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“Don’t Tell Me Underground”: The Politics of Joy and Melancholy in Jordan’s Alternative
Arabic Music

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Music

by

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June 2021

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June 2021

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Arabic Music

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by

Liza N. F. Munk

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Inspired by the strong dedication to family that I encountered so often in Jordan, I will begin by thanking my own. Thank you to my parents, Darlene and Peter, and my sister, Cristina, for your confidence in me, and for boosting my spirits with your humor, company, and delicious cooking. To my mom, dad, and late grandparents Frances and Alfred Munk and Nora and Anthony Kalentek: thank you for being the first supporters of my musical education, giving me my first instruments, saving for college, driving me to a colossal number of lessons and rehearsals, taking me to concerts, and playing great records and satellite radio stations for me. Hearing Cristina practicing the flute helped spark my interest in taking piano lessons myself, and later, everyone in the house was kind enough not to tell me how badly my fifth-grade oboe playing sounded. To dad, thanks for lots of long bike rides on back roads; to mom, thanks for the hugs and encouragement; and to Cristina and my oldest friend Michelle, for keeping me company on Zoom this past year.

My family's firmly global outlook and the travels we have shared together have helped shape my own goal to live and work abroad in order to understand another culture deeply. I also have the pleasure of being a part of an extended family that shares this global outlook, including the many organizers and participants in the Brunner family reunions, my aunt and uncle Karen and Dale, and my cousins Laura and James. Thank you to Laura for hosting me in Long Island during the semester I rehearsed with the New York Arabic Orchestra. Thank you to James for showing me around Budapest, and for sharing great travel stories, musical rabbit holes, and an understanding of the challenges of graduate school through your own studies in Hungary and Spain. Thank you as well for your research on

family history. Learning about my ancestry has been another major source of inspiration in my studies.

I view completing my degree as part of a wider story of strong women in my family committed to education, often well beyond the norms in their life circumstances. On my mom's side, my great-grandmother Mary Zisk Kalentek, not hindered by her lack of educational opportunities, taught herself to read the newspaper, one of the few women in her Whatley, Massachusetts community to do so. My *babcia* Nora had to leave school at fourteen to support her family when her father passed away. Also never hindered, she read classic literature to my mom Darlene Kalentek Munk when she was a child. My mom was one of the few women in her pharmacy school, and then went on to receive her BS and MS in Clinical Psychology at American International College in Springfield, Massachusetts. The head of the psychology department appreciated her work so much that he tried to convince her twice to continue on for doctoral studies. She and my family raised me to be a bookworm who grew up thinking that everyone reads before bed every night. Since we both chose fields starting with E that most people haven't heard of, my sister completed her BS in Entomology, as well as her MS in Public Health at Johns Hopkins University.

On my dad's side, my great-grandmother, Rega Brunner Munk, traveled from her home country of Austria to study for a year at Cheltenham Ladies College in England. She then went on to study botany at Newnham College at Cambridge University from 1911-1913, as one of few international female students. It would not be until 1948 that the university elevated women to full members of Cambridge, who then began receiving university degrees instead of certificates from their college. The outbreak of World War I interrupted Rega's studies and called her home to Austria. Rega was part of a large extended Jewish family. She went on to save hundreds of lives by developing an escape route out of Austria during World

War II. In her later years, she traveled across the country to attend the March on Washington in 1963. My cousin Glenn shared with me recently that Rega's daughter, my great-aunt Gertrude, wanted to be doctor, but Rega decided on another career track for her, hotel management. Unhindered, Gertrude completed her BA in Modern Languages in a single year for hospitality training. Later, she shifted towards her interest in medicine, going on to receive a BS in Library Sciences in medical and pharmaceutical contexts. My grandmother, Frances Juliano Munk, received her BS at University of Vermont. Like my mom, her professor respected her work enough to encourage her to continue to graduate studies. Due to the shortage of men during World War II, she secured work in a laboratory in New York City and also taught classes. In completing my MA and PhD in Ethnomusicology, I see myself as part of this larger story of women in my family who strongly pursued educations.

Turning to Jordan, I want to express all my gratitude to each person who shared their insights on alternative Arabic music with me. You are the true experts on this subject, and you made this project possible. In alphabetical order, a thousand thanks to the staff and volunteers at Al Balad Theater, and to Muhammad Abdullah, Yacoub Abu Ghosh, Tareq Abu Kwaik, Sari Abuladel, Jordan Akour, Abood Aladham, Ahmad Alhamed, Nasir AlBashir, Heba Albaz, Khalil Al Beitshaweesh, Anas Al Horani, Sobhi Allo Khamra, Tareq Al Nasser, Yosour Al-Zou'bi, Muhammad Amireh, Hussein Amri, Mounif Aref Zghoul, Hamza Arnaout, Balqeis, Yusra Barakat, Mohammad Ali Eswed, Raed Asfour, Mohammad Azraq, Yassir Bayoumi, Rami Delshad, Zaid Faouri, GuitaNai, Harget kart, Ayan Hatoqay, Mu'ath Isaeid, Nadeem Karkabi, Hana Malhas, Ma'in Mheidat, Hannah Pauline, Michelle Rounds, Jowan Safadi, Mais Sahli, Tarek Salem, Shermine Sawalha, David Scott, Junius Smith, Ramzy Suleiman, Kazz Torabyeh, Toleen Touq, Ahmad Yaseen, and Ala Zahrawi.

For the Arabic-language portion of my work, each song that I have translated has benefitted from many rounds of feedback from a range of language experts, including native speakers. Their guidance was all the more crucial to this study, given that the Levantine colloquial Arabic found in the song lyrics I focus on is largely uncodified to date. In many cases, the only way to understand a particular word or phrase is to ask native speakers, who have essential contextual understanding. I am therefore deeply indebted to the following individuals and institutions who have shared their language expertise with me: Qalam wa Lawh Center for Arabic Studies in Rabat, Morocco, where I received two months of instruction in summer 2014; Sijal Institute of Arabic Language and Culture in Amman, whose 2016 summer director Dr. Nader Uthman, Professor of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at NYU, supported my research project and first connected me with Al Balad Theater; Yusra Barakat at Qasid Arabic Institute in Amman, where I studied Arabic in 2018, funded by a Fulbright Critical Language Enhancement Award; and Omar Battikhi at Sijal Institute in Amman, who worked with me on song translations in 2019, also thanks to funding by Fulbright.

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VITA OF LIZA MUNK
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ABSTRACT

“Don’t Tell Me Underground”: The Politics of Joy and Melancholy in Jordan’s Alternative Arabic Music

by

Liza Munk

A major issue in popular English-language media today is the tendency to misrepresent Arabs as merely victims or enactors of violence. So far, the near-absence of Jordan in music scholarship across genres means that academics have much yet to do in order to help correct these misrepresentations. My dissertation begins to fill this gap by representing the thriving alternative Arabic music scene surrounding Amman, Jordan. Drawing on my ethnographic field research in Amman from 2016-2019, I analyze how Mashrou' Leila expresses political dissensus through melancholy, how 47Soul and Ayloul perform decolonial joy through *dabkeh*, and how El Far3i represents the nuances of Palestinian Indigeneity through ambiguous lyrics. I conclude with updates from Ertidad, Mais Sahli, and Sari Abuladel on new music projects and developments from the pandemic year. My analysis makes interdisciplinary contributions by linking current work from feminist studies and critical Indigenous studies to my particular MENA case studies. I argue that in its nuanced forms, alternative Arabic music is a powerful mode for expressing and elevating the voices of everyday, often marginalized people in and around Jordan. Musicians

in the scene use their work to express that their challenges have not defeated them. They compel listeners to hear a fuller spectrum of who they are as they dance in the dark.

NOTES ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION

This dissertation features translations from Arabic to English, as well as select translations from Spanish to English found in the 47Soul song, “Border Ctrl.” Three bands that I address, Mashrou' Leila, 47Soul, and Ayloul, have provided the public with English translations of their songs, which I feature here. I note any alternate translations that I have identified for these songs in footnotes. Some quotations that I cite from interviews held in Arabic are translated by other scholars, such as Chris Nickell’s translation of a quotation by the Lebanese rapper El Rass, with assistance by Ziad Dallal. Unless otherwise noted, all other translations featured here are my own, with extensive assistance from language instructors and native speakers who are credited with gratitude in my acknowledgements.

My transliterations of Arabic use the guidelines set by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, with the following exceptions. I choose to reflect any Levantine dialect pronunciations that differ from Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) in my transliterations. For example, I represent a silent pronunciation of the letter *qāf* [ق] as [ʔ]. I also provide the Arabic scripts, which tends to follow the standards of MSA due to the fact that Levantine dialects are not often written. I also use two additional symbols for the Arabic letter ‘*ayn* [ع] based on chosen spellings by prominent bands in my research: [3] as in the band El Morabba3 and the solo artist El Far3i, and [ʕ] as in the band Mashrou' Leila. Further, rather than using the English-language scholarly conventional spelling “alternative [Arab] music” in this dissertation, I use “alternative [Arabic] music,” which prioritizes the most frequent usage by dedicated scene participants.

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Introduction

One night in Amman, Jordan in August 2016, I made it inside a sold-out El Far3i (*al-Far 'i*) [The Branch] concert at Al Balad Theater because I knew the sound engineer, David Scott, who had put me on the guest list earlier that day. I went through the lobby, crowded with people meeting their friends or trying to wrangle last minute tickets, and up the stairs to the performance space. I found a spot near the back to sit cross-legged on the floor with the rest of the young crowd. The stage lights magnified El Far3i's shadow onto the purple backdrop framing the stage and made him the bright point in a dark theater. He sat center stage on a tall stool, holding his acoustic guitar. When he started to play, the audience knew all of the music. Everyone around me sang along with "Taht il Ard" (*Taht al-Ard*) [Underground], one of El Far3i's most popular songs, recorded during his time as a member of El Morabba3 (*al-Murabba '3*) [The Square] for the band's self-titled album (2012).

As I learned from attending many more of his shows, El Far3i [given name, Tareq Abu Kwaik (*Tāriq Abū Kuwayk*)] consistently performs with intensity, but he takes "Taht il Ard" to another level. Most powerfully in the chorus, his voice expresses a quality of pleading, as if he sings from the perspective of parents who want nothing more than to protect their child from danger. He sings [2:06-2:31],¹

*taht al-arḍ khallīkī.. burkāni bi-
tghazzal fikī..
khallī al-jadhūr taḥmīkī.. btarajja
fikī*

تحت الأرض خلیکی.. برکان بیتغزل فیکي..
خلی الجذور تحمیکي.. بترجی فیکي

Stay underground.. a volcano's
flirting with you..
Let your roots protect you.. I beg of you!

¹ El Morabba' posted the audio for "[Taht il Ard](#)" on YouTube on April 13, 2013, with Arabic lyrics and an English translation included below the video. The translation featured here is my own. See the Appendix for the band's original translation.

In 2019, I had the opportunity to ask El Far3i what inspired the poetic words of this song. He told me that in 2003, after two years as an undergraduate at University of Nebraska, he got deported from the US (pers. comm., January 22, 2019). Two weeks later, he was on the University of Jordan’s campus to continue his education when he got into an argument with two other students, who he described as goths in Slipknot t-shirts, a heavy metal band from the US. They tried to convince him to join them as metal fans—which El Far3i called “underground music”—and to disengage with politics. El Far3i did not share their music preferences or their stance of political disengagement. As a musician, he felt the need to address current issues in his work. He also suggested that the situations that people face in Jordan are often darker than the metal lyrics that the two students preferred, pointing to experiences of gender-based violence specifically.² That heated conversation stayed with him when he went home and wrote “Taht il Ard” in one sitting. He begins the song with the lines [0:44-0:53],³

mā t’ūlīlī..
taht il-ard..
illī usbū ‘ayn wā’if al-ard

ما تقوليلي ..
تحت الأرض..
إلي أسبوعين واقف على الأرض ..

Don’t tell me
underground
For two weeks now I’ve been
standing on the surface

In the track, El Far3i masterfully holds together seemingly opposite positions. He first opens with his own rejection of the other students’ insistence on their favorite underground metal music and disengaged stance. Then by the chorus, he begs a loved one to stay

² For more information on issues of gender-based violence in Jordan, see the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Gender-Based Violence (GBV SWG) sub-working group report (Anderson 2020); the Gender-Based Violence Information Management System (GBV IMS) Task Force Annual Report (2019); and Jabiri (2016).

³ My translation of the term “underground” in this opening line reflects El Far3i’s word usage as he told me the story of the song’s inspiration in English.

underground, safe from danger. El Far3i told me that later on, he and the students became friends. He expressed his empathy for them, considering the challenges they may have faced that he has not, such as depression, economic precarity, unequal gender norms, and the inability to travel outside of Jordan. The story El Far3i told me blended the intensity of a moment's heated argument with the nuance and understanding that comes from a friendship built over time.

My opening narrative about El Far3i's song "Taht il Ard" captures the central claim of this dissertation: that, in its nuanced forms, alternative Arabic music is a powerful mode for expressing and elevating the voices of everyday, often marginalized people in and around Jordan. I began this project with the following research questions: What is alternative Arabic music in Jordan? What role do affects (emotions experienced socially) play in alternative Arabic music? Further, what does being political mean in these music contexts, and how do those meanings complicate common understandings of resistance? Based on these starting points, I draw on my ethnographic field research from 2016-2019 to interpret the political and affectual stakes inherent in alternative songs, music videos, and performances by Mashrou' Leila (*Mashrū' Leylā*),⁴ 47Soul, Ayloul (*Aylūl*) [September], El Far3i, and Ertidad

⁴ To date, there is no standard English translation of Mashrou' Leila. While Mashrou' (*Mashrū'*) is consistently translated as "project," the inconsistency stems from Leila (*Leylā*): in written Arabic, this translates to the name, Leila, but if the word is spoken only, it also sounds like "night." In English-language journalism, the three most common translations over the course of the band's career have been, "Night Project," "Leila's Project," and "Overnight Project." *The Associated Press* standard seems to have shifted from "Night Project" to "Leila's Project" in 2016, then back again to "Night Project" in 2019. Some news sources no longer translate the band's name, and others have used "One Night Project" or "The Night Project"—the latter of which is grammatically incorrect, given that the Arabic for "night" and "project" is indefinite in this case. Nor has Mashrou' Leila released an official translation of the band name. The band's website also does not include a translation. Supporting the "night" translation, their homepage biography does begin with the phrase, "born of a nocturnal encounter" (Mashrou' Leila 2014), likely a reference to the late-night jam sessions that led to its formation at American University of Beirut. However, the band also supported the "Leila" translation when members wondered together in an interview who Leila is (Daily News Egypt 2011). Early in their career, band members also fostered speculation by sending letters to their fan page about a person named "Leila," discussing her sisters and lovers, her taste in music, her love of dancing, and even her musings on revolutions (Derderian 2014). Clearly, the band members enjoy fostering ambiguous interpretations. Leila also evokes a classic Arab

(*Irtidād*) [Rebound or Frequency] especially. In my case studies, I demonstrate how people who have been limited and silenced to various degrees by broader power structures outside of their control can use music as an avenue of expression.

I consider it of critical importance to bring the stories I address in my dissertation to a primarily English-language audience. My project contributes towards correcting Jordan's as-of-yet minimal presence in music scholarship across genres. It further works to counter harmful misrepresentations of Arabs in popular English media and imagination as merely victims or enactors of violence. Each of these case studies demonstrates that alternative Arabic music enables participants to express that their challenges have not defeated them. It provides an avenue for sharing a fuller spectrum of identity than suffering or victimhood. I highlight the agency of musicians by emphasizing that they actively choose to perform in ways that represent themselves and others complexly. Among the complex affects that these musicians express, I focus on identifying the ways that they foster melancholy, joy, and lyrical ambiguity (by which I mean the purposeful creation and performance of lyrics that can be interpreted in multiple ways). My analysis makes interdisciplinary contributions by linking theorizations of these concepts from feminist studies and critical Indigenous studies to my particular MENA (Middle East and North Africa) case studies.

In this dissertation, I refer to individuals of Palestinian descent such as El Far3i as Indigenous, following anthropologist Patrick Wolfe. Wolfe references the Palestinians specifically in his seminal concept, "the logic of elimination" (2007:387).⁵ He states that the primary motivation of settler colonialism is to control a territory of land (2007:388). Towards that goal, the logic of elimination refers to the range of tactics that settler colonists employ to

literary character. Layla and Majnun (*Majnūn*) [Madman] are the subjects of a famous tragic love story, roughly dating back to seventh-century Arabia, which has continued to inspire art for more than a thousand years throughout the MENA region (Pellat et al. 2012).

⁵ I do not modify direct quotations in this dissertation.

erase other competing inhabitants on that land. Wolfe frames Palestinians as Indigenous in relation to Israel, which he calls a settler colonial nation-state.⁶ Pointing to Israel's work to physically erase Palestinians from the land, Wolfe points to the hundreds of Palestinian villages that the Israeli state systematically depopulated and demolished in 1948, documented through exhaustive fieldwork by Walid Khalidi and his fellow researchers (1992). In Chapter 2, I cite 47Soul founding member Walaa Sbait (*Walā' Sbayt*) speaking about one of these villages that Khalidi documents; Israelis drove his grandparents from Iqrit (*Iqrit*), and now only rubble remains (Safran-Hon 2006). Wolfe further quotes the often-repeated discursive erasure of Palestinians by then-mayor of West Jerusalem, Meron Benvenisti, who writes, "As a member of a pioneering youth movement, I myself 'made the desert bloom' by uprooting the ancient olive trees of al-Bassa to clear the ground for a banana grove, as required by the 'planned farming' principles of my kibbutz, Rosh Haniqra" [(2000:2) Wolfe 2007:388]. The imagery of making the desert bloom is used to portray the land as empty and barren before Israeli arrival, even while Benvenisti acknowledges the olive trees already growing there. He leaves unspoken the fact that the Palestinians planted and cultivated them.

Based on Wolfe's research, Ilan Pappé explains that there is widespread agreement in the field of Palestine studies that Israel is a settler colonial nation-state (2018:158). Still, my referring to those of Palestinian descent as Indigenous does not imply that all Palestinians identify this way. Pappé explains that Palestinians with Israeli citizenship self-identify as Indigenous more often than those in Gaza or the West Bank for example, where Palestinians

⁶ In this dissertation, "Israel" refers to the actions of the nation-state. It is not synonymous with Jewish people as a whole, nor does it imply that all Jewish people agree with the actions of the Israeli nation-state. Given trends of rising anti-Semitism in the US and elsewhere, it is important to ensure that readers do not conflate Israel with the global Jewish community. While I expand on my positionality as an author later in this introduction, here I will add that as an adult, I learned of my own Jewish ancestry on my paternal grandfather's side. My grandfather and his entire extended family fled Austria to escape Nazi persecution. Researching this part of my family history has only deepened my sympathies for the refugee experience.

tend to frame their cause as a national struggle instead (2018:158). Pappe adds that activists and scholars who may reject identifying Palestinians as Indigenous tend to incorrectly associate Indigeneity with having failed in a struggle for independence (2018:157). Karkabi and Ibraheem also demonstrate the importance of Indigeneity as a self-identifying framework for those living under Israeli occupation in Jawlan (*Haḍbat al-Jawlān*) [Golan Heights], including for the Jawlani alternative band Toot Ard (*Tūt Ard*) [Strawberry] (2020:6).

In the remainder of this introduction, I outline the ethnographic fieldwork research methods that I applied to this study. I then offer starting points for readers to understand the overlapping contexts that my research is situated within: my primary research location, Jordan; my musical subject, alternative Arabic music; and Amman's alternative Arabic music scene. I follow this with a discussion of the existing bodies of scholarly literature that my work bridges and builds upon. Later, I provide an overview of each of the following three case study chapters, and end by articulating my positionality as an author in relation to those who generously supported my project in Jordan.

Research Methods

This dissertation is a product of the ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted in Amman, Jordan over the course of four years between 2016 and 2019. My first period of master's research took place in Amman from July 10 to August 24, 2016. During this time frame, Al Balad Theater's Mu'ath Isaeid invited me to return the following summer to volunteer at the theater's biannual music festival. Accepting his invitation, I returned to Amman for the second time from July 20 to Aug 4, 2017 to continue my research as a

festival volunteer. My third period of research in Amman took place from August 31, 2018 to July 20, 2019, funded by a Fulbright Study/Research Award and a Fulbright Critical Language Enhancement Award.

Thanks to Isaeid's introduction, I conducted my dissertation research in affiliation with Al Balad Theater, a well-respected independent institution of the arts in Amman that I introduce fully below. The hardworking theater staff were kind enough to accept me as a volunteer twice a week from January to July 2019, where I shadowed their planning efforts for the biannual Al Balad Music Festival which was held that June. Prior to the festival, my volunteer position also included translation work. I provided English translations of messages of support that Al Balad Theater had received when a change in ownership forced them to vacate the historic location they had been renting, so that the messages could be used as material in its international grant applications and future arts advocacy work. I have also applied my study of Modern Standard Arabic and Levantine dialect to the song lyric translation portion of this dissertation.

My ethnographic fieldwork also involved conducting formal and informal interviews with the wide range of contributors to Amman's alternative music scene. Over the course of my research, I conducted over forty interviews with musicians, composers, band leaders, concert organizers, graphic designers, venue owners, sound engineers, producers, theater directors and employees, and dedicated fans. The majority of these interviews took place in person in Amman, while some occurred online, after I had returned to the US. All but two of my interviews were conducted in English. Two people that I spoke with preferred our interview to be conducted in Arabic. Yassir Bayoumi (*Yassir Bayūmī*) served as a translator for my interview with rapper Kazz Torabyeh (*Kāz Turābiyya*) [Gas from the Ground], and

Mohammad Azraq (*Muḥammad Azraq*) translated for my interview with Al Balad Theater director Raed Asfour (*Rā'id 'Aṣfūr*).

In addition to these interviews and my translation work, I carried out extensive participant observation at alternative music performances in Jordan. From 2016 to 2019 I attended more than 60 concerts, all held in Amman aside from Ayloul's album launch, held in Irbid (see Chapter 2 for a detailed discussion of this performance). These concerts ranged from small-scale events such as weekly or monthly jam sessions at local bars, to large-scale outdoor summer shows and music festivals. In addition to my field data, I also drew on English-language music journalism and music-related social media platforms such as YouTube, SoundCloud, Facebook, and Instagram for this project. I have consulted homepages when available, but most musicians and bands that I researched did not maintain updated websites, favoring social media instead. The online component of my research, including music video analysis, reflects a major way that people participate in alternative Arabic music regardless of their location. While complex border-crossing restrictions frequently inhibit travel, no passport is required for watching and listening to a music video.

Background on Jordan

Before I introduce Amman's alternative music scene, I will first offer a brief description of Jordan to provide the wider context in which the scene takes place. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan (*al-Mamlakah al-Urdunniyyah al-Hāshimiyyah*) is a small Arab country of over 10 million people located in the Levant, the Eastern Mediterranean region of Western Asia.⁷ Jordan is bordered by Syria to the north, Iraq to the east, Saudi

⁷ The United Nations Population Division records the population of Jordan as 10,101,694, a figure that includes all residents, regardless of their citizenship or legal status (2019).

Arabia to the south and southeast, and by Israel and the Palestinian West Bank to the west. The West Bank is named for its geographic location in relation to the Jordan River at the border.



Figure 1. "Political Map of Jordan" by the Nations Online Project.

Jordan has been inhabited for millennia. Signs of ancient civilizations can be found throughout the country, such as the Ain Ghazal (*'Ayn Ghazāl*) [Spring of the Gazelle] statue

on display in Jordan's Amman Museum, recognized as among the oldest known large-scale statues of human forms, dating back to roughly 8,700 years ago (c. 6,680 BCE) (Tubb 2012).



Figure 2. Ain Ghazal statue at the Jordan Museum, Amman, Jordan. Photo by the author, July 21, 2016.

Jordan's most famous symbol of its ancient heritage is Petra, the Nabataean capital which flourished in the first century CE and is renowned for its temple structure called the Treasury, a striking, well-preserved façade carved from a sandstone cliff face.

While Jordan has ancient roots, it is a relatively new nation-state. Over the latter half of the 1800s, the Ottoman Empire introduced the foundational elements of a modern state to their territory of present-day Jordan, in part through taxation, codifying law, and establishing communication infrastructure (Rogan 1999:1). The Ottomans also expanded agricultural production among previously nomadic tribes. Tribal affiliations remain significant in Jordanian life and politics today, whether through *wasta*—the personal network of connections people rely on in order to access basic services—or through dispute resolution processes between tribes (Watkins 2014:31) (Kao 2015).

During World War I, the territory now known as Jordan became a theater of the Arab Revolt against the Ottomans, led by the Hashemite Emir of Mecca (*Makka*) (r. 1908-1924), Sharif Hussein (in full, *al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī al-Hāshimī*) (c. 1854-1931).⁸ The revolt aimed to achieve widespread Arab independence across the Middle East and North Africa after centuries of Ottoman rule. Great Britain backed the successful Arab Revolt, but did not keep wartime promises to support sweeping Arab independence [see the Husayn-McMahon Correspondence (Khater 2011:104-107)], having also secretly divided the region into French and British spheres of influence [see the Sykes-Picot Agreement (Grey 1916)].

After the war, another leader of the Arab Revolt, Sharif Hussein’s son Faisal (in full, *Fayṣal ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī al-Hāshimī*) (1885-1933) declared himself king of Syria, but the French quickly deposed him in 1920 (Middleton 2015:377). Sharif Hussein’s son Abdullah (in full, *‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī al-Hāshimī*) (1882-1951) gathered forces in Transjordan to resist the new French authority in Syria. After a series of private meetings in Cairo and Jerusalem led by British Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill, Abdullah agreed to call off his resistance and to become Transjordan’s first Emir (see the “Report on Middle East Conference Held in Cairo and Jerusalem, March 12th to 30th, 1921” 1921); his brother Faisal would rule Iraq (r. 1921-1933). Abdullah officially founded the Emirate of Transjordan in 1921, which operated under British Mandate (as would Palestine). In 1946, the newly designated Hashemite Kingdom of Transjordan officially became an independent state, shifting titles for its ruler from Emir to King Abdullah I (r. 1946-1951) (Robins 2019). Transjordan’s new alliance treaty with Great Britain qualified that the British would continue to provide financial backing and military officers for the Arab Legion,

⁸ Sharif (*sharīf*) is an honorary title signifying direct descent from Muhammad, the prophet founder of Islam. This lineage has conferred religious authority on the Hashemites in the region. As Emir of Mecca beginning in 1908, Sharif Hussein held additional religious authority as the custodian of sacred sites of Muslim pilgrimage.

Transjordan's military; it indeed continued to do so until 1957, having lost popular support (Tal 1995:39).

When the British Mandate over Palestine expired on May 14, 1948 and Israel declared its statehood, Transjordan joined the Arab league to fight in favor of Palestine in the first Arab-Israeli war (Shlaim 1987:59). After the war, in a widely unpopular move, the newly named Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan annexed the West Bank and East Jerusalem in 1950. The following year, a young Palestinian assassinated King Abdullah I at Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem as part of a plot for Palestinian nationalism (Yitzhak 2010:656). Due to mental illness, the late king's son and successor King Talal (in full, *Ṭalāl ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Hāshimī*) (1909-1972) (r. 1951-1952) only ruled briefly before abdicating the throne to his son, who was then crowned King Hussein (in full, *al-Ḥusayn ibn Ṭalāl al-Hāshimī*) (1935-1999) the following year (r. 1953-1999).

King Hussein's long reign weathered many crises, in part through successful international diplomacy. In 1957, Hussein's administration thwarted a coup attempt from within, led by Arab nationalists in Jordan who wanted to join in confederation with Egypt and Syria. After this incident, the Eisenhower administration sent Jordan tens of millions in foreign aid as part of a wider Cold War international policy, taking Britain's former place as Jordan's major financial backer (Hahn 2006:42). In 1958, Hussein's regime used intelligence shared by the US to stop a second coup attempt, plotted by the new United Arab Republic of Egypt and Syria (Tal 1995:42). After rebels violently overturned Iraq's Hashemite monarchy in 1958, King Hussein called on international alliances to secure his own throne. Along with US financial and diplomatic backing, a few thousand British soldiers occupied Jordan for much of the year, signaling that any attack on Hussein's regime would also constitute war

In 1916, he declared himself King of Hijaz, a position he held until he was forced to abdicate in 1924 (Strohmeier 2019:734).

against a NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) power; a United Nations observer mission in Amman also stabilized the situation (Tal 1995:49-51).

After quickly emerging the victor in the Arab-Israeli war of 1967, Israel took control of Jordan's annexed territories of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. As the decade drew to a close, Jordan became increasingly unstable as Palestinian guerilla groups used the country to stage attacks against Israel. In 1970, The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestinian Liberation Organization (PFLOP) held foreign hostages and hijacked multiple airlines out of Jordan; the king survived yet another assassination attempt (Ashton 2005:234). The regime's crackdown on Palestinian guerilla groups that year later became known as "Black September." The Jordanian military engaged in full-scale fighting both in Amman and in the northern city of Irbid, where the Syrian military and the Syrian-backed Palestinian Liberation Army invaded (Ashton 2005:234-235). By summer 1971, Jordan succeeded in driving out the guerilla groups from the country (Sirriyeh 2000:76). King Hussein formally relinquished any claims to the West Bank in 1988. Jordan became the second Arab country to normalize relations with Israel through a 1994 peace treaty (Haberman 1994).

Hussein's eldest son King Abdullah II (in full, *'Abd Allāh ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Hāshimī*) (b. 1962) (r. 1999-present) has reigned as Jordan's monarch since 1999. The current prime minister as of January 2021 is Bisher Al Khasawneh (*Bishir al-Khaṣawna*) (b. 1969). As a small economy with few natural resources, Jordan has continued to rely heavily on international aid. In 1989, Jordan first turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank to restructure its national debts. Since then, government austerity measures raising the costs of essentials such as fuel and bread have often sparked mass protests (Ryan 1998: 54-56).

Having faced no revolution or civil war during the so-called Arab spring, Jordan has a reputation as a stable country surrounded by unstable neighbors. Internally, residents of Jordan cope with increasing limits on dissent. From July to August 2020, Jordanian authorities suspended its largest independent trade union, The Jordan Teachers' Syndicate, for two years and arrested over a thousand teachers (Safi and Al-Tahat 2020). After a fifty year ban, the government had only just allowed the teachers' union to re-establish itself as a concession to protestors in Jordan in 2011. The union had planned demonstrations to contest the government's freeze on wage raises, given that increases in teacher salaries were part of Jordan's deal to end the union's historic strike in 2019 (Safi and Al-Tahat 2020).

In the case of my work, the majority of Jordan's alternative music scene takes place in Amman, the capital city, with a population of over four million. Schwedler calls Amman two cities: the rapidly developing West Amman, where my research largely took place, and the broadly unchanged East Amman, home to Amman's low-income classes (Schwedler 2010:547). Abdullah II's reign has been characterized in part by increased efforts to attract foreign investors, which, Schwedler explains, has been a major cause of the West Amman-East Amman divide (2010:548). Overall, Jordan is often ranked among the cities with the highest costs of living in the region and beyond. One such list deems only Tel Aviv more expensive to live in than Amman in the MENA region (*The Economist* 2020). The Economist Intelligence Unit's Worldwide Cost of Living Survey also ranked Amman 25th out of 133 cities across the world in terms of costs of living (*The Economist* 2019). Jordan's residents also must cope with a dramatically high unemployment rate, which was at twenty-three percent in the second quarter of 2020 according to the World Bank's October 1, 2020 report. As I discussed with Arabic-language tutor Yusra Barakat in Jordan, people cope with these trying circumstances as a family. Bakarat explained that families tend to live together and

pool the salaries of their employed members (pers. comm., September 25, 2018). While class dynamics are not a central focus of my dissertation, it is important to note that the majority of my research has taken place in West Amman, where the costs of concert tickets remain far out of reach for Jordan's poorer classes.

Another important aspect of Jordanian society is religion. The overwhelming majority of Jordan's population identifies as Sunni Muslim (Shoup 2007:29). Jordan also has a historic Christian community, estimated to be upwards of five percent of the population; most are Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic (Droeber 2012:60). There are also smaller religious minority communities of Druze and Bahá'ís in Jordan as well, though the state does not officially recognize these religions (Halabi 2020:743) (Esran 2019). While I did not focus on issues of religion in my research, it is also worth noting that many of the concerts I attended in West Amman were held at bars that serve alcohol and host mixed-gendered audiences, which many Jordanian Muslims may not consider permissible.

I will mention one additional backdrop for my study: the waves of refugee resettlement in Jordan. In recent decades, Jordan has increasingly become a hub for international aid organizations serving both the region and the refugee communities in the country. Although Palestinians make up the majority of Jordan's overall population (Ramahi 2015), their rights and citizenship statuses vary greatly depending on what year they came to Jordan and where they came from specifically. The two major waves of Palestinian refugees arrived in the country in 1948 and 1967, expelled at the founding of the Israeli state and fleeing the violence of Arab-Israeli wars. Most Palestinians who fled to Jordan in 1948 became citizens when King Abdullah I annexed the West Bank and East Jerusalem (Ramahi 2015). In contrast, Palestinian refugees fleeing Jordan from Gaza in 1967 do not have access to citizenship (Ramahi 2015). Today, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for

Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) reports over two million registered Palestinian refugees in Jordan (“Where We Work” n.d.). Palestinians are not the only refugee population in the country, however. Refugees fled to Jordan from the Gulf War in 1990 and the US Invasion of Iraq in 2003. Civil wars following popular uprisings in Syria and Libya starting in 2011 brought refugees to the country as well. A December 2019 report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) lists over 650,000 registered Syrian refugees in Jordan, as well 67,000 Iraqis, 15,000 Yemenis, 6,000 Sudanese, and 2,500 individuals representing 52 other nationalities (UNHCR 2019). Roughly 76,000 Syrians live in Jordan’s increasingly permanent settlement, Za’atari refugee camp, as of January 2020 (Omondi and Al-Taher 2020).

