multiculturalism and other counter measures... 'difference sells'" (Huq, 200) and for this reason, M.I.A. had an audience.

M.I.A. appears to be ahead of the curve of new music styles that are piling into the market. She has a wealth of subcultural capital, or value "embodied in the form of being 'in the know', (Thornton, 12) in a way only a trendsetter could. She was "A new raver before it was

old. A baile funk/pop pioneer before CSS and Bonde De Role emerged. A quirky female singer/rapper before the Mini Allens had worked out how to log on to MySpace. Missing In Action (or Acton, as she sometimes calls herself) has always been several miles ahead of the pack.” (Collins) Yet there is something more at work here than just knowing how to be “cool” to her globalized audience; she represents a complication of popular music styles that have preceded her, such as hip hop, electronic, baile-funk, reggae, and many more. She has a unique style which dismisses traditionally-held notions of a Sri Lankan immigrant, and her radical family history has caused much controversy. M.I.A.’s distinctive package challenges world views and the mainstream in a way that demands political attention. Ultimately she “powerfully weaves a consistent theme of rootlessness...drawing on her experiences in both the third world and modern London, from civil war to Western urban culture, and her own, highly unique, bastardized form of pop music is the extraordinary end result.” (Begrant) This weaving of musical creativity and unique experiences has challenged modern popular music in an interesting way.

M.I.A.’s music imagines a globalized audience, where non-Western voices are equally valued in cultural conversation among the dominant voices of the West which saturate everyday life. This mission arises during an interesting period in cultural studies as well. Cultural theory has shifted from examining post-subcultures which value individuality occasionally joined into loose collectives opposed to the mainstream. In this way postmodernism has become outdated, yet leaves its traces of post-industrial cultural recycling to be experimented with. For these reasons, the world was in a way ready for M.I.A. or she had in fact realized the world was ready for someone like her. She has responded to the power of electronic music and politics to demand new voices and challenge the culture which precedes her. Rightfully her message has become

more refined since she first appeared in the media; from overt radicalism on *Arular* to a matured global view on *Kala*. M.I.A. is met with consistent criticisms and her presence in the media has echoes the fear of subcultures of the past; that not only individual and local countercultural efforts reinforce the norms of the mainstream “but also even overtly political interventions like those of *The Clash*, are all somehow secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they themselves might be considered a part.” (Jameson, 227)

However, is it possible to establish a politics in popular culture, which uses the media in a positive way? It seems that M.I.A. has utilized her position in the spotlight to demand something new of popular culture. This method realizes the effects of globalization and looks past the over-saturation of traditional Westerner voices and begins to address the importance of others. With more songs about “ass, ass, titties, titties,” (qtd. from “Spike Spends Saturday with”) Maya vehemently opposes the scenario of “woman, radio, sings about sex, gold.” (qtd. in Symonds, 31) Instead through her work she claims there should be room for a more politically conscious voice. M.I.A. has produced an interesting mesh of myth, style, and political music which demands a different kind of attention from the media and her audience. Jimmy Iovine, chairman of Interscope records has deemed her one of those “really left-of-center artists,” continuing “you really wonder about them. Can the world catch up? Can the culture meet them in the middle? That's what the adventure is. It doesn't always happen, but it should and it could.” (qtd. in Sisario)

M.I.A.'s Myth and Public Identity

“*Got brown skin, I'm West Londoner; educated but a refugee still-ah*” (“Pop,” *Arular*)

Central to the meaning of M.I.A.'s music is the biography of Maya Arulpragasam. Mention of her Sri Lankan heritage and familial ties to radical politics often precedes her in the

media. M.I.A. is widely understood as a “Tamil Tiger's daughter chained to the most fetishized pop-music biography this side of Robert Johnson.” (Baron) This biography garners immense attention in the media, receiving both critical appraisal and the respect of her fans. The infatuation with her history has caused M.I.A.'s story to take on the qualities of a myth. It explains the morph from Sri Lankan refugee to globe-trotting pop star and further provides a context from which her music is streamed. Ultimately, the media focus on the story of Maya's past often overshadows the music it is set to promote. Though this myth causes a bit of controversy—for either the extent it is invoked or how easily it is dismissed—yet it remains a crucial element of M.I.A.'s overall impact. The story continues to snowball contributing to the authenticity of her music and serving as subcultural capital. Surely, Maya's identity (at least as transmitted through the media) is one key feature adding to her sense of authenticity and value as an icon outside of the mainstream.

Maya's story begins in 1977 in London. During this time the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka, which the Arulpragasam family was part of, was beginning to fight for sovereignty. Soon after Maya's birth, her father Arul Pragasam decided to relocate his family back to Sri Lanka to take part in the fight for Tamil independence. He quickly became estranged from the family and engulfed in the Sri Lankan conflict as a founding member of the Sri Lankan Tamil minority resistance group, the Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students (or EROS.) “EROS was responsible for a number of bombings and kidnappings in Sri Lanka in the 1980s.” (Chang) Later her father became a “member of the militant Tamil Tigers, whose violent tactics in their fight for a separate Tamil state (including suicide bombings) led the State Department to declare them a terrorist organization.” (Note: in other interviews Maya has remarked that he was not a member of this group.) (Chang)

Maya's childhood in Sri Lanka is framed as a time of turmoil and surrounded by violence. She was raised by her single mother, Kala, who struggled to support three children. Maya would find pleasure in dancing at parties to songs such as the Bollywood disco "Jimmy Aaja" (later covered on her album *Kala*). Often she would receive food, especially her favorite digestive biscuits, as payment for this work. Eventually, the family could no longer deal with the radical atmosphere of Sri Lanka and was able to return to London. While the young Maya never lived with her revolutionary father, this part of her history serves as the cornerstone of her public identity, and is understood as a major influence on her art and music.

The mythic story of M.I.A.'s history continues into young adulthood. In London, Maya was feeling alone and unable to relate to other adolescents. She fell in with a group of Bengali boys and became interested in the hip hop scene. As with many other young people in the early 1990's, hip hop provided a soundtrack for her teenage time of trouble. Immediately following the completion of her secondary education, she jetted off for South LA and spent a few months as hip hop video girl during the glory days of gangsta rap. (Rayner, 73) However, she had no intention of making a career out of this adventure and she returned to London, managing to become an art student at St. Martin's College. She covered her canvases in stenciled tigers and armed militants, and while she was a talented visual artist and video producer, it was her fairytale-like introduction to the Roland MC-505 which marked the transformation of Maya into M.I.A.. Maya met "fellow electro rap queen, Peaches" (Rayner, 74) through mutual friend Elastica lead-singer, Justine Frischmann (for whom she was working on a tour video). With the influence of these female musicians, Maya "developed her own unique style of music—a "do-it-yourself" aesthetic inspired by the British club scene, with stripped-down bass and drum rhythms

driving catchy melodies.” (Bordal) This style continues to characterize M.I.A.’s music and her myth continues to be complicated by additional events.

