

“Middle East LA” - Performance Lecture Proposal

Presenters: Mark Gonzales, Omar Chakaki, Nizar Wattad
humanwrites@gmail.com

In 2008, the Human Writes Project performed “Brooklyn Beats to Beirut Streets”, an examination of identity, pop culture, imperialism, and growing up 'other' in the United States. The piece traced the artists' development alongside the birth and growth of Hip-Hop, and touched on their own musical and poetic accomplishments.

With “Middle East LA” we showcase the performance aspect of our work, blending music, lyrics, and imagery that comment on and are the result of the unique intersection of cultures our combined experience represents, from the Middle East to East LA. The multimedia performance lasts approximately 45 minutes, followed by an interactive discussion with the audience on the growing influence of hip-hop on world youth culture.

Beirut’s own DJ Lethal Skillz, a pioneer of Lebanese hip-hop, provides the sonic backdrop as the artists deliver lyrics that touch on issues including colonization and resistance, the immigrant’s journey, the effect of a dual identity on memory and language, migrant labor in the Gulf and LA, mass consumerism, and faith.

In “Damascus” Chakaki translates Nizar Qabbani’s Arabic-language “Damascene Poem” into an English-language hip-hop song, over a beat incorporating samples from famous Mexican indigenous singer Armando Manzanero. In “Is This What Liberation Looks Like?” Gonzales blends the struggles of an Afghani mother, an Iraqi wife, and an imprisoned African-American for justice and dignity. And in “1948” Wattad breaks down the history of the Palestine/Israel conflict, emphasizing a sense of shared tragedy.