



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Speaking Smibanese: hip-hop, local youth language variety, and representations of the Amsterdam Bijlmer

Roest, F.A. de

Citation

Roest, F. A. de. (2023). Speaking Smibanese: hip-hop, local youth language variety, and representations of the Amsterdam Bijlmer. *Parallax*, 28(1), 105-120.
doi:10.1080/13534645.2022.2156692

Version: Corrected Publisher's Version

License: [Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3590759>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



Speaking Smibanese: Hip-Hop, Local Youth Language Variety, and Representations of the Amsterdam Bijlmer

Aafje de Roest

To cite this article: Aafje de Roest (2022) Speaking Smibanese: Hip-Hop, Local Youth Language Variety, and Representations of the Amsterdam Bijlmer, Parallax, 28:1, 105-120, DOI: [10.1080/13534645.2022.2156692](https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2022.2156692)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2022.2156692>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 28 Mar 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 149



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Speaking Smibanese: Hip-Hop, Local Youth Language Variety, and Representations of the Amsterdam Bijlmer

Aafje de Roest 

‘That shit is just HIP-HOP!’ is how writer Soortkill¹ characterises the popular local youth language ‘Smibanese’.² Soortkill is one of the members of SMIB, a trendy Amsterdam hip-hop art collective that uses this self-named and self-claimed local youth language in their hip-hop-inspired art performances. SMIB, founded in 2014 by artists Ray Fuego and GRGY, currently consists of multiple artists who produce a wide range of hip-hop art, ranging from music to fashion, podcasts, and even books, reaching a national audience with their locally oriented stories.³ The collective has played a crucial part in the spread of ‘Smibanese’ all over the Netherlands, both through their extensive usage of it in their hip-hop oeuvre (including lyrics, music videos and social media posts) and through their documentation of the local youth language in their two publications of the *Smibanese Woordenboek* (*Smibanese Dictionary*, 2017 and 2019).⁴

Benedict Anderson’s statement that each language ‘looms up imperceptibly out of a horizonless past’⁵ applies to contemporary linguistic varieties such as Smibanese, too. In his introduction to the Smibanese dictionary, SMIB’s writer Soortkill writes about the impossibility of tracing back its exact origin. Smibanese emerged ‘organically’ in southeast Amsterdam among hip-hop youth from a certain ‘feeling’ and ‘necessity’, Soortkill writes in line with Anderson’s insights on the ‘choice’ of language being ‘a gradual, unself-conscious, pragmatic, not to say haphazard development.’⁶ According to Soortkill, Amsterdam hip-hop youth speaks Smibanese because they ‘do not want to speak according to the standard Dutch language.’⁷ It offers him and other youths the chance to communicate freely ‘in a system that is not necessarily [their] own, but which does impose a standard language on [them]’.⁸ Both hip-hop and this language variety, he declares, make it possible to construct their own reality, which feels more comfortable. His expressions draw attention to the role language plays in representations of reality (specifically for youths who have been oppressed or are still oppressed through language). They also point to the possibilities and power of forming a new, local, non-standard language variety with which to question, challenge, or even openly oppose national narratives of identity and community.

While the link between hip-hop, language, and representation has been studied extensively⁹, there is a growing interest in how hip-hop performers actively use local linguistic sources (such as Smibanese) to style their local

identities and stories.¹⁰ Coming from a history of research into specifically contemporary Dutch hip-hop and identity practices, I would like to narrow these broad research focuses down to hip-hop artists' linguistic praxes in the Dutch context. Drawing on SMIB's rap/hip-hop music as a case study, I aim to answer how the hip-hop artists use the local youth language variety Smibanese to represent themselves, their local environment, and their local (imagined) community.

Hip-hop from the Bronx to the Bijlmer

Hip-hop originated in ancient African storytelling traditions and sprang from the blocks of the US-American South Bronx in the 1970s as the youth cultural movement surrounding rap music.¹¹ Its key elements are MCing/rapping, DJing, graffiti writing, and breakdancing. Fashion, social media expressions, and language and speech practices are also part of the *culture*.¹² Born from the experiences of socio-economically and culturally disadvantaged African-American and Latino-American youth, hip-hop is *from* the streets, *about* the streets, and *for* the streets. The culture distinguishes itself from other subcultures with a strong focus on socio-cultural issues related to 'the local', spatial awareness, and identity.¹³ Hip-hop's *glocality* in terms of content¹⁴ allows it to adapt its US-oriented frame to new contexts, local needs, and priorities relatively quickly.¹⁵ With the help of technological developments (from cassettes to online streaming platforms), hip-hop has grown from a local cultural expression from within the Bronx into an internationally popular youth culture.

Today, it is one of the most dominant forms of youth culture globally and in the Netherlands, blossoming, for example, on the streets of the Amsterdam Bijlmer, functioning as a powerful form of cultural resistance for youth to present their local, place- and space-bound experiences.¹⁶ They typically take up hip-hop practices in local youth language varieties, since rapping in the language of the streets and the 'hoods is considered the most authentic form of communication with the hip-hop audience.¹⁷ Unsurprisingly, then, Dutch-spoken and Dutch-centred hip-hop are extremely popular in the Netherlands: in 2018, 8 out of 10 music streams in the Netherlands were of contemporary Dutch hip-hop, and, in 2020 and 2021, Spotify's top five most streamed artists in the Netherlands consisted entirely of Dutch hip-hop artists.¹⁸ In times of globalisation and internationalisation, this unprecedented popularity of Dutch-spoken and Dutch-centred hip-hop culture in the Netherlands raises questions about how Dutch youth uses hip-hop to seek and (re)define their identities linguistically against a local background.