M.I.A.’s story is unconventional for a pop star, fragmented by multiple facets of identity, incorporating elements of gender, race, class, migration, art school education, and finally technology. These details serve as an excellent marketing tool for her underground sound. Additionally, the mythic quality of her story authenticates her music, a quality of utmost importance outside of the mainstream. Maya’s biography is essential to evoking meaning and purpose, anchoring the political influence of her work. Her unique hybridization of characteristics of globalization makes her contemporary, also positioning her in a distinctive category all her own. M.I.A.’s individuality and subsequent authenticity function in specific ways; an article in *Notion* magazine says Maya “has been many things: refugee, visual artist, daughter of a rebel fighter, film-maker, musician, sister, rapper—she’s done the rounds. Her history has been well documented, almost to the point of tedium.” (Symonds, 28) Together this unique amalgam of features is nearly perfect for both marketing M.I.A. and sustaining the attention of a dedicated subcultural audience.

After the release of *Arular* in 2003, stories of M.I.A.’s background flooded the media. Before this point M.I.A. “was well-received by those who heard the small indie release, but it wasn't until a few months later that word started to spread about the London artist of Sri Lankan descent, who, along with a budding career as a visual artist and as a musician, just happened to have a father who was a soldier in a Sri Lankan militant group.” (Begrant) This increased attention was complicated. Although it attracted interest, it also exoticized M.I.A.. Paul Gilroy argues “authenticity enhances the appeal of selected cultural commodities and has become an important element in the mechanism of the mode of racialisation necessary to marking non-

European and non-American musics acceptable items in an expanded pop market.” (Gilroy qtd. in Hutnyk, 19) While the genre of M.I.A.’s music remains blurry, this addition of the story of her past is used to incite interest in a market under the influence of globalized exchange. M.I.A. remains in the outskirts of the mainstream, but has attracted much media attention and is often highly regarded by critics and a group of dedicated followers.

Her myth is featured in the three examples of media: local micro-media, niche media such as the music press, and national media. In other words, the myth of M.I.A.’s past is equally distributed and fetishized amongst fans in blogosphere, music writers in music or so-called cultural publications, and finally in more serious forms in magazines like the *New Yorker* or on National Public Radio. This media attention could be threatening to a subcultural artist, but M.I.A.’s ‘cool’ is dependent on this variety of media coverage. Since the “media are a network or institution akin to the education system in their creation, classification and distribution of cultural knowledge...subcultural capital maintains its currency (or cultural work) as long as it flows through channels of communication which are subject to varying degrees of restriction.” (Thornton, 161) In the past, degree of media attention has been an ominous sign of inception by the mainstream that would soon follow. However, in the globalized media non-Western voices strive for this attention, and the possibility of “inserting th[eir] message into the media flows of MTV...TV, pop shows, and talk back.” (Hutnyk, 45) Due to the immense media coverage, the details of M.I.A.’s history have become even more mythic.

M.I.A.’s importance is metered through her subcultural value, enhanced by her distinction as an untraditional Western musician. In this manner, a fascination with the moment M.I.A. first hit the music scene becomes a sort of fairy-tale set in 2003 at a dance club called Fabric,

The song's MC begins a near-hypnotic vocal drawl. It wasn't grime, it wasn't electro, it wasn't dancehall; it was a sound alien to Fabric and the rest of the UK. As the crowds at the club submit one-by-one to the track's robotic-rudebwoy magic like extras in the *Thriller* video, one girl makes her way to the DJ booth to investigate further. The man spinning the disc, a rare new whitelabel ["a twelve-inch single produced in limited edition without colourful graphics...distributed to leading disc jockeys for club play (Thornton, 117)] called *Galang*, is globe-trotting booty music aficionado Diplo, and the female enquirer, perplexed at never having heard the song in a club before is its author, and performer, M.I.A. (Hodgson, 177)

This special night exemplifies the way that much of Maya's past is framed by the media; as a means to explain her individual identity and music. This event not only supposedly ushered in M.I.A.'s entrance into popular music, but also led to her much publicized relationship with Diplo. The myth emphasizes her authenticity—as a naïve dancer and musician—and explains her connection to one of the most fabled producers in current music. This fascination with the history of M.I.A. ensures media coverage across various forms, but also demonstrates the importance of her cultural authenticity.

Academic study of music outside of the mainstream usually accepts the “always already political (simply by virtue of resisting cooptation)” (Marchart, 88) quality of its subject. To explain this so-called inherent political tendency of subcultural music, authenticity serves to describe the right of artists to make particular claims in their music. In the past this has been class-based or localized, seen in examples such as hip hop being “firmly rooted in its origins and continuing significance as an African-American street culture.” (Bennett, 133) However, as the genre expanded world-wide, authentic hip hop had to expand to include the various youth facing challenging circumstances, also accepting its positioning as a popular form of entertainment. With immense media saturation, expanding global audiences, and exposure to popular music, authenticity remains a prominent gatekeeper used by audiences to discern worthy subcultural

music from manufactured commodity. This subjective power of the myth of authenticity is vital in the case of M.I.A., specifically in the manner it connects her history and political message.

Greil Marcus illuminates this strange phenomenon of authenticity in popular music, which assumes “the myth of authenticity, or purity—the idea that true art, or true culture, exist outside of base motives, outside of even individual desires, particular egos, any form of selfishness, let alone mendacity, let alone greed.” (Marcus, 23) While it has become one of the most important features of understanding popular music, authenticity is strictly based on perceptions of public identity, and therefore is dependent upon the framing of media coverage, which weaves a strange and interesting web. It has been argued that “‘authenticity’ as such has also struggled for intellectual credibility, contaminated as it is by romantic wish-fulfillment and political exploitation...to rehabilitate the concept would require ...that the fluidity of subjectivity and social positioning can be acknowledged, and the music’s role theorized within rather than beyond the circuits of commercial media processes.” (Middleton, 215) M.I.A.’s authenticity arises out of the relation of her past and its framing in the media. Her work demands an analytical framework that accounts for all facets of her background as well as her music.