Against this backdrop of refugee and migrancy issues, I address Palestinian Indigeneity specifically in Chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation. Now that I have provided introductory context for readers on Jordan’s geographic location and history, its capital and class dynamics, issues of economic precarity, its religious groups, and waves of refugees, I will next briefly explain the terminology I use to refer to the genres of music included in this study.

What Is Alternative Arabic Music?

During my first summer in Jordan in 2016, I rented a room in an old three-story house along a wide set of stairs that make up some city streets in Jabal Amman (*Jabal ‘Ammān*) [Amman Hill], one of the city’s oldest neighborhoods. Other renters were young Arabs, Europeans, and North Americans in Amman to work, intern, or study Arabic. For a few weeks, my stay overlapped with Jordanian software engineer Jordan Akour (*Jūrdān ‘Akūr*), who was about to move to Southeast Asia. Before he left, Akour introduced me to the term

“alternative Arabic music,” showing me his Facebook page by that name (pers. comm., July 12, 2016). Started on June 1, 2010, the “Alternative Arabic Music” Facebook page frequently posts lyrics and links to songs. As of March 18, 2021, “Radio Arddi” has been added to the page title, referring to the online radio station Akour founded to stream alternative Arabic music, which has over 180,000 followers (@AlternativeArabicMusic 2021). Akour said that alternative Arabic music records are typically made as individual projects that lack the widespread exposure of popular singers such as Nancy Ajram (*Nānsī ‘Ajram*) and Haifa Webhe (*Hayfā’ Wahbī*) (pers. comm., July 12, 2016). In this dissertation, I use “alternative Arabic music” based on both the example of Akour’s website, and on the terminology that El Far3i’s uses to market his music online (pers. comm., January 22, 2019).

In the context of my research, terms related to alternative include “independent” and “underground.” Two musicians that I interviewed in Jordan, rapper Satti (*Sātī*) [Robbery]⁹ [given name, Ahmad Yaseen (*Aḥmad Yāsīn*)] and jazz bassist, bandleader, and composer, Yacoub Abu Ghosh (*Ya ‘qūb Abū Ghūsh*), prefer “independent” (pers. comm., March 19, 2019; March 15, 2019). No one I spoke with directly shared a preference for “underground,” but concert organizer Shermine Sawalha referred to the scene using this term in another interview (Rohmer 2016). In my opening vignette, El Far3i uses underground to refer to metal music, which he associates with the US by referencing the US-based heavy metal band Slipknot. In Arabic, some use the term *al-ūghniyya al-badīla* [alternative song] or *mustaqill* [independent]. Whether calling it independent, underground, or alternative Arabic music, the terms tends to be associated with minimal support from major music industries, anti-mainstream music mentalities, and genres such as rock, rap, electronic music, and metal that blossomed in the US and Europe and have since been taken up and interpreted globally. In

this context, the mainstream music that alternative defines itself in opposition to is pan-Arab pop, which I discuss further in my review of literature.

The term “alternative” itself traces back to the US marketing category “alternative rock” that developed in the 1980s and 1990s (Cateforis 2012:21). In the 1980s, alternative rock referred to bands at the periphery of mainstream popular music that were strongly influenced by 1970s punk and post-punk, played shows at small venues, and received publicity from college radio stations. However, this all started to shift towards the end of the 1980s, when once-peripheral alternative groups like REM and Sonic Youth signed with major record labels (2012:22). These were the first in a series of changes that brought anti-mainstream musicians to wide-scale fame. In 1991, the first Grammy for “Best Alternative Performance” was awarded, the Lollapalooza summer music festival began, and Nirvana’s *Nevermind* reached the top of the Billboard album charts (2012:22). *Nevermind*, writes Cateforis, was an album filled with themes of alienation, self-deprecation, and cynicism—attitudes he connects with the new young, white, middle-class generation X that was coming of age in the 1990s. Musically, 1990s alternative rock in the US began to be characterized by “thick, distorted guitar tones” and the pattern of juxtaposing quiet, stripped-down verses with loud, abrasive choruses—both of which can be found in Nirvana’s famous track from *Nevermind*, “Smells like Teen Spirit” (2012:23). Big record companies, aware that Nirvana went from an unknown grunge band in Seattle to a household name, started signing lesser-known rock bands in hopes of mimicking Nirvana’s success. (2012:22). Cateforis writes that “alternative” as a category fell out of favor in the US by the end of the 1990s (2012:23), but the main characteristic of “alternative”—groups that identify themselves in opposition to mainstream, widely-popular music—has far from disappeared.

⁹ Satti shared the translation, “robbery,” with me in an interview (pers. comm., March 19, 2019). Another

Alternative Arabic Music in Jordan

Despite its relatively small size, Jordan holds an outsized place in alternative Arabic music across the MENA region today. For example, the 2020 inaugural Middle East Music Event (MEME), held in Cairo’s Zed Park from January 9-11, featured five Jordanian bands out of the twenty that performed: Autostrad, Akher Zapheer (*Akhir Zafīr*) [Last Exhalation], Jadal (*Jadal*) [Controversy], Ayloul, and one named for its lead singer and keyboardist, Aziz Maraka (‘*Azīz Maraqa*) (Adel 2019). Jordan’s alternative music is also commonly found represented on top-ten lists in music journalism. Saudi Arabia’s *Arab News* included four bands founded in Jordan on their list of the top ten alternative albums from the Arab world of 2018: *Nuun (Nūn)*¹⁰ by Albaitil Ashwai (*al-Bayt al- ‘Ashwā ’ī*) [Random House]; *Balfron Promise* by 47Soul; *Umm El Mawjat (Umm al-Mawjāt)* [Mother of All Waves] by The Synaptik; and *Nasi (Nāsī)* [My People] by Hana Malhas (*Hanā ’ Malḥas*) (Preradovic 2018). In my interview with Malhas, she agreed with my assessment that Jordan holds an outsized place in the region’s alternative music for such a small country and scene. Malhas called Lebanon and Egypt the other two current hubs, with a slow increase from Saudi Arabia, though she noted that most Saudi artists relocate to Dubai (pers. comm., May 26, 2019). In order to provide a context for the more narrowly-focused case studies in this dissertation, I offer here a brief overview of alternative music in Jordan, and look forward to future scholarship dedicated to the country’s diverse music histories.

possible translation would be “burglar.”

Recent Historical Starting Points

When I asked El Far3i about the history of Jordan’s current alternative Arabic music scene, he pointed to a “late ‘90s wave” of rock bands that students started at universities and private schools. El Far3i marked the period with music festivals such as The Beat in 1998 and 1999 and Jordanstock (a play on Woodstock), held annually beginning around 1995; he remembers performing at the festival in 2000 (pers. comm., January 22, 2019). Tareq Al-Nasser (*Ṭāriq al-Nāṣir*) was also active at this time, an ensemble leader and composer famous in the region for his television scores. Musicians such as members of Autostrad, David Scott told me, got their start playing in Al Nasser’s large ensemble, which he co-founded with his sister Russul Al-Nasser (*Rusūl al-Nāṣir*) in 1998 (pers. comm., February 1, 2019) (Hattar 2020).

The late ‘90s rock wave in Jordan did not last. Perhaps the flashpoint was an incident when a few children set fire to a Qur’an, the holy book of Islam, in a mosque located in the city of Zarqa (*al-Zarqā’*), El Far3i suggested (pers. comm., January 22, 2019). Then, due to moral outcries of “satanism,” the police enforced a ban on all rock concerts. As El Far3i explained, “The stereotype became, if you hold a guitar, you’re satanic” (pers. comm., January 22, 2019). The concert bans led some musicians to turn to the *‘ūd*, a short-necked plucked lute of the Arab world that lacked the social stigma the guitar had taken on. Others turned to different musical fusions: El Far3i played in what he called an Oriental jazz band titled Zaman Al Zaatar (*Zaman al-Za‘tar*) [Sign of Thyme] with Yacoub Abu Ghosh during this period, and his former 47Soul band member Hamza Arnaout (*Ḥamza Arnā’ūt*) played in a funk-influenced band with a brass section (pers. comm., January 22, 2019). Rather than

¹⁰ The album name, *Nūn*, refers to the Arabic equivalent of the letter “n,” written as ن.

admit defeat in this moment of moral panic over their music, musicians shifted their instruments or genres and found a way to keep playing.

Former Jadal founding member and current leader of the band Qabeela (*Qabīla*) [Tribe], Rami Delshad (*Rāmī Dilshād*), told me the band got its start in 2003 when there was not much of an alternative music scene in Amman to speak of. Qabeela's members played rock covers and their own interpretations of pieces by icons of Arab urban art music like the Egyptian singer Abd al-Halim Hafiz (*ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Ḥāfīz*) (1929-1977) (pers. comm., March 7, 2019). After Jadal's song "Selma" became a hit, Delshad told me, people of all ages started to attend their concerts, from school children to mothers and grandmothers. Jadal is one of four big Jordanian acts that have continued performing consistently in some form until today. Two are also rock bands, Autostrad and El Morabba3, and the other is a band known by the name of its lead singer and keyboardist, Aziz Maraka, which melds pop, rock, and jazz. An additional grunge rock band, Akher Zapheer, founded in 2007, fell into periods of inactivity before a 2018 comeback (Beyrouiti 2019). Former band member Hamza Arnaout called 2007 the beginning of the rise of "alternative Arabic music," not coincidentally, the same year Autostrad was founded (Holslin 2018). The band released its first album *Fi Autostrad* [On the Autostrad] a year later (2008), introducing a sound blending rock with Arab, Latin, reggae, electronic, and funk influences. Their 2017 album *Expansions to the Governorates* features collaborations with traditional Jordanian folk musicians from across the country. El Morabba3 was officially founded in 2009 (Freij 2015). El Morabba3's lead singer and bassist, Muhammad Abdallah (*Muḥammad ʿAbd Allāh*) is the one founding member who has stayed with the band. David Scott, who produced El Morabba3's self-titled, breakout indie rock album (2012), told me that recently, members of Autostrad shared with him that after they heard the album, they realized they had to up their game, and Jadal felt the

same (pers. comm., February 1, 2019). El Morabba3 recorded the album at Tareq Al Nasser's studio, Scott added.

Born in Tunisia to Lebanese and Palestinian parents, Jordanian singer, composer, keyboardist, and band front man, Aziz Maraka has studied music at both the University of Arkansas and in Jordan before releasing his first album *Master Copy* in 2008 with his 2005-founded group, Razz (his coined term standing for Rock, Arabic, Jazz) (Scene Noise n.d.; Salti 2012). Both former supporting member of the band, keyboardist Nasir AlBashir (*Nāṣir al-Bashīr*), and longtime Amman sound engineer, David Scott, have described Maraka's sound as somewhere between rock and pop (Albashir, pers. comm., April 9, 2019) (Rawashdeh 2017). I saw Maraka's performance along with thousands of others on April 26, 2019 at The Boulevard, a new upscale outdoor mall in the Abdali neighborhood of Amman, which is often scorned by locals for its marketing to wealthy tourists from abroad. The high degree of polish to his sound and persona on stage reminded me more strongly of pop than any other artists I have seen perform in Jordan. Still, Maraka says, "I consider myself as a singer in the alternative music movement" (Alkhatib 2019:100).

Alkhatib points to the rise in access to high-speed Internet, file sharing, and online platforms at this time period as key factors that enabled this wave of alternative bands to gain popularity without major music industry support (Alkhatib 2019:98). Abu-Kwaik echoed this to me, explaining that so many musicians he played with in the '90s did not "make it" because of their lack of fluency with the Internet (pers. comm., January 22, 2019). Overall, beyond this foundational generation of rock bands such as Jadal, Autostrad, El Morabba3, and Aziz Maraka's fusions, newer Jordanian rock groups include Ayloul, a central focus of Chapter 2, Albaitil Ashwai, and Ertidad, a band that I introduce in my conclusion. Before I

describe other key genres in the scene, I will introduce some of the dedicated women contributing to it.

Women Dedicated to the Scene

Jordan has among the lowest rates in the world of women who work outside of the home, making any women working in Amman's alternative scene major norm breakers in their country (Kasoolu et al. 2019:4). Over the course of my research from 2016-2019, Hana Malhas was the only Jordan-based woman I saw perform professionally in Amman's alternative scene. Malhas's position of economic security is a central factor enabling her to maintain her career, while a lack of the same security inhibits other women from pursuing similar paths. Malhas describes herself as part of the Middle East's alternative scene on her homepage. She also explains that her sound draws influences from electronic, acoustic, pop, and gospel music.

I first saw Malhas perform at *Masrah al-Shams* [Sun Theater] on December 11, 2018, as part of her launch for her first album, *Nasi*. Her title-track for the album was featured on the Universal Records MENA compilation, *Now: Best of Indie Arabia Volume II* (2017). In addition to her solo performance career, Malhas contributes to the scene in many other ways. She has hosted music industry workshops, including a course for eight to ten women in the region, focused on building self-management and music production skills. She has also given talks at schools, where she has been pleased to see greater acceptance for music-making among students than when she was growing up in Amman, and has met fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds who have already started bands (pers. comm., May 26, 2019). Malhas also founded *Balafeesh* (*Balā Fīsh*) [Unplugged] in 2013, a YouTube concert series that records live-audience performances by artists from the region (pers. comm., May 26, 2019). Malhas

estimates that the channel has now had over 25 million views. According to Malhas, *Balafeesh* has received key financial support from the Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation, an Amman-based charitable organization launched by the Arab Bank in 1978, named for the bank's late founder (1888-1974) (Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation 2021). The drummer of emerging Jordanian rock band, Ertidad, Zaid Faouri (*Zayd Fāwūrī*), shared that the Shoman Foundation funded a program he has participated in twice called Start Up Band, which involves forming a group, composing a song, and performing it live, all in three days (pers. comm., March 26, 2019). Faouri says that he met many of the musicians in his network through the event.

Women are better represented off stage in Amman's alternative scene. Sitting at the bar at Café Rumi in the Amman neighborhood of Weibdeh,¹¹ I met the fearless concert organizer Shermine Sawalha in 2016, who described her work to me as creating an alternative hub for the independent Ammani arts scene (pers. comm., July 24, 2016). As a concert organizer in Amman, Sawalha is CEO and Creative Director of Malahi Entertainment Inc., a local arts production company that produces, books, and manages performing artists in the wider region, especially musicians, dancers, and visual artists, as she told Natacha Rohmer in an interview (Rohmer 2016). “Malahi actually means amusement park. But more importantly, it's about building a playground for underground culture to thrive in,” Sawalha said. Sawalha described founding Malahi (*Malāhī*) as the building of a network:

I had an idea that I could help promote the work of a wide range of artists through an online network that would market, manage and allow a sort of cross-pollination of their varied content. I spent a few months researching different visual and performing artists in the region, hopping from country to another [sic], building a better understanding of each artist's needs. This helped me understanding how to shape my

¹¹ The official name of the neighborhood is Jabal al-Luweibdeh (*Jabal al-Luwībda*) [Weibdeh Hill].

own business model, and understanding how best to develop the independent art scene in the region. (Rohmer 2016)

Sawalha commented that once Malahi was established in Amman, “I booked local, regional, and international artists to perform in Jordan and throughout the region, while also producing different festivals and shows” (Rohmer 2016). When she produces shows and festivals, she said, she aims to keep costs low in order to build up the scene. “I’m not in the business of making money, I’m in the business of people,” and her collaborators love her for that, she told me (pers. comm., July 24, 2016). Her network-building also involves creating social spaces for performance. As Sawalha describes it:

We also set up venues, reviving and rebranding older ones and creating new hotspots too. Next we develop a dedicated fan base around each space by organizing special events, attracting media and sponsors. This raises the venues’ stature in the local arts and culture scene, which is necessary in order to develop a sustainable industry. (Rohmer 2016)

Sawalha also mentioned a third component to her network: the fans. “Fans follow my work and they also follow the bands...but I can’t do it without them; they can’t do it without me. It comes hand-in-hand: it’s not just me, you know” (Rohmer 2016). She clarified that her work “is much more than throwing parties; it’s about tapping into the region’s independent music industry, discovering a new artist, linking with other artists to design promotional materials, and still others to complement his performance with their own work. Malahi builds creative bridges” (Rohmer 2016). Sawalha said she is constantly looking for opportunities to expand her network as well:

I see opportunities. Like when people say, ‘Oh, but there isn’t any live music scene,’ or, ‘Oh, but there isn’t a place to dance’, for me that’s like a door opening wide to do something. People just see the negative of it not existing; instead, I see a chance to create it. And that’s how it keeps coming and multiplying. (Rohmer 2016)

Sawalha demonstrated her central role in catalyzing, maintaining, and expanding the network of alternative Arabic music in Jordan through these descriptions of her work. As with the

musicians in the scene, Sawalha uses the alternative music scene as an avenue of possibility and expression, where others see only limitations.

Mais Sahli (*Mays Sahlī*), managing partner at Corner's Pub, a central music venue for the scene, is another key figure. Enjoying the weather from Corner's outdoor seating, she described her many roles to me at the venue:

Mostly I'm at Corner's at night, evening onwards. Daytime, I'm talking to bands, emailing people, it's very chill. A cup of coffee, my laptop and phone, and I can work from anywhere. Some bands I book months in advance, especially when it's someone outside. I take care of everything, flyers, PR, social media accounts, posting everywhere, spreading the word, finding new acts. I set up an identity for the place, set up certain rules I need to follow every month. If we have a cover band we also have to have a band with original content. We must have a local band every month, and of course our open mic-night. (pers. comm., April 30, 2019)

Sahli also listed Mirna Nizar Khalfawi (*Mīrna Nizār Khalfāwi*) in public relations and marketing, and Lama Hazboun (*Lamma Ḥazbūn*), who leads and founded the music management company OrangeRed in 2004 and the Amman Jazz Festival in 2013, as other key women in the scene (pers. comm., April 30, 2019) (Hattar 2020). When I asked Sahli about the state of Amman's alternative music, she said, "I'm hopeful. Lots of people aren't. But if you were here fifteen years ago, absolutely nothing. I can book seven gigs a month." She added that her network outside of Jordan includes musicians in Tunisia, Kuwait, Lebanon, Syria, and parts of Europe (pers. comm., April 30, 2019).

Genres and Challenges

Other regular performers in Amman's alternative music scene include electronic musicians, rappers, jazz musicians, and various cover bands, who often play versions of major hit songs in English, Spanish, or Arabic. While not every musician in the scene calls it alternative [as I have mentioned, Yacoub Abu Ghosh in jazz and Satti in rap prefer the label independent (pers. comm., March 19, 2019; March 15, 2019)], these different genres are

interconnected, frequently sharing audiences, venues, and musicians. While El Far3i is most well-known as a rapper, he used to play percussion in a former iteration of Abu Ghosh's jazz ensemble, for example. Devoted fan and scene participant Yassir Bayoumi described the electronic music component of Amman's alternative scene to me as up-and-coming, with popular performance venues including Uncle Sam's Restaurant and Pub by Amman's Third Circle¹² and Zorba in downtown Amman (pers. comm., September 15, 2018). One of the new electronic music groups is Ghaem Jozi (*Ghā'im Juz'ī*) [Partly Cloudy], led by former El Morabba3 founding member Odai Shawagfeh (*Uday Shawaghfa*), featuring vocals by Ayloul's lead singer, Ra'ed Al-Tabari (*Rā'id al-Ṭabarī*), who favors his falsetto register. I saw the band open for Hana Malhas on April 3, 2019 at Opera House, a windowless, high-end venue, feeling mesmerized by the spacey visual projections behind them as they performed.

In terms of rap, Chapter 3 includes an account of El Far3i's solo career, who was one of the early rappers on the scene. Other foundational names in Ammani rap include Satti, Almkhtar (*al-Mukhtār*) [The Chosen], and the crew Torabyeh (*Turābiyya*) [From the Ground], still active through one of its members, Kazz Torabyeh. Kazz (*Kāz*) [Gas] has collaborated on tracks with each of the rappers above, and now does the majority of his work online as a multimedia artist, releasing tracks, music videos, and illustrations, as well as interacting with fans (pers. comm., May 29, 2019). Kazz now collaborates on the visual components of his work with Yassir Bayoumi. Satti currently works in the film industry, continues with hip-hop, and has also started a YouTube series called *The Closet Sessions*, which features local artists performing acoustic versions of their songs (pers. comm., March 19, 2019). Satti brought my attention to a slow increase in local opportunities for streaming

¹² Amman's seven major traffic circles are frequently used as landmarks.

and distribution; he recently signed a contract with Apple Music, and pointed to other artists' connections with Sony and Universal. More recent rappers include The Synaptik, a young doctor who has captured the attention of younger audiences in part through his mastery of social media. Another popular rapper is Emsellam (*Musallam*) [Flawless], who some locals love to hate. One listener compared him to Kanye West, and called his work "ego rap." These artists face challenges performing locally because overall, many Amman music venues are not interested in hosting rappers, making an already limited set of options even smaller. Bayoumi also pointed to the fact that there are less grant funding options available to rappers a well (May 29, 2019). The Synaptik said that rap is associated with poorer East Amman, where he estimates, four out of five concerts get shut down by the authorities after noise complaints (Talty 2018).

While there are few jazz bands in Amman, the city has an annual jazz festival all the same. I attended the 2019 iteration of the Amman Jazz Festival, which has a very wide scope in terms of the musicians it invites to participate. More than one festival event, for example, featured the captivating Egyptian performer Balqeis on her custom-made electric *'ūd*. Balqeis also features live looping in her sets, meaning that as she plays, she records short segments of herself, then replays them on loops, creating layered sonic effects. In terms of jazz musicians based in Amman, Yacoub Abu Ghosh is a jazz leader in the city, who plays the upright bass, composes, and leads ensembles. Nasir Al Bashir has joined Abu Ghosh in jazz groups on the keyboard.

Cover bands are another component in Amman's live music presence, including Al Bashir's group, Half Step Down, which covers tracks from US jazz, pop, soul, and funk. One of the active cover bands in Amman today is GuitaNai, a group whose name combines the words "guitar" and "nai" (*nāy*), a traditional Arab end-blown reed flute. GuitaNai has more

recently released original material as well, and has more songs in development. Others included Luis and the Amigos, a band that covered both English and Spanish-language global hits such as “We Are Young” by the US band Fun (2012) and “Despacito” [Slowly] by the Puerto Rican singer Luis Fonsi (2017), until after four years of performing in Jordan, the band’s lead singer Luis B. Flames announced on Facebook in May 2019 that he had to return to Spain. Additional well-known cover bands in Amman include Harget Kart (*Harget Kart*),¹³ who cover tracks by both English and Arabic-language music icons such as England’s Adele and Lebanon’s Fairuz (*Fayrūz*), as well as a country music cover band called Pinewood Rift.

I saw Pinewood Rift perform at Maestro, a key live music venue in Weibdeh, in March 2019, and later had a chance to interview Sari Abuladel (*Sāri ‘Abul ‘Adil*), sound engineer and founder of the band. Our conversation demonstrated how the scene repeatedly refuses to be defeated by its challenges. I asked Abuladel how the alternative music situation in Amman is different from other Arab countries. The following is his answer in full:

Very few musicians. Very little support and funding. Actually the odds are against the musicians in Amman more than anywhere else. And this is what makes us proud to be honest. The fact that we have so many famous acts and they’re so big all around the region, but they all come from Amman, where it’s so hard to get a musical instrument, it’s so expensive to do any of that. The government keeps shutting down events and venues. It’s quite admirable that they can survive let alone be successful in a scene where nothing is working for you. On paper, it’s not. It really isn’t. The perseverance of the musicians. They’re really really into it. They fight against the odds to produce and take the content all over the region. It’s quite cool. That’s it. Nothing positive. Any band from Amman, if they started somewhere else they would’ve saved so much time doing it. But they chose to stay and they’re doing it here. (pers. comm., March 27, 2019)

I asked Abuladel why he thought the scene has faced so much government pushback, and his simple answer was corruption. He explained that in customs, a guitar falls under the same

¹³ Harget Kart explained to me that the band name means “doing anything, music in our case, without considering the original style” (pers. comm., February 5, 2021).

category as diamonds. When he imported a PA System, he paid ninety-two percent of the item's cost in customs and fees (pers. comm., March 27, 2019). Knowing these kinds of challenges, there is an element of the miraculous in the fact that music continues to get recorded and performed in the city at all.

Other challenges that Amman's music scene devotees shared with me include border restrictions: bands used to be able to drive to Syria to tour, for example, prior to the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 (Malhas, pers. comm., May 26, 2019). Mais Sahli identified a lack of sufficient producers, managers, and booking agents (pers. comm., April 30, 2019). David Scott said that rehearsal spaces are often difficult to find and too expensive to rent (Rawashdeh 2017). Scott also views the lack of performance venues as a massive factor holding the scene back (Rawashdeh 2017). The problem is worst in the winter, when artists would struggle to find a location that could hold the huge numbers outdoor performances can with temporary stages. In the summer, those same outdoor concerts require licenses to take place, which are difficult to secure (Abu Kwaik, pers. comm., January 22, 2019). Even when venues are available, Scott says that artists are discouraged by prohibitively expensive rental equipment costs, driven high by lucrative wedding and corporate markets (Rawashdeh 2017). Many of the indoor venues are bars, where only ages 21 or 23 and above are allowed (Delshad pers. comm., March 7, 2019). Noise complaints are another issue, because most of the venues are in residential areas, but the venues don't invest enough in sound proofing and acoustic treatment. (Abuladel, pers. comm., March 27, 2019).

Some are able to secure corporate sponsorship to help combat the high costs involved in music performance, including from car companies such as Lexus and Toyota, alcohol brands such as Jameson Irish Whisky, and cigarette companies such as Winston; smoking is ever-present in Jordan. Jameson has sponsored at least three annual spring outdoor music

festivals in recent years, featuring many local bands. Sahli of Corner's Pub helped with the 2019 event promotion, and estimated that 5,000 people attended (pers. comm., April 30, 2019). Red Bull is another significant source of corporate sponsorship: Malhas has received funding from Red Bull for her solo work as well as for *Balafeesh*, and the brand is well-known for hosting a battle of the bands style event they call Red Bull Soundclash. Still, not all are pleased with the conditions that come along with corporate sponsorships, making the theater I introduce next all the more essential in its support of art without attaching restrictions.

Institutional Support: Al Balad Theater

Foundational independent arts institution Al Balad Theater is a prime example of the perseverance Abuladel identifies as a defining characteristic of Amman's music scene. Its founder Raed Asfour informed me that the idea for Al Balad Theater started in 2000, when he was helping to establish a theater in Alexandria, Egypt called Garage, in collaboration with the Arabian Fund Theater in Brussels, the Center for Theatrical Training in Beirut, and the Jesuit Group in Egypt (pers. comm., July 18, 2019). Asfour saw a need for an independent space where young artists could come together and create without government bureaucracy or official dictation on what could be shown or done there. In consultation with various engineering groups, Asfour considered roughly twelve potential locations before settling on a historic building, perched at the top of a long stairway street that connected it to downtown Amman. Al Balad received various small supporting grants for the project, including from Swedish and Swiss agencies for international development. Unfortunately, once the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the US took place, many organizations pulled out, and only the Swedish and Swiss grants for Al Balad Theater remained. With this

minimal amount of financial support, the theater opened to the public in 2005, and for the next three years, continued to operate without air conditioning or heat. Asfour invited representatives from Zain, a major telecom company, to see in person how busy and productive the theater had become, and after the visit, Zain chose to sponsor the theater's air conditioning.

Unfortunately, by the time I returned to Jordan to volunteer with Al Balad in 2018, the theater had lost its original location. Previously, Al Balad had rented the building, but when the owner passed away, the heir sold it, and the new owner canceled the theater's 35-year lease. During my fieldwork, I volunteered at the new location Al Balad Theater is currently renovating, an old cinema in Jabal Amman with increased audience capacity and performance space. Part of my tasks included processing statements of support that Al Balad received on social media after losing their original location. I will quote one of these statements in full below, which captures how beloved this arts institution is:

Theatre may refer dually to both/either the building and/or the collective of artists inhabiting the building. Sometimes these two meanings converge beautifully; they may complement one another so powerfully that we forget one or the other can stand on its own. As such, I have confidence that the creative team of Albalad Theatre will carry on as before. I am also hopeful that the edifice housing Albalad Theatre will continue to stand.

What I'm lamenting here is the loss of the thirteen-year connection between the community of artists and this theatre space. That connection will haunt the place regardless of what new shape it takes. Albalad Theatre, as a building, might be converted for another purpose and the new residents may thrive within its walls. However, the specters of those who occupied Albalad Theatre will continue to dwell in each of its corners, just as the ghosts of its cinema past are apparent for anyone who has been in that building.

I cannot imagine visiting Amman once again without seeing the familiar faces of Albalad Theatre IN Albalad Theatre. The vivid recollections of my work there, the avant-garde theatre productions, the alternative music concerts, and the meaningful conversations and friendships I enjoyed in that space will remain present in my memory. Those persons and the infrastructure are ONE for me.

So long, Albalad Theatre. Your transformation may take on any form, but in my heart, you will continue to exist as I knew you. (Fadi Skeiker April 5, 2018)

One major part of Al Balad Theater's work was not halted by the location change: its planning and executing of major arts festivals held in locations across the city. Al Balad hosted its first festival 2007, the storytelling festival, Hakaya (*Hikaya*) [Story], and its first music festival in 2009, titled Al Balad Music Festival, which became biannual; I volunteered at its 2017 and 2019 iterations.



Figure 3. Ayloul at the Odeon Theater in Amman, Jordan, for Al Balad Music Festival. Photo by the author, June 26, 2019.

The theater also hosts an annual street art festival called Baladk (*Baladak*) [Your Country], which Isaeid and other theater staff managed to hold across Amman in 2020, even amidst the unprecedented global challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Al Balad Theater deeply values being an independent arts organization. As Asfour explained, the theater used to host more film screenings, but now limits them rather than face

continued restrictions from state film censorship regulators. Asfour clarified for me that there are no laws in Jordan regulating live music and theater, but censorship boards do evaluate movies, as well as books, CDs, and DVDs imported from abroad. Al Balad also supports independent art in the city by providing grants to new bands and offering them free rehearsal space at the theater: most recently, to Ayloul, and in the past, to artists such as El Far3i, Autostrad, and El Morabba3. Asfour has also described Al Balad Music festival as an opportunity to bring smaller, emergent bands to the attention of global festival circuits (Freij 2015).

In this section, I have provided starting points for understanding basic components of alternative Arabic music in Jordan, from the different genres that artists perform and the challenges that they overcome to do so, to foundational, deeply loved institutions such as Al Balad Theater. I frame this information as starting points due to the fact that full monographs could be written on the wider scene and its history. Until then, it can provide readers with context for the more narrow scope of the in-depth case studies I provide in my body chapters. I now shift to outlining the varying academic discourses that my dissertation builds upon and brings into dialogue.

Review of Literature

My research builds on a small, emerging body of English-language literature on music in Jordan. A basic outline of the different forms of music in the country can be found in the encyclopedia *Oxford Music Online*, where Abdel-Hamid Hamam links Jordan to the music cultures of Syria, Palestine, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia (2001). Hamam continues on to explain that in the small agriculturist towns that largely composed Jordan before the Arab-Israeli War of 1948, vocal folk music predominated. Other forms that Hamam mentions

include the music of nomadic Bedouins; Christian religious music; Islamic chants; and Arab urban art music; as well as Western European art and military music, influenced by the British mandate period.

As of yet, the vast majority of existing research considers Jordan as one context among many. Some achieve this through studies of nomadic communities. Racy considers Bedouin music in the broader Eastern Mediterranean: Jordan, Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon (1996), and Karlyn Hazel Moyer's master's thesis focuses on Bedouin women's worship practices (2009). Kathleen Hood's monograph studies Druze religious communities across the Eastern Mediterranean as well, which includes parts of Jordan (2007). Research focusing on refugee music engagement has also led to cross-location studies that include Jordan. David McDonald's ethnographic monograph on Palestinian music and politics features some Palestinian collaborators located in Jordan (2013). Jennifer Lee Ladkani's dissertation on Palestinian refugee music is Jordan-based (2001); and Karen Boswall and Ruba Al Akash's article studying listening practices on mobile phones among Syrian women living as refugees in northern Jordan (2017). Hip-hop studies have included Jordan in transnational work as well. One of Rayya El Zein's chapters on hip-hop in Palestine, Lebanon, and Jordan focuses on Ammani rappers, who she argues actively negotiate political concerns by "performing resignation" (2016:303). The rappers she features call attention to their own political positions through music performance, and the most common position El Zein highlights is one of refusing to overtly engage with controversial politics in their work (2016:307). Alkhatib's dissertation provides a general survey of music in Jordan; see Chapter 2 for more on this author's research on the Jordanian alternative band Ayloul (2019:160). My research as well was not entirely confined within Jordan's national boundaries. It includes audiovisual engagement with music, as well as a Mashrou' Leila concert in Los Angeles, given that the

band was twice banned from performing in Jordan during my periods of fieldwork. This wider scope more accurately mirrors the transnational interconnections of today's world. Overall, this study aims to prioritize Jordan's music in a way rarely found in English-language scholarship. For the remainder of this section, I will introduce different bodies of literature that my project contributes to from the broader MENA region.