Reclaiming language to re-present

Language has a unique value in such identity-formation and community-building processes, Anderson points out in *Imagined Communities*. Specifically in poetry and song, it may evoke a unique sense of simultaneous

commonality.¹⁹ Members of the contemporary Dutch hip-hop community indeed deploy several linguistic strategies to connect with each other. Hip-hop specifically appeals to Dutch youth and artists with multi-ethnic backgrounds.²⁰ They code their language locally, drawing on multiple language reservoirs and creating ‘new’ distinctive, nonstandard language varieties. In postcolonial, multi-ethnic societies such as the Netherlands, both rappers and youth combine ‘regional, social and ethnic dialects’ to construct new linguistic varieties.²¹

Most of SMIB’s members are of Surinamese Dutch or Ghanaian Dutch descent and multilingual. I understand multilingualism as the ability of a person or a community to think and communicate in multiple languages. Smibanese, logically then, is a multilingual mixture of Dutch, English, Sranan Tongo, Papiamentu, Spanish and Arab expressions, combined with other local linguistic elements from the Amsterdam cant language Bargoens, which, in turn, loans words from the Yiddish language. The name of writer Soortkill is an example of this, with ‘kill’ meaning ‘boy’ in Sranan Tongo. The use of Sranan Tongo in Smibanese opens discourses of ‘territorial and cross territorial belonging’,²² since even long after slavery and colonialism, a history in which the language’s roots lie (as a creolised language that emerged out of the necessity of a shared language at the plantation), it was strongly discouraged by Dutch authorities to speak the language in the Netherlands.²³ Using Sranan elements, Smibanese strongly mirrors the Dutch colonial past and its migration history.²⁴ It also reflects the ethnic background of their neighbourhood since Sranan Tongo is used proudly in SMIB’s Amsterdam southeastern borough Bijlmer – giving the language a specific Amsterdam Bijlmer *twist* in the Dutch context.

Smibanese is also localised by other linguistic strategies, such as the switching of vowels and/or consonants (which is typical for youth languages²⁵), and signifying, referring to the practice of attributing new, different meanings to words.²⁶ Through language play, hip-hop artists manufacture their own forms of word art, *bricolages*, as it were, picking, combining, and remixing elements from local and global linguistic sources to express their hybrid identity in the newly emerged *glocal* language variety.²⁷

This ‘new’ local nonstandard language variety accepts the hybridity between its various linguistic influences without choosing, for example, between Dutch and Sranan Tongo. Instead, this new variety may function as an ‘undermining of, a resistance to borders’, by claiming and reclaiming both.²⁸ Smibanese, as such a ‘new’ nonstandard local language variety, enables SMIB’s artists to challenge the rules of the dominant standard language. What ceased to be the former coloniser’s language instead becomes the language of a new generation of Amsterdam youths, who assert their right to it. SMIB’s artists use their own remixed language variety to express resistance to the dominant national narrative and its language, call attention to their multi-ethnic background and the heterogeneity of their local community and the cultural history of their neighbourhood, and playfully reshape their hybrid local

identities in the process. When actively used, local youth varieties thus provide young people with the tools to ‘present themselves in and from a cultural standpoint’ and reinforce that standpoint, which itself ‘[can] facilitate change.’²⁹

While such hip-hop messages in Smibanese are incomprehensible for some (the outgroup), they are understandable for others: thus, they construct an imagined community of people who literally and figuratively speak the same language. By remixing both local linguistic elements and those of languages from their ‘roots’, SMIB’s artists can signal to the members of their hybrid ‘home’ communities that, while they might speak Dutch, they are still connected with the people they are (also) ethnically related to and linguistically affiliated with. Smibanese is a fruitful instrument to represent where they come from in terms of roots and linguistically pay homage to their local home environment.

Like French *banlieue* language varieties, Smibanese is ‘a melting pot of expressions that reflect the ethnic makeup of the communities where it is used.’³⁰ In SMIB’s case, that community is, as said, located in the Amsterdam borough the Bijlmer, which plays a vital role in their hip-hop oeuvre as their hometown. In the construction of their identity, hip-hop artists actively identify with the places and spaces they come from, such as the Bronx (American hip-hop) or the Bijlmer (Dutch hip-hop) but also with the more general notions of the ‘hometown’, the ‘hood’, and the ‘streets’.³¹ Their local connection to the ‘hoods and the streets may be expressed through different communicative modes and cultural practices, including textual, visual and musical signs. Hip-hop artists may rap *in* specific local varieties *about* street life and lived experiences in a particular neighbourhood or city, allude to area codes or telephone numbers in lyrics, artist names, or usernames on social media, or display iconic local buildings in music videos, for example.

Both *within* the hip-hop scene and by academics such as Murray Forman and Imani Perry, these types of place-bound representations are defined as ‘representing’, since hip-hop artists often portray places and spaces that have been marginalised through negative portrayal (for example, in mainstream media) and are re-claimed and re-presented by members of the hip-hop scene.³² *Represent!* is not only a famous hip-hop catchphrase but a broad, emancipatory practice of localisation and identification that allows artists to answer questions on what they stand for, where they come from, with whom they want to surround themselves and how they experience life in a specific environment.³³ It is a way to express their local identity and connection to their local familial community of neighbourhood residents and friends and family,³⁴ acting as its *representatives* and presenting complex and layered stories about their neighbourhood and its community.³⁵ From the very beginning of the hip-hop tradition in the Netherlands, Dutch hip-hop artists have copied this practice by US-American example, adjusting it to their own local issues and concerns, expressing their own local identities and those of their

community. These days, the practice of representing can be recognised in many hip-hop oeuvres of many contemporary Dutch artists, of which SMIB is a prominent example.³⁶

Contextualising SMIB: representing the Bijlmer

In the case of SMIB, their 'hometown' is prominently present in both the name of the collective and its artistic oeuvre. 'SMIB' is an inversion of the word 'Bims', a variation on the Sranan term for the Bijlmer ('Bimre'), the neighborhood in the south-eastern part of Amsterdam that SMIB represents and after which the local youth language Smibanese (language of the SMIB) is named. Built in the late 1960s, this residential area was promised to become the neighbourhood of the future. However, as anthropologist Markus Balkenhol delineates in his extensive study *Tracing Slavery* (2014) on this part of Amsterdam, even though the Bijlmer's architecture, contrasting other parts of Amsterdam, was quite ambitiously called 'the future', it 'failed to appeal to the white middle class for whom the suburb was intended.'³⁷ Not only differing in style and architecture, for a long time, the neighbourhood was also physically isolated from the rest of Amsterdam since there was no subway leading to the city centre. Because of this, the Bijlmer remained 'unfinished' and 'unreachable' for a long time, rendering it unattractive to potential buyers.