M.I.A. is able to achieve this specialized authenticity, one that is highly valued in a globalized context, through the multiple and varied contributions to her story. Her political messages and unconventional history were ripe for consumption by the music industry. The industry itself operates on crisp categories set to properly describe and market stars. Maya was outside of these constructs as an artist with an unfamiliar ethnicity and message. At this moment “difference is selling well on the display tables of tourism, technology, television and tele-marketing...[d]ifference is in style” (Hutnyk, 134) This characteristic of the popular music market readily welcomed Maya into its world, and with this entry, M.I.A. has been able to make

productive use of politics. In this way M.I.A.'s popularity becomes subcultural capital, a term coined by Sarah Thornton is indebted to Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital as a means of evaluating the worth of cultural goods. While this concept is a way of imagining the materialization of 'cool,' subcultural capital goes further, to "fuel rebellion against, or rather an escape from, the trappings of parental class." (Thornton, 13) An embodiment of the frustrations of youth is ultimately solidified in its artistic expressions and creative articulations of the experience of youth. M.I.A. has said "I'm not really a musician, but it is my priority...I'm living it out now...this is what I do and what I enjoy." (qtd. in Symonds, 31) The importance of this story in music cultures is crucial, and the possible political impact of an anti-pop star is massive. With eager audiences yearning for authentic music with subcultural worth, M.I.A.'s music and back-story complicate musical consumption and culture in a globalized world. While dance music has been providing escape for postmodern youth for sometime, the audience M.I.A. addresses is ever-changing. It has developed during a time of increased globalization and as a consequence experiences the difficulty of asserting individuality, while searching for some collectivity against the mainstream.

Today the music audience is characteristically "so dispersed and fragmented, so volatile and widely spread ...it seems almost pointless to think, 'Who will this music please?'" (McRobbie, "Thinking with Music," 38) This is the imagined globalized world where M.I.A. creates her culturally crossed-over audience. In these conditions it is nearly impossible to attract the attention of an audience oversaturated with media. But the media is crucial to distributing M.I.A.'s image. And even more curiously, it is this image that seems to guarantee her individuality. Despite all the changes experienced by subcultural youth, individuality has remained the core tenet of music subculture. This theory was supported by studies of the club

cultures of the 1980s and 1990s which asserted that clubs were filled with individuals momentarily unified by music and dance. (See Thornton and Reynolds) According to Frederic Jameson “Postmodern hyperspace—has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world.” (Jameson, 223) Club cultures exemplified this quality erasing the identity of individual dancers as they morphed into large anonymous groups. Evolving out of this culture with emphasis on technology, dancing, M.I.A. is attempting to change the practices of popular music by highlighting the globalized context of today’s world.

While M.I.A.’s music is opinionated it “is the weaving of the political into the fabric of what are still, basically, dance tunes” (Christgau) that makes her message acceptable to audiences. Whereas club culture was dependent on the sounds of records played by DJs at raves and discotheques, M.I.A.’s work has begun to incorporate the importance and authenticity of a vocalist. DJing and dance music present a collection of sounds from a variety of unknown sources. It appears the emphasis on the local, once believed to be the truth of understanding subcultures, has been dismantled by global anonymity, as well as the blurring of cultural lines. In this way, the story of her origins supplements the authenticity of her sound. Often there is a stigma associated with dance music that it is “uncritical and mindless to the extent that it can debase the music with which it is associated.” (Thornton, 71) M.I.A. attempts to legitimate dance music by combining a desire for political importance with an inherent pleasure principle. This is an electrifying equation assuming that the youth of today can comprehend this message. The music of M.I.A. is wildly different from other dance musicians since, whether intentionally or not, her message is political.

How can someone in this cluttered and confused globalized world assert a political message, especially when their public identity is constructed in and through the media? In an interview with *VenusZine*, M.I.A. was quoted as saying,

Politics has always been around in my family. It's in me...I have to talk about it. But I found politics really confusing because, while I have little more attachment to it than the average person, because of my family, I still only knew about the same as the average civilians. And that was my whole point—I don't have to have a degree in politics, and I don't want to be a journalist working in Darfur, but I still want to talk about this. (qtd. in Payne, 38)

This belief obviously reflects the importance of politics in current popular culture and is undoubtedly speaking to an audience desiring it. Through a complicated presentation of identity in the media, this emergence of the political impact of M.I.A.'s music within the constructs of postmodern identity can be related to Angela McRobbie's *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*. She claims "The social subject can take responsibility for his or her own history, though not achieve fullness. It is this incompleteness which creates the 'social imaginary' which, in turn is the sphere of representation." (McRobbie, "Postmodernism," 50) In the realm of popular music this is extremely relevant; Maya Arulpragasam surely has a distinct and real history. Yet through media projects this history spins out of her own control and is framed the constraints of M.I.A. the artist and an imagined figure. This significantly alters the identity between the person and the persona, but does not necessarily yield negative results. Rather a fragmented identity can "point the way to new forms of struggle, [and] can create conditions which are 'more difficult to manipulate and control.'" (McRobbie, "Postmodernism," 50) The less-than-conventional history of M.I.A., serves a commercial purpose by creating an individual who can speak to a globally informed youth, by exemplifying a person outside of the realm of mass control, and enhancing the politics of her projects.

M.I.A.'s fruitful conglomeration of difference appeals directly to her globalized audience. It might appear that specific differences are becoming less evident with hybridization, but instead by "destroying the local differences between national and regional cultures, globalisation may in fact work to enhance such differences." (Bennett, 54) Maya is able to appeal to a large subcultural audience oversaturated by commodified media because she embodies a hyperindividual difference they crave. Her myth has aided her mission by gaining the attention of media and audiences alike. She is wildly different, not only as a radical Sri Lankan refugee, but apparently brimming with creativity. Whether or not the history preceding Maya set the stage for her media inception or for her creativity, M.I.A. is now offering a different sound, which functions as an extension of her identity. As Angela McRobbie points out "popular culture has replaced nursery rhymes and fairy tales as a source of imagery, narrative, and information." (McRobbie, "Thinking with Music," 45) Popular culture has become a way for modern youth to make sense of their world.