Music and Socially-Experienced Emotions

This dissertation builds on research in ethnomusicology and cultural anthropology on music and affect, or socially-experienced emotions, in the MENA region. Ethnomusicologist A.J. Racy's seminal work on *ṭarab*, which he defines as "a musically induced state of ecstasy," provides a foundation for this body of scholarship (2003:6). More specifically, *ṭarab* both refers to the urban art music tradition of the Arab world, and to the ecstatic state that can arise from the relationality between practiced listeners in the audiences and skilled performers in the genre, such as the most famous singer of the 20th century Arab world, Umm Kulthum (*Umm Kulthūm*) (c.1904-1975) (Danielson 1997:1). Racy further argues that *ṭarab* provides a socially sanctioned space and mode for people to express intimate feelings (2003:193). Anthropologist Jonathon Holt Shannon extends Racy's work on *ṭarab* to urban art music performance in Aleppo, Syria, also asserting that relationality between expert performers and skilled audience listeners is essential to the process (2009:168). Other studies have applied *ṭarab* outside of Arab urban art music tradition specifically. Ethnomusicologist Michael Frishkopf identifies *ṭarab* in the context of Egyptian Sufi chants (Frishkopf 2001). In his study of Islamic sermons recorded on cassettes, anthropologist Charles Hirschkind also focuses on *ṭarab* as the intersubjective exchange of feeling between listeners and performers (2006:23). Anthropologist Rayya El Zein's dissertation applies the concept of *ṭarab* to rap

concerts in Ramallah, Beirut, and Amman. El Zein is specifically concerned with audience dynamics, towards the broader aim of adding scholarly validity to rap listening practices (2016:141). My study follows the lead of the culture-bearers I study, who have never introduced *tarab* to me as a central part of their scene, yet the project relates to the scholarly discourse more broadly by analyzing affects of melancholy and joy.

Popular Music Ethnographies

My work also adds to the collection of ethnographies about popular music in the MENA region such as those by Martin Stokes (1992; 2010) and Marc Schade-Poulsen (1999). Stokes frames his work on *arabesk*, a Turkish urban popular music form that emerged in Istanbul the 1970s, as filling a gap in ethnomusicology on urban popular musics that he suggests is especially evident in works on the Middle East (1992:3). Stokes explains that *arabesk* is the music of labor migrants from rural southeast Turkey (1992:8), often deemed a “backward,” “exotic” anomaly to a secular, Westernized ideal of the Turkish state. Stokes built on this work in his most recent monograph, which offers case studies on three deeply loved Turkish popular musicians, Zeki Müren, Orhan Gencebay, and Sezen Aksu. Stokes frames them as “voices of cultural intimacy” (2010:15) who offer more personal expressions of Turkish identities than those sanctioned by the state. Cultural anthropologist Marc Schade-Poulsen (1999) focuses his ethnography on *rai*, a genre of popular Algerian music that mixes Western instruments and disco rhythms with Moroccan wedding songs, Egyptian preludes, and beyond. In the 1980s, *tai* gained popularity in risqué cabarets, social spaces for bending the rules regulating gender and sexuality in Algerian society. My work draws on these scholars who demonstrate through their projects that whatever negative social

stigmas may accompany them, popular music forms should be taken just as seriously as any other genre as a key mode to better understand a society.

Pan-Arab Pop

The focus I place on alternative Arabic music in my research helps balance the far more extensive academic discourse on pan-Arab pop, which alternative fans often use as the foil to the music they prefer. Thus far, authors have focused on the genres of *shabābī* [youth music] and *sha‘bī* [popular, of the people], often through the lens of music video analysis, also known as “*fidīyūclīb*” [an Arabic pronunciation of the English phrase, “video clip”]. Scholars position the genres’ emergence in the 1970s in the wider context of the open-door economic policy of Egyptian president Muhammad Anwar Sadat (*Muḥammad Anwar al-Sādāt*) (1918-1981). Although Sadat’s policies largely failed, leaving Egypt with heavy international debts, a destabilized economy, and a widening wealth-poverty gap, the policies also brought increased exposure to international media and imports of cassettes, amplifiers, recording equipment, and instruments (Frishkopf 2003:156-158; Grippo 2015:115).

Scholars use economic differences as a distinguishing framework between *shabābī* and *sha‘bī*. As Grippo notes, *shabābī* stars project “a slick, iconic, flawlessly sexy image” (2015:113), whereas *sha‘bī* evokes the Egyptian working classes, specifically through the sounds of brass and folk instruments, strong or gritty vocals in Egyptian-Arabic dialect, and lyrical content on wide-ranging topics, including issues of class (2015:113). According to Grippo, the vast majority of video clips feature *shabābī* stars. While there are *sha‘bī* crossover stars into the *shabābī* aesthetic, the opposite does not often occur (2015:114). Hakim (*Hakīm*) is one of those *sha‘bī* crossover stars. Cairo folklorist Muhammad ‘Umran told Marcus, “part of Hakim’s appeal is that he represents *sha‘bī* [here, working-class] life on

five-star hotel stages” (2006:166). Marcus uses Hakim’s hit song and video clip, “is-Salamu ‘alaykum” (*is-Salāmu ‘Alaykum*) [Peace Be Upon You] (2002) to exemplify Hakim’s cross-class success. In the video, Hakim embodies a constantly shifting cast of “everyman” characters, from mechanic, to shopkeeper, to bus driver. The song’s refrain and title feature the most common greeting in the Arab world, writes Marcus, another way of connecting to everyday experiences (2015:154-155). In contrast, Marcus watched Hakim perform this song repeatedly in an Italian suit in elite Cairo hotels.

Nancy Ajram and Haifa Wehbe are two of the most common examples scholars use to illustrate how representations of female sexuality have taken precedence in *shabābī* (Grippio 2015; Marcus 2015; Gilman 2014; Frishkopf 2010; Cestor 2010). Both are Lebanese singers and two of the biggest stars of pan-Arab popular music. Cestor credits Nancy Ajram’s rise to fame to her flirtatious video, “Akhasmak Ah” (*Akhasmak Ah*) [I’ll Taunt You] (2010:104). Ajram carefully balances her image with public acts signaling “morality,” such as her two albums of children’s songs, and her serving as a goodwill ambassador for UNICEF (Marcus 2015:157). Moments such as these are reminiscent of what Van Nieuwkerk calls, “performing piety”—artists who can afford to sometimes entirely remarket their careers to frame themselves as “good Muslims” (2013:10). Scholars frame Haifa Wehbe as a foil of Ajram, for she is far more provocatively sexual in her image (Marcus 2015:157).

Patricia Kubala importantly points to a different sort of response to morality outcries against Arab pop: releasing videos professing Islamic values on the same stations that play Nancy and Haifa. Kubala gives the example of Sami Yusuf (*Sāmī Yūsuf*) and his video, “al-Mu’allim” (*al-Mu’allim*) [The Teacher]. Yusuf plays a chic young photographer who is also a “good Muslim”—he teaches religious lessons to children, and is kind to his mother and his community (2010:208). Frishkopf adds his own interpretation to such videos: both capitalize

on representations of “beauty.” While Islamic morality videos do not feature women, they do show attractive young men, as an appeal to their young female audiences (11:2010).

Frishkopf also points to the television’s ability to act as a metaphoric veil, allowing male stars like Yusuf to “enter respectably into the home, seen but unseeing, blinded by TV’s one-way transmission (just as – in Arab medieval times – blind male musicians were favored in female performance contexts)” (2010:24). He attributes part of the outcry over representations of female sexuality in video clips to their challenging the separation between public and private space.

Overall, my project bridges pan-Arab pop scholarship with works on alternative Arabic music by identifying points of connection between the two areas. For example, Chapter 1 includes a chronicle of the backlash that Mashrou' Leila has faced in the region, including in Egypt. Likewise, pan-Arab pop video clips often become a flash point in morality debates in the region. Often, the major critique is against content that some deem contradictory to Muslim values. For example, Marcus notes that a member of the Egyptian parliament called Hakim’s “*is-Salamu ‘alaykum*” defamatory to Islam for using a Muslim greeting inappropriately (2006:167). Worse, Egypt has begun charging *shabābī* stars with jailtime in recent years. In January 2018, Leila Amer (*Leylā ‘Amir*) faced a two-year sentence for a music video determined too salacious; Shyma (Shaimaa Ahmed) (*Shaymā ‘Aḥmad*) was charged with a year in prison for a risqué music video, and Sherine (Sherine Abdel Wahab) (*Shīrīn ‘Abd al-Wahāb*) was given a six-month sentence for a comment on the Nile river’s pollution during a performance (Simon 2018). Notably, all those charged are women. In Saudi Arabia, an arrest took place at a much higher level: Prince Alwaleed bin Talal (*al-Walīd bin Ṭalāl*), the majority owner of Rotana Music, was one of the two hundred officials arrested in a crackdown ordered by Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (*Muḥammad bin*

Salmān) (Sorkin 2017). As the Egyptian economy declined, the Gulf economies rose, and the pan-Arab pop industry followed. Egypt's biggest stars are now signed to Rotana, Saudi Arabia's largest media company which controlled eighty-five percent of the Arab-Egyptian music market as of 2010, according to Grippo (2015:115). Since Prince bin Talal's release in 2018, he reportedly has shifted from an independent-minded investor to a close follower of the crown prince's policies (Faucon, Hagey, and Jones 2019).

Resistance and Power Dynamics

This project also extends MENA popular music scholarship's focus on issues of resistance and power dynamics, which often dialogues with cultural anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod's critique of the romanticization of resistance in social science research (1990:42). Abu-Lughod instead draws on Foucault's work to propose that scholars should interpret resistance as a diagnostic of power, meaning that they should question what often-fleeting moments of resistance reveal about the power structures they take place within. Abu-Lughod's call is for ethnographies that attend just as carefully to the diverse nuances of power as others have attended to resistance, with an awareness of how power and protest are intimately connected. Some take up Abu-Lughod's call directly (El Zein 2016; Moreno Almeida 2017). Others contribute to the broader discourse through ethnographic works that consider the power dynamics inherent in popular music genres that are often associated with resistance (Gilman 2015; McDonald 2012) and the force of sonic violence (Daughtry 2015; Cusick 2013). Both Rayya El Zein and Cristina Moreno Almeida demonstrate that MENA rap is at once deeply associated with tropes of resistance and entrenched in nuanced systems of power. Moreno Almeida points to the fact that in Morocco, there are rappers promoting the monarchy, other rappers supporting Islamist movements, and still other rappers espousing

the messages of liberal-secular groups (2017:8). El Zein adds a class-based analysis by pointing to ticket prices in Amman that are out of reach for poorer residents (2016:324); Nickell builds on this work through analysis of class in Beirut's independent music scene (2020). For example, Nickell frames Mashrou' Leila's achievements in the context of the band members' access to private school, English-language educations enabled by their upper-middle-class families (2020:51).

Whether in the context of alternative Arabic music or the country writ large, self-censorship is common in Jordan to avoid the legal consequences that can arise from critiquing key institutions such as the monarchy or religious institutions (Al-Masri 2016). None of the lyrics I quote in my study name specific politicians by name, for example. In Chapter 1, my case study demonstrates the severe consequences that arose for Mashrou' Leila due to the band's refusal to self-censor. Daniel J. Gilman identifies a similar pattern of what he calls "strategic ambiguity" in the music of many *shabābī* stars following the 2011 Egyptian revolution (698:2015). While these artists released music praising the martyrs of the revolution, says Gilman, they carefully avoided specific details such as who killed whom and why. Gilman demonstrates that the *shabābī* industry relies on the financial support of Egypt's wealthiest, who seek to maintain the status-quo military dictatorship so as to preserve their elite status. Some stars such as Hakim even overtly praised the military coup in their music (2015:706). These stars, argues Gilman, choose ambiguity or direct support of the state rather than risk their careers by contradicting the politics of their benefactors. David McDonald makes a similar argument in regards to what he calls the "transnational Arab pop intifadiana" (2012:129). "Intifadiana" is a play on the term *intifada* [uprising], which refers to movements of Palestinian resistance against Israel that arose for a brief period in response to Israel's Operation Desert Shield, a horrific attack on Jenin in Palestine's West Bank that

lasted for two weeks in April 2002. “*al-ḥilm al-‘arabī*” [The Arab Dream] (1998) was re-released in response, a collaboration between twenty-three Arab pop stars which, McDonald writes, professes Arab unity through the expression of Palestinian suffering (2012:133). Rather than gloss the song as protest against the Israeli occupation of Palestine, McDonald uses the song to unravel interlaced systems of power. Despite an accompanying music video with images of Palestinian suffering, no Palestinian artists or producers contributed to the track, McDonald clarifies, nor do its lyrics directly mention Palestine at all. The participating pop stars, he continues, are detached from the horrific conditions Palestinians in the Occupied Territories face, and at times, their tours are sponsored in part by multinational corporations connected to the US and Israeli governments (134-137). Through these examples, Gilman and McDonald show how songs that could be oversimplified as protest music are deeply entrenched in systems of power.

In my own research, alternative musicians show signs of processing the myriad violent conflicts in the MENA region by sampling the sounds of war, such as the subtle whistling sound of a rocket in “E-stichrak” (*Istishrāq*) [Orientalism] (2012), a track that I analyze in Chapter 3 by El Far3i and the Lebanese rapper Mazen El Sayed (*Māzin al-Sayyid*), stage name El Rass (*al-Rās*) [The Head]. This aspect relates to other ethnographic projects on issues of sonic power and violence, which I understand as indirectly responding to Abu-Lughod’s call for ethnographies of power structures. Cusick frames “acoustical relationality” as the act of defining the self in relation to surrounding sounds (2013:276), a term that could be applied to the sampling practices of wartime sounds in alternative Arabic music as well. Cusick’s research context is the sonic torture of prisoners in the US’s so-called global war on terror. There comes a point for these prisoners, Cusick argues, where they can no longer

separate themselves from the blasting music they cannot control. This sonic violence, she continues, shatters prisoners' subjectivity.

J. Martin Daughtry builds on Cusick's work on the power of sound to harm in his ethnography of the "belliphonic" sounds of war in Iraq. The sampling practice I identify in "E-stichrak" relates to the category of wartime sound that Daughtry calls the "narrational zone," referring to sounds that listeners can turn into stories, such as listening to a warplane in order to determine how far away it is from the hearer. Daughtry attends to the immense complexities of the sounds of war as well. He shows, for example, how the war can be defined in terms of "sonic campaigns," such as the US introduction of helicopters, Humvees, and missiles, whereas insurgents add the sounds of Kalashnikovs, mortars, and IEDs (improvised explosive devices) (2015:186). My project applies Cusick and Daughtry's methods of close listening to the sounds of war to sampling practices in alternative Arabic music.

Rap, Metal, Rock, and Electronic Music

My dissertation additionally contributes data on Jordan to genre-focused scholarship on rap, metal, rock, and electronic music in MENA. In terms of rap, few have devoted full-length works to the subject. Sunaina Maira's monograph builds on a range of existing scholarship on Palestinian rap (Stein and Swedenburg 2004; Massad 2005; Swedenburg 2013; Anderson 2013; McDonald 2013a, 2013b; El Zein 2016, 2017). El Zein's ethnographic dissertation focuses on rap in Beirut, Amman, and Ramallah (2016), while Cristina Moreno Almeida's monograph on rap in contemporary Morocco (2017) brings a critical North African perspective to the genealogy of MENA rap. Moreno Almeida begins her analysis of

hip-hop in early 1990s Morocco, roughly a decade before scholars date the rise of rap in the Palestinian territories in 1999 or 2000.

Moreno Almeida draws influence from Abu-Lughod in her monograph on power structures and Moroccan rap in a number of ways. She considers, for example, how the Moroccan state grants artists a place of privilege in the music scene if they engage with what Moreno Almeida calls “the narrative of development”: optimistic accounts that present Morocco as being on a constant path to democracy, which, she argues, legitimizes the current monarchy (2017:83). In Morocco, critics call patriotic raps “*watanounism*”—combining the Arabic word *watan* [nation] with the French suffix *-isme*, usually referring to an opinion or attitude (2017:93). Like El Zein, Moreno Almeida also points to the ways that ostensibly resistant music may be more complicated than it seems on the surface, and that artists can commercialize rebellion. She presents the example of Moroccan rapper Chaht Man, who uses the stage name *Athawri* [The Revolutionary] and positions himself as a social justice fighter against the state (2017:100). Moreno Almeida argues that this rapper’s “kind of criticism remains within the state’s accepted ‘oppositional’ discourse or accepted criticism that still does not cross the country’s ‘red lines’” (2017:103). For example, it is acceptable to the state to critique the former feared Interior Minister, Driss El Basri, as Chaht Man does, because the currently reigning King Mohammed VI dismissed him when he came to power (2017:102). Chaht Man has created a brand out of his resistant image—a calligram (a signature of interwoven Arabic words) of his stage name appears on the clothes of dancers, rappers, and actors in his music videos (2017:105). Moreno Almeida demonstrates through this example how a rapper acting out “resistance” also supports the powerful state and capitalist system within which he works.

To my knowledge, Jordan is currently absent from the small body of existing scholarship on metal in the MENA region, a genre difficult to study due to state repression in a range of countries. Therefore, the brief information on Jordanian metal that I include in this introduction begins to fill that absence. I did not encounter metal bands during my periods of field research in Jordan, likely because any active bands must preserve a degree of anonymity in order to avoid state attention. Sound engineer and founder of the country cover band Pinewood Rift, Sari Abuladel, shared with me that now, metal bands in Jordan come together for about one concert a year, and every time, there is a fifty-fifty chance that the event will get raided, and someone will end up in jail (pers. comm., March 27, 2019). At one recent annual metal event, it was a friend of Abuladel's who got arrested. There were families in the audience, mothers and children trying to support their sons and brothers in the bands. Music venues do not want to host these events because of the risk of raids and the high volume of the music, Abuladel added. Zaid Faouri has sung and drummed for metal bands in Jordan in the past, and has worked as a session musician for the band Eternal Insomnia (pers. comm., March 26, 2019). Faouri now drums for the alternative rock band Ertidad (*Irtidād*) [Rebound or Frequency] in Amman. Unfortunately, he also shared that his family frowned upon his music-making. Mohammad Ali Eswed (*Muḥammad 'Alī Iswīd*) of Ertidad added that the metal scene has vanished in Jordan, so the musicians, whom he praises for their technical skill, have started performing in other genres (pers. comm., March 26, 2019). Faouri represents many other metal musicians in Jordan who, rather than being defeated by their difficult circumstances, have responded by generating creative alternatives, such as shifting to performing rock music.

In terms of scholarship on MENA metal in other countries, Benjamin J. Harbert draws on field and archival research in Cairo and Alexandria in 2006 to analyze the events of

January 1997, when authorities arrested roughly one hundred fans and metal musicians, who then faced brutal torture in prison (2013:234). He demonstrates how the state strategically used metal as a scapegoat, defining its defense of Islam in opposition to metal's accused "satanism" and its US roots (2013:229). In his short survey of MENA metal, Pierre Hecker marks Egypt's 1997 incident as the first moral panic over the genre, followed by a police crackdown, then notes other incidents that followed in Morocco, Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey (2005:59-61). Hecker interprets these local metal scenes as part of a transnational network of global metal popular culture (2005:58). In Hecker's ethnographic monograph on metal in Turkey, he interprets metal as a way that enthusiasts find meaning in their lives (2012:15). Hecker traces the genre's beginnings in the country, arguing that it arose in response to the increased government controls that followed the 1980 coup (2012:37). Writing for a wider popular audience, Mark LeVine describes metal scenes in what he calls the Muslim world, including in Morocco, Egypt, Israel, Iran, and Pakistan, and encourages his readers to pay attention to youth cultures as a serious way to better understand the region (2008:2).

My research on rock bands founded in Jordan, such as Ayloul in Chapter 2, contributes to a small but growing academic discourse on the genre in MENA. Though work focused entirely on rock remains rare, Carolyn Ramzy does so in an article on how the Egyptian rock band Cairokee has navigated post-revolution Egypt (2020). Hani Alkhatib introduces Ayloul in his dissertation as well (2019:160). Other scholars include rock in their analyses of a broader scene, such as Darci Sprengel's article on the ineffable, affective politics of Cairo's post-2011 revolution Do-It-Yourself (DIY) musicians (2019), and Nickell's dissertation on independent music in Beirut (2020). Nickell's research includes rock bands such as Mashrou' Leila, analyzed through intersecting issues of race, class, sect, and masculinity (2020:4).

Perhaps the least-researched of the genres that fall under alternative Arabic music is electronic music. In terms of potential forthcoming scholarship, ethnomusicologist Clara Wenz focuses a dissertation chapter on the Syrian-born “electro-tarab” artist Samer Saem Eldahr (*Sāmīr Ṣā’im al-Ḍahr*) known as Hello Psychoaleppo, who now resides in Turkey, but as of yet this research is not accessible to readers. At University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) event titled, “Middle East and Central Asia Music Forum,” held online Nov 10-11, 2020, Wenz introduced Hello Psychoaleppo as one of the most influential artists in the region’s alternative music scene, whose work combines global electronic music sounds with sounds and samples from Arab music traditions. My work on 47Soul adds to this nascent literature: in Chapter 2, I discuss in detail the work of foundational scholars in this area, Shayna Silverstein (2016) and Nadeem Karkabi (2013; 2018). I will next expand on the detailed case study chapters that will follow this introduction.

Overview of Chapters

In Chapter 1, I focus on Mashrou' Leila. Founded in Beirut, Mashrou' Leila is known for a rich musical career interwoven with bold explorations of sexuality and religion, including the longtime choice of the band’s lead singer Hamed Sinno (*Hāmid Sinnū*) to openly identify as queer (Sinno, pers. comm., April 12, 2021).¹⁴ These topics and their decisions to express them are considered controversial in the Middle East and North Africa. As I detail in the chapter, Mashrou' Leila has faced retaliation in the region, including in April 2016, when the band’s scheduled concert in Amman was canceled at the eleventh hour. This incident that occurred just as I began my master’s research led me to define the scope of

this project to include Arab bands not founded in Jordan, given that Amman is an important touring stop for the region. Due to the backlash Mashrou' Leila too-often faces in MENA, it was in Los Angeles that I was able to see them perform live in October 2019. I interpret the melancholy final encore of that show and other moments throughout the Mashrou' Leila's career as strategic performances of what philosopher Jacques Rancière calls "dissensus" (2010). Rancière uses dissensus to describe moments when individuals on the margins of society cause momentary breaks in "the partition of the sensible"—meaning, what has been established by dominant groups as common sensory experience—and revealing widely accepted presumptions in the process (2010: 140;152). After reading the chapter, Sinno supported my interpretation by mentioning to me, "Rancière was a significant influence when I was in college" (pers. comm., April 12, 2021). I also engage Rancière in dialogue with current scholarship on melancholy by feminist theorist Sara Ahmed (2010; 2015) and ethnomusicologist Denise Gill (2017), who bring concepts of agency to their analyses of performing melancholy, framing it as a way to push back against broader power structures. Reading these authors together, I understand Mashrou' Leila's active choices to perform melancholy as expressions of dissensus as well.

In Chapter 2, I turn to 47Soul and Ayloul, two alternative bands founded in Jordan in 2013. The electronic music group 47Soul is likely the most globally known band to emerge from Jordan's alternative scene, while the rock band Ayloul is one of its rising stars, recently signed by Universal Music MENA for a distribution deal. In this chapter, I focus on the ways that 47Soul and Ayloul foster joy through *dabkeh*,¹⁵ a traditional music and line dance from the region. Building on the work of ethnomusicologist David McDonald (2013), I interpret

¹⁴ Sinno clarified for me that while the press uses other terminology at times, he specifically self-identifies as queer (pers. comm., April 12, 2021).

these performances as decolonial expressions of presence, asserting that their peoples have not only survived but also continue to thrive despite the disruptions and violence of colonization processes that have taken place. I further extend anthropologist Nadeem Karkabi's work (2017). Karkabi highlights a complex picture of Palestinian identity by focusing on the joy that the bands 47Soul and Ministry of Dub-Key¹⁶ express through *dabkeh*. My work builds on these current Middle East ethnographies of Palestinian music not only by applying them to more current releases by 47Soul and Ayloul, but also by engaging them in dialogue with other recent theorizations of joy. I introduce cultural theorist and organizer, Nick Montgomery, and author, director, and youth alternatives-to-education worker, carla bergman (2017) following the lead of Mashrou' Leila's lead singer, Hamed Sinno (*Hāmid Sinnū*), who referenced their title concept "joyful militancy" in an interview as inspiring some of the band's yet-to-be-released tracks (Wetmore 2019). I draw on Montgomery and bergman's understanding of joy not as merely personal feelings of happiness, but as a social capacity of openness to affect and be affected by others that can strengthen activist communities. I also engage with work on Indigenous activist media (Ginsburg 2018; Córdova 2018), especially by Freya Schiwy (2019), who roots her analysis of joy in Indigenous decolonization efforts. I apply her conceptualization of joy as a decolonial affect that enacts prefigurative politics to the contexts of 47Soul and Ayloul.

In Chapter 3, I highlight the rap lyrics and a performance by one of 47Soul's members, El Far3i. With a solo act beginning in Amman in 2008, El Far3i is a founder of the alternative music scene there today. I interpret El Far3i's work through the lens of recent

¹⁵ I use the spelling "*dabkeh*" to reflect the way the term is most commonly pronounced in Jordan, according to Heba Albaz, *dabkeh* dancer and instructor at Jordan's Al Hannouneh Society for Popular Culture (pers. comm., August 22, 2020).

¹⁶ "Dub-Key" is a pun on the Arabic *dabkeh*; the electronic music genre, dubstep; and dub, the electronic-music-based reggae subgenre. The band is an earlier, less-established group co-founded by 47Soul member Walaa Sbait (*Walā' Sbayt*).

critical Indigenous studies scholarship by Vicente M. Diaz (2016), Māori Ngāti Pūkenga scholar Brendan Hokowhitu (2016), and Kanaka Maoli scholar Stephanie Nohelani Teves (2018), who each critique the foundational binaries that have been instrumental in processes of colonization. These scholars also move beyond a mode of critique and offer their projects as decolonial models of how to focus on the vast nuances inherent in expressions of Indigeneity instead. My close reading of two El Far3i tracks, one recorded in collaboration with El Rass, aims to highlight the intentionally ambiguous quality of his lyrics. I suggest that attending to the open-ended meanings in El Far3i's lyrics as an Indigenous Palestinian musician helps deconstruct binary modes of thinking that colonizers have weaponized against Indigenous peoples.

Identifying the Author

I conclude this introduction to my dissertation project by introducing myself as a researcher in relation to my topic. I do so following what Elizabeth Mackinlay calls an ethical necessity in the work of decolonizing ethnomusicology, to engage in “uncomfortable reflexivity—a reflexivity that seeks to know while at the same time situates this knowing as tenuous” [(2003:188) 2015:379]. I am a white woman, born and raised in the US, a settler colonial nation-state, whose tax dollars support Israeli settler-colonialism. Sharing my positionalities is important to this study because my race and citizenship especially have deep associations with oppression in the MENA region. I hope that sharing how I came to carry out this project can convey my sensitivity to these legacies and my profound appreciation for the rich cultures I seek to honor in my work.

My engagement with MENA cultures did not begin in graduate school. I grew up admiring the masterful Arabic calligraphy hanging in our dining room, and hearing prayers

chanted in Farsi and Arabic by respected Persian members of our local Bahá'í religious community. My religious upbringing meant that I grew up in a globally diverse community that included a great deal of Persian hospitality. After graduating high school, I had the wonderful opportunity to travel with my family to Haifa and Acre to visit some of the world's holiest sites for members of the Bahá'í Faith. I wonder if these experiences are what drew my interest so strongly to study the region later. At Franklin and Marshall College, I chose courses in modern Middle East history, Islam, anthropology, music, ethnomusicology, and Arabic. After attending a performance by Palestinian-American *'ūd* and violin virtuoso Simon Shaheen (*Sīmūn Shāhīn*) on campus, I applied for and received a grant from the music department to pursue introductory *'ūd* studies and attend Shaheen's annual summer Arabic Music Retreat at Mount Holyoke College. There, I heard ethnomusicologist A.J. Racy lecture every day at lunch. Each time, Dr. Racy analyzed a single, masterful Umm Kulthum song from a different angle. The following fall, I accepted an invitation from Bassam Saba (*Bassām Šābā*), the late Lebanese *nāy* and flute virtuoso, to play the oboe in his New York Arabic Orchestra for the fall 2012 season. Perhaps my time with these masterful musicians and scholars drew me to focus my studies on the Eastern Mediterranean Arab region in particular.

I chose to pursue graduate studies in ethnomusicology because I felt that even all of these rich experiences still only scratched the surface of understanding. At University of California, Santa Barbara, my advisor Dr. Scott Marcus—one of Dr. Racy's students—has welcomed me to participate in his courses on the region, his rousing Middle East ensemble, and to sit in his office for detailed music lessons on the *'ūd* and *nāy*. I now continue my appreciation of Arab urban art music traditions as a listener, and turned my research in the direction of popular music forms, inspired by my colleague at University of California, Santa

Barbara, ethnomusicologist Dr. Stephanie Choi's compelling presentations of her research on K-pop. In terms of choosing a specific research location, I first turned to Jordan for practical reasons. Unlike Lebanon, for example, I could apply for US research grants to conduct my study in Jordan. I was further motivated to research in Jordan when I realized so little has been published in English on any type of music there, as I have discussed so far in this introduction. Once I began fieldwork in Jordan in 2016, luck immediately connected me to active participants in the alternative music scene. I got in touch with expert sound engineer Dave Scott through my housing search, and met dedicated fans Jordan Akour and Yassir Bayoumi in the building where I rented a room. Their openness and generosity to share some of their experiences in the scene with me guided the direction of all of my research that followed.

During my research, my female gender identity likely became a limiting factor in my study. While Amman's alternative music scene is far more liberal-valued than Jordan as a whole, during my fieldwork from 2018-2019 I suspected that my gender was the unspoken reason I found it difficult to access many private spaces of music-making, such as rehearsals or recording sessions. Women living in Jordan are subject to a far higher degree of social control than I experienced growing up in the US. I will reference a conversation that highlighted this reality for me. One afternoon in Amman, a friend from the US shared with me that she got scolded by her Jordanian language partner for laughing in public. Such public displays of emotion by women are considered taboo, she learned. Her language partner had also confided in my friend that she wants to study in the US, but she was afraid that even if she received a grant to do so, her father or fiancé would prevent her from leaving the country. Such fears relate to what Amnesty International calls Jordan's "male guardianship system," which makes it possible for women to be arrested for leaving their homes without male

permission (Amnesty International 2019). I speculate that these embedded understandings of the roles of women and men in Jordanian society also effect liberal spaces such as the alternative music scene as well. Additionally, while English is widely spoken in the scene I studied, and I have studied Arabic for years, I am not fluent, meaning that I likely missed linguistic nuances at times. I look forward to future co-authored projects by people of diverse identities to overcome some of the limits inherent in a solo-researched and authored project, as my degree program requires.

While I could never reach the level of expertise that the culture-bearers in this study possess in their own music, I am grateful for this opportunity to use my positions of privilege to draw attention to the rich musical worlds centered around Amman. In my work, I carry with me the words of Kathy Sullivan, wife of then-Executive Director of the Binational Fulbright Commission in Jordan, Alain McNamara. During the orientation for our grant period in Jordan, she told us, “We are guests here.” I offer my dissertation to my readers in a spirit of gratitude, with my thanks to every host in Jordan who invited me in.

Chapter 1. Mashrou' Leila and the Politics of Performing Melancholy

It's October 3, 2019, and Lebanon's iconic alternative band, Mashrou' Leila (*Mashrū' Leylā*),¹⁷ is about to perform their last song of the night at the Regent Theater in downtown Los Angeles. The band's electric lead singer Hamed Sinno (*Ḥāmid Sinnū*) has grabbed us with his intensity and velvety voice: singing with his eyes closed, gripping his microphone stand, jumping across the stage, body rolling through instrumental breaks.



Figure 4. Hamid Sinno at the Regent Theater, Los Angeles, CA. Photo by the author, October 3, 2019.

¹⁷ To date, there is no standard English translation of Mashrou' Leila. While Mashrou' (*Mashrū'*) is consistently translated as “project,” the inconsistency stems from Leila (*Leylā*): in written Arabic, this translates to the name, Leila, but if the word is spoken only, it also sounds like “night.” In English-language journalism, the three most common translations over the course of the band's career have been, “Night Project,” “Leila's Project,” and “Overnight Project.” *The Associated Press* standard seems to have shifted from “Night Project” to “Leila's Project” in 2016, then back again to “Night Project” in 2019. Some news sources no longer translate the band's name, and others have used “One Night Project” or “The Night Project”—the latter of which is grammatically incorrect, given that the Arabic for “night” and “project” is indefinite in this case. Nor has Mashrou' Leila released an official translation of the band name. The band's website also does not include a translation. Supporting the “night” translation, their homepage biography does begin with the phrase, “born of a nocturnal encounter” (Mashrou' Leila 2014), likely a reference to the late-night jam sessions that led to its formation at American University of Beirut. However, the band also supported the “Leila” translation when members wondered together in an interview who Leila is (Daily News Egypt 2011). Early in their career, band members also fostered speculation by sending letters to their fan page about a person named “Leila,” discussing her sisters and lovers, her taste in music, her love of dancing, and even her musings on revolutions (Derderian 2014). Clearly, the band members enjoy fostering ambiguous interpretations. Leila also evokes a classic Arab literary character. Layla and Majnun (*Majnūn*) [Madman] are the subjects of a famous tragic love story, roughly dating back to seventh-century Arabia, which has continued to inspire art for more than a thousand years throughout the MENA region (Pellat et al. 2012).