After the independence of Suriname in 1975, the Dutch government forced Surinamese citizens to choose between either a Surinamese or Dutch nationality. Those who chose a Dutch nationality often migrated to the Netherlands. Many of these immigrants were placed in social housing in the Bijlmer. Since their recent immigration and small chance of employment and income, many of the new residents of the Bijlmer had an unfavourable and sometimes rather hopeless financial situation, often depending on social benefits and illegal labour. Crime became a more prominent pillar in the neighbourhood, and, as a result, in the media, the Bijlmer was often quite negatively portrayed as being a poor, Black neighbourhood.³⁸ In the following years, the south-eastern part of Amsterdam continued to be racialised as a 'place of blackness and danger' in both politics and media. The Bijlmer fell into a negative spiral of negative perception and stereotyping, and partly because of that stigmatisation, this image continued through time.³⁹

Despite the negativity surrounding the Bijlmer, its residents display a powerful sense of solidarity and belonging, 'a spirit of resistance of sorts.'⁴⁰ Continuing with Balkenhol's insights and in line with Anderson, I consider the Bijlmer to be an 'imagined community' in which the residents can never all know each other but do feel a strong sense of connection to each other because of, but also despite, how persistently they are portrayed as a group. Notably, this community is not a national (Dutch) one, but one that incorporates both transnational (migratory) and subnational (local) elements.

Therefore, it is worth considering with which ‘style’, as Anderson calls it, this community is portrayed in SMIB’s hip-hop expressions.⁴¹

In the case of the Bijlmer, Smibanese comes to function as a binding agent which evokes a sense of community that reaches beyond knowable surroundings. This way, SMIB seems to portray the ‘local’ as a site that is both beneath and beyond the nation-state. From this strong sense of a collective ‘us’, residents have, over time, repeatedly made efforts to challenge the negative image of their neighbourhood, often with success. The hip-hop collective SMIB, too, aims to change the national perception of the Bijlmer as a maligned space. This is reflected in their rap/hip-hop musical practices, which paint a more nuanced picture of the Bijlmer in all its colours. In the rest of this article, I will discuss how their local nonstandard language variety Smibanese offers SMIB’s lyrical pioneers the opportunity to do so.

Welcome to ‘the eleven zero’

Throughout their oeuvre, SMIB’s members proudly present themselves as Bijlmer residents and members of the local community. Many of their music videos portray the hip-hop artists against the backdrop of the ‘hood, recognisable to the Dutch audience as the Bijlmer. The beginnings of music videos of the songs ‘Dimmelicht’ (2016) and ‘Fukboiproof’ (2015), contain solid local references, showing various zip codes of the Bijlmer (1103) and surrounding areas: 1104 and 1106. These local codes are repeated and reinforced linguistically in their lyrics. This way, SMIB’s members evoke their relationship to the local place of the Bijlmer and the figurative space of their neighbourhood.

In the track ‘DR’ (2016), SMIB artist Tads Thots raps about how ‘he is in the 1106’, actively addressing the listener as his witness (‘I pulled up and you know I was there’). In ‘Tonnop’ (2016), Tads Thots and SMIB artist Ray Fuego present themselves as neighbours, sharing similar, close-by zip codes ‘1103’ and ‘1104’. By lyrically merging these codes into one, rapping ‘this is the 11034’ (pronounced as the ‘the *eleven zero, thirty-four*’), they show off their connection to each other and the neighbourhood. Their lines, ‘this is the 11034, the geese – crows the same’, reflect how the hip-hop artists *represent* similar spaces, of which the ‘local codes’ both literally and figuratively seem to become one. The merged code ‘11034’ is a new, ‘collective’ code used to localise themselves. The artists lyrically again confirm the similarities between one part of the Bijlmer, Ganzenhoef (‘goose farm’), and another part, Kraaiennest (‘crow’s nest’), by combining these localities in their wordplay ‘the geese, crows, the same’ – representing these as spaces that are much alike. Ray Fuego and Tads Thots turn the word ‘crows’ into a verb [to crow, *kraaien* in Dutch] in the Dutch wordplay. It is as if the different birds (geese and crows), after which their neighbourhoods are named, have metaphorically shared the same ‘nest’ of the South East – just like the rappers and the inhabitants, who share an unseen, familiar bond. It seems like the

birds make the same sound – in short, these places are sounded similarly, as if characterised by similar acoustics, and thus, similar local dynamics. In addition, *kraaien*, a Dutch term to describe the sound that roosters make to mark and defend their territory, is metaphorically used to indicate the artists' demarcation of the district of Ganzenhoef and Kraaiennest as 'theirs'.