The politics of her message do not only arise from her political past. Maya continues to amend the myth of her history, adding stories of globe-trotting and gender struggle. M.I.A. has said

Coming out of Sri Lanka and being the first refugee who made it to America and got signed to Interscope; that's the journey I've made...I've got to make that make sense to me. I've got to know when to stop and just be content with not trying to be connected to Sri Lanka anymore. You have to move on and think about how you fit in now.

This confusing struggle seems to demonstrate how the politics of M.I.A. have developed. After first appearing on the music scene with the radical politics of her Sri Lanka, with this attention she has shifted the focus, expanding to problems of globalization and Western media saturation. Maya has said "the thing is, an American [Western] voice, in every shape, form, size, is getting heard on the planet all over the world. If you go to a mud hut in Africa, they are listening to an

American voice...a two-way exchange can exist.” (qtd. in Danton) Reiterated in many ways and forms, M.I.A. is using the frame of her unique history to attempt a rethinking of globalized media. With her signing to major label, Interscope, or her recent feature on MTV, M.I.A. is “Coming back with power, power!” (“Bamboo Banga,” 2007)

Through analyzing the identity of M.I.A., many things became evident. The myth of Maya Arulpragasam is consciously constructed through the media to appeal to the demands of a global audience. This paradox of postmodern hyperindividuality is perhaps a result of the continuing interaction between identity and history or “Personal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with the present before me.” (Jameson, 210) This is at least in part because personal identity is constructed out of the understanding of others. This is especially true of the choices made by subcultural audiences. While they may not be forming political collectives in alignment with these tastes and choices; they undoubtedly are basing perceptions of themselves upon these beliefs shared by others in the subculture. During a time when difference is being rapidly exchanged, even commodified, and individuality appears to be a façade, M.I.A. declares “It’s about being a human being, I’m not a robot. I’m not some product who comes along and churns it out for record companies. The majority of [being an artist] is like that...I’m always thinking about it...I don’t want to become a pop star...That’s not my agenda.” (Durbin, 72) Using subcultural capital to place value on her decisions, M.I.A. is a sort of cultural studies jackpot, with multiple references and hyperindividualism, she is an icon, intended to be emulated and analyzed.

M.I.A.'s Distinctive Style

“She looked like a future-hippie-rave-ninja” (Durbin, 72)

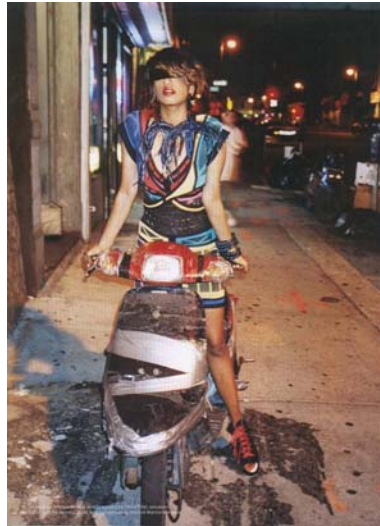


Figure 1
(photo by Cass Bird in Durbin, 71)

Style is the first visual clue into the identity of any person. Clothing provides numerous cues which have culturally come to represent the person wearing them. For M.I.A. style works harmoniously with her political mission in the globalized world. In Ted Polhemus’s *Style Surfing*, he says central to arguments about the meaning of style is that “our dress hair, style, footwear, make-up, and so forth...functions as a medium of expression” continuing that these features can “‘say’ certain things—or, at the very least, express them—more immediately and powerfully than verbal language ever can.” (Polhemus, 8) Past studies of subcultures, such as Dick Hebdige’s *Subcultures: The Meaning of Style*, have emphasized the importance of this theory, citing style as a unifying characteristic of youth collectives. While the basic idea of subculture has evolved, the study of youth music cultures remains faithful to a deep connection with consumerism. Style is a unique articulation of identity made through products. Ted Polhemus calls this tendency of globalized youth “style surfing,” or “a way of making something new from assorted—found, at hand—bits and pieces...The objective was/is to mix

together the most diverse, unexpected, absurd, and downright contradictory combination of styles.” (Polhemus, 59) The collage created through these choices can communicate the unique stance of people living in the current global village. For this reason, style is essential to the equation that is M.I.A.

Bricolage describes the manner in which youth re-imagine the meanings of symbols embedded in culture, asserting their unique identity through this process of cultural reinvention. The term bricolage has long been embedded in the study of music subcultures. In the past, this meant that radical cultural signs (such as the swastika) could be used simply as an accessory (such as by a punk), challenging the general understanding of the sign. According to John Clark, “the bricoleur re-locates the significant object in a different position within that discourse, using the same overall repertoire of signs, or when that object is placed within a different total ensemble, a new discourse is constituted, a different message conveyed.” (Clark qtd. in Hebdige, 104) Since the 1970’s study of punk subculture, these practices have intensified in new ways, and this is obvious in the hyperindividual style of M.I.A.. She has successfully combined an “instinctual” connection to the 1990s, “collect[ing] every piece of clothing that, at the time, was embarrassing,”(qtd. in Detrick) and adopting them to fit her individuality. As stressed in her interview with *Paper* magazine and the photos included in the feature (see Figure 1), her style cannot be neatly categorized. M.I.A.’s style reveals a superficially unbounded identity which refuses the imagined limitations of her ethnicity and gender. Without any previous knowledge of her background, personality, or familiarity with her music, she demands immediate attention.



Figure 2
(www.miauk.com)

M.I.A.'s style is outrageously (but very consciously) eccentric, deriving from various sources. Her stylistic approach seems to have evolved out of distinctly postmodern attitudes. David Muggleton references the words of Jameson saying postmodern style is "schizophrenic," (Muggleton, 36) further applying this to the fashion of post-subcultures focusing on "aesthetic play, hedonism, pleasure and spectacle." (Muggleton, 38) For youth this means that style is no longer bounded by the constraints of a single "uniform" and the "contradictions between their selected subcultural identities, [since] there are no rules, there is no authenticity, no ideological commitment, merely a stylistic game to be played." (Muggleton, 47) M.I.A.'s style is built upon such a playful combination of baggy t-shirts, leggings and short-shorts, incorporating eccentric accessories all bedazzled in bold patterns, sparkle and over-saturated neon color. (See Figure 2) Once kitschy, this style now dictates the trends of her subcultural audience. Additionally, her webpage (<http://miauk.com>) flashes with colorful graphics in an almost seizure-inducing manner perpetuating this stylistic image. M.I.A. consciously references the baggy clothing and eccentric accessories of hip hop and day-glo, outrageously patterned clothes of rave cultures. She has

fashioned a new style that has inspired flocks of “garishly-clothed all-too-sassy new-rave girls...[wearing things such as] bright red tights, [a] cheetah-skin smock and [a] faded ‘80s T-shirt.”(Hawkins) These bricolaged references conjure the memories of subcultures of the past. Together these references combine adolescent frustrations of race and class and strong desire to dance. M.I.A. presents a challenge to the mainstream with her ironic style.