The crowd has danced and screamed and sung along, breaking the stereotypes I have heard about apathetic LA audiences. Still, for the last song in their encore, Sinno chooses to break with the dance club energy of the hall. He cues the lighting technician to submerge us in darkness. He tells everyone to turn off their phones. “*Be with us in the room. Fuck Instagram.*” I glance over at someone near me, holding onto their phone three beats longer than anyone else, before stuffing it into their bag. This next song, Sinno says, is “*about dealing with mental illness, and not getting your meds right, essentially.*” We stand around in the dark, wondering what will happen next.

Sinno begins to sing the a cappella opening words of their song, “Marikh” (*Mirrīkh*) [Mars]. His voice pleads, “*dā—wī —ni* [cure me],” drawing out the second syllable with anguish. I hear someone near me say impatiently to the person next to them, “*It’s too slow.*” “Marikh” is indeed a contrast to other Mashrou’ Leila songs in more than its tempo: it has no percussion—only prolonged, angst-filled vocals like moans or cries, a droning synthesizer, and periodic trills on the violin. During the performance, visual projections behind the band depict what looks like the experience of speeding past stars through the vast emptiness of space, which my friend Nalini Kale described to me as “moving forward to nowhere.” Kale saw Mashrou’ Leila perform the same song as the final encore in San Francisco a few days after I did. During “Marikh,” she told me, she found herself crying and saw others around her visibly moved. Why would Mashrou’ Leila choose to end the concert like this, making people cry in the dark?

Founded in Beirut, Lebanon, in 2008, Mashrou’ Leila is one of the most popular groups in alternative Arabic music today. Its members distinguish themselves by their open engagement with contentious subjects in the region, such as issues of sexuality and religion.

Just as I began following the alternative scene in Amman for my master's research in April 2016, Mashrou' Leila began to appear in international headlines after their scheduled performance in Amman, Jordan, was canceled by authorities just days before it was planned to be held. This moment motivated my decision not to limit my dissertation to alternative bands founded and based in Jordan, only. Amman is a frequent touring stop for bands from other countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and elsewhere. Based on Mashrou' Leila's significance in Amman's scene, my scope became alternative Arabic bands that formed in Jordan, are based there, or have toured there from other parts of MENA, and the thriving scene in Amman that often hosts them.

In this chapter, I argue that throughout their career, Mashrou' Leila's members have strategically chosen again and again to enact what I call political dissensus. Philosopher Jacques Rancière uses the term, "dissensus," to focus on moments when members of marginalized groups especially, cause a break in normative sensory experience and expose largely unquestioned assumptions as a result (2010:140). Rancière frames normative sensory experience as "the partition of the sensible," or what is commonly considered "the visible and the sayable" by dominant groups (2010:152). Acts of dissensus break with these expectations. I call Mashrou' Leila's actions political based on Rancière, who writes that a political subject is defined in terms of a capacity to stage scenes of dissensus (2010:69). In fact, after reviewing this chapter shortly before the completion of my dissertation, Sinno told me, "Rancière was a significant influence when I was in college" (pers. comm., April 12, 2021), further supporting my interpretation. I also read Rancière together with affect theory, interpreting his references to sensory experience as affective ones, in order to understand the politics of causing affective breaks, as the band members so often do.

Next, I provide a background on Mashrou' Leila's career, and interpret a range of moments throughout it as examples of enacting political dissensus. Faced with a recent string of conflicts and threats in regards to performances in the MENA region, Mashrou' Leila's members actively continue to express themselves and their politics despite the incredibly difficult consequences they face for doing so. In part because of their conscious refusal to self-censor, they are also the only band from my fieldwork that I have seen perform in the United States: it is easier to see them play outside of MENA, now that so many countries there have made them unwelcome.

I then propose that another way that Mashrou' Leila enacts political dissensus is through performances of melancholy, as in the final encore I describe at the opening of this chapter. I argue that when Mashrou' Leila performs intense, weighty moments like the "Marikh" encore in Los Angeles and San Francisco, the band performs melancholy. Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud's essay "On Mourning and Melancholia" (1917) is considered a watershed moment for the analysis of melancholy in North American and European academic contexts. Freud pathologizes melancholia¹⁸ as a condition where the expected pain and suffering that comes from a major loss continues on, rather than ending after a limited period of time. My use of the term draws primarily on the current works of feminist theorist Sara Ahmed (2010; 2015) and ethnomusicologist Denise Gill (2017). To Freud's foundation, Ahmed and Gill bring analyses of power dynamics and active choice to discussions of melancholy, and both consider how marginalized groups can not only choose to express melancholy when faced with threats of erasure, but can also use it to counter those threats.

Building on Freud's work, Ahmed views melancholy as getting stuck in, or refusing to let go of, the pain of a loss. I apply two of Ahmed's examples, based on their connections

to members of Mashrou' Leila. I first draw on Ahmed's additions to the work of English and comparative literature scholars, David L. Eng, and David Kazanjian. Eng and Kazanjian argue that LGBTIQ+¹⁹ peoples' mourning for members of their community who were killed in the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks is an ethical response to loss (2003:3)—a holding onto melancholy that resists common erasures of the presence of their marginalized group (2015:159). Otherwise, writes Ahmed, it stays unmentioned that any of the people killed on 9/11 identified as LGBTIQ+ at all. Openly memorializing the LGBTIQ+-identifying people who were killed on 9/11 exposes an unspoken assumption that all who were killed identified as heterosexual, and asserts LGBTIQ+ presence against that erasure (2015:158). Mashrou' Leila's lead singer, Hamed Sinno, has openly identified as queer for many years, and recently, the band's violinist, Haig Papazian (*Hāyk Bābāziyān*), has publicly identified as “queer” as well. Papazian (2020) did so in a piece he published in response to the tragic suicide of one of their Egyptian fans, Sarah Hegazy, who was imprisoned and tortured for waving a flag of LGBTIQ+ pride at the band's Cairo concert in 2017. Ahmed's reading of Eng and Kazanjian helps me demonstrate that when Sinno and Papazian hold onto their melancholy at Hegazy's loss and identify, as she did, with the same LGBTIQ+ identity group that the Egyptian government systematically works to oppress, the band members counter that work, insisting on their presence.

I also interpret the situation of two of Mashrou' Leila's members through the lens of Ahmed's concept of the “melancholic migrant” (2010:139), who refuses to stop mourning a loss, such as a migrant's lost homeland, despite pressures from the state to do so. To date,

¹⁸ Aside from my direct discussions of Freud's work, I shift from using his term, “melancholia,” to using “melancholy,” the more contemporary term.

¹⁹ After Hamid Sinno's usage in communication with me, the following acronym is my standard: LGBTIQ+ (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Intersex Queer/Questioning Plus, with “Plus” referring to all other identities not reflected by those letters in the community). I do not alter directly-quoted text that uses a different term to refer to such identity groups.

Sinno and Papazian are migrants or refugees, now based in New York City. The band refused to stop performing in a way considered increasingly controversial in the MENA region. They then lost their safety, and in two cases, their homeland, as a result. Their performances such as the “Marikh” final encore evoke the melancholy of losing one’s homeland that Ahmed describes.

Gill’s ethnographic scholarship on contemporary Turkish classical musicians supports my argument that Mashrou’ Leila performs melancholy in what Gill calls purposeful, productive ways (2017:32). When I apply this point to my own case study, I use the term “strategic” in regards to their performances. As in Ahmed’s example of LGBTIQ+ mourning after 9/11, Gill’s collaborators face attempted erasures: she demonstrates the ways in which the fledgling Turkish republic worked to erase the two major streams of influence on Turkish classical music: the music practices of Sufism and of the Ottoman court (2017:40-44). Therefore, their performances of melancholy reassert the continued legacy of these genres that the state tried to erase.

I then apply my theoretical analysis of strategic dissensus and melancholy to the case study of Mashrou’ Leila’s 2016 music video, “Aoede.” I suggest that “Aoede” features expressions of melancholy and dissensus lyrically, sonically, and visually. In support of my interpretation, Sinno shared with me, “I was reading *Mourning and Melancholia* when I wrote Aoede after my father’s passing” (pers. comm., April 12, 2021). Sinno’s lyrics interweave aspects of monotheistic religions with ancient polytheistic ones, which has challenged some conservative Christians in Jordan and Lebanon. For lyrical analysis throughout this chapter, I feature the band members’ own English translations of their lyrics, which they regularly share along with their YouTube videos. Finally, through prolonged

sonic tension and visuals in “Aoeede,” they invite listeners to take a step towards experiencing the immense suffering of the migrant experience.

In short, this chapter analyzes Mashrou' Leila's career and select works as choices to enact political dissensus, including their performances of melancholy. In doing so, they express the presence of marginalized groups and offer listeners the opportunity to strengthen their empathy. Listening to Mashrou' Leila's performances, music, and statements means hearing about the experiences of migrant and LGBTIQ+ communities. Further, the band invites these listeners to empathize affectively by feeling their melancholy with them.

Politics as Dissensus

I frame Mashrou' Leila's career through the lens of “dissensus,” a concept elaborated in philosopher Jacques Rancière's *Dissensus* (2010). Rancière defines the term as enacting a momentary break in normative sensory experience, or in his terminology, a break in “the partition of the sensible:” what dominant groups determine can be “the visible and the sayable” (2010:140, 152).²⁰ I also read Rancière's work on sensory experience together with affect theory. Indeed, a fundamental assumption underlying Rancière's work, notes music theorist Jairo Moreno and ethnomusicologist Gavin Steingo, is that “societies and communities are partitioned first and foremost on the level of sense perception” (2012:487). Based on such a foundation, it would not be extraneous but rather essential to understand the affective potential of politics.

Because Rancière frames “consensus” as when a singular sensory experience is taken as a given (2010:149), a powerful component of dissensus is that it momentarily exposes the multivocality of affective experience. Rancière is especially interested in moments when

²⁰ I do not modify direct quotations in this dissertation.

members of marginalized groups strategically enact dissensus—a strategic break in sense perception. In his book on Rancière’s writings on aesthetics and politics, political theorist Davide Panagia writes that Rancière’s case studies “are all objects or persons who are not authorized to express sentiments, sensibilities, or acts but who nonetheless realign affective practices of time and space, of systems of value, and partake in the work of expressivity” (2018:2). Based on the formal and informal criminalizing of Mashrou' Leila specifically and LGBTIQ+ communities in general that I will recount in the following section, I will demonstrate that the band members are not readily authorized to assert and re-assert their existence, yet they continue the work of expressivity. Dissensus as a concept focuses on the ways that members of marginalized groups can stage affective experiences that unsettle those present and cause them to question status-quo assumptions.

In terms of understanding Mashrou' Leila’s career as political, I turn to Rancière. He writes, “a political subject is a capacity for staging scenes of dissensus” (2010:69). Elsewhere, as quoted by Moreno and Steingo, Rancière poses, “Politics is primarily conflict over the existence of a common stage and over the existence and status of those present on it” (1999:26). The following is one of Rancière’s examples of dissensus: what he calls Olympe de Gouges’s famous statement from the French Revolution, paraphrased as, “If women were entitled to go to the scaffold, then they were also entitled to go to the assembly” (2010:68). De Gouges’s statement momentarily exposes an underlying assumption of the status-quo at that time and place: that it is possible to separate public and private life. Rancière explains that men justified French women’s exclusion from voting or running for office by stating that women belonged in private life, yet De Gouges mentions the scaffold to reference a public execution. According to Rancière, De Gouges argued that if women were treated as public, political subjects under the guillotine, then they deserved to be granted the

same status writ-large. As a member of a marginalized group, her statement momentarily throws into question the partition of the sensible, and therefore enacts dissensus.

Panagia also captures the anti-hierarchical assumptions inherent in Rancière's positions on politics. Panagia writes, "For Rancière politics comes with no qualifications" (2018:viii). He highlights Rancière's critiques of Marxist analyses that establish "epistemic qualifications for political emancipation...Freedom, in other words, can come only with knowing the world correctly" (2018:11). Panagia gives a succinct picture of the powerful critique of intellectual elitism that Rancière offers. Simply put, Rancière critiques Marxism for implying that a subject must know Marxist theory in order to be emancipated. After Rancière, then, politics should not be defined in a way that excludes those who lack a grasp of a certain body of knowledge. In the context of this chapter, I apply this point—that politics should come with no qualifications—to suggest that music need not have direct links or references to a clearly defined political movement in order to qualify as political.

In his essay, "The Paradoxes of Political Art," Rancière also critiques the perspective that art must model behavior, or change behavior, in order to be effective (2010:136-137). I see this critique mirrored in an interview Hamed Sinno gave to the press. Rather than glorify music's ability to directly enact change, Sinno instead highlights music's ability to prompt conversation and reflect frustrations with his country's stagnation. "I know that music has the ability to get the people who are concerned with these things to start talking, or at least to reflect a genuine disenchantment with a situation." He continued, "We are in our 20s at this point, and we have been watching the transformation of Lebanese society for 20 years, and it just doesn't seem to be getting anywhere" ("I Want to be Leila," 2009). Sinno expresses a feeling of futility, wondering if his home country will ever change. Mashrou' Leila band members do not call for direct changes in fan behavior in every song and statement they

release. However, Rancière disagrees with the line of thinking that deems art only valuable when linked to direct action or calls to change behavior. Instead, in the following analysis, I point to numerous moments that the band strategically chooses to engage in politics by enacting dissensus: challenging assumptions in their disruptions of the status-quo.

Mashrou' Leila: Performing Political Dissensus

In this section, I argue that Mashrou' Leila's career is political in the sense that it is filled with performances of dissensus. I discuss the band's career chronologically from 2011-2020, including canceled Mashrou' Leila appearances in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Jordan once again, and Qatar. I frame my account of recent controversies surrounding the band in the MENA region as a demonstration of the serious stakes inherent in simply performing music in this case. I also show that the band members are strategic actors: despite all the canceled events and frequent backlash they face, they refuse to shift away from challenging norms in the region and elsewhere.

In 2008, three architecture and design students at American University of Beirut posted flyers on campus to promote their music workshop. These three students were violinist Haig Papazian, guitarist Andre Chedid (*Andre Shadīd*), and pianist Omayya Malaeb (*Umayya Malā'ib*), who started the workshop or informal jam session that went on to become the now-iconic band, Mashrou' Leila. They were joined by vocalist Hamed Sinno, drummer Carl Gerges (*Carl Jirjis*), bass guitarist Ibrahim Badr (*Ibrāhīm Badr*), and multi-instrumentalist Firas Abou Fakher (*Firās Abū Fakhr*) (Daily News Egypt 2011). The band first performed publicly in 2008 at Lebanon's Fête de la Musique, and in 2009, won the jury and popular awards in *Radio Liban's* Modern Music Contest (Crane 2011). The band released their first album, *Mashrou' Leila*, in 2009 as well, at a live event held at a steel

factory (*The National* 2013). The album features danceable tracks, prominent violin lines, sonic evocations of violence such as the countdown timer of a bomb, and a slow, heartbreaking ballad. In 2010, Mashrou' Leila became the first Lebanese band to headline the country's Byblos International Festival (Faber 2019), an event I discuss further later in this section. With time, the band shifted from seven members to four: pianist Malaeb would leave the band in September 2013 (Dabbagh 2015), guitarist Andre Chedid left that year as well (Stoughton 2013), and bass guitarist Ibrahim Badr appears to have left in 2018. As of 2020, Mashrou' Leila has four members: Sinno, Papazian, Abou Fakher, and Gerges.

From early in their career, Mashrou' Leila has approached the music industry with a seriousness that has likely helped lead to their current international success. Speaking about the band's second independently released album, the EP *El Hal Romancy (al-Ḥall Rūmānsī)* [The Solution is Romantic] (2011), Abou Fakher explains that Mashrou' Leila launched it at the Beirut Hippodrome, and continued, "We wanted to do it as a stadium band. We forced ourselves to professionalise. Coming from architecture and design, we were very rigorous. We decided to learn about gear and ear monitors. We analysed other bands, and figured it out" (Atallah 2019). The EP features some hard rock sounds like driving electric guitar, as well as melismatic vocal solos by Sinno, and a technique also found on their first album, where the vocals sound as if they are coming out of an old, tinny amplifier. In 2012, Mashrou' Leila performed their third successful large outdoor show in Lebanon, closing Baalbeck Festival (Stoughton 2013). Their streamlined professionalism as an independent, unsigned band has continued into the second decade of Mashrou' Leila's career as well. As Papazian says,

When we show up at a venue we'll often see other bands that show up with a team of 10 to 15 people. Engineers, managers, merchandising. And we just show up as these four guys. Sometimes venues don't take us seriously. Because we're Arab, we sing in

Arabic and we just show up as this small unit. Then, when they see the shows, they're pleasantly surprised. (Atallah 2019)

The polish of Mashrou' Leila's live performances shows that their efforts to professionalize have proved successful.

Despite their successes, the first major performance cancellations that the band members faced were the concerts that would have made up their May 2011 tour of Syria (T. F. 2013), due to the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War. Still, other events of the so-called Arab Spring did not stop Mashrou' Leila from performing in Jordan, Qatar, Egypt, and Tunisia, sometimes simultaneously with ongoing protests (T.F. 2013). Their politics did cause the band members to cancel a performance scheduled for September 6, 2012, to open for the Red Hot Chili Peppers in Beirut, however (*The Daily Star (Lebanon)* 2012). After much pressure to do so from pro-Palestine activists and fans, Mashrou' Leila decided to back out because of the Chili Peppers' planned performance in Tel Aviv less than a week later. In that moment, the band actively chose to turn down a major opportunity in favor of supporting calls to boycott Israel. It was a moment of dissensus, in that it highlighted the band members' opposition to Israel, expressed through their rejection of being even indirectly associated with the Chili Pepper's Tel Aviv performance.

According to Sinno, the band members were "greatly influenced and embroiled with the political events of that period" when developing their third album, *Raasük (Ra'aşük)* [They Made You Dance] (2013) (pers. comm., April 12, 2021). Still unsigned, Mashrou' Leila raised \$66,000 in crowdfunding to support the creation of it (Fitch 2016). Speaking about the album's title track, Sinno said that "Raasuk" means, "you've been choreographed. You've been given the exact moves and that's how you're supposed to dance" (Stoughton 2013). These lyrics represent dissensus by raising the issue of the ways that power structures place limits on personal freedoms.

While Mashrou' Leila recorded *Raasiik* at the Montreal recording studio Hotel2Tango in 2012, a car bomb went off in Beirut. According to Sengupta (2017), the band members (the five-person lineup as of 2017) were all born before the Lebanese civil war ended, a period when sudden acts of violence such as this were common. The band would go on to release the album in 2013, expanding their sound palate by featuring French jazz trumpeter Erik Truffaz, along with instrumentalists on the piano and accordion, for example. The car bombing during their recording session prompted them to add the following verse to their album track, “Lil Watan” (*lil-Waṭan*) [For the Nation] (T.F. 2013)²¹ [0:48-1:13],

kull mā ṭālabat bi-taghyīr al-waṭan
ya 'asūk ḥattā tabī' ḥurriyatak lammā
yaḍī' al-waṭan
'ālūlak
ḥāj tabashshir ta' ra' 'aṣnī shwayye

كل ما طالبت بتغيير الوطن
 بأسوك حتى تبني حرياتك لما يضيع الوطن
 قالوك
 حاج تبشر تع رقصني شوي

Every time you demand change, they
 make you despair until you sell out all
 your freedom
 They tell you to stop preaching and
 come dance with them

These lyrics express a sense of futility at the possibility of achieving lasting, constructive change in Lebanon.

However, Mashrou' Leila's members do not show a pattern of resigning themselves to seemingly futile situations. In 2014, Sinno joined a social media campaign in Lebanon aimed at protesting the kind of despair that the often-violent socio-political climate of the country cultivates. The event that sparked the campaign was in December of 2013, when a car bomb went off targeting former Lebanese ambassador to the US, Mohamad Chatah, and killed sixteen-year-old Mohammad Char and several others in the process (Jamjoom 2014). The “Not a Martyr” campaign featured the following messages on its Facebook page: “We can no

²¹ The Arabic lyrics are by Hamed Sinno. The band posted them and the English translation that I quote with

longer desensitize ourselves to the constant horror of life in Lebanon” and “We refuse to become martyrs. We refuse to remain victims. We refuse to die a collateral death” (Jamjoom 2014). Those supporting the campaign posted photos with a range of resolutions for Lebanon. Sinno posted a photo of himself holding a sign in Arabic that read, “I want to hold my boyfriend's hand without being afraid of the police” (Jamjoom 2014). The act of holding up a sign and making these statements pushes back against feelings of futility. As I discuss later in the context of Sinno’s comments on the work of Brian Whitaker (2011), his sign for the campaign enacts dissensus by speaking to the existence of the LGBTIQ+ community in a place where the majority would prefer that their presence remained unacknowledged. In 2013, Britain’s *Independent* named Sinno one of the fourteen “most influential LGBT names internationally,” demonstrating that his statements calling for equality had a widespread audience (*Independent* 2013).

That year, Haig Papazian spoke to the press about the fact that many of their Arab fans assume that all members of Mashrou' Leila identify as queer, and that they all receive frequent homophobic e-mails. Despite Sinno being the only openly out member of the band at the time, the group as a whole has worked to complicate essentialized understandings of gender in a range of ways. For example, in the music video for “Fasateen” (*Fasātīn*) [Dresses] from Mashrou' Leila’s first album, Carl Gerges wears a wedding gown and applies a bit of makeup to a bearded face before beginning to cut the dress with scissors. Speaking about the music video, Papazian said, “The wedding gown was part of the director’s vision. It really puts it out there. I mean Carl Gerges is a very macho and tough looking guy but at the same time if you put lipstick on his face it creates a ruptured picture of what a man is” (Derderian 2014). Gerges performed an even stronger disruption of normative gender roles

their [official music video](#) for the track on YouTube, September 12, 2013.

by donning the dress and makeup as one of the band members who has not openly identified as queer. Gerges did so knowing that there would likely be more hate mail directed at the band as a result of performing non-normative gender expressions. I thus interpret Gerges's performance in "Fasateen" as a strategic act of political dissensus. While his society largely prefers non-heteronormative expressions of gender to be hidden, Gerges chose to openly perform them to call attention to the underlying societal issue.

In 2015, Mashrou' Leila released their fourth independent album, *Ibn El Leil (Ibn al-Lail)* [Son of the Night] (2015), after two years in the making (Campaign Middle East 2015). The album features synthesized sounds and string choruses more prominently, and includes both songs that I focus on in this chapter: "Marikh" and "Aoede." The deluxe version of the album adds one new track, "Roman," and alternate versions of three others, including the version of "Maghawir" (*Maghāwīr*) [Commandos] that the band would go on to perform for *NPR Music's* Tiny Desk Concert series, discussed below. The deluxe version also includes three spoken clips from rehearsals during the recording process.

At the 2015 album launch at the Barbican in London, Papazian wore sequins along with Sinno, and one reviewer described them as the band's "twin poles of flamboyance" (Costa 2015). Recently, Papazian (now New York-based) continued to add complexity to normative representations of masculinity in MENA and the US when he shared a photo on his official Instagram page, smiling affectionately on the couch with another male-presenting person's arm around him (Haig Papazian @haigpapa, March 3, 2020). Papazian also wrote that the courage and resilience of the many queer Arab activists that the band members have met on tour have "taught me to be more at ease with my own sexual identity and queerness" (2020), this likely being his first public written statement where he identified as queer. As with Sinno and Gerges, his acknowledgement of the presence of LGBTIQ+ individuals in the

face of attempted societal erasures enacts dissensus, even more strongly due to his choice to openly identify as queer himself.

In 2015, *Ibn El Leil* topped Lebanon's iTunes charts (Little 2016) and reached number 13 on the Billboard World Album chart ("Stifled in Middle East, Lebanese Band Finds Audience in West" 2017). For the album tour that year, the band also played for the first time in North America, with US stops in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Boston, and New York City (von Aue 2015). Tragically, Mashrou' Leila's second North America tour happened to intersect with a flash of great violence.

On June 12, 2016, forty-nine people were killed in the Pulse Nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida (Cockrel 2018). It became the deadliest mass shooting targeting LGBTIQ+ people in the United States (Alvarez and Pérez-Peña 2016). The shooting took place one week into Mashrou' Leila's tour for *Ibn El Leil*. The album eerily includes "Maghawir," a song Sinno wrote in response to two nightclub shootings in Beirut (Tsioulcas 2016). Two of the shooting victims died celebrating birthdays that night in Beirut. The song also deals with issues of hyper-masculinity. The band performed "Maghawir" for *NPR Music's* Tiny Desk Concert series the day after the Pulse Nightclub shooting took place. Another track on the album addresses violence in a nightclub as well: Sinno wrote the dark imagery of "Tayf" (*Tayf*) [Ghost] in response to a police raid at a now-closed LGBTIQ+ friendly club in a suburb of Beirut (Sewell 2016). Sinno reported experiencing both strong support from fans as well as racism and homophobia during his tour in North America in the wake of the Pulse shooting (Zaru 2016), which was carried out by a Muslim-American. Performing at the Hamilton in Washington DC, he said, "There are a bunch of us who are queer who feel assaulted by that attack who can't mourn because we're also from Muslim families and we exist ... this is what it looks like to be called both a terrorist and a faggot" (Zaru 2016). Here

Sinno expresses dissensus by strategically calling out the often-unspoken experiences of discrimination that Muslims and LGBTIQ+ people frequently face in the US. Despite the series of conflicts surrounding canceled Mashrou' Leila concerts in the MENA region that I will outline next, the only instance of mass killings that happened in conjunction with their tours was this deadly night in Florida.

To the MENA region: On Friday, April 29, 2016, Mashrou' Leila was scheduled to perform at the roughly two-thousand-year-old Roman Amphitheater in downtown Amman, Jordan. This would not be their first performance in Jordan or their first at this historic location. They performed there on a Friday in September 2012 to approximately 3,000 fans. Jordanian censors required the band to remove the obscenities from the lyrics of the song “Latlit” (*Latlit*) [Gossip] for that performance, but the audience filled them in. A small group of people outside the venue harassed police officers, wanting to disrupt the show, but they were not permitted to enter (Hadid 2012). Mashrou' Leila also performed at the amphitheater to an energetic audience on September 14, 2013, according to Jordan’s primary English-language newspaper, *The Jordan Times*. The article also quotes one longtime fan who said, “I love this band because they dare to talk about social taboos...politics and society. In Jordan we like things to look pretty on the outside but we sweep them under the carpet; here they deal with them.” The fan shows appreciation for the band members choosing to enact what I identify as dissensus, by openly voicing sociopolitical taboos. I found it notable that *The Jordan Times* would publish such a comment that celebrates Mashrou' Leila’s breaks with societal expectations, especially given Jordanian media censorship norms.

Critiques of Mashrou' Leila often attack band members for their expressions on religion, sex, and politics—a rough approximation of the big three categories actively

censored in Jordan. For example, according to Jordan's Media Commission, acceptable film and television media,

Does not insult His Majesty the King or the royal family or slander any of the Abrahamic faiths. Furthermore, material must not include content that provokes civil strife, promotes racism or sectarianism or that could destabilize the security and safety of the country. Finally, the film must not contain material that flares sexual content, encourages pornography, violence, crime, deviance, or offenses against the public order. (Al-Masri 2016)

Al-Masri reports that all sex scenes are removed by film and television censors in Jordan, as are scenes that “insult religious sensibility.” It is possible that officials informally use similar standards to evaluate music.

However, not all official institutions share the openness of the interviewee quoted in *The Jordan Times*. On Monday, April 25, Jordan's Department of Antiquities withdrew its authorization for Mashrou' Leila's scheduled performance, stating that the band “clashes with the heritage of the historic site” (Montoya 2016). A day later, Mashrou' Leila posted a statement on the incident on their official Facebook page,

We have been unofficially informed that the reason behind this sudden change of heart, few days before the concert day [sic], is the intervention of some authorities. Our understanding is that said authorities have pressured certain political figures and triggered a chain of events that ultimately ended with our authorization being withdrawn.

We also have been unofficially informed that we will never be allowed to play again anywhere in Jordan due to our political and religious beliefs and endorsement of gender equality and sexual freedom. (Mashrou' Leila 2016)

Officially and unofficially, the band members received a message that their expressions on religion, politics, and sex were no longer acceptable for a Jordanian stage.

Supporting Mashrou' Leila's account of facing pressure by political figures, Jordanian members of government spoke openly against the band to the press. Governor Abu Zaid confirmed to CNN Arabic, “Yes, we banned the concert for religious and social reasons, and because what the band offers contradicts the values of Islam and Christianity” (Elkamel

2016). Parliament member Bassam al-Batoush called for banning Mashrou' Leila because of their “controversial” lyrical references to sex and homosexuality, “calls for revolution,” and “Satanic” themes (Tsioulcas 2016). Speaking to CNN, Jordanian parliamentarian Dima Tahboub directly linked her support for the ban to the band’s lyrics and opinions on sexuality (Qiblawi 2017). Tahboub is the English-language media spokesperson for the Islamic Action Front, the Jordanian political party that represents the Muslim Brotherhood (Barghouthi and McConaghy 2017). The government first licensed the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood in 1945 as a society and as a branch of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (Patel 2018). In 2015, Jordan’s branch officially splintered: by March of that year, a new organization called the Society of Muslim Brothers officially gained Jordanian government recognition as a charitable society, which framed itself as a domestic organization only: in other words, lacking any connection to Egypt (whose government calls the Brotherhood a terrorist organization) or any other Muslim Brotherhood organizations outside of the country (Patel 2018). Leaders of the new society also successfully pursued legal means to take away the original Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood’s legal recognition with the government, therefore officially making the original organization illegal. In practice, this did not take away the original Brotherhood’s ten seats in Parliament as of January 2018, writes Patel (2018): he instead frames the de-recognition as the government’s attempt to weaken the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood through fracturing it, or to push its members to participate in upcoming elections, rather than boycott them as they had multiple times in the past. Patel’s report suggests that the Jordanian government intended not to erase but to manipulate the Brotherhood. Therefore, when the government conceded to calls to ban Mashrou' Leila, such as those made by parliament member Tahboub of the Brotherhood, one local expert I spoke with (who will remain anonymous) argued that it was an attempt to appease Jordan’s

religious conservatives (pers. comm., July 15, 2016). This situation surrounding the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood did not make the international English-language news coverage of the concert cancellation, but it offers an important perspective on a government's potential motivations for censoring a concert such as Mashrou' Leila's that have little to do with the band itself.

Many journalists framed Jordan's canceling of the Mashrou' Leila concert as an act of discrimination against LGBTIQ+-identifying individuals. While Jordan is one of the few countries in the Middle East that does not criminalize consensual sex between individuals of the same sex, acts of discrimination and stigma remain significant (Mendos 2019). Jordan's LGBTIQ+ community at once faces a plethora of informal abuses, and is also recognized in the region for *My.Kali*²²—an English and Arabic-language online magazine founded in Jordan in 2007, which “strives to address social problems, and empower the youth to defy mainstream gender binaries in the Arab world” (Leach, n.d.). *My.Kali* has featured interviews with Mashrou' Leila more than once. Rand Beiruty of *My.Kali*, for example, asked Hamed Sinno in an interview if the controversial statements that he seems to express at every concert are aimed at making people think. Sinno answered, “Not that the intention here is gratuitous controversy, but yes, I think challenging moral standards forces people to reassess them” (My.Kali 2012). The band's challenges have been matched by immense pushback as well.

In an even more last-minute twist to the Jordan situation, governor Abu Zaid rescinded what he had called an irreversible ban on Mashrou' Leila performances in the country (Elkamel 2016). He announced in a memo that the Ministry of Interior had authorized the concert, a mere twenty-four hours before it was originally scheduled to begin

²² *My.Kali* is an English-language title that references the magazine's founder, Kali, also known as Khalid Abdel-Hadi.

on April 29, 2016. The authorization happened too late for the concert to still move forward, but at the time, many applauded the reversal as a positive sign in terms of free expression, the effectiveness of widespread popular outcry (which took place mostly on social media over the initial ban), and the possibility of future Mashrou' Leila performances in Jordan (Khouri 2016). The following summer would show that this positive sign did not hold.

On June 13, 2017, Mashrou' Leila announced on Facebook that Jordan had canceled their scheduled performance at the last minute for the second year in a row. The concert was scheduled for June 27 in Amman, and had been approved by the Jordanian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, but ministers and members of parliament reportedly succeeded in petitioning the Ministry of Interior to cancel it (Khalaf 2017). Interior Minister Ghaleb Zuabi vaguely stated that the ban would prevent “the exploitation of such performances for the implementation of certain agendas that may lead to internal disagreements” (2017). The minister did not discuss whether canceling the event could also be interpreted as implementing an agenda of music performance censorship.

Mashrou' Leila called the second concert ban in Jordan a stance against freedom of expression and the rights of LGBTIQ+ people, and expressed surprise at authorities' mixed messages,

The inconsistency of the Jordanian authorities in this respect (inviting us, then banning, then cancelling the ban, then inviting us again, then banning us again – all within the course of 14 months – has culminated in a clear message, that the Jordanian authorities do not intend to separate Jordan from the fanatical conservatism that has contributed in making the region increasingly toxic over the last decade. (Mashrou' Leila 2017)

The band members' open critique of Jordan's authorities represents another striking example of dissensus. The film censorship standards discussed above highlight Jordan's restrictions on freedom of speech, so choosing to publicly critique its leadership is no small thing. In addition to protests against the band in parliament, threats of violence at the concert seemed

to have been a another motivation for the cancelation. As Sinno said after the band's second canceled concert in Jordan, "I don't think anyone could wake up to an endless stream of death threats and insults without taking it to heart" (Qiblawi 2017).