In the lyrics of 'Tonnop' (2016), the artists communicate that everyone who lives in this similar area, the Bijlmer area with zip codes ranging from 'the three, four to the zero six' ('[110]3 tot de [110]4 tot de 06') belongs to the similar, family-like group: the 'squad'. This term shares familiarity with 'the posse' and bears the meaning of 'alternative family'. The squad points to an imagined community of friends, family members and residents – people who are not necessarily family but share an unseen bond (as if it were by bloodline) because of their origin from the same local place or space. Balkenhol's study on the Bijlmer, as we saw earlier, shines a light on how negative influences from 'the outside' lead Bijlmer residents to feel united on the inside of the neighbourhood. The 'we' that emerges 'pits a collectivity of residents of Amsterdam Zuidoost against the overwhelming forces of an 'elsewhere'.⁴² This collective 'we' is imagined lyrically by SMIB's artists multiple times, addressed through local linguistic codes and terms.

In the lyrics of 'Tonnop' (2016), Ray Fuego emphasises that he truly is a 'head to toe' Bijlmer resident ('van me toes up'). In 'Dimmelicht' (2016), Fuego connects his straightforwardness, realness, and truthfulness to the Bijlmer: 'I come through [a wordplay with 'true'] [...] straight from the SMIB' ('Ik kom through [...] straight uit the SMIB'). The words 'coming through' also hint at him becoming noticeable through action and performance – a wordplay that foregrounds the artist as a truthful and successful rapper with local Bijlmer *roots*. Moreover, in their track 'Bummy Boys' (2015), artists Ray Fuego and GRGY assert that you could call upon Bijlmer residents as witnesses to testify about who they are and that they and their squad are indeed from the Bijlmer: 'ask all those people [...], they know my boys from the SMIB' (vraag al die mensen [...], die kennen mijn boys uit de SMIB'). These lyrics function as a confirmation *from* and *to* their audience that the artists are *genuine* and legitimate.

Such constructions of *realness* and fabricated authenticities are of great importance in hip-hop.⁴³ Authenticity and claims on the authority of origin are rooted in the place hip-hop artists come from or live in – often the place they represent.⁴⁴ There, the artists claim to have experienced what they rap about: that these are *lived experiences* that earn them *street credibility*. SMIB's expressions of locality thus have a four-fold function: (1) detailed profiling of the hip-hop artists as residents of the Bijlmer, (2) an implicit shout-out⁴⁵ to the residents of their neighbourhood and the imagined community, (3) an act of paying homage to their neighbourhood and (4) a confirmation of them being *streetwise*, which feeds their authority.

Representing the SMIB

The previous samples exemplify how textual signs and language can be valuable tools to *represent* and linguistically establish a performer's authenticity. SMIB's hip-hop artists invite listeners to pay a 'lyrical visit' to their neighbourhood. They both express critique and show pride in their neighbourhood. Sometimes, SMIB confirms the negative image of the Bijlmer, such as in the track 'Eleven 0' (2015) (again, a locally coded reference to zip code 110[x] (eleven zero [number]) from the Bijlmer), where SMIB artist KC raps that 'the hood is polluted'. However, the artists also make tangible how negative stereotypes of the Bijlmer influence their daily lives. They rap about ethnic profiling, which they assert happens more within the Bijlmer than in the Amsterdam city centre, as Ray Fuego says in an interview with the national newspaper *NRC* and as the artist Tads Tods raps in the track 'DR' (2016).⁴⁶ He raps that there are 'plakkoes in de hood like a western' and that the 'in de 1106 waar die mannen kunnen dullen op een n****' [1106 is a place where men chase on a n****]. 'Plakkoes' is a signified term that means 'transmitting beacons'. 'Dullen', meaning 'chasing', is also a signified term. These words would indicate that Black male residents of the Bijlmer appear to be followed and monitored preventively.

Artist Ray Fuego critically reflects on this type of ethnic profiling and its effects on himself and his community. In the *NRC* interview mentioned above, Fuego tells the interviewer more about his tune 'Tonnop' (2016), which criticises the excess of police surveillance in the Bijlmer, stating that this song refers to his neighbourhood: 'I portray the Bijlmer as a collection of "lit candles", referring to the excess of police cars driving around here, with their lights flashing. More than in the city centre. Maybe the police are here for a reason, but it is still intimidating.'⁴⁷ Ray Fuego refers to the following lines from 'Tonnop': 'De SMIB is waxinelichtjes, nachtlampjes, lit als bic b*tch' [the SMIB is tea lights, night lights, lit as *bic* b*tch']. With these lines, he reverses a stereotypical image of the Bijlmer. First, comparing his 'lit up' neighbourhood to candles, he euphemises the image of harsh light from the police cars. Following this, Fuego flips the script of his neighbourhood's representation by rapping that it is 'lit' as a 'bic' because of these lights. With 'bic', Fuego refers to the popular lighter brand *BIC* and to the image of a lighter as a source of fire. Through linguistic wordplay, framing the same lights that previously cast a negative light on his neighbourhood as something positive, Fuego takes control over the representation of his neighbourhood and, with it, *represents* the Bijlmer as an attractive place to be, instead of a maligned spot.

The earlier mentioned track 'Eleven 0', shows the struggle between confirming stereotypical depictions of the neighbourhood and the intrinsic love SMIB's members feel for it. On the one hand, KC raps about the Bijlmer's shadow side, confirming the griminess of the 'hood, which offers him as a hip-hop artist a certain dark, indifferent rawness and coolness. This portrayal of the Bijlmer as the 'hood feeds into his rags-to-riches narrative, where he,

despite everything, is one of the only ones to have ‘made it’, making him unique or even a ‘chosen’ one. This narrative is frequently employed in both popular music and hip-hop, the latter genre giving the narrative a local twist, in which the artist moves from the ‘streets’ to success. It also brings the artist closer to the listener: he was like you not long ago. He, too, carries the ‘hood with him, and if he has a successful rap career, perhaps you can, too.