M.I.A. is utilizing bricolage to assign politics to her eccentric clothing. In conjunction with her overt political opinions, M.I.A.’s style further asserts her world views. She is truly “sampling & mixing, of taking bits and pieces of history and dollops of geography and sticking them in the semiological blender, of making sense of nonsense and nonsense of sense.” (Polhemus, 100) While this intense interplay of various stylistic elements makes investigating globalized style difficult, this scattered array of fashion holds a powerful purpose. In order to displace the commonly-held assumptions about her ethnicity or gender, M.I.A. asserts creative originality through her hyperindividual identity as a Sri Lankan refugee-turned-pop star. M.I.A. is not only differentiating herself from the mainstream, but using her unique position to challenge hegemony.

Outside of the mainstream, “the underground espouses a fashion system that is highly relative; it is all about position, context and timing.”(Thornton, 118) With a unique place as an underground artist with significant media coverage, M.I.A. is able to utilize this immense power of style. Referencing different eras of fashion and global locations or going on a sort of shopping spree through the “supermarket of style.” (Polhemus) M.I.A.’s intelligent references support her subcultural power and outstanding creative ability. With a consideration of the expanding and cross-breeding of cultures it seems “instead of focusing around a single ‘direction,’ our world has splintered and fragmented into a plethora of lifestyle options which

coexist, rubbing shoulders with each other like commuters on a Tokyo subway.” (Polhemus, 32) M.I.A.’s style is uncategorized and full of global references (both spatially and temporally), therefore displacing commonly-held perceptions of a Sri-Lankan immigrant as a citizen of the third world and altering the understanding of similar individuals in the globalized world. With the aid of the media and a stylist, Carri Munden of Cassette Playa (a new-rave designer staple), M.I.A has been propelled into a stylistic icon. Her shift from a new, naïve subcultural star to multinational icon reflects the effects of “post-war, multi-national/late/consumer capitalism.” (Muggleton, 35) Her image, achieved through a manic collaging of global locations and styles from various eras reifies opinions into a distinctive identity.



Figure 3
(Mangla, courtesy XL recordings)

M.I.A.’s style is a “Molotov cocktail of global influences [that reflects] Maya’s journey from Sri Lankan refugee to stylistic pioneer, nodding to pretty much every flavour under the sun.” (Hodgson) When Maya Arulpragasam released *Arular*, her cultural power was not yet realized, and without this experience, a political awareness was not as obvious. Early photographs of M.I.A. are more noticeably ethnic looking than her image today. With long, dark hair, and recognizably South-East Asian features, M.I.A. was an interesting artist, but she was not doing much with the politics of style. (See Figure 3) This is often a conflict of

immigrants, especially females for whose style is “often used to represent national identity or ethnic loyalty.” (Maira, 14) Rupa Huq describes the struggle of second-generation immigrants in both Britain and France, as they negotiate ethnicity and what she calls the “cool cachet” of popular culture. She highlights there is “a growing visibility of youth of second generation ethnic origins in the mainstream media reflecting the changing perceptions of minorities in the popular imagination from ‘immigrants’ to ‘settled population’.” (Huq, 199) However, this is not to say that visible cues of ethnicity disappear from the perception of these people. Media perceptions have been highly problematic for M.I.A. “British media initially found her too hipster and she was shut out on all sides; not ‘Asian’ enough for the Asian media, nor street enough for the urban crowd - ironic given her upbringing could make even Lil' Kim's life look Little Bo Peep-like.” (Collins) This conflict is important in the world view of M.I.A., who continually asserts that the ‘third world’ she is attempting to represent in popular culture is often misunderstood by Westerners. (see “Spike Spends Saturday with”) As politics have come to the forefront of M.I.A.’s public identity, her style has intensified and seemingly makes bolder statements.

M.I.A. now displays a distinct super-style which is almost as notorious as her politics and history. Her ethnicity has become less evident; her long, dark hair has been replaced with a short curly bob with blond highlights, and her style has become more outrageous melding futuristic metallic with retro 1990’s styles. She takes the stage “in lace-up gold tights and immaculate white high-top sneakers, looking like a Fly Girl from television's "In Living Color" in 1990.” (Sisario) Consciously retro zeitgeist, but distinctly her own, style is a defining element of M.I.A. In Figure 4, M.I.A.’s creativity takes on a globalized stance, her hair now covered by a neon-blue wig, sunglasses, and clothing without any central reference or cohesion. M.I.A. is

representative of the “simulation, the generation by models of real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.” (Muggleton 34) The globalized context of the world today blurs the boundaries of various characteristics which had once defined and separated identity. For M.I.A., now these characteristics have become individualized allowing her to pick and choose among them.

However, this does not eliminate the possibility of “choos[ing] a costume and stick[ing] to it—at least for a short while.” (Sweetman, 91)



Figure 4
(www.miauk.com)

M.I.A. has ostensibly invested in her distinctive style, evident in her clothes, graphics, album art, and more. With her distinct political views her style seems to articulate her sense of a world full of blurring boundaries of ethnicity, gender, and most importantly the media which expresses cultural norms. While this overt stylistic freedom displaces common misconceptions of artists from the third world, it importantly adds to her assertions about woman as well. Maya respects her mother, but she often mentions her struggle to not be like her. “If you’re a Sri

Lankan woman you get brought up to be the best wife you can possibly be...home-making, being able to be a good mother.” (qtd. in Rayner) In this way M.I.A.’s “notions of style are embedded in deeper contradictions ... [in a] contestation [that] is enacted not only in gendered but racialized terms.” (Maira, 48) M.I.A.’s bricolage of style opposes the traditional role of a Sri Lankan woman, negotiating style in a personal and political manner.