When I asked dedicated participants in the Jordanian alternative music scene about the Mashrou' Leila incidents, they focused on the religion angle in their interpretations. Mounif Zghoul (*Munīf Zaghūl*), guitarist and vocalist for the Jordanian rock band Ayloul, told me that interpretations of Mashrou' Leila's lyrics as anti-religious prompted the ban (pers. comm., August 19, 2016). According to Jordanian bass guitarist, composer, producer, and longtime leader in Amman's music scenes, Yacoub Abu Ghosh (*Ya 'qūb Abū Ghūsh*), a Jordanian priest published a piece online that criticized Mashrou' Leila for being anti-religious, and the priest's piece reached the government (pers. comm., August 5, 2016). Abu Ghosh called this the first time that a church got involved in attempting to police music scenes in Jordan. Dedicated listener and supporter of Amman's alternative music scenes Yassir Bayoumi (*Yassir Bayūmī*), found it notable that conservative Christians, not Muslims, were the religious group leading the movement against the band (pers. comm., July 16, 2016). He said that Jordan's minister of culture was responsible for the decision to cancel the concert. Bayoumi also pointed to Mashrou' Leila's song "Djin" (*Jinn*) [Demon] from *Ibn El Leil* (2015) as the track that sparked the priest's outrage.

Just two months after the first Jordan concert cancelation, Mashrou' Leila performed "Djin" live as one of three tracks for *NPR Music's* Tiny Desk Concert series on June 24, 2016. Sinno introduced the song by saying,

It takes from Joseph Campbell this idea that reading into archetypes across different cultures' mythology can actually deconstruct the way that mythology works. It draws comparisons between Christian mythology and Dionysian mythology, but it's also about getting really messed up at a bar. (NPR Music 2016)

This will not be the only example of Sinno strategically exploring and performing academic theories that I will discuss in this chapter. Joseph Campbell (1904-1987) was a professor of literature at Sarah Lawrence College. Sinno references his work on comparative mythology; he is most well-known for *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), and within it, his theory, *monomyth*, a formula for a hero's adventure: "separation—initiation—return" (1949:46). Campbell also cites psychoanalyst Carl Jung's concept of "archetypal images" as the foundation for his own theorizing on archetypes. Campbell quotes Jung's definition of archetypes as, "Forms or images of a collective nature which occur practically all over the earth as constituents of myths and at the same time as autochthonous, individual products of unconscious origin" (1949:1062 [1958: par. 88]). Campbell uses Jung's theory to outline similarities in myths across different times and places. Dionysus, son of Zeus and Semele, is the ancient Greek god of wine and intoxication (Henrichs 2020), fitting with one of the song's settings, Beirut's nightclubs. Additionally, the title of the track, "Djin," complicates the mythologies interwoven in the song even further. Not deriving from Christianity or Dionysian mythology, "Djin" or *jinn* is an Arabic word that means "demons (invisible beings, either harmful or helpful, that interfere with the lives of mortals)" (Wehr 1994:164). *Jinn* has wide-ranging additional meanings. In Pre-Islamic Arabia, it was associated with beings of nature, especially the hostile side of the desert; it is also fully part of Islamic belief, referenced more than once in the Qur'an; and finally, it appears in folklore across North Africa, Syria, Iran, and Turkey (MacDonald and Massé 2012). In his lyrics, Sinno draws on ancient Greek mythology, Campbell's work, and a concept relevant in pre-Islamic Arabia, Islam writ-large, and folklore from MENA and beyond, to interweave mythologies and beliefs more commonly viewed as distinctly separate. He enacts dissensus by deconstructing

a binary division that is at times assumed between monotheistic religions such as Christianity and Islam and the folk and polytheistic beliefs that predated them.

The lyrics to “Djin” begin with Dionysian references [00:01-00:03],²³

bi-l-ghāba mnashar bi-leyl
mnashrab min 'alb al-ghazāl

بالغابة منسهر بالليل
منشرب من قلب الغزال

We keep watch by the forest moon²⁴
Drink from the gazelle’s heart

and continue [00:15-00:19],

kull in-niswān wi-r-rijāl
jāyīn lābsīn il-jlūd

كل النسوان والرجال
جايين لابسين الجلود

All the women and the men
Arrive shrouded in hides

Christian references in the lyrics include evocations of the death and the resurrection of Christ [0:21-0:23],

biyintazir illi biyimūt wa-biyi 'ūd

بانتظار اللي يموت ويعود

Awaiting he who dies and then returns
to life

melding the Christian ritual of baptism with drinking alcohol [1:05-1:06],

wi- 'imādat kibdī bi-l-jinn

وعمادة كبدي بالجن

Liver baptized in gin

and the first two thirds of the Holy Trinity [1:14-1:16],

bi-smi l-ab wa-l-ibin

باسم الأب والإبن

²³ The Arabic lyrics are by Hamed Sinno. The band posted them and the English translation with a remix of the track on YouTube, Mar 15, 2018. The original lyric video for “Djin” has been made private on the Mashrou' Leila YouTube channel, likely due to detractors’ focus on this track in particular. My time listings still refer to the [lyric video](#), which can still be viewed on Josef Haj’s YouTube channel.

²⁴ While the band’s English translation includes the phrase “forest moon,” the Arabic lyrics do not include the word “moon.”

In the name of the father and the son

Amidst these references to Christianity, the line that follows the phrase “Liver baptized in gin” ends with the song’s title word, “djinn,” the pre-Islamic Arab, Islamic, and MENA folkloric concept of a demon or spirit [1:06-1:08],

bir’uṣ l-a’ūdḥ min al-jinn

برقص لعود من الجن

I dance to ward off the djinn

This creates an end rhyme and a play on words, using an English and an Arabic word that sound the same: gin and djinn. I interpret the song as suggesting similarities between religious ritual and the ritual of participating in Beirut’s nightlife. It is likely this choice to interweave aspects of Christianity and Islam with polytheism and folklore, especially, along with references to drinking and partying, that Jordanian detractors emphasized in their critiques.

Just a few months later, on September 22, 2017, Mashrou’ Leila performed in front of some 35,000 fans in Cairo; Papazian (2020) called it the band’s largest ever in terms of audience attendance. During the show, a few members of the audience waved rainbow flags representing LGBTIQ+ pride. Those fans enacted dissensus by acknowledging Egypt’s LGBTIQ+ presence in the face of attempted government erasures. This was at least the second time such a flag has appeared at a Mashrou’ Leila concert in Cairo: after a 2016 performance, Sinno expressed on Facebook how proud he was of fans who had the courage to wave it then (Noureldin 2017). Ruth Michaelson called the flag waving during the more recent 2017 concert a move in support of Sinno, who she describes as “one of the very few openly gay performers in the Middle East” (2017).²⁵ One of those 2017 flag wavers, the late Sarah Hegazy (1989-2020), expanded on her motivations and the unpredicted consequences,

²⁵ While I do not alter direct quotations included in this dissertation, note that Sinno prefers to be identified as “queer” (pers. comm., April 12, 2021).

It was an act of support and solidarity—not only with the [Mashrou' Leila] vocalist but for everyone who is oppressed. We were proud to hold the flag. We wouldn't have imagined the reaction of society and the Egyptian state. For them, I was a criminal—someone who was seeking to destroy the moral structure of society. (Arraf 2018)

Another of the flag wavers, Ahmed Alaa, called it “the best moment of my life” and shared photos of himself waving it on Facebook, as did others. He woke up to death threats the next day (Arraf 2018). Hegazy's and Alaa's comments suggest to me that like rainbow flags, Mashrou' Leila has become a symbol of LGBTIQ+ pride in the Middle East and North Africa and a flashpoint for governments who crack down on these segments of their societies.

What Mashrou' Leila initially called “one of the best shows we've ever played” (Mashrou' Leila 2017a) may well have been their last in the country. By September 25, the Egyptian Musicians' Syndicate banned Mashrou' Leila from all future performances in Egypt. Some interpret the Musicians' Syndicate as a controversial vehicle for President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's government to control music in the country and to ban events deemed morally questionable (Al Bawaba 2017). However, unlike the situation in Jordan, the performance ban occurred in parallel with a series of arrests of perceived LGBTIQ+ individuals and what the band calls far more severe attacks in the media than they had ever previously faced. In a October 2, 2017 statement condemning the situation, Mashrou' Leila explained that after the performance,

What followed was the most aggressively homophobic media frenzy we've ever witnessed. State sponsored news outlets and various independent outlets alike, took the opportunity to publish vile articles promoting hate speech and dividing the Egyptian community, while repeatedly publishing false news about the band and about non-normative sexualities, with inflammatory headlines. This was also echoed by an equally brutal social media attack on the band, our friends and families, and most relevantly, our fans in Egypt. (Mashrou' Leila 2017b)

By December 2017, the *New York Times* reported at least seventy-six arrests of perceived LGBTIQ+ individuals since the September concert (Boushnaq and Boshnaq 2017). By June of the following year, *NPR* reported more than one hundred (Arraf 2018). According

to Amnesty International, Egypt's Forensic Medical Authority conducted anal examinations on at least five of those imprisoned as of October 2, 2017, a practice Amnesty's Campaigns Director for North Africa, Najia Bounaim (2017) calls "tantamount to torture" and continues, "There is no scientific basis for such tests and they cannot be justified under any circumstances." Two arrested for waving rainbow flags, Sarah Hegazy and Ahmed Alaa, were charged with "joining a group formed in contrary to the law" and "propagating that group's idea," while Hegazy was additionally charged with "promoting sexual deviancy and debauchery" (Daily News (South Africa) 2017). These charges point to the legal gymnastics involved in the crackdown.

Egypt is not currently one of the countries that still officially criminalizes consensual sex with another person of the same sex. Instead, Egyptian laws such as those against "debauchery and prostitution" are used to target perceived LGBTIQ+ individuals.²⁶ By December 2019, a draft law had advanced to Egypt's Legislative and Constitutional Committee that would, if passed, make the act of having sex with a person of the same sex a crime punishable by up to seven years in prison (Hamid 2017). In the particular case of the two flag wavers, Hegazy and Alaa faced three months in prison, then were released on bail, and would have faced potential sentences of up to fifteen years if they had remained in the country. While on bail, Alaa feared that others who encountered him in prison would, upon their own release, find him and kill him out of their hatred for perceived LGBTIQ+ individuals. Hegazy accounted that upon her arrest, she was blindfolded and taken to a location where she was tortured with electricity to the point where she lost consciousness

²⁶ Article 9 of Egypt's *Law 10/1961 on the Combating of Prostitution* states, "Punishment by imprisonment for a period not less than three months and not exceeding three years and a fine not less than 25 LE and not exceeding 300 LE [...] or one of these two punishments applies in the following cases [...] (c) Whoever habitually engages in debauchery or prostitution" (Itaborahy and Zhu 2013).

(Hegazy 2020).²⁷ She continued on to explain that at Sayyida Zeinab Police Station, officers incited other female prisoners to sexually assault her, and at Qanater Women’s Prison, she was put in solitary confinement, later prohibited from speaking with other prisoners in a shared cell, and not allowed outside for her entire sentence. Hegazy and Alaa each told *NPR* reporters of their suicide attempts while on bail. By 2018, both individuals sought asylum in Canada (Arraf 2018). Tragically, in June 2020, Hegazy died by suicide in Canada at the age of thirty (*Al Jazeera News* 2020). Both Papazian and Sinno published pieces that emphasized the horrific consequences that Hegazy faced for waving a flag in support of LGBTIQ+ identities. In response to the note that Hegazi left behind after her death, granting forgiveness to a horrifyingly cruel world, Papazian stated that her “forgiveness reminds me why having queer voices and public representation in the region is so important as we seek compassion and courage to unite us in our dangerous, often lethal, fight to be ourselves” (Papazian 2020). Sinno wrote that “She embodied everything our societies are built to silence: a queer woman, a feminist, an activist, and a communist who had renounced her hijab. She spoke out. And for speaking, she was cruelly punished” (Sinno 2020). There is no stronger example that I have come across in Mashrou’ Leila’s career that demonstrates the immense risk that the band and their fans face for performing political dissensus: Hegazy’s act tragically led to her brutal torture and death.

Unfortunately, the arrests and severe treatment of concert audience members in Egypt in 2017 was far from an isolated incident in the country. Dalia Abdel Hamid of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights frames the concert as one link in a chain of systematic government-led targeting of LGBTIQ+ Egyptians since 2013. The report documents a nearly five-fold increase in LGBTIQ+ targeted arrests under al-Sisi: prior to his presidency, arrests

²⁷ *Mada Masr* published Hegazy’s essay, where she recounts her severe mistreatment after arrest, in the

averaged 14 per year since the year 2000, while arrest averages spiked to 66 per year from 2013-2017 (Abdel Hamid 2017). The report emphasizes the importance of understanding that the crackdown began before the international media attention surrounding Mashrou' Leila and continued after the story faded. The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights has painstakingly documented the fact that the arrests after Mashrou' Leila's performance are part of a five-year trend beginning with al-Sisi's presidency. Antoun Issa considers what motivated the dramatic increase under the current administration: "On the broader scale, the persecution of Egypt's LGBTQ+ community is a rule out of an old playbook among Arab regimes: espouse a conservative social policy, particularly on matters of gender and sexuality, to appease Islamic sensibilities and maintain 'religious' legitimacy" (Issa 2017). Issa argues that because al-Sisi's government is a secular one, formed by toppling then-president Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, the crackdown is meant to gain his administration support from religious blocs that are against the expression of non-normative sexualities.

Following the events in Egypt, Mashrou' Leila effectively broke up as a band for roughly nine months. They had recorded six songs for a new album, and Sinno continues,

We'd had a couple of long tours, but we'd also had a lot of time off, to reflect on whether or not we even wanted to still be doing this. We hit a bit of a rough spot. We started fighting about things that weren't even our concern to start with. Honestly. It was like we brought other people's expectations, or other people's rubrics for what success is, into the studio, and it just felt really difficult to make any kind of decision, even about how to write a song. We had a big falling out and decided to stop. (Grundy 2019)

Egypt was the first time the attacks targeted not just members of the band, but their fans as well. In the face of violence, for a time, they shared that their work seemed futile (Atallah 2019). Members had conflicting ideas about the best way to respond. Finally, they came back

original Arabic and English for the first time on their website shortly after her passing (Hegazy 2020).

together and realigned their goals. As Firas Abou Fakher phrased it, “If we break up, it’s the worst way to fight back” (2019).

On March 1, 2019, Mashrou' Leila released their fifth album, *The Beirut School*. I opened this chapter describing the final encore of one performance on the album tour, the band’s October 3, 2019 show at the Regent Theater in downtown Los Angeles. The album includes three new tracks and nine from the previous four albums. The new songs include three with a danceable, cinematic quality: “Roman – Paris Version,” featuring English-language vocals by Irish singer, songwriter, and producer, Róisín Murphy, “Radio Romance,” and “Cavalry.” Unfortunately, *The Beirut School* tour was subject to two more cancellations in the MENA region in Lebanon and Qatar.

Lebanon would become the next MENA country to cancel a Mashrou' Leila concert scheduled for July 2019, but as in Egypt, it was not an isolated incident. Lebanon has an informal reputation as the queer capital of the Middle East (Berger 2019), yet it also legally criminalizes sexual relations “against nature,” punishable with up to a year in prison.²⁸ On September 29, 2018, Lebanese intelligence officers attempted to shut down the annual conference of the Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality, which frames part of its mission as supporting sexuality and gender rights movements in the MENA region. Their conference had convened annually in Lebanon since 2013. According to Human Rights Watch, intelligence officers took names of all participants, including those from Egypt and from Iraq, where armed groups have killed perceived LGBTIQ+ individuals and faced no penalties for doing so (2019a). The decision by authorities to shut down such a conference,

²⁸ Article 534 of Lebanon’s *Penal Code of 1943* states: “Any sexual intercourse against nature is punished with up to one year of imprisonment” (Itaborahy and Zhu 2013).

after years of permitting it to occur undisturbed, offers one example of a trend that would go on to include the 2019 canceled Mashrou' Leila concert.

As in Jordan, the controversy that erupted in Lebanon was around the band's scheduled July 2019 performance at Byblos International Festival, a location where Mashrou' Leila had already performed twice before: in 2010 and 2016.²⁹ In 2010, Mashrou' Leila became the first Lebanese band to headline the festival (Faber 2019). During the performance, Hamed Sinno unfurled a rainbow flag mid-song, with the prime minister at the time, Saad Hariri, in the audience. Tamara Qiblawi (2019) writes that it was likely the first time a rainbow flag was flown on such a major Lebanese stage, but it did not reach international headlines. One LGBTIQ+ Lebanese activist who was in the Byblos audience in 2010 recounted, "That was a moment of history," and added, "Hamed carried it like Umm Kulthum carried her white scarf and sang" (Qiblawi 2019). Sinno's powerful vocal improvisations also evoke the Arab urban art music tradition that Umm Kulthum performed, such as the melisma, ornamentation, and melodic contours of his improvisation on the word "ḥabībī" [beloved] in "El Mouqadima" (*al-Muqaddima*) [The Introduction] from *El Hal Romancy* (2011). Ethnomusicologist Virginia Danielson describes Umm Kulthum as "unquestionably the most famous singer in the twentieth-century Arab world" (2008:1). Therefore, the comparison to Umm Kulthum is a testament to Mashrou' Leila's importance to fans at this emergent moment in the band's career.

Another aspect of the band's performance at Byblos 2010 proved confrontational as well. Mashrou' Leila chose to include "Al Hajez" (*Alā Ḥājiz*) [The Checkpoint] in their set (Stitch 2016). Sinno grew up in an apartment that neighbored prime minister Hariri's palace (Fitch 2016). He wrote the song based on his frequent experience of passing through

checkpoints and being subjected to search in order to come and go from his own home. At Byblos, Sinno directed the expletives in the chorus of “Al Hajez” at the prime minister, who apparently did not flinch (Fitch 2016). Sinno’s act of dissensus, swearing in the direction of one of Lebanon’s most powerful figures, did not prompt retaliation against the band.

Despite being allowed to perform on the Byblos Stage twice before, in the lead-up to what would have been the band’s third performance there in 2019, Lebanese Christian activists stirred anti-Mashrou' Leila sentiments in a social media campaign against them. Accusing the band of “blasphemy” and “devil-worship,” some compared themselves to crusaders and threatened Mashrou' Leila “with force” (Qiblawi 2019). Their building virtual mob on WhatsApp and Facebook urged officials to join their campaign. On July 22, 2019 lawyer Christine Nakhoul filed a complaint urging the government to prosecute Mashrou' Leila (MENAFN – Asia Times 2019), based on their alleged violation of three articles of the Penal Code: Article 373—which criminalizes speech, intentional or not, that incites sectarian violence; and Article 474—criminalizing insulting religious rituals; and 475—distorting religious symbols (Human Rights Watch 2019b). That same day, the office of the Maronite Archbishop of Byblos also released a statement saying that the band members “undermine religious and human values [and] attack sacred symbols of Christianity” (Beaumont-Thomas 2019) and called for the concert to be canceled (*Agence France Presse - English* 2019). Together with the social media mob, a formal legal complaint, and calls from Maronite leadership, Mashrou' Leila faced attacks from multiple angles.

Critics used the band’s lyrics as evidence against them, focusing in particular on “Djin,” the same track that Bayoumi pointed to as sparking controversy in Jordan, and “Asnam” (*Aṣnām*) [Idols]. Both songs interweave imagery from Christianity into the lyrics.

²⁹ See Nickell for a detailed analysis of flag symbolism in Mashrou' Leila’s 2017 performance in Ehden,

In response, Mashrou' Leila insisted that their songs had been twisted and misinterpreted, emphasized that they had released both tracks in 2015, and had performed them at Byblos in 2016 and across Lebanon without issue (Qiblawi 2019).

In response to the filed legal complaint, the prosecutor of the case sent Mashrou' Leila to be interrogated, which lasted for six hours on July 24, 2019 (Human Rights Watch 2019b). While they were released without charge after the interrogation, Lebanese state security officers forced them to remove so-called offensive content from their social media profiles, issue an apology, and remove any songs from their proposed concert setlist that offended Christianity (2019b). That day, the band also met with the Maronite Archbishop who had called for the cancellation, and on July 25, an agreement between them was announced: that the performance could go forward once the band issued an apology and removed “Djin” and “Asnam” from the setlist (*Agence France Presse - English* 2019). Despite all this, by July 30, the Byblos International Festival committee canceled the performance “in agreement with the band,” based on their inability to assure the safety of the performers and audience members (Hall 2019). Speaking on the potential for violence erupting at the concert, Hamed Sinno explained,

There were Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups that were made so that people can start making inventories of what artillery they had at their disposal. The plan was to go down there and start shooting people ... You can't possibly guarantee the audience's security when the threats get that serious. (Savage 2019)

Human rights lawyer Nizar Saghieh said of the situation, “It’s not the first time that an artist is accused of blasphemy (in Lebanon), but it is the first time that the artist is accused and given a verdict in a mob trial against them” (Qiblawi 2019).

Nasri Atallah describes the affective weight on the band from the Lebanon cancellation and potential ulterior motives behind the decision,

Lebanon (2020:246).

There is a melancholy entwined with their enthusiasm about the recent tour. “The concert in Lebanon in August was meant to be a homecoming,” says Carl. “It was sad to go from playing at the Met in New York to having all that trouble in Lebanon. It was devastating,” adds Firas. “And it’s not a coincidence that it happened at a time of huge economic problems and fears being stoked. We’d performed the exact same songs in the same place before; there was no reason for what happened.” (2019)

Firas Abou Fakher implies that his band became a scapegoat to distract public attention from Lebanon’s growing economic crisis. Other analysts position the Lebanese Christian activists who led the social media campaign against Mashrou’ Leila in the broader context of the global rise of right-wing movements. According to Qiblawi, these movements cohere around aspects of identity, such as identifying in opposition to LGBTIQ+ communities or sharing sentiments of nationalism (Qiblawi 2019). Additionally, since 2017, Lebanese Christian leaders in government have become increasingly anti-refugee: potentially feeling threatened by growing numbers of Muslims and decreasing numbers of Christians in Lebanon today (Griswold 2015). Gebran Bassil, Foreign Minister and leader of one the country’s two main Christian parties, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), has proudly adapted critics’ label for him, “racist Lebanese,” and has worked with the second major Christian party, Lebanese Forces, to add increasing restrictions to Palestinian refugee workers, and to crack down on the more than one million refugees and undocumented workers from Syria currently in Lebanon (Qiblawi 2019). These concurrent issues raise the possibility that the cancellation could have been motivated by a desire to distract attention away from Lebanon’s economic and refugee crises, or as another way to further cohere particular Christian identities.

Doha, Qatar recently became the latest setting for the censorship of Mashrou’ Leila in the region. The band had been scheduled to participate in a talk titled, “Language and the Rhythm of the Street,” on the subject of “media revolutions in the Middle East” at Northwestern University in Qatar on February 4, 2020. The talk was to be hosted at Media Majlis, a university museum that explores journalism, communication, and media through

exhibitions, events, and publications. However, the university canceled the talk days before it was scheduled to take place. Northwestern's director of media relations, John Yates, told *Reuters*, "The decision to relocate was made out of abundance of caution due to several factors, including safety concerns for the band and our community" (Cornwell 2020b). Yates also explained that Mashrou' Leila agreed with the university on the cancellation and on relocating it to Northwestern's Evanston, Illinois campus in the future.

As in Lebanon and Jordan, furious commenters rose up against the band on social media shortly before the cancellation in Qatar. Critics on Twitter accused Mashrou' Leila and the university of violating Qatari and Islamic values, and others rallied against homosexuality (Cornwell 2020b). One senior at Northwestern University in Qatar also told reporters that they and others who had supported the event had faced threats and retaliation (Closson 2020). The Qatar Foundation, a non-profit with links to the Qatari state, offered a different explanation for the cancellation of the talk. The foundation's spokesperson told *Reuters*,

We place the utmost importance on the safety of our community and currently do not have any safety or security concerns. We also place the very highest value on academic freedom and the open exchange of knowledge, ideas and points of view in the context of Qatari laws as well as the country's cultural and social customs. This particular event was canceled due to the fact that it patently did not correlate with this context. (Cornwell 2020a)

The spokesperson leaves open for interpretation exactly which aspects of Qatari culture, customs, and laws would not correlate with a talk that would include members of Mashrou' Leila. One possibility is that the foundation does not welcome Sinno's open identification as queer. While there is no Qatari law that labels openly identifying as non-heterosexual a crime, the law punishes the act of having sex with someone of the same sex with prison time.³⁰ Brian Whitaker's work offers one potential explanation for this incongruence when he

³⁰ Article 296 of the Qatari Penal Code states, "Whoever commits the following offences shall be punished with imprisonment for a term of no less than one year and no more than three years: 1- Grooms a female to commit adultery; 2- Instigates, induces, seduces a female in any way to commit adultery or to frequent a brothel

writes, “As with many other things that are forbidden in Arab society, appearances are what count; so long as everyone can pretend that it doesn’t happen, there is no need to do anything stop it” (2011:14). In other words, by openly identifying as queer, Hamed Sinno breaks the illusion that there are no LGBTIQ+ Arabs. Instead he labels himself as part of this community and in doing so, enacts political dissensus.

Likely motivated by the interrogations and death threats that they now face in their home country of Lebanon, Mashrou' Leila members Hamed Sinno and Haig Papazian have moved to New York City. Sinno is a dual-citizen. The band has consciously chosen to continue free expression, up to the point that it seems to have driven half of the members out of their homeland. In long-distance communication with Firas Abu-Fakhr and Carl Gerges, they are working on their sixth album (Atallah 2019). As of the time of writing, the band remains unsigned. Sinno has said he would like to be, but they have refused deals that would require self-censorship: they have been asked by western and non-western labels alike to change their lyrics or album art, for example (Fitch 2016). Sinno continued that the band is not interested in pitches that frame the members as symbols of unity across Lebanese sectarian divides; Sinno is Muslim; Papazian, Armenian; Abu-Fakhr, Druze; and Gerges, Christian, but none are piously religious. The band members’ intention to leave these aspects of their identities out of their self-promotion work has succeeded, in that it is rarely mentioned in the English-language press. Their rejection of labels that seek to represent them in a certain way also highlights that the band strategically chooses how they present themselves publicly, and what to leave out.

in order to commit debauchery whether inside or outside the country; 3- Leading, instigating or seducing a male by in any way to commit sodomy or dissipation; 4- Inducing or seducing a male or a female in any way to commit illegal or immoral actions; 5- Bringing, exposing or accepting a male or a female for the purpose of sexual exploitation” No. 11 of 2004 Issuing the Penal Code 11 / 2004, Article 296. 2004.

As they lose so many performance arenas in the MENA region, Mashrou' Leila has started writing select English-language songs, though the vast majority of their ten-year repertoire features Arabic lyrics. In their performances outside predominantly Arabic-speaking countries, the band members see many non-Arabic speakers singing along. Sinno says, “In the current political climate, the fact that people could relate Arabic not to Islamic fundamentalism and terror, but to learning phonetics and going to a concert, it’s a kind of political victory,” and adds, “It’s moving” (Faber 2019). The band’s performances in North America and Western Europe break with all too common stereotypes against Arabs in these regions.

My analysis so far has primarily considered Mashrou' Leila in the wider nexus of national and regional politics in the Middle East and North Africa. Each of the particular incidents I consider highlight the serious threats that the band members have faced for performing their music, identities, and political alignments in the region. It emphasizes their strategic choice to continue enacting dissensus despite the consequences. I now shift to introducing the concept of performing melancholy, another way that the band enacts political dissensus. I then analyze my case study of Mashrou' Leila music video, “Aoele” through these lenses.

Strategic Performances of Melancholy

I now interpret aspects of Mashrou' Leila’s work as performing melancholy, mainly drawing on scholarship by feminist theorist Sara Ahmed (2010; 2015) and ethnomusicologist Denise Gill (2017). I am especially interested in building on their work that addresses how performing melancholy can enable marginalized groups to assert presence in the face of attempted erasures. I begin with psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud’s essay “On Mourning and

Melancholia” (1917). Considered a seminal piece in academic discourses on melancholy, it still circulates in the contemporary scholarship that I draw from in this chapter. Freud compares and contrasts mourning and melancholia as two different responses to experiencing a significant loss. He does so within the framework of his broader concern for individual ego formation. For Freud, mourning happens in response to the loss of a clear object, such as the death of a loved one (1917:256), and is not pathological—the period of mourning ends after a limited amount of time (1917:243). In contrast, Freud calls ambivalence a precondition of melancholia (1917:258). Perhaps a loved one has been lost not to death, but by ending a relationship, or maybe it remains unclear or unconscious to an individual what was even lost at all (1917:245). While Freud explains that both mourning and melancholia feature deep, painful dejection, lowering of activity, loss of the capacity to love, and decreasing interest in the outside world (1917:244)—only melancholia, in his conception, features ego-loss (1917:247) or self-hatred, or turning all the bad feelings of the loss onto the self (1917:249). Freud writes, “In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” (1917:246).

Sara Ahmed reads an analysis of power dynamics into Freud’s classic melancholia essay. For example, Ahmed reframes Freud’s distinction between mourning as a healthy process and melancholia as pathological. In her analysis of LGBTIQ+ expressions of grief in response to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, she draws on Eng and Kazanjian to suggest that it is the refusal to let go that is the ethical response to loss. Eng and Kazanjian call melancholia “an enduring devotion on the part of the ego to the lost object” (2003:3), which Ahmed adds, keeps the object alive in the present and prevents it from being severed from history (2015:159). As discussed in the background that I provide on Mashrou’ Leila in the context of Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, and Qatar, LGBTIQ+ relationships are still prohibited

by law and informally persecuted. The most haunting example of this persecution in the region that I discussed is Egypt's imprisonment of perceived LGBTIQ+ audience members from the band's 2017 concert. Authorities arrested Sarah Hegazy and Ahmed Alaa for waving flags of LGBTIQ+ pride, and Hegazy (2020) recounted the ways that she was tortured during her time in prison. In response to Hegazy's tragic death by suicide in 2020, both Sinno (2020) and Papazian (2020) published pieces honoring her. In Papazian's, he overtly identified himself as queer for perhaps the first time publicly. While Egypt's pattern of crackdowns on perceived LGBTIQ+ individuals works to erase the community, Sinno's and Papazian's pieces purposely choose to hold onto the melancholy of losing Hegazy, and to express LGBTIQ+ existence in the face of attempted erasures.

Ahmed also proposes to remove the hierarchy that she sees in Freud's description of loss. While Ahmed explains that Freud sees the loss of a beloved person as more significant than the loss of an abstraction such as one's homeland, Ahmed instead argues that the loss of an abstraction can be just as significant (2010:140). She focuses on a figure that she calls the "melancholic migrant" (2010:138). While she writes that affective communities can form among migrants over the shared lost object of a homeland, she adds that those communities mourn the loss for a time, and then move on—thus matching Freud's theorizing of the mourning process being temporary. Meanwhile, like Freud's, her understanding is that melancholy is not temporary. She calls melancholy "not simply feeling bad or bad feeling but getting stuck in bad feeling" (2010:138). Unlike the community of migrants who temporarily mourn, Ahmed distinguishes the "melancholic migrant" as an "affect alien"—alien in the sense of being an outlier who refuses to "get over" the loss of one's homeland and the racism faced in a new country, despite imperatives from the state to do so in order to assimilate (2010: 139-143). Both Sinno and Papazian are migrants now, having moved from Beirut to

New York City. Since their 2016 tour stops in the US at least, Sinno has been speaking out against the racism that Arabs and Muslims face in the country (Zaru 2016). The band's music and performances continue to hold onto expressing melancholy in a way that invites listeners to momentarily share in the suffering of marginalized groups.

In her ethnography of contemporary Turkish classical musicians, Denise Gill also argues that performing melancholy can be an active, constructive response to state attempted erasures. Like Ahmed's work, the melancholy she studies also often centers around abstract objects such as one's heritage and God. Gill's term "melancholic modalities" refers to her proposal that Turkish classical musicians actively express loss or suffering as a productive affective practice in their social-musical worlds (2017:32). Gill shows that Turkish classical music is rooted in the music practices of Sufism and the Ottoman court, both being streams of influence that Mustafa Kemal and his allies specifically worked to erase as part of their westernizing, secularizing project in founding the Republic of Turkey (1923) (2017:40-44). The Turkish classical musicians that Gill studies have experienced great losses of their own heritages, yet these streams have not been successfully erased. In her chapter on the *ney*, a reed flute that she explains became central to Ottoman court music due to its connection to the Mevlevi Sufi order (2017:62), Gill delves into the ways in which the order views the pain of separation from God as a fundamental aspect of the human condition (2017:65). Therefore, connecting with this melancholic narrative through listening and performing Turkish classical music, is spiritually productive for those sharing losses of heritage and sharing the Mevlevi belief in the pain of separation from God.

Ahmed and Gill have different positions on the question of where affects such as melancholy come from. Ahmed argues that as objects circulate, they accumulate affect, or become "sticky" with it (2015:45). In other words, circulation produces affect, rather than

people or objects themselves. Meanwhile, Gill rejects the premise that objects have agency in her ethnography. She writes that her book “disrupts questions about the relationship between music and affect that prioritize the sonic object and assume its capacity to act. ‘Music’ is not an object with agency that can produce, elicit, or express” (2017:14). Therefore, rather than study how a musical object makes people feel, Gill instead focuses on “how *particular people* claim that they actively *use* processes of music making, performance, and teaching to make themselves, and potentially their listeners, ‘feel melancholy’” (2017:17)—what she calls a “people-centered, practice-oriented approach” (2017:14). In other words, Gill defines melancholy as an affective practice, and she defines affect as “the subjective and conscious aspect of feelings and emotions” (2017:17). For example, in her observations of music lessons given by master-teachers of Turkish classical music, Gill heard teachers telling students, “You and I are here now and separated from God. We see God’s beauty and long for it through music. But our music is not music until someone else hears it and understandings that we are putting our pain, that separation, into music” (2017:95). Gill argues through her ethnographic research that the transmission of melancholy as affective practice is actually more central than sonic practice to the formation and maintenance of the Turkish classical music community (2017:98).