On the other hand, however, Ray Fuego expresses an ultimate loyalty to the the Bijlmer area by equating himself to his zip code and stating that he will represent it until his death (‘dit is 1103 tot ik heel diep sliep’ [this is 1103 until I have slept deeply]). Although SMIB sometimes continues a negative image of poverty, dullness and crime in their neighbourhood, they mostly seem to criticise this negative image of the Bijlmer. SMIB recognises the difficulties in the ‘hood while at the same time emphasising how they always want to stay there. As a kind of love-hate relationship, the Bijlmer is still the place to be for them. This is common in the practice of *representing*: it may confirm grimy and raw images of the ‘hood, but also criticises these images, shedding light on and paying respect to everything that the ‘hood has provided for the hip-hop artists, their squad, and other residents.⁴⁸

Representing through local language confirms the authenticity and authority of the artists, but it also serves an emancipatory goal. SMIB’s members actively present themselves as pioneers who want to change something for the inhabitants of the ‘hood, wanting to improve the situation for the youth in the Bijlmer, as expressed in the track ‘Ordeloos’ (2015) by Ray Fuego (‘[I] do it for my people’) and in ‘Tonnop’ (2016) by Tads Thots (‘SMIB is for the children, children, ey woah this is for the kids’).

Hip-hop artists use local references to lay bare the forces that set real or symbolic boundaries in and outside this environment – with the ability to flip the script on (negative or stereotypical) representations of their ‘hood. According to Forman, it is precisely in the places most maligned by the general public (such as the Bijlmer’s ‘hood) that ‘acts of atrocity and conditions of desolation are accompanied by promising conditions steeped in optimism, charity, and creativity.’⁴⁹ Following Forman’s insights, SMIB’s hip-hop practice analysis shows that this usually happens through the ‘claiming’ of spaces through local codes. SMIB’s artists lyrically and linguistically reclaim the Bijlmer as a place and space that ‘makes existence, no matter how bleak or brutal, something with stakes, something worth fighting for’,⁵⁰ challenging ‘the damning images’ of the Bijlmer and ‘of an oppressed and joyless underclass that are so prevalent in the media and contemporary social analyses.’⁵¹ By doing this, artists may create opportunities for their home area and its residents.

Literary scholar Brian George, too, argues that through this local locus of identity construction, young people can stand up ‘against the injustice perpetrated on their communities by mainstream society.’⁵² Local networks can form the basis for new social movements where such revolts may occur.⁵³

Because of their connection to the 'hood and the posse, SMIB's members are the designated artists to provide such networks, create new images and representations, and possibly, a platform for the youth in their neighbourhood.⁵⁴ Through their continuous representation of their living environment, SMIB commits itself to the Bijlmer and its residents, taking back agency on their own local story and that of their community.

Speaking Smibanese: opening up a resistance vernacular

It is often said that hip-hop language is 'incomprehensible', and that only people who are well acquainted with the socio-cultural sphere of hip-hop can understand the various meanings of locally encoded, reversed, translated, or signified words.⁵⁵ Hip-hop language may indeed be challenging to understand if you do not, in one way or another, belong to the hip-hop community. This difficulty of hip-hop language is, according to Perry, 'a cultural and a political strategy, as well as an ideological one.'⁵⁶ It requires an authentic personal relationship to hip-hop and its geography and a thorough investment in the cultural and symbolic values of *the culture*.⁵⁷ SMIB's artists phrase it in the *NRC* interview: 'everyone is welcome at SMIB', but you do 'have to make an effort.'⁵⁸ To decipher and understand SMIB's hip-hop messages, one needs to possess knowledge of various cultural texts and their language registers and the traditions in which those texts are embedded.⁵⁹ Language thus functions as a mechanism of both inclusion *and* exclusion.⁶⁰

This paradox of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion is inherent to language use but raises the question of who *does* belong to the community of Smibanese speakers. This community consists partly of the multi-ethnic, multilingual inhabitants of Amsterdam Southeast, partly of SMIB fans from other parts of the Netherlands, and partly of members of the global, border crossing Hip-Hop Nation, in which people are connected through the language of hip-hop.⁶¹ Linguists have stated that local nonstandard language varieties (such as Smibanese) often pay the price for their status because they can only be used in a limited area, making them both linguistically and commercially limited to the local and inaccessible to those outside of that context.⁶²

However, due to the multilingual character of Smibanese, honouring the heritage languages of the local posse, the language appeals to the subnational community of the Bijlmer – but it may also resonate with a transnational community because of the influences and languages that belong to imagined communities elsewhere. In addition, the appearance of the *Smibanese Dictionary* has enlarged the variety's accessibility, at least in the Dutch language area. In Amsterdam newspaper *Het Parool*, Soortkill claims that, by documenting Smibanese, he let his readers step into a world 'previously unreachable for them.'⁶³ By opening up their local youth language to former members of the 'outgroup' through their dictionary, SMIB offers listeners who are not yet familiar with Smibanese a chance to decipher and decode

the local codes in their hip-hop art. The dictionary challenges hip-hop languages' encrypted character, making Smibanese accessible to people who are not immediately familiar with the variety so that they become acquainted with it and might get invested in new, positive images of the Bijlmer.