In a *Chicago Tribune* article she said “I had to morph...I'm going to get into more trouble for saying this, but it was morphing from being lyrically political into just living political and being comfortable with that. Sometimes you don't have to shout out about stuff.” (qtd. in Danton) In other words, M.I.A. is aware of the impact of her music and opinions which demand political analysis. Consequentially, she has expanded from just making political statements in her music to performing politics throughout her life especially through style. Seemingly this assertion could cause some trouble, but it appears that M.I.A. works diligently to maintain her stance. Her quality of “living politically,” simply accepts the inevitability of the political context of her work.



Figure 5
M.I.A. with Afrikan Boy at the “Paper Planes” video-shoot
(www.myspace.com/mia)

It seems the mission to “just live politically” is one that M.I.A. had been struggling with for some time. Her purpose and opinions have been challenged, and ultimately her style is used to combat these accusations; “people are always giving me crap for not looking hard as my sound...They’re like, ‘Why you wearin’ lipstick?’ and I’m like, ‘Who cares? This is ME.” (qtd. in El-Ali) Surely this is the danger of being a stylish, trendy female in the realm of popular music. M.I.A.’s authenticity has been challenged as false and faddish, full of contradictions, or an exploitation of her ethnicity. In the face of critical charges that the “decoratively arrayed, pastel-washed tigers, soldiers, guns, armored vehicles, and fleeing civilians that bedeck her album are images, not propaganda,” M.I.A. asserts her style and art are direct articulations of her own experience. (Christgau) M.I.A. becomes political as she embodies the resistance of commonly-held (Western) notions of the non-Westerners, or more specifically those of the third world, and as she defends her own authenticity. She is an example of a chief in Ted Polhemus’ style tribe or a group consisting of members that

may well live in different cities, even different countries and typically strangers to one another—recognizable only by a common style ‘uniform’ which symbolizes a shared system of values and beliefs (that is, a culture)...styletribes could only exist in the modern-day ‘global village’ where disparate neighborhoods, cliques clubs and ‘scenes’ are effectively linked together by a national and international media eager to report on the latest ‘youthcults’ and (sic) ‘fashions.’ (Polhemus, 40-42)

Arguably, the manner in which her style does not emphasize her heritage but instead presents her as an outlandishly unique individual, seemingly asserting the validity of her music and importance of her presence. There is something ineradicably radical about her image, “not just because brown skin is always real, but because M.I.A.’s documentable experience connects her to world poverty in a way few Western whites can grasp.”(Christgau) M.I.A.’s style further authenticates her sound and represents her globalized media mission.

M.I.A.'s Music

“Hands up, guns out, represent the World Town” (“World Town” Kala)

M.I.A.'s music is the so-called icing on the cake of her entire political package. *Arular* had its punk-like DIY aesthetic and overt radical politics. She followed up with *Kala*, a realization of her global stance, featuring advanced production, and a refined politics of “what she really meant.” Together the two albums provide pleasurable dance music with underlying politics that cannot be ignored. With her bricolage of musical styles, she has created music that has left journalists scratching their heads—what genre is M.I.A.'s music? However, it is not just M.I.A.'s musical obscurity which is interesting, but the distinctly creative product which has found some success on the trivial Billboard Electronic charts (as well as Rap Album, Hot Digital, Hot Dance Club Play and Pop 100 charts). (Billboard) So does this commercial success challenge her mission of embodying the third world and providing it a voice in the Western world? Remaining true to her subcultural roots is how her music continues to be interesting. This emphasis on roots further politicizes her message, even as it challenges the mainstream.

Within the music industry, music is produced and packaged to fit into specific genres. Genre is a primary way that music is understood by audiences. An important characteristic of M.I.A.'s music is that it has challenged this conception of music. One music journalist has said “As someone writing about music, MIA's most frustrating feature is that you cannot pigeonhole her as a rapper, dancehall MC or world music artist. But as a music lover that is exactly her appeal.” (Leonard) This complexity of her music works directly with a political purpose. Deriving from the genres which are often used to describe her music, M.I.A. intelligently combines characteristics from these different generic definitions to her advantage. Typically genre-naming functions as an “appropriation of the music of minorities...and the rapid and

ongoing naming process within electronic/dance music subcultures acts as a gate-keeping mechanism...deeply bound up in both the political-economy and group identity formations of electronic/dance music communities.” (McLeod, 74) By mimicking the stereotypes of genre, M.I.A. challenges their boundaries through her combinations.

M.I.A.’s music lies somewhere between the genres of world, electronic and hip hop music, which all contribute different musical rhetoric to her sound. World music is a controversial category which “is the product of aggrieved populations, either from third world countries...or from disadvantaged population groups in a general sense” (Guilbault, 176) This label becomes dangerous as consuming world music equates to a sort of tourism and uninformed consumption, in which

...hybridity and diaspora are those aspects which repackage and reinscribe difference, juxtaposed exotica (hybrid as exotically mixed) and otherness as marketable categories...within the system [difference] necessarily comes with an illusion of equality” (Hutnyk, 32)

This illusion usually does not actually result in equality among different voices in the global market, where it is commodified. M.I.A. combines the world genre with electronic and club sounds. This music, commonly meant for dancing is “less about ‘communication’ in the rock sense and more like engines for ‘the programming of the sensations.’ (Susan Sontag qtd. in Reynolds, “Generation Ecstasy,” 52) Electronic music blurs “the lines between art and craft, inspiration and technique...between the song and the recording tricks with which it’s embellished....music *is* the production.” (Reynolds, “Generation Ecstasy,” 52) The instinctual dance of electronic is finally combined with hip hop, which is no longer just “the Black CNN’ but has become the channel for youth culture in general.” (Maira, 57) Hip hop has become a common language of the mainstream. It is also an ideal—nearly necessary—vehicle for youth of various ethnicities to express experience of diaspora. This is reflected in M.I.A.’s past

influences, when she “play[ed] hip-hop all day long...[and] had a hunger for knowing everything about it...[g]oing from Eric B. and Rakim to Public Enemy to Cookie Crew.” (qtd. in Hiatt) On its own this combination of genres evokes a lot of meaning.

M.I.A.’s first album, *Arular*, challenged musical genres and made significant use of her father’s revolutionary past. The album is built upon infectious and unfamiliar dance-beats combined with an untrained, yet dynamic voice. It “sold a modest 129,000 copies but was a critical jackpot, both in the mainstream press and the blogosphere.” (Sisario) With its extreme political lyrics and imagery, the album was consistently misunderstood as a trendy interpretation of terrorism. However, Maya claims the album is about being a “powerless noncombatant...about how confusing it is to talk about things as a civilian when you are caught up in something like that...You can never say good and evil, and 'We'll fight the axis of evil,' because it's a confused line.” (qtd. in Sisario) The album is a creative expression of experience and opinion, not just an invalid attempt at politics. *Arular*’s cohesive production and content established M.I.A. as a creative female producer with strong opinions.