Like Gill, I choose the term “melancholy” for this chapter because the band members of Mashrou’ Leila use the term themselves in their descriptions of their music. This is one difference when comparing Gill’s ethnographic work to Freud’s and Ahmed’s—Gill’s theoretical lens emerges from her fieldwork with the people she studies. For instance, Gill quotes a Turkish classical music composer who says, “Sadness comes and goes, but melancholy is our essence. Melancholy stays. Life—for me as a musician, playing this Turkish classical and Ottoman music—life is melancholy” (2017:57). While Mashrou’ Leila

does not privilege the term to the same degree, after reading this chapter, Sinno shared with me, “I was reading *Mourning and Melancholia* when I wrote *Voede* after my father’s passing” (pers. comm., April 12, 2021). Years previously, a reporter also quoted Sinno’s description of the band’s sound as “like the dancey melancholia of that riff in *Love Will Tear Us Apart* without sounding like that” (Knar Bedian 2017). Further, they value the term enough to feature it on their website. The biography section of their homepage includes the following text: “With their distinct approach to storytelling and orchestration, they have crafted some of the most melancholic ballads and raucous anthems in contemporary alternative Arabic music” (Mashrou’ Leila 2014). That the band members chose the term melancholy in their short self-description on their homepage is more than a passing reference: their website is a rare internet space solely devoted to representing them and their career, unlike social media pages, where theirs is one of countless others.

I offer an interlude that demonstrates how actively and consciously Hamed Sinno chooses words as he performs and composes lyrics for Mashrou’ Leila. I do so to emphasize these actions as political, strategic choices, as I have throughout this chapter. The son of an English professor at American University of Beirut (Sengupta 2017), Sinno began a Master’s Program in Digital Musics at Dartmouth College in fall 2020 and could easily be called a public intellectual. Take, for example, one of his responses to the common comparison that reporters make between himself and Freddie Mercury (1946-1991), the lead singer of the rock band Queen. Mercury became internationally known as a talented vocalist and an LGBTIQ+ icon. Sinno knows that reporters compare him to Mercury because he has brown skin and black hair, a similar mustache, is also a lead singer of a rock band, and publicly identifies as queer. However, interviewers do not overtly mention any of these connections when they bring up Mercury. It is Sinno, in an interview with Harriet Fitch from *Financial*

Times Magazine (2016), who uses surface-level comparisons to launch into complex topics like Mercury's connections to Islam, postcolonialism, and LGBTIQ+ identities. In regards to Islam, Mercury's given name was Farrokh Bulsara, and he was born to a Parsi family in Zanzibar, a predominantly Muslim island with roots to the earliest days of Islam (Jones 2012:29-30). Queen's iconic song "Bohemian Rhapsody" also includes the Muslim phrase of supplication that opens the Qur'an, "*bismillāh*" [in the name of God]. Though he does not consider himself pious, Sinno comes from a Muslim family (Fitch 2016). Additionally, Sinno calls Mercury's career "'the first instance of post-colonial queer rock'" (Fitch 2016), a concept which, Sinno later clarified with me, is a reference to the thinking of Dr. Jason King of New York University, who is currently working on a biography of Mercury (pers. comm., April 12, 2021).

Professors of Theater and Drama Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins clarify that postcolonialism is often misunderstood as referring to a time after colonization has ended, when in fact, the effects of colonization continue long after a country declares independence. They instead define postcolonialism as "an engagement with and contestation of colonialism's discourses, power structures, and social hierarchies" (2002 [1996]:2). In the context of Mercury's career, whiteness, Christianity, and heteronormativity top social hierarchies. Therefore, Mercury's rise to rock stardom as an LGBTIQ+ person of color in a white-dominated industry, who references Islam in one of his band's most iconic songs, fits Gilbert and Tompkins' definition. I also consider his statements on Mercury in the contexts of Islam and queer postcolonialism an example of performing dissensus in their pointed disruption of the status-quo. In other words, while interviewers linked Sinno to Mercury, it was Sinno who pushed the conversation in a direction that exposes commonly unspoken social hierarchies of race, religion, and gender and sexuality.

Further, Sinno and his band frequently perform dissensus lyrically. As their credited composer of lyrics, Sinno draws on gender studies; surrealism; feminist social theory; Marxist theory; ancient Greek mythology; and poetry from ancient Greece, the Arab world, and the 20th century United States in a handful of songs that I reference here as examples. “Shim el Yasmine” (*Shimm al-Yāsmīn*) [Smell the Jasmine] from their first album, *Mashrou' Leila* (2009), is a dialogue with gender studies. About the song, Sinno told *Daily News Egypt*, “I was reading Brian Whitaker’s *Unspeakable Love* and there was a part where he was talking about the shame of publicly wavering masculinity in the arts... I wanted to try something like that because I didn’t find it shameful” (2011). In “Shim el Yasmine,” Sinno does more than just reference this key text in the discourse on current issues of gender and sexuality in the Middle East³¹—his song is a response to it. The song expresses Sinno’s sadness after a break up with a man he dated. He performs an alternative to the shame the text describes with lyrics such as [2:13-2:15],³²

a ‘mal sitt baytak

أعمل ست بيتك

Be your housewife

In the song, Sinno challenges status-quo assumptions about masculinity by publicly expressing emotions, an LGBTIQ+ relationship, and identifying with the commonly female-gendered role of a housewife. These choices represent Sinno’s open embrace of difference, rather than shame. Sinno frames another track from the band’s first album “Raksit Leila” (*Raqṣat Lailā*) [Leila’s Dance] as “an attempt at surrealism after reading Andre Breton.” Now former Mashrou' Leila guitarist, Andre Chedid, adds, “The sentences in themselves

³¹ For additional works on issues of sexual orientation in MENA, see also Ghoussoub and Sinclair-Webb 2000; Habib 2007; Pratt 2007. For works framing issues of gender and sexuality through the lens of pan-Arab popular musics in the region, see Armbrust 2010; Cestor 2010; El Khachab 2010; Gilman 2014; Kubala 2010; Schade-Poulsen 1999; and Van Nieuwkerk 1997.

³² The Arabic lyrics are by Hamed Sinno. The English translation is posted in a [lyric video](#) uploaded by CB Vintage on June 25, 2019.

make sense, but in an order they don't really mean anything" (*Daily News Egypt* 2011).

Sinno also describes "El Hal Romancy," (*al-Ḥall Rūmānsī*) [The Solution is Romantic], the title track from their 2011 album, as influenced by feminist social theory. He continues, "It criticizes the marital institution as being one that is strictly for economic purposes, masking themselves as spiritual or romantic solutions" (*Daily News Egypt* 2011). Referencing Marxist theory, he sings in the same track (*Daily News Egypt* 2011) [0:39-0:43],

zawajnī wa-a'r'a angalz fī sarīrī

زوجني وأقرأ أنجلز في سريري

Marry me and read Engels in my bed

A Greek-mythology influence becomes clear in my case study (below) of the music video for the band's song "Aoede" from *Ibn El Leil* (2015); they also titled another track on the album "Icarus." Finally, from the same album, "Tayf" references both ancient Greek and Arab poetry—Sappho and Abu Nuwas—and Sylvia Plath's poem, "Mushrooms," which Sinno calls "one of the most incredible feminist texts I've ever read" (Muhanna 2017). Sinno's positioning of Mashrou' Leila's work in this wide range of academic discourses and poetic pieces is another way the group distinguishes themselves as strategic actors in alternative Arabic music. Based on the great care and research that goes into Sinno's compositions in collaboration with his other band members, I can infer that his powerful performances of melancholy are conscious and strategic as well. I now turn to my case study, considering the different ways the music video "Aoede" performs melancholy and enacts dissensus, or momentary affective disruption, as a political act.

Dissensus and Melancholy in Mashrou' Leila's "Aoede"

In this section, I focus on Mashrou' Leila's April 2016 music video titled, "Aoede." I interpret different aspects of "Aoede" as strategic performances of melancholy, and nest those performances under the broader category of enacting political dissensus. I would also like to emphasize the importance of analyzing a music video in particular in this case. With a growing list of countries who have made the band unwelcome to perform, Mashrou' Leila's music videos can circulate affect far more widely than live shows. Through melancholy elements and other enactments of dissensus, the lyrics, visuals, and sounds of "Aoede" work to counter threats of erasure that marginalized groups so-often face.

I will begin with a discussion of the song's lyrics. The title "Aoede" is the Greek word for "song" and is one of the three original muses of ancient Greek mythology. In his ten-volume description of Greece, second-century Greek author Pausanias recounts that the three original muses were Melete [Practice], Mneme [Memory] and Aoede [Song]. Later, the muses were expanded to nine (Pausanias 1954:294-295). I understand "Aoede" to perform melancholy lyrically.³³ After reading this chapter, Sinno supported my view by explaining to me, "I was reading Mourning and Melancholia when I wrote Aoede after my father's passing" (pers. comm., April 12, 2021). As I have discussed, one central component to melancholy is that it comes about in response to a major loss. In his lyrics, Sinno evokes the loss that comes from the passing away of a loved one through death imagery. The speaker in the song addresses Aoede as a ghost, for example [9:13-9:16],

tayfak biyir 'ubnī

طيفك بير عبنى

Your ghost frightens me³⁴

³³ For a different performance of the lyrics, see the band's [live version](#) of "Aoede" at American University of Beirut on December 25, 2016.

Lyrically, the speaker also visits Aoede's gravesite [8:04-8:07],³⁵

i'taqnī shayāṭīnī
basqī bi-dammhā turābak

إعتقني شياطيني
بسقي بدمها ترابك

Bleed out my demons to water your
grave

These one-on-one statements by the speaker to Aoede imply intimacy, and in the context of ghosts and graves, the pain of intimate loss. Also, when Sinno sings [7:46-7:49],

anā asīr mirāyatī

أنا أسير مرايتي

I am my mirror's prisoner

it could be related to a feature of melancholia that Freud emphasizes: turning the pain of a loss onto the self. In Arabic, the word *anā* [I] is also the word for Freud's concept of the "ego."

Sinno's lyrics also enact dissensus by using symbolism from both monotheistic religions and polytheistic Greek mythology in the same song. In terms of potential references to monotheism, the song's first line could be read as a reference to the flood narrative from the Bible's Old Testament [7:41-7:45],

khudh al-'ubāb

خذ العباب عني

Wash this flood off of me

The other line I consider rich with potential monotheistic interpretations is [8:31-8:41],

jāzī l-'ibād

جازي العباد

which Mashrou' Leila translates into English in two different ways in their two different appearances in the lyrics: first, as "Reward your acolyte," and second, appearing in the last line of the song, as "Reward those who pray." For viewers who read the English translation,

³⁴ The Arabic lyrics are by Hamed Sinno. The band posted them and the English translation with their [official music video](#) for the track on YouTube, April 14, 2016.

³⁵ A literal translation would be "free my devils" or "emancipate my devils."

“acolyte” could be considered a reference to church acolytes, who act as assistants in the ceremonial aspects of a service. In general, the concept of rewards associated with prayer can be found in Abrahamic faiths such as Christianity as well. In the Bible for example, Matthew 6:6 states, “Pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.”

In terms of polytheism, overall, the song’s lyrics resemble a prayer to Aoede, an ancient Greek goddess and muse. At different moments in the song, the speaker beseeches Aoede [7:59-8:03],

‘am birja ‘ nādīlak

عم برجع ناديلك

Again I summon you³⁶

[8:22-8:25],

Jāzīnī

جازيني

Reward me

[8:27-8:31],

saiṭar ‘alā fammī

سيطر على فمي

Conquer my mouth

[9:03-9:11],

Kallimnī

كلمني

Speak to me

[9:35-9:39],

Wāsīnī

واسيني

Comfort me

and [9:39-9:43],

Bleed out the words within me

These beseeching statements can be interpreted as prayer. Especially in regards to the phrase “Bleed out the words within me,” the speaker is offering to sacrifice to Aoede, the muse of song, in order to be granted inspiration. If taken literally, evoking prayer and ritual directed towards an ancient Greek goddess could potentially lead certain audiences to interpret the song as polytheistic worship. Unfortunately, as I described in my earlier contextualization of the recent conflicts that have arisen around the band, certain Lebanese Christians did circulate similar examples found in other Mashrou' Leila songs to raise outrage as part of their campaign against the band's scheduled performance at Byblos Festival, 2019. Through the interpretive lens of dissensus, one source of the outrage could be that the band's lyrics interweave Greek mythology with monotheistic themes, which implies their similarities, exposing an assumption that monotheism and polytheism have nothing in common and should remain separate.

From another angle, I interpret the visual components of the “Aoede” music video as Mashrou' Leila mobilizing melancholy to counter erasures of Syrian refugees, as well as refugees more broadly crossing the Mediterranean. The narrative of the video is about the separation of two lovers. The video opens with the lovers' embrace, and ends with their separate expressions of immense sadness—she crying, immobile on her bed, he wracked with grief, having arrived in port and jumped over a fence, sprinting into the dark.

³⁶ Although the muses are all female in ancient Greek mythology, Aoede is addressed as masculine in the lyrics.



Figure 5. Separated lovers in “Aoede.” Screen captures by the author (Mashrou' Leila 2016).

YouTube viewer commentary on the video points to a range of images that evoke the refugee crisis. It is clear to viewers that the couple is being separated by the man’s journey on a ship transporting cows from Beirut to Spain, but the narrative leaves the question of his return unanswered. One YouTube commenter, Nina MT, shared her impression that the leading man in “Aoede” is a Syrian trying to escape by ship to Europe, and that he will never return to his Lebanese partner in Beirut (2016, comment on Mashrou' Leila 2016). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that more than 5.6 million people have fled Syria since the outbreak of civil war in 2011. Nina MT points to the life jacket the man sees floating in the water from the dock of his ship as a reminder of the refugees who have died trying to cross the Mediterranean in recent years. The contrasting scenes in the video that depict Hamed Sinno in a dark dance club provide a sharp contrast: while others, including Sinno, have the privilege to go out dancing, others are losing loved ones. Viewers of this video are pulled into Mashrou' Leila’s melancholy dissensus, by briefly sharing in the tragedies that too-often accompany the refugee experience.

Sonically, I propose that the unresolved tension of “Aoede” can be understood as political dissensus as well. Rancière argues that art does not have to call viewers to change their behavior in order to be political. Art can be political by unsettling viewers when it breaks with a normative affective experience they expect. For example, the main male

character does not speak at all during the thirteen-minute music video, even in the opening scene, when his partner is speaking to him. This only serves to intensify the sense of despair he projects. I read his silence as an unresolved conversation, which, like an unresolved dissonant chord, can create a sense of tension in listeners, who hang waiting for a comfortable resolution. His partner also creates sonic tension through a long pause in her opening speaking lines, lasting fourteen seconds [0:16-0:30]. Twice during that pause, she breathes in as if she was about to begin speaking again, but does not; listeners wait in anticipation for her to break her silence.

Further, for the first two-and-a-half minutes of the thirteen-minute video there is no music: the only sounds are the one-sided dialogue and ambient noises—a scratchy record, traffic, and eventually, the sounding of the massive ship's horn. All of this can also foster tension in a listener, who is expecting music from a music video, and is instead left hanging for minutes, waiting for it to begin. And although synth-pop music does begin at 2:39, it stops in favor of ambient sounds again from 4:39 to 5:02, prolonging the tense expectation for lyrics. When the music starts again, the beat is slower. There are inaudible vocals at 6:02, sounding as if they emerge from a tinny loudspeaker. Mashrou' Leila's Sinno does not begin singing until 7:39. The video grants the listener about two minutes that could pass for a pop song, not unsettling to the listener. Even still, the music does not dominate, but rather the vocals are soft. Then, at 10:06, a high-pitched tone begins and continues until 11:08, only to be replaced by other whining sounds that chromatically build until 11:42. Rather than appearing as brief moments of sonic tension that are quickly resolved, the tension resolves, then reappears, disappears, then reappears. Reading the sonic content of the video through the lens of dissensus, I understand it as political in its ability to make listeners uncomfortable. Mashrou' Leila creates an affective community of listeners, who, due to factors like

unresolved sonic tension, may share in a piece of the discomfort inherent in being forced to flee one's home and loved ones.

Conclusion

I now return to my opening question. Why does Mashrou' Leila end performances by making people cry in the dark? In this chapter, I argued that moments like Mashrou' Leila's final encore of "Marikh" enact dissensus: they are strategic political choices that can make listeners uncomfortable by disrupting the status-quo. Sinno validated my argument as well after reading this chapter, adding, "Ranci re was a significant influence when I was in college" (pers. comm., April 12, 2021). In my analysis, I continued on to identify moments like this throughout the band's career. Angry mobs, religious leaders, and governmental figures rose in opposition to Mashrou' Leila in order to cancel the band's shows, as occurred in Jordan in 2016 and again in 2017. The situation then spun out into a government crackdown on perceived LGBTIQ+ audience members in Egypt in 2017. It next morphed into a Lebanese Christian movement converging on social media to threaten violence against Mashrou' Leila members and their audience in 2019. It most recently surfaced as a canceled university talk in Qatar in 2020. I provided this detailed background on Mashrou' Leila and the controversies the band members and their fans have faced to demonstrate the very serious stakes involved in their performing in the MENA region, and to highlight their strategic choice to continue to enact dissensus, expressing the presence and affective experiences of marginalized groups, despite being banned from performing in more than one country and threatened in their own country as a result.

In light of these serious challenges, I focused on the concept of choosing to perform melancholy. Ahmed addresses this concept through the example of LGBTIQ+-identifying

peoples' mourning at the loss of members of their community to the 9/11 attacks, whose choice to do so reasserts their community's presence (2015:158). Likewise, when Mashrou' Leila members Sinno and Papazian chose to publicly share their queer identities and hold onto the melancholy of Sarah Hegazy's death, they say "We are here" in contrast to forces such as the Egyptian government who actively work to erase them. Like the figure Ahmed proposes of the "melancholic migrant" (2010:139), band members chose to express the suffering of the migrant experience as well.

I drew on Gill's rich ethnographic work with contemporary Turkish classical musicians to emphasize that Mashrou' Leila's performances of melancholy are strategic and productive. I pointed to the fact that the band members self-describe their sound as melancholy on their homepage biography (Mashrou' Leila 2014) and in interviews—it is no accidental, or academically imposed, term, but instead one of the few words they choose to describe themselves on an online space that presents the band to the world. As Sinno assured me, "I was reading *Mourning and Melancholia* when I wrote *Aoede* after my father's passing" (pers. comm., April 12, 2021). I also interpreted the music video for "Aoede" as lyrically engaging with melancholy through death imagery, which implies the pain of a loss, and through the image of a mirror as a prison, which evokes the Freudian concept that melancholy involves turning the anguish of a loss onto the self.

I then framed Mashrou' Leila's "Aoede" as enacting dissensus lyrically, sonically, and visually. The anguished lyrics break normative assumptions by interweaving imagery from ancient Greek mythology, the Old Testament, and in the English translation, Christian liturgical ritual, a blending practice that questions normative assumptions of a chasm between polytheism and monotheism. The lyrics have indeed been challenging for some: certain Lebanese Christians have used them as fuel to fire their violent organizing against the

band. The music video's various forms of unresolved sonic tension likely also unsettle listeners who expect music from a music video. I interpret the sonic tension as a strategic choice, where listeners are affected and unsettled as a way to begin to experience the deep melancholy of the migrant's tragic separation from home and a loved one depicted in the visual component of the video, especially of Syrian refugees crossing the Mediterranean.

The spark for this chapter was Mashrou' Leila's melancholy final encore in the live performance I attended on October 3, 2019 in Los Angeles. It affected me more strongly than any other moment that night, and it went on to affect a San Francisco concert goer, Nalini Kale, strongly too. In their encore, they strategically chose to turn audience expectations on their head. Contrastingly sharply from what became normal to expect based on the rest of the night's high-energy dance music, they told us to put away our phones, they shut off the lights, and they slowed the tempo. I read this affective break as enacting political dissensus, and as an invitation to share in their melancholy: for Sinno and Papazian, as openly queer performers and migrants or perhaps refugees, for all four members, as subject to threats of violence. For a moment, the music may carry audience members out of normative experiences and into the suffering of oppressed groups. Mashrou' Leila's career represents a powerful example, where in the face of harsh consequences, they choose, again and again, to openly express themselves. The band works to encourage listener awareness of marginalized experience, in part by sharing in affective ones. They artfully encourage their audiences to not get too comfortable.

Chapter 2. “We Are People Who Create and Enjoy”: *Dabkeh*, Joy, and the Decolonial Politics of 47Soul and Ayloul

At a basic level, the music video “Intro to Shamstep” is a party.³⁷ The video—which had over 14 million views as of April 27, 2021—is by Walaa Sbait (*Walā’ Sbayt*), Ramzy Suleiman (*Ramzī Sulaymān*), Tareq Abu Kwaik (*Tāriq Abū Kuwayk*), and Hamza Arnaout (*Hamza Arnā’ūt*), who together founded the band 47Soul in Amman, Jordan, in 2013. Since then, 47Soul has toured widely around the world and has gained increasing popularity along the way. The band artfully achieves a balance between performing long-held Arab music and dance traditions and electronic dance music. The sounds and scenes in the opening ten seconds of the music video highlights the importance of Arab traditions in that balance. “Intro to Shamstep” begins with fast cuts between black-and-white shots. Viewers see a flash of Walaa Sbait’s drum mallet beat a heavy *dumm*³⁸ on the worn animal skin head of the *ṭabl* [0:00].³⁹



Figure 6. *Ṭabl* bass drum in “Intro to Shamstep.” Screen capture by the author (Indiemaj 2015).

³⁷ Indiemaj posted 47Soul’s music video, “[Intro to Shamstep](#),” on YouTube on October 28, 2015. “Sham” refers to *Bilād Al-Shām* [Greater Syria] and “step” refers to the electronic dance music genre dubstep that began in 1990s London.

³⁸ *Dumm* is one of the two central sounds of the *īqā’āt* [Arab rhythmic modes]: “the lowest sound possible on a drum, created when the drum is struck toward the center of the drumhead” (Marcus 2007:60). *Takk* is the second central sound and is high-pitched.

³⁹ The term *ṭabl* is a generic term for drum in Arabic that typically refers to double-headed bass drum (Pirker 2001).

Ramzy Suleiman's hands fly across the keys of the Arabic org.⁴⁰



Figure 7. Arabic org in “Intro to Shamstep.” Screen capture by the author (Indiemaj 2015).

Suleiman's melody in *maqām bayyātī* on Bb⁴¹ [0:00] imitates the *mijwiz*, a traditional double-clarinet reed instrument found in Greater Syria and western Iraq (Poché 2001). The scene leaps to a shot of the four band members walking down a London street, then jumps to a fast pan across their concert stage and dancing audience [0:00-0:02]. Repeat shots of Sbait's drum, Suleiman's synthesizer, and the crowd add enthusiasm like an exclamation point [0:02-0:03]. 47Soul walks through a side door into the venue and the camera zooms in on Abu Kwaik's guitar case [0:03-0:04]. Then they walk down a London street, holding their instrument cases [0:05-0:07].



Figure 8. From left to right, Hamza Arnaout, Tareq Abu Kwaik, Walaa Sbait, and Ramzy Suleiman in “Intro to Shamstep.” Screen capture by the author (Indiemaj 2015).

⁴⁰ The “Arabic org” is a synthesizer, which is also referred to as a keyboard (Rasmussen 1996).

Abu Kwaik’s hands hit the drum head of the *darbūka* [0:08].⁴²



Figure 9. *Darbūka* in “Intro to Shamstep.” Screen capture by the author (Indiemaj 2015).

Audience hands clap as Abu Kwaik adds ornamental *takūk* [sing. *takk*] on his *darbūka* before playing the Arab *īqā‘* rhythmic mode *malfūf* [0:08]. Suleiman plays one of the side-by-side synthesizers on stage [0:09-0:10] and Sbait spins, holding a *riqq* [tambourine] [0:10]. All this, within the first ten seconds of the video.

In this chapter, I emphasize the joy that two alternative bands founded in Jordan foster in their recordings and live performances. These two bands, 47Soul and Ayloul (*Aylūl*) [September], do so especially through the sounds and dance steps of *dabkeh*,⁴³ a traditional Eastern Arab line dance. Palestinian engineer and writer Majdi Shomali (2002) calls *dabkeh* “a symbol of joy.” It is a communal dance, a feature of celebratory occasions such as weddings, parties, or the birth of a baby. “Intro to Shamstep” has flashes of *dabkeh* dancing in the music video, but in live 47Soul performances it is ever-present. The music video also evokes the form by featuring the traditional instruments that have accompanied it, especially

⁴¹ Suleiman features E half-flat in his melody, which is characteristic of *maqām* [melodic mode] *bayyātī* in particular. Quarter-tones are also a core feature of many Arab-born music forms in general.

⁴² The *darbūka* is a single-headed goblet-shaped drum, common to a wide range of Arab music forms (Conner, Howell, and Langlois 2001).

⁴³ I use the spelling “*dabkeh*” to reflect the way the term is most commonly pronounced in Jordan, according to Heba Albaz, *dabkeh* dancer and instructor at Jordan’s Al Hannouneh Society for Popular Culture (pers. comm., August 22, 2020).

mijwiz—playing *maqām bayyātī*—*ṭabl*, and *darbūka*. Ethnomusicologist A.J. Racy describes the sound of the *mijwiz* as an enthusiastic one that strongly compels Eastern Arabs to dance (1994:50).



Figure 10. “*Mijwiz* from Egypt” (Linden 2017)

When 47Soul, the dance troupes in their music videos, Ayloul, and both bands’ audiences joyfully dance *dabkeh* to the sounds of traditional instrumentation, I understand it as political in a decolonial sense: it asserts perseverance in the face of Israeli erasures. In doing so, I further ethnomusicologist David McDonald’s argument that dancing *dabkeh* enacts Palestinian presence, keeping its cultural practices alive through Israel’s continued encroachment (2013:22). 47Soul is a band founded around four members’ shared Palestinian heritage. They are an example of the far scattering of Palestinians, growing up in Amman (Tareq Abu Kwaik and now-former member, Hamza Arnaout), Haifa (Walaa Sbait) and the Washington DC metropolitan area (Ramzy Suleiman). Ayloul was founded in Irbid, Jordan. Its members— Ra’ed Al-Tabari (*Rā’id al-Ṭabarī*); Mounif Zghoul (*Munīf al-Zaghūl*); Yosour Al-Zou’bi (*Yusur al-Zu’bī*); Ma’in Mheidat (*Ma’in al-Mahīdāt*); Abdel Fattah Terawee (*Abd al-Fattāh Ṭirawwī*); and Hayyan Juqqa (*Hayyan al-Juqqa*)—are all from Jordan and are of part Jordanian ancestry, part either Palestinian or Syrian. The once free-flowing movement between these countries is now strongly limited due to the Syrian Civil War and border controls. Ayloul further emphasizes the ancestry some members share, coming from the Hauran (*Ḥawrān*) plain, a region now divided between northern Jordan, southern Syria, and the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights (Al-Zou’bi, pers. comm., May 11, 2019), thanks to a process initiated by the British and French empires after World War I. Through hardships,

both bands pair political lyrics with the joyful music and dance steps of *dabkeh* to express their heritage, and meld it with the sounds of other popular music forms as well.

Further, I argue that expressions of joy in alternative Arabic music contribute to processes of decolonization by pushing against all-too-common essentializations of Arabs: as merely suffering victims or enactors of violence. My focus on joy instead highlights constructive social spaces and works towards understanding a fuller spectrum of Arab identities and cultures. I build this point upon anthropologist Nadeem Karkabi's (2018) ethnographic work on the political implications of joy expressed by the bands Ministry of Dub-Key and 47Soul. Karkabi critiques the widespread over-emphasis on the deconstructive forces Palestinians face under Israeli occupation, and clearly demonstrates band members' active interest in performing a fuller picture of Palestinian culture, one that includes celebration and joy through *dabkeh* (2018:191-192). As Karkabi identifies, this joyful openness also reaches out beyond Palestinians who are already familiar with the tradition. Acknowledging the global focus of these bands, Karkabi argues that Ministry of Dub-Key⁴⁴ and 47Soul foster not only Palestinian national pride, but also international political solidarity through "the shared experience of joy" that fans can experience from dancing *dabkeh* at their shows (2018:174). He states that the joy of dancing *dabkeh* collectively helps consolidate and encourage political activism in both local and global contexts (2018:191). This communal dance invites people in to experience both Palestinian and Eastern Arab heritage, which could foster enthusiasm for political activism. Through my case studies, I extend Karkabi's arguments to Ayloul and 47Soul's most recent work.

⁴⁴ "Dub-Key" is a pun on the Arabic *dabkeh*; the electronic music genre, dubstep; and dub, the electronic-music-based reggae subgenre.

Further, in this chapter I dialogue with two additional academic works outside of the context of the Middle East and North Africa in order to position these bands within a global context. First, I draw on cultural theorist and organizer Nick Montgomery, and author, director, and youth alternatives-to-education worker, carla bergman's (2017) nuanced analysis of joy. Mashrou' Leila's Hamed Sinno (*Hāmid Sinnū*) gave an interview that introduced me to their work. Speaking about an unreleased track that the band performed during the tour for Mashrou' Leila's latest album *The Beirut School* (2019), Sinno said,

I was reading something about joyful militancy as an optimistic approach to politics and how joy can be a wonderful political call for activists. I guess I was trying really hard to channel that into the lyrics and the writing. The sound is very different from my regular bleakness. (Wetmore 2019)

Here Sinno references Montgomery and bergman's 2017 book, *Joyful Militancy: Building Resistance in Toxic Times*. In this chapter, I highlight these coauthors' analysis of joy as a social quality, one of openness to affect others and to be affected by them, specifically in the context of advancing the strength of community in activist groups. I apply this quality of openness to the act of choosing to perform the sounds and steps of *dabkeh*, a social activity that requires an openness to engage with others in order to participate.

Second, I draw on Indigenous activist media scholar Freya Schiwy's (2019) work, which foregrounds processes of decolonization in her analysis of joy. In the context of her research on Indigenous-language activist videos in Mexico, she argues that joy is a decolonial affect (2019:17), meaning that it helps to contest and unravel the effects of Mexico's colonization. I apply her argument to my analysis of 47Soul, whose members contribute to decolonization by expressing Indigenous Palestinian identities. Schiwy further contends that joy decolonizes by enacting "prefigurative politics," meaning, enacting the future one wishes to see (2019:33). I highlight this point in order to push back against oversimplifying Palestinians as merely victims. In the same songs, members of 47Soul and

Ayloul both question devastating realities, and also enact the open, anti-hierarchical world they want to see, now.

I begin my case studies by first introducing 47Soul's and Ayloul's members and their careers. I understand my presentation of this background as decolonial in the sense that it centers Arab popular musicians in an English-language context. To my knowledge, there is no other academic publication in English that attends to 47Soul's background in this great of detail. Musicologist Hani Alkatib's dissertation (2019) is the one in-depth scholarly discussion of Ayloul that I have encountered in English. After introducing 47Soul, I then analyze two of the music videos from the band's latest album *Semitics* (2020) that feature *dabkeh* prominently: "Border Ctrl" and "Dabke System."

I next introduce Ayloul's members and careers, then analyze their track "Nazel Al Ghor" (*Nāzil 'al-Ghūr*) [Going to Al Ghor]⁴⁵ from their album *Salute to Al Ghor* (2019). I consider the audio and two live performances of the song at their back-to-back album launches in Irbid and Amman, Jordan, on May 2 and 3, 2019. At both live shows, band members and their audiences danced *dabkeh* together during the *mijwiz* solos. I argue that the *dabkeh* music and dance aspects of these case studies especially express joy: not as a romanticized happiness, but as an openness to affect and be affect by others, and as prefigurative decolonial politics.

This chapter highlights the importance of fostering joy in alternative Arabic music. I show through my 47Soul and Ayloul case studies that featuring traditional Arab sounds and dances in their works does just that. By paying attention to the joy of their audio, music videos, and live performances, I aim to contribute towards presenting a more complex representation of Arab cultures than the too-common over-emphasis on the deconstructive

forces in the region. Finally, I build on Karkabi, Montgomery and bergman, and Schiwy to suggest that joy is a key factor in sustaining activist goals. 47Soul and Ayloul’s music is not only fun: it is a joyous assertion of presence, which does decolonial work and for a moment, enacts a more equal future.

Dabkeh as a Symbol of Joy

Unlike any other alternative bands I have seen perform in Jordan, members of Ayloul and 47Soul consistently dance *dabkeh* in their concerts and encourage their audiences to do the same. The *Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Standard Arabic* defines the verb *dabaka* as meaning, “to stamp the feet” and “to dance the *dabka* (syr.) [e.g.] a group dance in which the dancers, lined up with locked arms or holding hands, stamp out the rhythm and sing” (Wehr 1993). Racy writes that “*Dabke*, which is also commonly spelled as *debke*, *dabké* or *dabkeh*, [and *dabka* in Wehr] has been translated into English as “stomping” (1994:49). I use the spelling, *dabkeh*, to reflect how the term is most commonly pronounced in Jordan, as explained to me by Heba Albaz, a *dabkeh* dancer and instructor at Jordan’s Al Hannouneh Society for Popular Culture (*Jam ‘iyya al-Ḥannūna lil-Thaqāfa al-Sha ‘biyya*).