As we have seen, SMIB uses locally encoded messages to depict the Bijlmer in their performances. Smibanese, as a local nonstandard language variety, serves as a form of rebelliousness and individuality and a way to create commonality.⁶⁴ It challenges the rules of the standard language and critiques or even rebels against the structure of society that perpetuates existing power structures. This corresponds with linguist Russel A. Potter's claim that hip-hop language is a 'resistance vernacular' and an 'empowering language variety.'⁶⁵ That is where language and hip-hop meet: they are both fed and nourished by social, political, and cultural issues,⁶⁶ both able to voice youth and allow them to express themselves about their social position.⁶⁷

Linguist Brenna Byrd notes how '[h]ip-hop's cultural history as rebellion against those in power is an attractive metaphor for those in other countries feeling similarly repressed by their society and searching for a legitimate means of artistic expression.'⁶⁸ Through this idea of 'connective marginalities', hip-hop will continue to gain popularity in multi-ethnic, local minority communities worldwide and in the Netherlands. When the question is asked how the community of Smibanese speakers relates to the traditional imagined community of which the Bijlmer is a part (the Netherlands), the answer is that this community is both sub- and transnational, mainly characterised by its critical questioning, rebellious attitude in which there is no more agreement with the stigmatising images of the Bijlmer created at the national stage of Dutch media and politics. Speaking Smibanese means putting a marginalised community on the map, and through that, SMIB and their fellow Smibanese speakers may be able to re-present this local minority and its relationship to the majority (the national) by presenting new, challenging views on the Amsterdam Bijlmer. Linguistically and lyrically shifting power relations, claiming back ownership multilingually, they contribute to equality and emancipation. Thus, hip-hop is an extremely popular, fun cultural expression for Dutch youth, but it has also been an instrument to remix hybrid local and multi-ethnic identities that enable a deconstructive and reconstructive perspective on the Bijlmer and its community. Smibanese is a linguistic tool that may bring about 'street credible' hip-hop identities *and* possibilities for emancipation.

While this may count on scepticism from both inside and outside *the scene*, and while not everyone has thanked Soortkill for revealing the 'secret' of Smibanese to the public, the dictionary and the discourse of the 'hood create opportunities for youths and others outside the Bijlmer to start participating in an 'ongoing local, regional, national and global dialogue with each other.'⁶⁹ It opens the door for a new group of users who might be interested in speaking the language of hip-hop, rebelliousness and resistance. This way, Smibanese might be able to grow from a marginalised local youth language into a popular resistance vernacular within Dutch society. No longer a means

of communication between local youth and residents, local codes can turn into powerful practices to articulate identity and community questions and express views on local issues from a wider, national, or even global perspective to a broad audience.

Track list

Ray Fuego & GRGY – Bummy Boys (2015)

Ray Fuego – Dimmelicht (2016)

Ray Fuego & KC – Eleven 0 (2015)

Ray Fuego – Ordeloos (2015)

Ray Fuego ft. GRGY, Tads Thots & GHQST – Tonnop (2016)

Tads Thots – DR (2016)

Tads Thots – Fukboiproof (2015)

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to Irene Stengs, Geert Buelens and the members of the Amsterdam hip-hop collective SMIB for their sustained critical engagement with this work. I thank the anonymous reviewer and the editors for their constructive feedback on this article.

Notes

¹ Translation: ‘just a boy’. Unless otherwise indicated, all Dutch translations to English are my own.

² Soortkill, *Smibanese*, 8.

³ Over the years, SMIB has opened its own fashion store in Amsterdam, has published magazines and a dictionary, has its own stand at the library of Amsterdam and has performed at national music festivals in the Netherlands, such as Lowlands, Appelsap and WooHah. Front man Ray Fuego has won a preeminent national music prize for his album *Zwart [Black]* (2018), The Prize for Best Dutch Album of the Year 2018 by multimedia platform 3voor12 of the Netherlands Public Broadcasting VPRO for alternative pop.

⁴ The first and second print of the dictionary (2017) were self-published, an updated version was published at the Dutch publishing house Pluim.

⁵ Anderson, *Imagined*, 144.

⁶ Anderson, *Imagined*, 42.

⁷ Soortkill, *Smibanese*, 10.

⁸ Soortkill, *Smibanese*, 10.

⁹ See for example Terkourafi, *Languages*; Alim et al., *Global*.

¹⁰ See the work of H. Samy Alim, Ibrahim Awad & Alastair Pennycook (2008) and Jannis Androutsopoulos (2008); cf. Clarke & Hiscock, “Hip-hop,” 245.

¹¹ Gilroy, *Black*, 33, 103.

¹² Alim et al., *Global*, 2, 40; Huq, *Beyond*, 14.

¹³ George, *Music*, 111; Forman, *The Hood*, 11, 17.

¹⁴ As a glocal youth culture, hip-hop is defined by an unceasing mutual relationship between the global and the local (Alim et al., *Global*, 25-42), Roland Robertson (1995), theorising the glocalisation of culture, analyses how this dialogue between the global and the local incites an effect of “difference-within-sameness” (Robertson,

Global, 25-44). On the one hand, hip-hop youth shares sensibilities and sentiments that become visible in the practices of the global community of hip-hop fans, The Hip-Hop Nation. Its members share a “commercially communicated style irrespective of their location on the globe” (Bennett, *Popular*, 27). On the other hand, local, regional and national hip-hop scenes and its members distinguish themselves from each other by the integration of hip-hop in unique local dynamics and dimensions.

¹⁵ Alim et al., *Global*, Mitchell, “Doin,” 44.

¹⁶ Cf. Mitchell, “Introduction,” 1-2; Huq, *Beyond*, 14.

¹⁷ Bennett, “Hip-Hop,” 182; cf. Byrd, “Stylized,” 292.

¹⁸ De Roest, “Status”.

¹⁹ Anderson, *Imagined*, 145.

²⁰ Bennett, “Hip-Hop,” 81; Osumare, “Beat,” 172.

²¹ Androutopoulos and Scholz, “Spaghetti,” 473. Cf. Sarkar & Allen, “Hybrid,” Sarkar & Winer, “Multilingual”.

²² Sarkar and Allen, “Hybrid,” 125.

²³ *One World*, Jeangu, <https://www.oneworld.nl/lezen/kunst-cultuur/jeangu-macrooy-zingt-in-een-taal-die-ooit-verboden-was/>.