One of the defining aspects of *Arular* was the DIY aesthetic established by a Sri Lankan, female producer. The album was produced mostly on a Roland 505 drum machine, reflecting the fact that “electronic dance music is often made with relatively low-level equipment and outmoded machinery.” (Reynolds, “Generation Ecstasy,” 49) This characteristic of electronic music is similar to a DIY aesthetic of punk, which offered disillusioned youth a mode of expression. The sound of *Arular* has an “over-all effect [of] what a politically minded class of fourth graders might do for a term project if they had access to a lot of electronic toys.” (Frere-Jones) While the sound of the record is simple and the political messages can feel a bit unfounded, audiences connected with this music which offered an egalitarian political awareness

and a new sound. M.I.A.'s music utilizes bricolage layer sounds and while "the sampler does indeed offer "infinite possibilities" for resequencing and warping these samples, most dance producers are constrained by the functionalist criteria of their specific genre." (Reynolds, "Generation Ecstasy," 48) However, M.I.A.'s music, a "canny composite of street beats makes all the right connections, organizing a pan-global conference call between Kingston's concrete jungles, Dalston's grimy council estates, Rio's funky favelas, and... the bad areas reggaeton hails from...[ultimately] comes from nowhere."(Reynolds, "PIRACY") This aspect of the record could be seen as inability to commit to a single musical direction, but is more a commitment to M.I.A.'s global influences and assertive politics.

Almost more important than the music of *Arular*, is the lyrical content. Writing lyrics came before Maya actually started singing. She only picked up the microphone after being frustrated by other female vocalists who sang in "this R&B Whitney Houston fucking voice...how I sing is like how a tone-deaf person would sing...I'm just gonna keep writing songs...[and] understand that it's all about just being brave with who you are." (Hoard) The lyrical content of *Arular* is dripping in the revolutionary influence of Maya's father. His legacy is present throughout the album, especially in the inter-song, "Freedom Skit" that sings "Freedom fighting dad/ Bombed his pad/ Called him a terror/ Put him on wanted ads." With this artistic vision, the album maintains a revolutionary focus throughout its body. Defining herself as "a third-world refugee terrorist or whatever," (qtd. in Hoard) M.I.A. caused controversy with her radical words. The lyric metaphor of the notorious line in "Sunshowers" which said "Like PLO, I don't surrender," was often misunderstood and caused speculation of terrorist sympathies. The album also tackles other extraordinary subjects such as "Fire, Fire" which reminisces on "growing up guerilla"; "Amazon" which entails the experience of an imaginary

kidnapping, and “Galang” the album’s biggest success makes popular culture references with lines such as “London calling, speak this slang” and to drug references with “Blaze a blaze/ galang, galang, galang/ purple haze/ galang....” While the album contains a few narrative songs, they are equally contrasted by confusing jumbles of words, as M.I.A. says “I am precious about my attitude, but...not very precious about my words.” (Light, 137)

Arular, achieved great acclaim because of its unconventional recipe of a female producer and vocalist singing about controversial topics. It also obtained much subcultural capital as a result of the remixed, *Piracy Funds Terrorism* (referencing anti-bootlegging slogans shown at British cinema (El-Ali)) mixtape. Produced by Philadelphian and future ex-boyfriend, DJ Diplo, the mixtape was an intelligent use of the DJ as a marketing tool. The shift from *Arular* to *Piracy Funds Terrorism* perhaps reflects the fact that “creativity in dance music involves a balancing act between making your tracks both “music and mixable”...one of the defining qualities of digital music is the sense that this music “is never finished and...never really integrated” as composition...it is this “unfinished’ aspect...that enable the DJ to plug tacks into the mixscape.” (Reynolds, “Generation Ecstasy,” 49) *Piracy Funds Terrorism* placed M.I.A. in the soundscape of popular music alongside artists such as Missy Elliot, LL Cool J, Madonna, Jay-Z and incorporated the distinct Hollertronix style of its producer. Amplified with new rhythms, gun shots, and sound effects, *Arular* morphed from a global electro-dance album into a party mix. The mixtape earned great praise on the subcultural radar, and propelled M.I.A to the status of underground pop star. However, the collaboration also led to some confusion about the production of Maya’s work, and forced her to assert her creative authorship and this seemingly had a large affect on the approach of her follow-up album, *Kala*.

M.I.A. began an interview with the music blog/website, Pitchfork, about her album, *Kala* by saying

Diplo didn't make...He never made *Arular*, but you guys keep writing it.... And I just find it a bit upsetting and kind of insulting that I can't have any ideas on my own because I'm a female or that people from undeveloped countries can't have ideas of their own unless it's backed up by someone who's blond-haired and blue-eyed. [Diplo] After the first time it's cool, the second time it's cool, but after like the third, fourth, fifth time, maybe it's an issue that we need to talk about, maybe that's something important, you know. (qtd.in Thompson)

The attitude in this quote reflects an important shift in the politics from *Arular* to *Kala*. The album had a different approach asserting the importance of Maya as a producer and creative musician without the influence of her ex-boyfriend Diplo. There is a maturity in her tone, M.I.A. has said “people can't just be opinionated and loud, because it leads to nowhere.” (qtd. in Diehl) *Kala*, named after her mother, is practical and its message more focused. The album contains “snapshots of the daily lives and concerns of the underclass [in stark contrast to the more radical] geopolitical analysis” (Light, 137) of *Arular*. Additionally, the importance of her experience of the third world is more explicit. The record also reflects her new contract with *Interscope* which allowed for more mature production and access to samples from the Modern Lovers, the Pixies, and the Clash. Another important influence on *Kala*, was M.I.A.'s inability to obtain a United States working visa. With plans to work with hip hop producer/mogul, Timbaland, M.I.A. could have easily “become Nelly Furtado, move[d] to Beverley Hills, g[o]t married to other famous people and ha[d] babies” (Hodgson, 181) Perhaps luckily, and in an almost mythical fashion, this decision was not made. Instead she “spent a whole lot of Interscope Records' money” (Hiatt) and traveled to “India, Trinidad, Becquay, Japan, Liberia, London, Virginia, Baltimore, Australia, China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and...Chester” (qtd. in Cosyns) to create a truly global record.