Traditional instruments that accompany *dabkeh* include the *mijwiz*. Racy explains that the instrument “commands an air of compelling enthusiasm” (1994:50). He also states that many Near Eastern Arabs have told him “that when they hear it they lose their inhibitions and feel an overwhelming urge to dance” (1994:50). Rasmussen calls the sounds of *mijwiz* and the dance movements of *dabkeh* practically inseparable (1996:359). Jargy writes that the *darbuka* “reinforces intimacy with the *dabke*, the most widespread dance in the Arab-Islamic

⁴⁵ Ayloul posted the Arabic lyrics and translation of “Nazel Al Ghor” below the [official lyric video](#) for the track on YouTube on November 24, 2019. Al Ghor refers to the Jordan Valley. My translation of the song title is “Heading Down to Al Ghor.”

world of the Middle East” (1978:9). *Dabkeh* is also traditionally accompanied by the double-headed *ṭabl* drum (Sbait 1989). Since the 1970s, the “Arabic org” synthesizer [org being short for electric organ], where software, levers, and dials can create variances in intonation, often takes the place of an instrumental ensemble. Rasmussen writes that the Arabic org has become a standard part of Arab music performance, both in the Arab world and the Diaspora. She emphasizes that the org “is capable of a completely indigenous, if synthetic, musical idiom” (1996:345-46) and that “Digital musicians evoke the ethos of tradition and celebration” (1996:359). In terms of the *maqāmāt* of *dabkeh* songs, Racy writes that they “tend to either conform to or use some of the notes of a scale roughly resembling the lower pentachord of the urban Bayyati maqam, or mode, in relative pitch, roughly the notes D, E half-flat, F, G, and A” (1994:56).

In this chapter, I argue that these performances of Arab tradition foster collective joy among 47Soul, Ayloul, and their audiences. Shomali supports my argument, writing,

Dabke is a symbol of cooperation and solidarity, and a symbol of joy, strength, steadfastness and determination. It is a way for expressing the feelings of pride and gratitude to each other, and also to the land. Dabke does not only take place on wedding occasions and parties, but also when a new baby is born or when a new house is built and during the harvest. Members of the community look at participation in dancing as an integral communal pursuit rather than as a source for individual self-enjoyment, exercise or regular public performance. To them, it is a symbol of standing for that family that stood for them one day. (Shomali 2002)

Shomali calls *dabkeh* a symbol of joy, emphasizing as well the importance of the communal aspect of the dance in fostering that joy and solidarity.

In her ethnographic dissertation on *dabkeh* as a site for contesting everyday social freedoms in the face of state-enforced constraints in contemporary Syria (2016:7), ethnomusicologist Shayna Silverstein describes the basic steps of the dance as a six-beat sequence. On beat one, the dancer crosses the left foot in front of the right; on beat two, the right foot follows behind the left into a standing position; on beats three and four, the first

two steps are repeated; on beat five, the dancer kicks the left foot straight out; and on beat six, stomps the left foot on the ground (2016:1-2). These steps are called the *taḥmīl* [foundation or base], which a line of *dābikūn* [those who dance *dabkeh*] traditionally dance hand-in-hand. Often at the front of the line, a lead dancer called *lawīḥ* or *awwal* will embellish and improvise during rhythmic breaks (2016:2).

As Karkabi explains, *dabkeh* has been used for a range of different purposes in Palestine. Zionists appropriated *dabkeh* there in the 1930s and 1940s; it was used to promote pan-Arab identity in the 1950s; and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) used it to promote Palestinian national identity beginning in the 1960s—especially after being on the losing side of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war—and continued to promote it through the 1970s and ‘80s (2018:176-7). The Oslo Accords (1993-1995) led to a partial, more official recognition of Palestinian national identity, causing folklore to lose its urgency and popularity, writes Karkabi (2018:177). Class divides increased, with the middle and upper-classes beginning to look down on folk cultural forms like *dabkeh*, while village and refugee camp residents continued to dance *dabkeh* at social events. In response to class divides, 47Soul’s Walaa Sbait told Karkabi, “I love forcing the Ramallah upper-class people, with their Lacoste shirts and high heels, to jump together to dabke” (2018:185). Sbait’s comment suggests the joyful, festive quality of the dance, and suggests that he takes personal pleasure in making elite Palestinians a little uncomfortable, knowing that they will be caught up in the pull of the dance, and will have little choice but to join the crowd in performing their heritage. Karkabi observed a related moment in a 47Soul performance at Portobello Market in London, where Sbait addresses the Arabic-speaking audience. He said, “*ya jama ‘a* (oh people), teach the *ajaneb* [*ajānīb*] (foreigners) how to dance *dabke*” (2018:186). In this line, Sbait calls the likely non-Arabic speaking audience members the foreigners, positioning the likely Arab

ones who were already familiar with *dabkeh* as the expert teachers. The moment serves as an example where Sbait consciously framed *dabkeh* as a moment to invert a class hierarchy. More recently, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in Israel/Palestine began to use *dabkeh* for their peace-making projects that normalize occupation, according to Karkabi (2018:178).

“Growing More Powerful Together”: The Politics of Joy

McDonald calls *dabkeh* the most important musical/social space in any Palestinian celebration (2010:198). He also notes that the Palestinian nationalist movement utilizes versions of these same traditional song and dance forms to garner support for its cause (2010:191). McDonald argues that part of the nationalist movement’s success in gaining support comes from these art forms, which engender strong feelings of solidarity with one’s community, nation, and its history at an unstable time (2010:202). When rallying crowds hear and dance *dabkeh*, for example, feelings of support for the nation blur with feelings for their own families, due to the social gatherings *dabkeh* would likely call to mind (2010:203).

McDonald quotes a testament to the political power of *dabkeh* from librarian, scholar, and folklorist, ‘Abd al-Aziz Abu Hudba (Abu Hani) at the *In ‘āsh al-Usra*⁴⁶ Society in the West Bank, who over the course of decades, has helped lay the foundation for studies of Palestinian culture and folklore. He explains,

We stomp our feet in the dabke to show the world that this is *our land* [*baladna*] [stomping loudly on the floor], that people and villages can be killed and erased [stomping again] . . . , but *our heritage* [*turāthnā*] is something that they can’t reach because it is here [motioning to his heart]. They have stolen our land [stomp], forced us out of our homes [stomp], but our culture is something they cannot steal. When we stamp our feet we are saying that no matter how far we have been scattered, *Palestine*

⁴⁶ McDonald does not include a translation of “*In ‘āsh al-Usra*” in his monograph. While I have also not found an official translation by the society, one possible translation is “Revival of the Family.”

will always remain under our stamping feet [filasṭīn rāḥ biḏāl taḥt aqdāmnā] (emphasis and transliteration by McDonald). (2013:18-20)

Abu Hudba's testament demonstrates the deep significance of *dabkeh* to the Palestinian people. It is a performance of perseverance in the face of Israel's ongoing settler-colonial erasure. It resists what Patrick Wolfe calls "the logic of elimination": the fact that settler colonialism can aim for Indigenous erasure, through discourse and genocide, in its struggle for the land (2007:387).

Throughout his research on 47Soul and Ministry of Dub-Key, Karkabi clearly illustrates the importance of joy to the bands' performances, as well as the connection between this affect and their political motivations. Karkabi critiques any over-emphasis on the deconstructive forces that Palestinians face. He argues that joy is an essential, sustaining experience for Palestinians when he writes,

The focus on pain and suffering to establish political solidarity has led Palestinians into despair and cynicism, especially since requests for political intervention constantly fall on deaf ears (Allen 2013). By contrast, joy may offer a refreshing political manifestation in which the confirmation of others is not necessary for practicing self-empowerment, as in the local performance of dabke. Joy is an expression that people in Palestine, and other war-affected countries in the Middle East, yearn for and perform at every opportunity, in which dabke is a telling example. (2018:192)

Karkabi calls Sbait's and 47Soul's understanding and expressions of joy as "a conscious political statement" (2018:191). Sbait says, "It can say a different thing about us [Palestinians] as people from our region, that people [abroad] can share the same way, that we celebrate and enjoy [life]. This is the context of it: we are not just a people who cry and suffer, we are people who create and enjoy" ([Haddad 2015] 2018:191). Sbait resists the essentialization of Palestinians as experiencing nothing else but the protracted conflicts and the dire sufferings of the Israeli occupation. He positions 47Soul as a band that performs an alternative that acknowledges a fuller spectrum of Palestinian identity—one that includes joy.

Karkabi also argues that through dabkeh, Ministry of Dub-Key and 47Soul foster both Palestinian national pride and international political solidarity through “the shared experience of joy” (2018:174). He explains that when audiences collectively participate in dancing *dabkeh*, it creates political solidarity, wherever the participants come from (2018:174). As will become clear through various examples, such as the international reference points in 47Soul’s music video, “Border Ctrl,” the band creates solidarity outside the Arab region. As Suleiman told Karkabi, “The performance of collective joy aims to ‘celebrate people’s struggles against global apartheid and give them power and confidence to continue’” (Suleiman 2017). Karkabi continues, “47Soul encourages people around the world to celebrate their unity while resisting similar oppression based on race, nationality, and citizenship. The joy of dancing dabke collectively offers consolidation and encouragement for political activism, in both local and global contexts” (2018:191). As Abu Kwaik told me in his story about how he connected with another student at University of Nebraska after realizing that they both loved the same band, “If you ever remember a moment when you and a friend or a person you met agreed that a certain song is good, it’s always a bonding moment (pers. comm., January 22, 2019). He points to the way that sharing a love of music can create community across difference.

Following Hamed Sinno’s lead, I put Karkabi’s analysis in dialogue with Montgomery and bergman’s work on the concept of joyful militancy. As poet, educator, teaching artist, and editor Hari Alluri writes in his foreword to their book, “joyful militancy” is “the type of joy that looks and feels like growing more powerful together” (2017:2). Montgomery and bergman build their understanding of joyful militancy in opposition to the “rigid radicalism” (2017:22) that they have experienced within a range of activist circles. They characterize rigid radicalism as an atmosphere of hostility, shaming, mistrust, anxiety,

and posturing that forms barriers to collective transformation (2017:20). Instead, Montgomery and bergman explain, “We have become increasingly convinced that the most widespread, long-lasting, and fierce struggles are animated by strong relationships of love, care, and trust” (2017:31). The authors emphasize that fostering a supportive community is essential in activist work.

Montgomery and bergman define joy based on the work of seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, who has become a strong influence on many affect theorists. They write,

From Spinoza, joy means an increase in a body’s capacity to affect and be affected. It means becoming capable of feeling or doing something new; it is not just a subjective feeling but a real event that takes place. In this sense it is different from happiness, which is one of many potential ways a body might turn joy into a subjective experience. This increase in capacity is a process of transformation, and it might feel scary, painful, and exhilarating, but it will always be more than just the emotions one feels about it. It is the growth of shared power to do, feel, and think *more*. (2017:284)

In addition to drawing on Spinoza, Montgomery and bergman use ideas from feminist theorist Sara Ahmed to clarify that joy is not synonymous with happiness. In dialogue with Ahmed’s monograph *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), they suggest that happiness can be used as “a tool of subjection” (2017:56) in a neoliberal capitalist system that encourages people to center life around a quest for happiness, while simultaneously prioritizing white male happiness and policing the emotions of other non-dominant groups (2017:56-57). They cite Ahmed’s description of happiness as a blanket that covers the potential for one to be affected otherwise (2017:57). For example, it prompts people to turn away from whatever threatens their happiness, such as the suffering of others (2017:57). Montgomery and bergman argue that this kind of “search for happiness closes off other possibilities” (2017:57). This stands in direct contrast to the authors’ association between joy and openness: the openness to affect and be affected, and the openness to transform and grow in

community with others. These authors demonstrate that joy is not simply a synonym for the subjective emotion of happiness, but that in fact, joy is an active, social process of growth that can also involve feelings of fear and pain. I apply Montgomery and bergman's nuanced understanding of joy to my case studies in this chapter, where musicians simultaneously express the pain and suffering of their situations while also performing *dabkeh*, a communal dance that demands from participants an openness to affect others and be affected by them—Montgomery and bergman's definition of joy.

In this chapter, I also put Montgomery and bergman's work in dialogue with Freya Schiwy's, whose scholarship represents a larger academic discourse on powerful Indigenous contributions to activist media. I will first introduce select examples from this broader discourse before discussing Schiwy's work further. One of the foundational scholars to research Indigenous media, Faye Ginsburg (2018) introduces the term "media sovereignty," which refers to Indigenous people's right and capacity to gain control over how they are represented in the media (2018:32). Despite uneven access, Ginsburg points to the ways that Indigenous communities creatively utilize new technologies and platforms such as YouTube on their own terms, enabling far higher levels of visibility than before for their people (2018:42). Indigenous media scholar Amalia Córdova specifically focuses on a pioneering hip-hop music video to highlight the ways that the Mapuche peoples of Chile use new media to resist state oppression. Chile, which does not recognize Indigenous rights to territory or self-representation, is frequently denounced for legally persecuting and physically harming both Mapuche and non-Mapuche activists in their cause (2018:64-65). Córdova analyzes a music video titled "Newen" [Life-Force in Mapuzungún, the Mapuche language] by Mapuche hip-hop artist Jennifer Andrea Aguilera Silva (stage name, JAAS) from her album *En Este Mundo* [In This World] (2004) (2018:65-66). "Newen" both evokes hip-hop culture

through rap and styles of dress, and also highlights Mapuche culture through her pioneering use of the Mapuzungún language and the trill of a *trutruka* horn, which traditionally calls a Mapuche community together. JAAS critiques state oppression both lyrically and visually through footage of protests for the Mapuche cause. Overall, Córdova's analysis of JAAS's music video emphasizes how the Mapuche nation uses new media to counter state oppression, advocate for its community, and affirm its culture (2018:71).

In her chapter "Rage, Joy, and Decolonial Affect: ¡Viva México! (2010) and Un tren muy grande que se llama la Otra Campaña (2006)," Schiwy also understands joy as open-ended affect (2019:19). She draws on a social theorist and philosopher Brian Massumi, who like Montgomery and bergman, differentiates joy from personal emotional experiences (2019:19), and likewise critiques promotion of "hedonist enjoyment" that obscures clear understandings of global capitalist forces (2019:133). Schiwy further shares Montgomery and bergman's focus on activist groups and presentation of joy as a foundationally social affect.

Schiwy builds on affect theory by interweaving it with studies of decolonization, arguing that joy enacts a prefigurative decolonial politics. She defines "prefigurative politics" as simply "practicing the change you want to see" (2019:33). In other words, in the context of her research, the term means working to enact the goal of equal, anti-hierarchical social relations, rather than postponing doing so until an envisioned future revolution succeeds (2019:8). Schiwy explores these concepts through the example of the Zapatistas, or the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), which has held autonomous control of the Mexican state Chiapas since 1994 (2019:158). She calls the Zapatistas' prefigurative political actions decolonial in the sense that they question and unseat the continuing effects of Mexico's colonization. She offers the Zapatistas' creation and maintenance of the

autonomous zone of Chiapas and their film *Un Tren* as examples (2019:18). Schiwy argues that joy in the Zapatistas' decolonial movement and their video express the open-ended quality of prefigurative politics (2019:19). Notably, as in the work of Montgomery and Bergman, Schiwy does not frame joy as simply personal happiness. In fact, she identifies the Zapatistas' expressions of communal joy as all the more striking in light of the brutal repressions that they face (2019:16). Further, she adds that joy is essential to sustaining long-lasting activist movements (2019:33). In all, Schiwy interprets the autonomous zone and *Un Tren* as an open invitation to join the decolonial future that the Zapatistas already work to enact.

Schiwy focuses on the Indigenous language video *Un tren muy grande que se llama la Otra Campaña* [A Very Big Train Called the Other Campaign] (2006), shot in Mexico, to exemplify her argument that joy expresses prefigurative decolonial politics. The video is a collective production by Zapatista youth, crediting editors by first name only: Moises, Eva, and Amalio (2019:158;154). Schiwy emphasizes that the video does not include footage of physical acts of violence—such as those the organization would often experience at the hands of the police—and that excluding violent footage was an active choice by the collaborators (2019:154). Schiwy also highlights their choice to feature an offscreen narrator whose accent, Schiwy explains, identifies her as a speaker of an Indigenous Mayan language. According to Schiwy, this narration choice “establishes a female Indigenous subject position” (2019:156), a powerful countering of colonial erasures of Indigenous women. The 47Soul music videos that I analyze in this chapter feature similar choices. None of the three include scenes of humans enacting violence against others, and “Border Ctrl” features two women prominently, including rapper Shadia Mansour, who expresses a Palestinian Indigenous subject position as well.

Karkabi, Montgomery and bergman, and Schiwy all emphasize the enactment of desired futures in their analyses of joy. Aligning with Schiwy’s conceptualization of “prefigurative politics” and Karkabi’s analysis of *dabkeh* as fostering political solidarity, Montgomery and bergman state that one of their basic premises “is that transformative potentials are always already present and emergent” (2017:27). They also state that “the first step, for us, has been to affirm that we are *already otherwise*: we all have parts of ourselves that are drawn towards other ways of being. Everyone has glimmers, at least, of the ways that fierceness can be intertwined with kindness, and curiosity with transformation” (2017:24).

Omar Souleyman: Laying the Groundwork for 47Soul

As 47Soul’s drummer Tareq Abu Kwaik told me, Omar Souleyman’s (*‘Umar Suleymān*) “techno-*dabkeh*” laid the foundation for the genre of music that 47Soul performs. Praising Souleyman and his influence on their sound, Abu Kwaik said, “This is the man of the original form; we play an alternative, sub-genre of the form” (pers. comm., January 22, 2019). Souleyman (born circa 1966) is from Ras al-Ayn (*Ra’s al-‘Ayn*) and Tal Tamer (*Tal Tamir*), Syria (Silverstein 2016:265). In 1994, based on a friend’s encouragement, he shifted from years of manual labor to becoming a *muṭrib* [wedding singer] and soon had a waiting list for his performances (2016:269). He would begin his set with a *mawwāl* (pl. *mawāwīl*) [unmetered vocal improvisation], then alternate between performing *mawāwīl* and upbeat dance forms like *‘atābā* and *dal‘ūna*, accompanied by his band on *mijwiz*, *ṭabl*, and *darbūka*. The percussion lines would feature *īqā‘āt* such as *baladī* that were typically featured in *sha‘bī* music in the region in the 1970s and 1980s, and audience members would dance *dabkeh* together to the music (2016:270). Souleyman became incredibly prolific, going on to

release roughly 500 cassette and CD recordings of his live performances at weddings over the course of twenty years (2016:272).

Mark Gergis of the record label Sublime Frequencies first heard Souleyman's cassettes at a street stall in Damascus in the late 1990s, and contacted him a few years later seeking a distribution deal. Souleyman granted the label permission to distribute his recordings, and Sublime Frequencies released *Highway to Hassake* in 2007, a compilation of Souleyman's live performance recordings (Silverstein 2016: 266-67). The biggest break for Souleyman came when Gergis released a YouTube video collage for the album track "Leh Jani" (*Leḥ Jānī*) [When I Found Out] (translation by Silverstein) in 2009, which did more for his international career than any previous project (2016:268). Media coverage often emphasizes the joyful, celebratory nature of his performances. After the release of the "Leh Jani" video on YouTube, *NPR* featured Björk on their radio segment "You Must Hear This" speaking about Souleyman. Björk said, "I think what's refreshing about Omar Souleyman is the party—it's fun. It's really alive and very urgent" ("You Must Hear This: Omar Souleyman" 2009). In 2017, *The Wire* called his music "the most joyful, jouissant and probably unintentionally punk celebration of pure sound since the earliest days of Hardcore Techno" (2016:274). With the support of Sublime Frequencies, Souleyman became the first Syrian wedding singer to reach widespread audiences outside of the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region (2016:266).

Silverstein argues that more than any other factors, Souleyman's sound has succeeded so resoundingly with US and European audiences because the fast, high-energy duple meter of *dabkeh* rhythms relates easily with current Euro-American dance music conventions (2016:272). Souleyman himself also emphasizes the importance of sharing *dabkeh* with his

audiences. When Will Glasspiegel asked Souleyman how he would describe *dabkeh* to someone unfamiliar with it, he answers:

First of all, this music is our music, an Arab dance music. Any person who hears this music will want to dance. Whenever I am on stage, my mission is to make those who don't dance dabke, dance dabke. In other words, I want to teach people to dabke, God willing. (2016:289)

Souleyman continues, “My flavor is different from other people’s flavor: the dabke was slow, I made it faster” (2016:290). Like 47Soul would go on to do, Souleyman points to his own interpretation of the traditional form—increasing the tempo—and clarifies that his priority is collective participation, whether someone in the audience has danced it before or not.

Silverstein writes that for a Syrian listener, what distinguishes Souleyman is the way he blends the Turkish, Iraqi, and Kurdish sounds that are characteristic of his home, the Hassake region of Syria (Silverstein 2016:270). Ras al-Ain borders Turkey, and minorities of Armenian, Assyrian, Kurdish, and Turkish backgrounds have long lived there along with its Syrian-Arab residents. Souleyman was known for customizing his performances to cater to his audiences’ backgrounds, whether that be Iraqi *chōbī* [the upper Euphrates region’s version of *dabkeh*] (Hassan 2001); Kurdish *govend* [dance songs] (Bum, Christensen, and Shiloah 2001); or Syrian *dabkeh* (2016:270). “Leh Jani” represents Souleyman’s efforts to cater to audiences from the Gulf as well. He performs at Gulf parties in the video, as well as at Iraqi ones (2016:270).

Through the course of his music career thus far, Omar Souleyman has gone from performing at village weddings to performing at Glastonbury Music Festival, South by Southwest (SXSW), and even the 2013 Nobel Peace Prize ceremony (2016:266; 280) (Nobel Peace Prize Concert 2014). As I can attest from attending Souleyman’s performance at University of California, Santa Barbara on May 15, 2017, he has what Silverstein calls a

“surreal performance style” (2016:267). The surreal element comes from the contrast between the high-energy dance music and the stoic persona he projects, wearing dark sunglasses and often keeping his body rigid, though he also claps and walks around the stage. As viewers can see from his Nobel Peace Prize ceremony performance, only one other man is on stage with him, covering all sounds aside from Souleyman’s singing on a synthesizer, including the sounds of strings, percussion, *mijwiz*, and *arghūl*.



Figure 11. Omar Souleyman and accompanist at the Nobel Peace Prize Concert, December 11, 2013. Screen capture by the author (Nobel Peace Prize Concert 2014).

During a January 2019 interview, while Abu Kwaik was in Amman to perform and see family, he described to me how Souleyman prioritizes making his audiences joyful during his live shows. Souleyman said in an interview, Abu Kwaik told me, “I’m a Bedouin man who makes party music” (pers. comm., January 22, 2019). Then when the interviewer asked Souleyman what it was like performing in the US and Europe, he responded, “My function is, all my life, people call me for *al-farah*, and I go.” Abu Kwaik defined the concept of *al-farah* for me: “We call it happiness—happiness could mean anything, it could mean a graduation, wedding, a happy event.” The noun form of the term is also defined as “joy” (Wehr 1994:822). Abu Kwaik added that Souleyman “thinks of Glastonbury or

whatever as *farah*. He doesn't see it as, I'm gonna go to festivals and get into the circuit and the industry, he's like, 'you want me to come and make you happy, I come, simple'" (pers. comm., January 22, 2019). Abu Kwaik's account demonstrates what he values about Souleyman's esteemed career—his work to spread joy. While personal feelings of happiness can be part of the experience, it is the social quality of joy that is essential to Souleyman's performances. As I explained at the start of this section, because Abu Kwaik considers Souleyman the foundation upon which he and his band mates built 47Soul, this suggests that fostering joy is a priority of theirs as well.

Unfortunately, after Souleyman's hometown of Ras al-Ain became a flashpoint in the Syrian Civil War, he and his family fled to Turkey, where they now reside as refugees (2016:271). Souleyman has also been one of many performers from MENA who have been unable to secure visas for performing in the US since the Trump administration's so-called "Muslim Ban" on January 27, 2017, which prevented Syrian immigrants and non-immigrants from entering the country (Trump 2017). Before the ban, Souleyman established a wide following with US audiences, having traveled there for performances sixteen times since 2010 (Hogan 2017). Souleyman's US tours thus laid the groundwork for the global touring that 47Soul went on to do.

Presenting 47Soul

In the following introduction to 47Soul, I center one of the most globally-reaching alternative acts to emerge from Jordan in recent years. While I cite from the plethora of music journalism published on the band, as of yet, Nadim Karkabi's article (2018) was the only academic work I found that centers 47Soul. My attention on the band aims to fill this gap in scholarship. 47Soul formed in Amman in 2013 around the shared Palestinian heritage

of its four founding members: cousins Tareq Abu Kwaik, stage name El Far3i (*al-Far‘ī*) [The Branch] and Hamza Arnaout, stage name El Jehaz (*al-Jihāz*) [Equipment], from Jordan; Walaa Sbeit from Haifa, Israel; and Ramzy Suleiman, stage name Z the People, from the Washington, DC area. Both Abu Kwaik’s and Arnaout’s parents came to Jordan in 1948, fleeing the first Arab-Israeli war (Langendo 2018). Sbeit states that his grandfathers were forced out of their village, Iqrit (*Iqrit*), to Haifa in 1948 (Safran-Hon 2006). He continues, “I identify myself as a refugee, an internal refugee, inside Israel. I cannot go back.” Sbeit says that he cannot go back to Iqrit because in 1951, members of the Israeli Defense Force “systematically blew up every house in the village” (Ryan 1973:62). Suleiman told me that he is the son of refugees as well (pers. comm., February 5, 2019). His father is from the West Bank village El Bireh (*al-Bīrra*). Based on these personal histories, issues of free and restricted movement are central to 47Soul. Abu Kwaik explains that their band name refers to 1947, the year before the founding of Israel, when it was still possible for Palestinians to travel freely around the Levant. “So it’s a symbol of freedom of movement. But the Occupation of Palestine ended that” (Jensen 2019).

The band’s lineup has changed twice since its founding. First, in a 2015 promotional YouTube video for 47Soul’s EP crowd-funding campaign, Walaa Sbeit mentions Rami Nakhle (*Rāmī Nakhle*) from the Golan Heights as a fifth band member on drums and vocals, but otherwise Nakhle does not appear in the video and remains largely absent from publications on the band (47SOUL 2015). Second, on January 5, 2020, Hamza Arnaout announced on his Facebook page that he was leaving 47Soul, not with “sadness or bitterness, but an overwhelming feeling of gratitude and love.” In an interview, Arnaout explained that he left the band to slow down his pace, in contrast to the roughly 90-110 shows he has

performed per year with 47Soul for the last five years (Ahmad 2020). Ending the grueling touring schedule, he continued, gives him more energy to be creative.

47Soul has created a new genre label for the band's sound: "shamstep." Others have referred to the wider genre they are a part of as "electro-shaabi" and "electro-dabke" (Karkabi 2018), and as I discussed above, 47Soul builds on Omar Souleyman's globalizing of Syrian wedding music. As Arnaout says, "The way I see it, this is the wedding and celebration music that I grew up around" (47SOUL 2015). In the same video, Sbait points to the style as "that Syrian, Galilean, Ghorian style," indicating the diverse regional influences on the traditional elements of their sound.

Shamstep fuses Arabic and English lyrics, traditional Arab rhythms, modes, instruments and dance, as well as a range of other genres such as electronic dance music, hip-hop, rock, and reggae. Sbait leads the dance components of 47Soul, and as I introduced at the start of this chapter, the band features a range of traditional Arab instruments. Abu Kwaik plays *darbūka*, Sbait plays *ṭabl*, *daff* [frame drum], and occasionally *riqq* [tambourine], and Suleiman evokes the *mijwiz* on the Arabic org. Their hit video "Intro to Shamstep" features two Arab *īqā'āt*, *malḥuf* and *chōbī*, and *maqām bayyātī* on Bb. Below I will analyze one of their newest videos "Dabke System" in greater detail, which is in *maqām bayyātī* on B and features more than forty young *dabkeh* dancers as well.

47Soul also draws on popular music styles that originated in the US and Europe and have since been re-interpreted globally. Abu Kwaik, Sbait, and Suleiman often rap, for example. Sonically they also feature the classic offbeat rhythm of reggae, emphasizing beats two and four. Instrument-wise, Abu Kwaik often plays the drum pad, Arnaout plays the electric guitar, and Suleiman plays a range of other sounds on the synthesizer besides evoking *mijwiz*. All of these elements combine to create joyful, celebratory music. As

Grundey writes, “47Soul, at their heart, is a party band” and “that celebration is clear in their live shows.”

I will now offer a background on each band member of 47Soul. Abu Kwaik immersed himself in the arts from childhood. As he told me, he started with drumming on the table, and later went to a music center to take drum lessons (pers. comm., July 29, 2016). Abu Kwaik also wrote poems in classical Arabic in his Arabic language class at school, priming him for the poetic element of writing rap lyrics. Abu Kwaik began attempting to rap as a child as well, making his parents laugh with lyrics about Jordan’s beloved national dish *mansaf* [lamb with rice]. He also joined his brother in taking up the guitar. While his brother dropped it after a month, Abu Kwaik kept at it (pers. comm., July 29, 2016). His parents also supported his music interests. At first they could not afford to get him a drum set, and even if they could have, it would not have been permitted in their building because of the noise. Eventually, his mother lent him the money to buy his first set. He performed for the first time in eighth grade, at a summer celebration for girl scouts and boy scouts held at a swimming pool at Sports City, an athletic complex in Amman. They played covers of songs by bands like Nirvana, one of the foundational bands of alternative music in the US. Developing his music career in Amman, he co-founded the band Zaman Al Zaatar (*Zaman al-Za‘tar*) [Sign of Thyme], with composer, producer, and bassist Yacoub Abu Ghosh, a cornerstone of Amman’s music scenes, and ‘ud player Ahmad Barakat, influenced by traditional Arab music, funk, bebop, and rock (*Cairo Scene* 2013).

Abu Kwaik went to college in the US and in Jordan: he graduated from University of Nebraska, Lincoln, in 2008, with a degree in electrical engineering. He also studied at Jordan University for a time when visa issues forced him to leave the US (pers. comm., July 29, 2016). He gained regional fame as a percussionist and singer in the band El Morabba3 (*al-*

Murabba') [The Square], founded in 2009 (El Morabba3 n.d.). As I discuss in greater detail in Chapter 3, Abu Kwaik also established a solo career, rapping and singing while accompanying himself on the acoustic guitar under the stage name El Far3i. He eventually left El Morabba3 to form 47Soul, but continues to perform his solo act.

With the support of his parents, Arnaout started playing music when he was four years old (pers. comm., July 29, 2016). His parents both supported him and had deep involvement in the arts themselves: his mother as a radio DJ who also sang, and his father as a movie director. Like Abu Kwaik, Arnaout drummed on tables when he was little, and he also tried the harmonica. He probably performed publicly for the first time at nine or ten. Although he has left the band, Arnaout is also known for being a co-founder, electric guitarist, and producer for Autostrad, one of Amman's foundational alternative rock groups that started in 2007 and still performs today (Rawashdeh 2015).

Like Abu Kwaik, Sbait went to college in the US. He studied at Brandeis University, where he majored in theater arts and sociology and minored in peace, conflict, and coexistence studies (Safran-Hon 2016). Sbait was a Slifka Scholar at Brandeis, awarded for fostering coexistence between Arabs and Jews in Israel, and he graduated in 2008 (Safran-Hon 2016). On 47Soul's homepage, he describes himself as "a performer and an educator who uses dance, theatre, singing and poetry as means of self-expression as well as tools for community building and social empowerment" (47Soul n.d.). Before 47Soul, Sbait co-founded the band Ministry of Dub-Key with Bruno Cruz in Haifa in 2009, and collaborated with Maysa Daw. Ministry refers to the famous British dance club and collective Ministry of Sound, while Dub-Key references *dabkeh*, dub music, and the prominent Palestinian refugee symbol, the key, which represents the house keys kept by refugees who were forced to flee their homes (Karkabi 2018:184). Ministry of Dub-Key's sound combines the traditions of

dabkeh with aspects of hip-hop and reggae. Karkabi draws on Gilroy (2005) to describe the band's use of reggae as evoking "a global culture of universal resistance against oppression" (2018:183). While the band has not achieved the global reach of 47Soul, their use of reggae represents a global mindset, connecting Palestinian resistance with a genre that has become a symbol of global resistance. Ministry of Dub-Key was most active from 2010-2013, when they toured extensively in Palestine (Karkabi 2018:185). They resumed performing at least as early as 2016.

Among the band members, Sbait has been the most outspokenly political in his artistic career. On June 10, 2014, The Israeli Lands Administration arrested Sbait along with several other activists for participating in direct action aiming to reclaim the land of his ancestral Palestinian village, Iqrit (*Iqrit*) (Brehony 2015). In this incident, Sbait chose to act in a way that had inherent risk for the sake of his broader goals as an activist. He explained in an interview that the Iqrit event was one of many times that authorities blocked his actions. This includes the interrogation he faced in Israel after performing politically sensitive material at a street festival (Garratt 2016). Karkabi writes that Israeli forces took Sbait off stage at a Haifa festival and accused him of incitement to terrorism; at another time, Karkabi continues, a Muslim shaykh with a rifle and a gang of thugs drove Ministry of Dub-Key away from a bar in Nazareth (2013:314).

Yallah! Underground [2017 (2015)], a documentary chronicling alternative musicians from 2009-2014 directed by Farid Eslam, features one of Walaa Sbait's politically provocative performances. Accompanied by other percussionists, he performs a spoken word piece in English while playing a *daff* (pl. *dufuf*) [frame drum], which critiques US and European stereotyping of Arabs as terrorists. His lines in the performance are [39:00-40:33],

Search me I'm an Arab I'm a walking bomb,

straight up from the land of martyrdom,
check out every airport check out every checkpoint,
search me I'm an Arab I'm a walking bomb.
Yeah I'm a terrorist but I'm one of those who you will never expect,
I'm one of those who out of your mind, you will never get.
Yeah I'm a terrorist but no rifle on my back,
no explosives in my bag,
no TNT in my pants,
I just need a one shot of chance.
With that one shot I'll shoot you a bullet of poetry,
assassinate you with a [inaudible],
suicide bomb you with a freestyle dub,
and I'll torture you with the rhythm of my bass drums,
and I'll demolish your house with a song out of my throat.
Come drink with me some of my Arabic coffee ain't that a kidnap attempt.
Yeah I'm a terrorist but of a different kind,
yeah I'm a terrorist but one of those you will never expect.