²⁴ The Netherlands also has a history of labor migration which influences contemporary hip-hop in practice and in language. In the Netherlands, workers came over from (mainly) Turkey and Morocco in the 1960s and 1970s. Turkish-Dutch and Moroccan-Dutch young people from the generations today are regularly disillusioned about integration processes and the way in which society views them. Rap and the accompanying hip-hop culture play an important role in the formation of a new sense of identity among the multi-ethnic young inhabitants, and linguistic practices (influences from Arab, for example) are an important tool to reclaim and reappropriate their identity narratives. (Bennett 1999)

²⁵ And can, for example, be recognised in the French argot Verlan, common in French youth language, which in itself is an example of Verlan, since it is an inversion of the French word ‘l’envers’, meaning ‘the inverse’.

²⁶ Perry, *Prophets*, 61.

²⁷ Alim et al., *Global*, 54; Williams, *Remix*, xxv, 36.

²⁸ Wekker, “Disciplinariteit,” 75.

²⁹ Whiteley et al, *Music*, 10.

³⁰ Bell, Susan. “Talk of Town Irks Academic,” *The Australian* 20 Jan. 1999. Rpt. from the London *Times* in Mitchell, “Doing,” 45; cf. Westinen, “Rapping,” 15.

³¹ The ‘hood is a simple abbreviation of neighborhood, yet with a ghetto-like connotation. Even though hip-hop culture has become popular in all social classes, *representing* the ‘hood ‘continues to play an important role’ (Kuppens, *De globalisering*, 42). The ‘hood and the streets as tropes symbolise authenticity and realness, ‘the underground’ and the hard life of the Black lower classes, whereas the city center and suburbs would represent the bourgeois lifestyle of the white middle class. (Ibid., cf. McLeod, “Authenticity,” 139).

³² Forman, *The ‘Hood*, Perry, *Prophets*. The practice is sometimes also known as “naming” (Hebdige) or “repping the ends” (Gidley); cf. Adams, “Home,” 444. Terms that are not chosen or used in this article because they mainly focus on simply depicting a certain place or space (without necessarily representing it) or on claiming a specific place or space. The term ‘representing’ does justice to the presentation and re-presentation of identities involved in the practice. It accounts for the accompanying responsibility often felt by rappers in this process.

³³ Smith, “Method,” 347.

³⁴ This community is therefore often referred to as “an alternative family” and indicated with family-related notions, cf. Rose, *The Hip-Hop*, 78; Forman, *The ‘Hood*, 40, 77. The familial vocabulary with terms such as “posse”, “gang”, “k/clan”, “club” and “fam”, shows similarities to gang culture, cf. Perry, *Prophets*, 33.

³⁵ As Adam argues for grime artists, see Adams, “Home,” 439.

³⁶ De Roest, “Status”.

³⁷ Balkenhol, *Tracing*, 62.

³⁸ *Humanity in Action*, ‘The Bijlmer’, https://www.humanityinaction.org/knowledge_detail/the-bijlmer-a-dutch-approach-to-multiculturalism/.

³⁹ Balkenhol, *Tracing*, 62, 63.

⁴⁰ Balkenhol, *Tracing*, 71.

⁴¹ Anderson, *Imagined*, 6.

⁴² Balkenhol, *Tracing*, 71.

⁴³ McLeod, “Authenticity;” Perry, *Prophets*.

⁴⁴ Forman, *The ‘Hood*, xviii.

⁴⁵ ‘Shout out’ is a hip-hop sign of recognition.

⁴⁶ Carvalho, “Dit”.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

- ⁴⁸ Forman, *The Hood*, 181.
⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.
⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.
⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 180.
⁵² George, *Music*, 111.
⁵³ Rose, *Black*, 78.
⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 257.
⁵⁵ Cf. Sarkar and Allen, “Hybrid,” 124.
⁵⁶ Perry, *Prophets*, 50.
⁵⁷ *Ibid.*
⁵⁸ Carvalho, “Dit”.
⁵⁹ Perry, *Prophets*, 63.
- ⁶⁰ Kooijman, “Fok,” 195.
⁶¹ Alim et al., *Global*, 107.
⁶² Cf. Mitchell, “Doin,” 52.
⁶³ Unen, “Rappers”.
⁶⁴ Kooijman, “Fok,” 195.
⁶⁵ Potter, *Spectacular*, 57; cf. Mitchell, “Doin,” 41-45.
⁶⁶ Ogbar, *Hip-Hop*, 175; Androutsopoulos and Scholz, “Spaghetti,” 473.
⁶⁷ Osumare, “Beat,” 173; Kahf, “Arabic,” 359.
⁶⁸ Byrd, “Stylized,” 292.
⁶⁹ Forman, *The Hood*, 67.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Aafje de Roest  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8653-8378>

Bibliography

- Adams, Ruth. “‘Home sweet home, that’s where I come from, where I got my knowledge of the road and the flow from’: Grime music as an expression of identity in postcolonial London.” *Popular Music and Society* 42, no. 4 (2019): 438–455.
- Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 2016.
- Alim, H. Samy, Ibrahim Awad and Alastair Pennycook, eds. *Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language*. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Androutsopoulos, Jannis and Arno Scholz. “Spaghetti funk: Appropriations of hip-hop culture and rap music in Europe.” *Popular Music and Society* 26, no. 4 (2003): 463–479.
- Androutsopoulos, Jannis. “Potentials and Limitations of Discourse-Centred Online Ethnography.” *Language@Internet* 5 (2008): 1–20.
- Balkenhol, Markus. *Tracing slavery. An ethnography of diaspora, affect, and cultural heritage in Amsterdam*. Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2014.
- Bennett, Andy. “Hip Hop am Main: the localisation of rap music and hip hop culture.” *Media, Culture and Society* 21, no. 1 (1999): 77–91.
- Bennet, Andy. *Popular Music and Youth Culture: Music, Identity, and Place*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000.
- Byrd, Brenna. “Stylised Turkish German as the resistance vernacular of German hip-hop.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop*, edited by Justin Williams, 292–300. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Carvalho, Hester. “Dit rapcollectief uit de Bijlmer heeft alles om het publiek voor zich te winnen.” NRC, January 10, 2017, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/01/10/kijker-poetisch-naar-dan-snap-je-wat-we-bedoelen-6132277-a1540583>.
- Clarke, Sandra and Philip Hiscock. “Hip-hop in a Post-insular Community: Hybridity, Local Language, and Authenticity in an Online Newfoundland Rap Group.” *Journal of English Linguistics* 37, no. 3 (2009): 241–261.