With its multiple locations and producers, *Kala* is a fragmented record with scattered influence but clear purpose. With an established position in media and with a dedicated audience, *Kala* did not have to shout its politics. Drawing equally from Western and various ethnic influences, the album is an artful collage of culture seemingly representing an equalized mode of global communication. “The result plays like an audio encyclopedia of musical influences, drawing from Bollywood, tribal music, raga, and hip hop [and more] and then throwing it all into a digital Cuisinart.” (Irwin, 155) The dynamic opening track, “Bamboo Banga,” announces the arrival of M.I.A. with the repeating line of “M.I.A. coming back with power power!” continuing to “Barbarella looks like she my deadringer,” referencing the futuristic space heroine (another powerful female who dons metallic ensembles) from the 1968 cult film. With its flawless incorporation of the Modern Lover’s “Roadrunner” and a sample from the Sri Lankan film “Dalapathi,” *Kala* opens with confidence.

Following “Bamboo Banga,” *Kala* begins its journey around the world shadowing the travels of its singer. First in India, where M.I.A. attempted to “get drummers to play Baltimore Club on ...2000 year old drum kits at the temple” (Symonds, 28). Moving next to a cover of the Bollywood disco song “Jimmy Aaja,” reinvented as the anthem to a “genocide tour.” (supposedly a proposed date to Rwanda by a BBC journalist in Liberia) “Hussel” criticizes the obsession with money in popular music and features a rapper from Nigeria, Afrikan Boy, who repeats “You think its tough now, come to Africa.” The global references continue to Australia “Mango Down Pickle River” featuring a group of Aboriginal boys and sounds of the didgeridoo, and then to Baltimore with club-beats produced by Blaqstarr. Finally arriving at “Paper Planes” the album’s most successful single which is about “making visas,” (qtd. from “Spike Spends Saturday with”) M.I.A. sings “I fly like paper, get high likes planes/ If you catch me at the

border, I got visas in my name.” Accompanied by a guitar hook from the Clash’s “Straight to Hell,” the song was described as “so dissertation-ready that you could easily overlook its undisputed spot as the year’s second-catchiest single.” (Shepherd) The success of “Paper Planes,” perhaps reflects M.I.A.’s success in packaging distinctive world views in the form of enjoyable dance music. While *Kala* has less a cohesive concept than *Arular*, it seems to have achieved a global hybridization of sound which communicates M.I.A.’s creative politics.

M.I.A. has intelligently utilized musicianship and creativity to communicate her strong opinions and to begin a mission of third world awareness. For her, “culturally it’s important to bridge t[he] gap [between first and third world] to make communication possible” (qtd. from “Spike Spends Saturday with”) Her “creativity arises not from a cultural context which exists in monolithic isolation, but in borrowings from [others],” (Negus and Pickering, 188) which is obvious in her collaging of music genres. Additionally, her lyrics of personal experience and of cultural observation invoke a political power. M.I.A. has caused controversy with references to her father’s revolutionary history and her own radical political statements. However, this ability to attract negative press coverage, acts as “a culmination and fulfillment of youth cultural agendas in so far as negative [press coverage] baptize transgression. Whether the underground espouses an overt politics or not, it is set on being culturally radical.” (Thornton, 129) Her unique identity and music have captured this aspect of controversy, and combined with her praise, has worked to substantially amplify M.I.A.’s politics. This power has already achieved international attention and could affectively set an example for other artists to follow. The result is an appreciation of “the interconnectedness of people and practices on which the global music industry is built,” (Guilbault, 190) which appears to be part of M.I.A.’s mission.

Conclusion

M.I.A. is a creative artist whose music arises out of “a passionate will to push against existing forms and conventions, and an equally passionate desire to communicate beyond immediate temporal and spatial boundaries.” (Negus and Pickering, 189) She imagines a global audience that not only recognizes the immense media saturation in their world, but also “the ease with which records travel in space and time...and growing globalization that characterize post-war popular music ...[which] trespass on the borders of neighbourhood and nation.” (Thornton, 70) Her mission is to get past the accepted results of globalization, and do something more. Edward Said stated culture “is never just a matter of ownership, of borrowing, and lending with absolute debtors and creditors, but rather of appropriations, common experiences, and interdependencies of all kinds among different cultures.” (Said qtd. in Negus and Pickering, 188) However, a new discourse is needed to realize the importance of this cultural exchange.

M.I.A.’s presence in the media emphasizes that equalizing modes of communication are needed, that will value both first and third world voices. This approach embraces and understands the potential of contemporary conditions in which we are

enjoined to construct greater narrations, inclusive and liberatory, capable of embracing the heterogeneity of humanity without jettisoning the advances of technology, the capacities of production and the creativity of many. Heterogeneity in itself would be dangerous idea if it came to hegemony outside a programme of redistributive justice and advanced development. It is important to politicise different in such a context.” (Hutnyk, 224)

Instead of simply marketing difference as just that or throwing unfamiliar sounds into the ‘world music’ rack, M.I.A.’s challenges categorization. Her myth, style, and music draw attention to the politics of what is called difference and provide a specific context to understand it. Her music accepts the hybridization of cultures in a global context and provides an appropriate soundtrack for its audience. Soon Maya will begin her own record label, Zig-Zag. (“When the

world is zig, you zag it.” (qtd. from “Spike Spends Saturday with”)) Afrikan Boy, the Nigerian rapper from the *Kala* track “Hussel” will be the first artist signed to it. This new project strives to take M.I.A.’s globalized politics to a new level, offering the market to more artists with third world experience.

M.I.A. takes chances with her music and politics, but in the end she says “I just wanted to make shit that you can play in any country, and people recognize as belonging to them, no matter where they’re from or what they’re doing.” (Hodgson, 181) In this statement, she demands a universal politics from her music and opinions, wanting to become “political in the extent to which [her music] transcends its own particularistic interests and links up with other social forces beyond the subcultural sphere.” (Marchart, 96) This possibility is perplexing, is it possible for popular music to have a larger political impact? Can the world catch up to M.I.A.? Or will M.I.A.’s politics vanish as she is commodified, and her distinct sound becomes another remnant of the confusing cycle between subculture and media? No matter what becomes of M.I.A.’s “third world democracy” in the future, she has struck an interesting chord, which for now resonates in its own unique space.

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