- De Roest, Aafje. "Niet naar school, maar wel in de boeken: Status quaestionis van hiphopstudies wereldwijd en in Nederland." *Tijdschrift Vooys* 38, no. 1 (2020): 35–46.
- Forman, Murray. *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002.
- George, Brian. "Rapping At the Margins: Musical Constructions of Identities in Contemporary France," In *Music, National Identity and the Politics of Location: Between the Global and the Local*, edited by Vanessa Knights and Ian Biddle, 93–113. London/New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Huq, Rupa. *Beyond Subculture. Pop, Youth and Identity in a Postcolonial World*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Kahf, Usama. "Arabic Hip Hop: Claims of Authenticity and Identity of a New Genre." *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 19, no. 4 (2007): 359–385.
- Keyes, Cheryl. *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004.
- Kooijman, Jaap. "Fok de macht: Nederlandse popcultuur als karaoke-amerikanisme." *Sociologie* 4, no. 2-3 (2008): 195–207.
- Krims, Adam. *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Kuppens, An. "De globalisering van hiphop: Vlaamse hiphop artiesten over authenticiteit." In *Media, cultuur, identiteit: actueel onderzoek naar media en maatschappij*, edited by Hilde van den Bulck, 37–50. Gent: Academia, 2008.
- McLeod, Kembrew. "Authenticity Within Hip-Hop and Other Cultures Threatened with Assimilation." *Journal of Communication* 49, no. 4 (1999): 134–150.
- Mitchell, Tony. "Doin' damage in my native language: The use of 'resistance vernaculars' in hip hop in France, Italy, and Aotearoa/New Zealand." *Popular Music and Society* 24, no. 1 (2000): 41–54.
- Mitchell, Tony. "Introduction. Another root: Hip-hop outside the USA." In *Global noise: Rap and hip-hop outside the USA*, edited by Tony Mitchell, 1–38. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001.
- Ogbar, Jeffrey. *Hip-Hop Revolution The Culture and Politics of Rap*. Kansas: Kansas Press, 2007.
- Osumare, Halifu. "Beat Streets in the Global Hood: Connective Marginalities of the Hip Hop Globe." *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures* 24, no. 1-2 (2001): 171–181.
- Potter, Russel. *Spectacular Vernaculars*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1995.
- Pennycook, Alastair. *Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows*. London: Routledge, 2007.
- Perry, Imani. *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.
- Robertson, Roland. "Glocalisation: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity." In *Global Modernities*, edited by Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash and Roland Robertson, 25–44. London: Sage, 1995.
- Rose, Tricia. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994.
- Sarkar, Mela and Lise Winer. "Multilingual codeswitching in Quebec rap: Poetry, pragmatics and performativity." *International Journal of Multilingualism* 3, no. 3 (2006): 173–192.

- Sarkar, Mela and Dawn Allen. "Hybrid identities in Quebec hip-hop: Language, territory and ethnicity in the mix." *Journal of Language, Identity and Education* 6, no. 2 (2007): 117–130.
- Smith, Christopher Holmes, "Method in the Madness: Exploring the Boundaries of Identity in Hip-Hop Performativity." *Social Identities* 3, no. 3 (1997): 345–374.
- Soortkill. *Smibanese Dictionary 2.0*. Amsterdam: Pluim, 2019.
- Terkourafi, Marina. *Languages of global hip hop*. Continuum: London, 2010.
- Unen, David van. "Rappers van Smib leggen straattaal uit in woordenboek." Parool, December 9, 2017, <https://www.parool.nl/nieuws/rappers-van-smib-leggen-spraaktaal-uit-in-woordenboek~b04d32f9>.
- Wekker, Gloria. "Disciplinariteit als strijdtoneel: Gloria Anzaldúa en interdisciplinariteit." In *Handboek genderstudies in media, kunst en cultuur*, edited by Rosemarie Buikema and Liedeke Plate, 95–112. Bussum: Uitgeverij Coutinho, 2015.
- Westinen, Elina. "Rapping the 'Better folk': Ideological and scalar negotiations of past and present." *Language and Communication* 52 (2017): 74–87.
- Whiteley, Sheila, Andy Bennett and Stan Hawkins. *Music, Space and Place. Popular Music and Cultural Identity*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2004.
- Williams, Quentin. *Remix Multilingualism: Hip Hop, Ethnography and Performing Marginalised Voices*. London: Bloomsbury, 2017.

Aafje de Roest is a Ph.D. researcher in Dutch literary studies at Leiden University. Her dissertation focuses on the cultural identity constructs of artists and their active audience in contemporary Dutch hip hop. The project is funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO).

Roest, Aafje de. "Doe je best op school: Nederlandse hiphop in het literatuuronderwijs." *Nederlandse Letterkunde* 27:1 (2022), 102-117, <https://doi.org/10.5117/NEDLET2022.1.007.ROES>.

Roest, Aafje de. "Holland's hip hop hitting the books: The state and status of Dutch hip hop studies." *Global Hip Hop Studies* 2:1 (2022), 75-92, https://doi.org/10.1386/ghhs_00034_1.