In his piece, Sbait reinterprets the concept of the terrorist, not as one that enacts violence, but as one that performs challenging art. As he explains in the documentary [19:24-19:32], "Cultural resistance people, believe in cultural resistance. Because the oppressor is afraid of culture. That is our weapon." If taken out of context, his statement "I'm a terrorist" could be enough for a country to block his visa. However, the documentary that features this particular piece of Sbait's artistic output has not received widespread international attention.

Ramzy Suleiman grew up in the Washington DC area (All 4 Palestine, n.d.). Listening to his mother's records, Suleiman started learning to sing and play the piano by transcribing Ray Charles songs by ear and imitating his voice (BWW News Desk 2011). He began singing at churches and other venues as a child, winning honors for his performance of Ray Charles's, "Baby What'd I Say," at the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer in Bethesda, Maryland (Lane 2009). He also learned to play the clarinet, saxophone, and the melodica (Lane 2009). Suleiman has expressed that he is "eternally grateful" for his upbringing; his family travelled globally, spending every summer abroad—including in his father's hometown, El Bireh, Palestine—which gave him and his sister, Nura, the chance to learn about the world from a young age (Lane 2009).

Suleiman studied at Berklee College of Music in Boston, where he was a recipient of the Berklee Achievement Scholarship (All 4 Palestine, n.d.). He spent a semester abroad, studying Mediterranean percussion in Athens, Greece, and graduated in 2009 (Lane 2009). After graduating, Suleiman recorded the jazz and soul-influenced album *The News Caters Home* (2010) with his band formed at Berklee, Ramzy & the Newscasters (later, Ramzy and the Brothers Handsome). He has also attended Mali's Festival in the Desert, where he had the opportunity to play with contemporary African music stars, Salif Keita, Vieux Farka Touré, and Habib Koité (Lane 2009).

Setting the stage for the founding of 47Soul, Suleiman moved to Palestine and then to Jordan with the goal of learning to play the Arabic org. Once a member of 47Soul, he recorded his first solo album in Amman, *Z The People – Zayn al-Nās* [Z The People] (2019), which highlights Suleiman's soulful vocal abilities. He told me that his Amman album launch at Corner's Pub on February 4, 2019, was the most important night he has experienced musically (pers. comm., February 5, 2019). He also shared different Arab artists

who have influenced his work, including Muhammad Abdallah’s melodies (founding member, lead singer, and electric guitarist in the central Jordanian alternative band, El Morabba3), rising rapper The Synaptik’s Arab trap, and most of all, his current bandmates Abu Kwaik and Sbait (pers. comm., February 5, 2019).

A friend introduced Abu Kwaik to Suleiman’s music. Speaking about the first time they met, Abu Kwaik said to me, “we became brothers at that moment” (pers. comm., January 22, 2019). Abu Kwaik explained that Suleiman expanded his perspective on mixing Arabic and English lyrics. He said, “I’ve always felt that multi-lingual bands are cheesy—I always hated the idea—but with 47Soul it felt very natural because when I met Ramzy, I felt like this guy is like me and Jehaz and Walaa, but he grew up in DC” (pers. comm., July 29, 2016). At the time, Abu Kwaik was already sharing an apartment with his cousin Arnaout (Langendo 2018). Sbait connected with the others, having first heard Abu Kwaik’s solo act, El Far3i, on YouTube (47SOUL 2015).

Shermine Sawalha, founder and creative director of Malahi (*Malāhī*) [Amusement Park], a production, booking, and management company for the arts, has worked with 47Soul since their formation (pers. comm., July 24, 2016). Sawalha helped arrange their first concerts, including one called “Borderless Beats,” held in June 2013 at Blue Fig restaurant in Amman. Abu Kwaik explains that prior to the show, they could only manage to hold three rehearsals together because of border crossing restrictions (47SOUL 2015). Still, the event was a huge success. In a YouTube video featuring part of the performance, the audience dances and cheers to the band’s improvisatory playing (Videoisahumanright 2013). While now 47Soul’s songs are more pre-composed, aspects of the band’s playing that night continued: Tareq playing the *īqā’*, *malfūf*, on *darbūka*, Suleiman playing synthesized *mijwiz*, Sbait dancing *dabkeh*, and Arnaout playing electric guitar. Abu Kwaik says, “It was the first

time I performed at a show where the person who valet parks, the person whose car he parked, the person who reserved a table, and the waiter serving it, were all dancing!” (47SOUL 2015).

As Sawalha explained to me, 47Soul shifted from a side project to a main idea in 2014, the year the band gained recognition in the UK (pers. comm., July 24, 2016). Sawalha’s coworker Danni Evans had connections that helped the band get established there (pers. comm., July 24, 2016). By November 2014, they had already sold out shows at some of London’s most well-known venues that feature international music; been featured on television in a segment on how they have inspired the Arab community of London, and performed at two summer festivals, including at Quest Festival at Newton Abbot Racecourse in South Devon, an event that combined world music performances, dance, and natural health shows (Herald Express 2014a; 2014b). Abu Kwaik said, “The idea of 47Soul wasn’t that this could actually become a band,” and continued, “It was more like a ‘seasonal collective.’ It wasn’t serious. But after we played those shows in the UK and we felt the impact of what we’d done, the idea of this becoming a full-time band started to come out” (Grundey 2018). According to Sawalha, 47Soul performed in Amman again in 2014 as well at an event titled “TBA Collective Live” (pers. comm., July 24, 2016).

In 2014, 47Soul’s four members moved to London together, demonstrating their commitment to the band. Arnaout explained that they built a small scene and formed connections in London, a city considered central to the international music industry (pers. comm., July 29, 2016). Not only did London position the band in a global music hub, but it also allowed all four members to live in the same city as well. As Abu Kwaik explained, they could hardly rehearse before their first performance in Amman in 2013 because of border

crossing restrictions (47SOUL 2015). London did not come with the same issues, enabling the band to focus on its development.

47Soul's performance at London's Jazz Café in 2015 including a striking moment midway through the show. Suddenly, speakers blared with the sound of an air raid siren. Sbait pointed up at an imaginary military airplane and urged the audience to duck for cover with him (Karkabi 2018:190) (Brehony 2015). This part of the performance highlights the experiences of everyday Palestinians living in a conflict-zone under Israeli occupation. By attending shows such as this one in London, 47Soul fans who do not face such threats could potentially open themselves to be affected by new experiences, imagining the fear people face who live in the shadow of possible military assaults.

In 2016, 47Soul's first scheduled tour in the US had to be canceled before it began, when one member's visa was denied. Even though they had provided their proofs of residency and work visas for the UK, as well as their past international performance history—including Australia, New Zealand, Chile, Canada, Scotland, France, and Egypt—the US Embassy stated that they had not provided sufficient proof that they intended to leave the US after their tour (Hoory 2016). Immigration lawyers, arts administrators, and European diplomats say that the US “almost automatically” subjects performers with noticeably Arab and/or Muslim names to further delays through “additional administrative processing” when they apply for visas to tour there (Rohter 2012). As I discuss in Chapter 1, following the crackdown on perceived-LGBTIQ+ individuals in Egypt after a Mashrou' Leila concert there in 2016, 47Soul's two concerts scheduled to be held in Egypt that year were canceled as well (Holslin 2018).

Border restrictions have been a major challenge that 47Soul's members have contended with throughout their career. At a basic level, none of the members can live in

their ancestral Palestinian villages. Because of Sbeit's internal displacement as a Palestinian raised in Haifa, he holds an Israeli passport, which restricts where he can travel in the Arab world (Garratt 2016). They often only receive confirmation that they are permitted to travel for performances one or two days before the shows are supposed to take place (Saeed 2018). Abu Kwaik explains that they cannot be in many Arab countries together for long periods of time, and emphasizes that this is not just their challenge, but a widespread one that many face in the region. Abu Kwaik also resists being defined by this struggle when he says, "That's our story at the end of the day, and our people's story," yet "It's not the only part of our story" (Grundey 2018).

Despite cancelations in the US and Egypt, 47Soul toured widely in 2016. They played to enthusiastic crowds at WOMAD (World of Music, Arts, and Dance) and Glastonbury Festival in the UK for the second year in a row (Saeed 2018). 47Soul also performed at four other world music festivals that year: WOMADelaide in Adelaide, Australia; Dumfries and Galloway Arts Festival and Knockengoroch World Ceilidh in Scotland; and Liverpool International Music Festival in England. They performed in Amman on July 29, 2016, and were even permitted to perform for the first time in the West Bank in 2016, which was difficult to accomplish because none of the band members have Palestinian Authority papers (Garratt 2016).

In 2017, 47Soul's July performance at Amman's biannual Al Balad Music Festival highlights the fast pace of their touring schedule. According to festival organizer Mu'ath Isaeid, the band members were in Jordan for less than twenty-four hours (pers. comm., July 27, 2017). They returned to the airport as soon as their show ended, flying back to the UK for another gig. Further, from September 13-23, 2017, they were scheduled to perform eleven shows in ten days in Switzerland, Germany, Denmark, and Norway (pers. comm., July 27,

2017). That year they also performed at Denmark's Roskilde, the largest music festival in Northern Europe. In MENA in 2017, they also performed in Rabat, Morocco during Ramadan (*Morocco World News* 2017); the United Arab Emirates at NYU Abu Dhabi's world music festival, Barzakh (*The National* 2017); and the Jazz in Carthage festival in Tunisia (*Agency Tunis Afrique Press* 2017).

47Soul released *Balfron Promise*, the band's first full-length album, on February 2, 2018 on the independent London-based label, Cooking Vinyl. The album got positive reviews in English-language media; it was named The Guardian's "world music album of the month" (Denselow 2018) and *Arab News* reporter, Iain Akerman (2018), called them "the poster boys of Arab alternative music." Abu Dhabi's *The National* (Saeed, Workman, and Hawksley 2018), and Saudi Arabia's *Arab News* (Preradovic 2018) also included *Balfron Promise* on their lists of the best albums of the year.

47Soul's members named the album after Balfron Tower, a high-rise where they lived for a time in Poplar, one of London's poorest neighborhoods (Holslin 2018). The Hungarian-born architect Ernő Goldfinger designed the towers in 1968 for social housing, which refers to buildings owned by a local council or non-for-profit, fixed at affordable rental rates for low-income residents (Langendo 2018). The building has more recently been dubbed "a vivid microcosm of London's gentrification" (Wainwright 2014). From 2008 to 2014, the social housing residents of the building were gradually evicted—a luxury developer had bought the building and transformed it into private housing to cater to nearby bank employees (Langendo 2018; Wainwright 2014). As residents were evicted and their apartments emptied over the years, the local arts organization, Bow Arts Trust, temporarily filled some through an artist-residency program. Through this program, 47Soul lived in an apartment on the 21st floor of Balfron Tower while working on the album (Holslin 2018).

“Property guardians” filled other apartments in the tower, a role that one former resident calls “basically getting paid to squat,” and adds that property guardians can be given 24 hours’ notice that they must vacate a property (Butler 2013). 47Soul received two 28-day notices to move out of the apartment in Balfron Tower during their eleven-month stay, which they successfully appealed (Holslin 2018). In the last months of the drawn-out eviction and renovation process, a series of arts events were held at the tower, including pop-up gallery showings, supper clubs, and performances by the live/work studio residents, which Wainwright (2014) described as a “live gentrification jamboree.”

Abu Kwaik connects the transformation of Balfron Tower to the situation of Palestinians when he says,

Thinking of the tower and what we’re doing there and the history of our ancestors, [and] our people having to leave because someone thinks this land should be theirs, versus leaving a building because someone thinks this building would do much better as a mall [for example] ... [there are] parallels. (Langendo 2018)

Simply put, both Palestinians and social housing residents in London face being forced out of their homes. The band lyrically evokes these situations of forced displacement with the album track “Move Around” where Sbait sings, “My people, moved around, more people move around, my people move around, before we all get moved around.” 47Soul has both chosen to move and been forced to, as the last phrase of Sbait’s lyrics suggests.

Balfron Promise also evokes a document of historical significance to Israeli and Palestinian history: the Balfour Declaration. Motivated to gain Jewish support for the Allies in World War I, the UK authorized Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour to write the letter that is now known as “The Balfour Declaration,” dated November 2, 1917, to Lord Lionel Walter Rothschild, leader of the Jewish community in Great Britain. The letter pledged that the British government would support the founding of a Jewish state in Palestine, while at

once not violating the rights of the Palestinians residing there (Alderman 2015). It is now viewed as a milestone in the creation of the state of Israel (Gelvin 2011:219).

Balfon Promise as a whole showcases the band members' range of musical abilities. It features Sbait's powerful bass vocals, as well as rap lyrics by Sbait, Suleiman, and Abu Kwaik, who often trade vocal lines within songs. The core elements of Arab traditional music that they have used before also still stand, such as Abu Kwaik playing *īqā' malfūf* on the *darbūka* in "Gamar" [0:58]. The album cover features an illustration of a crowd dancing *dabkeh* in lines as well. The lyrics deal with the potential for sudden crisis, which they interweave with references to the social media fabric that is now integral to so many peoples' lives. For example, the track title "Marked Safe" likely references a Facebook feature when, in the wake of a major natural disaster or violent incident, users in that location can mark themselves safe for friends and family who are wondering if they are all right. I hear the same concept echoed in "Mo Light" when Abu Kwaik sings in English, "We're good we're good, we alright, they've seen us alive." Hamad (2020) also points to a moment when the bands' lyrics combine Arab tradition with the setting of an upcoming riot. "Locked Up Shop" includes the refrain [1:35],

aḥiliq yā ḥalā'

احلق يا حلاق

Shave, oh barber

which, Hamad writes, is traditionally sung to grooms getting their pre-wedding haircut.

Instead, the song twists the phrase to refer to getting a haircut prior to a riot, or as Suleiman sings in English, "this riot's like a wedding day" and "trim me up for war."

47Soul added to the list of countries where they have performed during the *Balfon Promise* album tour. Their show at Abu Dhabi's second Al Barzakh Festival at the Red Theater was their first in the Gulf region (Saeed 2018). The band toured in the US for the

first time in January 2019. They performed at University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg Center, at Union Stage and Tropicalia in Washington DC, and at GlobalFest in New York City. In a video from one of these performances (now no longer on the band’s Facebook page), Walaa Sbait called out to the audience, proclaiming as he often does that their music is, “anti-colonial music;” “anti-fascist music;” “anti-apartheid music;” “anti-walls music;” and that “this music is for the freedom of Palestine.” His call-outs bring to mind Karkabi’s argument, that 47Soul’s work builds international political solidarity, by positioning Palestinian liberation as part of global resistance movements.

In January 2019, 47Soul also returned to perform in Jordan. On January 25, I saw their back-to-back shows at Canvas Lounge in the Weibdeh neighborhood of Amman. They framed the first early-evening concert as a family show, and the second as 21+, with the bar serving alcohol. Both shows were packed with enthusiastic fans. 47Soul’s veteran sound engineer for the two performances, David Scott, estimated that some 650 people attended (pers. comm., January 25, 2019). The concerts were very similar in terms of set list, though the first was better-lit and drew a more diverse age group. During “Intro to Shamstep” in the second performance, a handful of fans each waved a black-and-white checkered scarf called a *kūffiyya* in the air, a symbol of Palestinian national solidarity, that matched the pattern of Sbait’s shirt. During the song, the front rows of audience members enthusiastically danced *dabkeh*. That night was the only time I have heard of a band playing two shows back-to-back in Amman, and I interpret it as one of the many ways that 47Soul works to connect with as wide a range of fans as possible. It is likely that young people coming from families who are wary of establishments serving alcohol would be more willing to let their children attend the first show, where none was served. Drinking alcohol is officially not permissible in Islam, and I did see many more fans wearing the *hijab* during the first show.

On the “About Us” section of 47Soul’s homepage, they write that in 2019, they performed more than 160 live shows internationally (47Soul n.d.). The list includes a number of music festivals in the US: the Ann Arbor Summer Festival in Michigan; Indiana University Bloomington’s Lotus Festival; and South by Southwest Music Festival (SXSW) in Austin, Texas. They also performed at festivals outside the US, including London’s world music festival, TD Sunfest; Dubai’s Arabic Alternative Music Festival; and Mexico City’s radical Mestizo festival of music of the world, Wasla. Additionally, 47Soul recorded three live performances that were later shared on YouTube. First, on June 13, 2019, YouTube Space Dubai posted 47Soul’s four-part performance. Second, on August 26, 2019, *NPR Music* released 47Soul’s Tiny Desk Concert. Walaa Sbait was definitely the first to dance *dabkeh* on the tiny desk the series is named after. Third, 47Soul recorded a live performance for the Seattle, Washington radio station, KEXP-FM, which the station posted on YouTube on December 3, 2019. Of all their numerous performances, Abu Kwaik told me that their shows in Jenin (*Jinīn*) and Nablus (*Nābulus*) in the West Bank were some of the most moving. He said that his mother is from Jenin, now “a roughed up place,” and it was powerful to play the band’s same set from Glastonbury for Palestinian audiences there (pers. comm., January 22, 2019).

While 47Soul’s members are no longer all living together in one country—and are instead split between London, the US, and Palestine (47Soul n.d.)—this did not stop them from releasing their second full-length album, *Semitics*, on August 21, 2020. Recorded in London, the album is by far their most collaborative yet. The album features five guest rappers, three of whom are based in London: Fedzilla, an up-and-coming German-Chilean rapper who writes on her Facebook page that she “specializes in multi-lingual lyricism;” Lowkey, the veteran British-Iraqi rapper and activist; and Shadia Mansour, the British-

Palestinian rapper widely known as “The First Lady of Arabic hip-hop” (Isherwood 2014). 47Soul also collaborates with two MENA based rappers: The Synaptik, a Palestinian who is one of Jordan’s fastest rising; and veteran Tamer Nafar, of the foundational Palestinian rap crew, DAM. 47Soul collaborates with Jordanian music teacher Hasan Minawi as well, who gained fame playing the musical instrument he created out of a drinking straw on *Arab’s Got Talent* (2012) and on *Britain’s Got Talent* (2020). Their spectrum of collaborators speaks to 47Soul’s ever-increasing efforts to connect with as wide a range of people as possible, as well as their efforts at fostering political solidarity: Fedzilla, Lowkey, Shadia Mansour, and Tamer Nafar are all openly political in their music.

On their Bandcamp page for the album, 47Soul calls their album title *Semitics*, “one of the most emotionally-charged words in the English language, especially when preceded by the word Anti,” and continues,

Tareq argues that “the term is used in a strange way, and in so much propaganda. People need to know that Semite doesn’t just mean Hebrew alone – Arabs are included.” After all, “semitic languages” include both Hebrew and Arabic “and all the people who spoke those languages mixed a lot – it was one of the most metropolitan areas in history. The album is titled *Semitics* because it has a lot of these theological/historical/geographical themes – but it’s a dance album!” (47SOUL 2020)

In the statement, the members of 47Soul capture the complexity they want their work to represent. The statement at once pushes back against erasures and oversimplifications and also emphasizes that this music is meant for dancing. I will next analyze two of the tracks from *Semitics* through their music videos, in order to show how 47Soul fosters joy through *dabkeh* music and dance traditions. Through *dabkeh*, they express Palestinian perseverance, and nuance representations of Arab cultures and identities. As Karkabi (2018) argues, 47Soul creates moments of political solidarity across borders through *dabkeh*, and the band has only increased such efforts in *Semitics*.

47Soul’s Decolonial Joy in “Border Ctrl” and “Dabke System”

Of the four music videos 47Soul released from the tracks on *Semitics*, I focus on the open-ended joy they foster through the sounds and steps of *dabkeh* in the following two: “Border Ctrl” and “Dabke System.” In my analysis, I apply Montgomery and bergman’s understanding of joy as a social quality, an openness to affect others and be affected by them in the process of strengthening the bonds of activist communities (2017:284). I argue that the joyful performances in these two music videos by 47Soul and their collaborators enact decolonial politics. As they dance, rap, and sing, they express Palestinian perseverance in the face of Israeli occupation. They counter misrepresentations of Arabs as merely violent or victims of violence, and encourage political solidarity, inviting others to join them in enacting the future they seek, now.

The first music video I consider, “Border Ctrl,” features 47Soul’s first collaborations with women: rappers Fedzilla and Shadia Mansour.



Figure 12. From left to right, Fedzilla and Shadia Mansour in “Border Ctrl.” Screen captures by the author (47SOUL 2020).

Fedzilla adds a third language to 47Soul's repertoire by rapping in Spanish;⁴⁷ she is also German-Chilean, and Mansour is British and Indigenous Palestinian. They also encapsulate different positions in a music career. Fedzilla has a small following so far, while Mansour is a veteran in Arabic-language rap. While the musicians of Amman's alternative music scenes are disproportionately male, 47Soul's scope is not only Amman, but the globe. Featuring Fedzilla and Mansour shifts 47Soul towards reflecting a more diverse intersection of identities, befitting a band with global aspirations. Expanding representation in this way can also encourage greater solidarity across difference.

The visual elements of "Border Ctrl" link the pride and decolonial perseverance of *dabkeh* to 47Soul's pride for Amman and its ancient heritage. Amman is where 47Soul got its start, and its where two of its founding members, Abu Kwaik and Arnaout, grew up. Amman has persevered to become one of the oldest continuously inhabited places in the world (Al Rawashdeh 2012). The music video features aerial shots of the city's iconic, nearly two-thousand-year-old Roman Theater (Friedland and Tykot 2012), an amphitheater still in use for performances. I saw 47Soul perform there as a volunteer during Al Balad Music Festival in 2017. The music video also features the Amman Citadel, which has been inhabited beginning circa 3000-2300 BCE and was first fortified circa 2000-1500 BCE (Hübner 1992).

The music video links Amman's ancient heritage to *dabkeh* through featuring performances by the Jordanian *dabkeh* dance troupe Al Ajaweed (*al-Ajāwīd*)⁴⁸ at the Citadel [first appearing together 0:54-0:56]. Al Ajaweed performs the most traditional version of *dabkeh* yet featured in a 47Soul music video. The troupe also reappears for brief flashes

⁴⁷ 47Soul posted the Arabic lyrics and translation of "Border Ctrl" with the [official music video](#) for the track on YouTube on August 20, 2020. The translation is embedded in the optional subtitles of the video.

⁴⁸ I have not found an official translation by Al Ajaweed of their name. *Ajāwīd* is the plural form of the Arabic word *jawād*, which is typically translated as generous, magnanimous, or even noble.

throughout the video, in the same style of quick cuts between scenes that 47Soul utilizes in “Intro to Shamstep.” Unlike a formal performance however, where a stage separates dancers from their audience, 47Soul often joins Al Ajaweed in the dance, and the troupe sometimes dances circles around the band [3:29-3:31].



Figure 13. Al Ajaweed dance around Ramzy Suleiman and Walaa Sbait in “Border Ctrl.” Screen capture by the author (47Soul 2020).

Elsewhere in the video, 47Soul encourages strangers to dance with them as well [0:54-0:55] [1:02] [1:05-1:12] [1:14-1:17] [1:25-1:26] [1:32] [1:43-1:44] [1:55-1:56] [2:11-2:18] [2:32-2:33] [2:37-2:38] [2:47-2:52] [2:56-2:57] [3:20-3:22] [3:27-3:31] [3:33-3:35] [3:41-3:44], including a grinning group in Mexico where one person holds a sign that reads “¡Se Regalan ABRAZOS!” [Free HUGS!] [3:31]. To use Schiwy’s title phrase, this joy is an “open invitation” (2019) to participate, building connection and solidarity across difference.

47Soul also features an uninterrupted *dabkeh* performance by Al Ajaweed on a separate Instagram video (47Soul 2020). With ruins of Roman columns behind them, they dance *dabkeh* in a line, wearing matching military-style green clothing and tall black boots. A *lawīh* (also called *awwal*) [leader] wears all black at one end of the line. A second *lawīh* dances in front of the line and twirls a black-and-white-striped stick in his hand, later tossing it high to the other *lawīh*, who catches it from the end of the line. Some smile while they

dance, expressing the joy that *dabkeh* fosters, and each wears a black-and-white *kūffiyya* on his head, a decolonial expression of Palestinian identity. Notably, the dancers do not wear military colors in the context of violent footage, so their strength and discipline instead gets associated with their dance, a decolonial symbol of perseverance and pride.

“Border Ctrl” evokes the joy of *dabkeh* sonically as well by playing *maqām bayyati* on A. Other sounds from Arab traditional music in the song not specifically tied to *dabkeh* include the percussion instruments playing *īqā‘āt malfūf* [0:27] and *ayyūb* [0:36], as well as the multiple voices singing the chorus together [0:36]. In the vein of fostering joy to as wide an audience as possible, some may hear *īqā‘āt ayyūb* as a reggaeton beat, especially with Fedzilla’s Spanish-language verses. Ethnomusicologist Wayne Marshalls outlines the transnational influences of reggaeton (2008:31), a genre that has been strongly influenced by reggae, another globally loved genre associated with resistance. Both reggae and reggaeton are associated with the openness of a party atmosphere as well.

47Soul, Fedzilla, and Mansour express a broad critique of border restrictions in the music video in a spirit of building international solidarity. The music video includes footage of both the US-Mexico border wall and Israel’s heavily graffitied separation wall. Because the song features three languages—English, Spanish, and Arabic—it can connect to a wider linguistic audience than any previous 47Soul song, therefore supporting their efforts towards expanding solidarity. In the many traded verses and choruses of the song, the artists emphasize that the challenges of heavy border-crossing regulations are not fleeting, but instead life-defining, and call for their dissolution. For example, Suleiman sings in English [1:11-1:27], “This border control / Congesting our soul / Taking its toll on us all / We gonna dissolve / This Mexico Bethlehem wall / If you hear us heed the call.” Like the visuals, by mentioning two different border walls together in one line, Suleiman makes points of

connection among different locations and experiences, encouraging solidarity. Fedzilla’s rap verse in Spanish begins [2:22-2:24], “Bienvenido a la fila, / que definirá tu vida” [Welcome to the queue / That will define your life], referring to the long lines many are forced to wait in for hours before being permitted to cross a border. She emphasizes the hardship of being barred from crossing a border with the line [2:26-2:28] “Condenado sin la visa” [Condemned without the visa]. By not specifying which border crossing she refers to in her verse, Fedzilla leaves open the door for a wider audience to personally connect with her message. The chorus shares Fedzilla’s opening line, but in Arabic, singing [0:45-0:46],

'faḍḍal 'al' al- ṣaff

تفضل على الصف

Welcome to the queue

The phrase gets repeated throughout the song, which hints at the monotony of long hours spent waiting. The waiting is more than monotonous—it can be deadly. On August 23, 2020, an eighty-nine-year-old woman went into cardiac arrest and died while waiting with her family in their car for over six hours to cross from Tijuana to San Diego (Naso 2020). The wait times have increased due to added second screenings meant to reduce non-essential travel because of COVID-19. The final shot of the music video features a segment of this same border crossing, where it extends out into the ocean.

As Montgomery and bergman describe, experiencing joy as an openness to engaging in a process of activist community growth may involve personal feelings of pain and anger. While the track lyrically acknowledges the suffering that accompanies too many border crossing experiences, “Border Ctrl” far from projects defeat in the face of these walls. The final shot gets superimposed with the silhouetted image of Al Ajaweed’s members standing in a line, locking hands.



Figure 14. Al Ajaweed *dabkeh* dance troupe in “Border Ctrl.” Screen capture by the author (47SOUL 2020).

The image implies that together in community, they stand to challenge such oppressive power structures. Likewise, the artists provide lyrical assertions of global political solidarity. Suleiman sings, for example, “We gonna dissolve / This Mexico Bethlehem wall / If you hear us heed the call,” and Fedzilla raps [2:44-2:46], “Palestino Latino Andino no será callado [Palestinian, Latino, Andean, will not be silenced], repeating the line for emphasis. They express resilience, insisting on continuing to work together in ever-widening solidarity.

Notably, just as Schiwiy identifies in her Zapatista Indigenous media case study (2019:154), “Border Ctrl” specifically does not feature any sounds or images of human suffering. This is not to suggest such suffering does not exist—the artists bear witness to the struggles of so many in their lyrics. Yet they refuse to be reduced to mere victims. Visually, the video instead features people who express strength, pride, and an open-ended joy towards others. More than once in “Border Ctrl,” city dwellers playfully join in the dancing. The joy they express is not individual happiness, but instead a willingness to join in with 47Soul, Fedzilla, Mansour, and Al Ajaweed, who perform the world they are calling for, where their communities are not deemed irreparably broken, but instead become increasingly open and connected with one another.

47Soul expresses the decolonial joy of *dabkeh* even more strongly in their music video “Dabke System.” The video fosters a high-energy, joyful mood by featuring more than forty young Palestinian *dabkeh* dancers from a number of dance troupes (Al Bawaba 2020). This strength in numbers expresses Palestinian perseverance in the face of Israeli settler-colonialism. Further, their joyful dancing asserts that they are more than the hardships they face. On 47Soul’s homepage, the band encourages global political solidarity as well when they dedicate the track “to the Dabke dancers of the world” (47Soul n.d.). As of April 28, 2021, the video had well over three million views.

Albaz, *dabkeh* dancer and instructor at Jordan’s Al Hannounch Society for Popular Culture, described the video as featuring a more modern style of *dabkeh*. While traditional *dabkeh* is usually danced by a group of people standing next to one another in a line, she explained, this video was more like the “organized chaos” that is common in modern interpretations of the form (pers. comm., August 22, 2020). The modern interpretation featured in the music video also includes break dancing moves [0:34-0:37] [0:46] [3:02-3:05]. Additionally, the dancers perform physical depictions of phrases from the lyrics as well. For example, the second time the vocalists yell [2:09-2:11],

yā mniṭla ‘ fū ‘

يا منطلع فوق

Or we rise up!⁴⁹

three dancers jump high in the air, circling their arms above them in a slow-motion shot. The music video features aspects of traditional *dabkeh* too. Albaz identified two basic traditional *dabkeh* moves performed in the video in particular: [1:08] “wahdeh w nos” (*wahḍa wa nuṣṣ*)

⁴⁹ 47Soul posted the Arabic lyrics and translation of “Dabke System” with the [official music video](#) for the track on YouTube on June 11, 2020. The translation is embedded in the optional subtitles of the video.

[one and a half] and [3:09] “shammil”⁵⁰ (pers. comm., August 22, 2020). The dancers also twirl ropes, another aspect found in traditional *dabkeh* performances, and some wear black-and-white *kūffiyya*-s.



Figure 15. *Dabkeh* dancers twirl rope in “Dabke System.” Screen capture by the author (47SOUL 2020).

Throughout the video, viewers can share in the joy of the performers when the camera highlights dancers’ smiling faces [1:35] [1:47] [3:07] [5:01] [5:06] [5:15] [5:22]. When I see their grins, I imagine how incredibly excited they must be to dance together in a music video with 47Soul. The track also features two traditional Arab *īqā‘āt*, [0:09] *malḥūf* and [0:13] *ayyūb*. The majority of the instrumentation is synthesized, and as Rasmussen notes, the synthesizer “is capable of a completely indigenous, if synthetic, musical idiom” (1996:345-46). In other words, Rasmussen does not interpret synthesizer performance in Arab music styles as a mere imitation or imposition of Anglophone music forms. She instead credits Arabs as inventors, using the synthesizer to express music forms Indigenous to the MENA region. Or as Rasmussen writes on Arab synthesizer players, “Digital musicians evoke the ethos of tradition and celebration” (1996:359).

While the members of 47Soul and the dancers mirroring them often project tough, proud, strong personas, anyone who has been to a 47Soul concert or watched enough of their

⁵⁰ Albaz, who spells the name, شَمَل, was not sure what it means, but guessed it could be the name of a village (pers. comm., September 16, 2020).

videos knows that they make party music, and they actively aim for their audiences to have fun. I build on Karkabi’s work to frame this joy, expressed through *dabkeh* and beyond, as decolonial, in that it acknowledges a fuller spectrum of Palestinian identity than merely suffering (2018:191). The lighthearted side of their project comes through with the whimsical, absurdist choice that band members and dancers hold a number of exotic animals throughout the video, such as the blue-and-yellow macaw on Sbait’s shoulder [0:09]. One moment when the animal appearances move past whimsy is when Abu Kwaik bends down during his verse so that the white wings of a Cockatoo seem to emerge from his shoulders [2:58]. The wings evoke the free movement of a bird’s flight, and giving Abu Kwaik these wings for a moment imagines a reality where Palestinians do not face wide-ranging restrictions on their own movements. The end of the video also adds a biting decolonial spin to the animal presence by showing the lines of text [4:31], “All animal rights were protected in this project, while none of these HUMANS live with basic rights yet.” The statement, along with the fifty or so Palestinians in the music video, forcefully re-asserts their perseverance in the face of the human rights abuses they face at the hands of Israel.

The lyrics of “Dabke System” call for political solidarity and celebrate Indigeneity.

For example, the chorus sings [2:05-2:11],

yā mnaw’a’ taht
yā mniṭla’ fū’

يا منوقع تحت
يا منطلع فوق

We either fall down
Or we rise up!

This chorus sounds a refusal to be defeated by their challenges. Their choice to say “we” also serves as an open invitation to join them in rising political solidarity. Suleiman makes more specific references in his verse as well. He evokes a classic Palestinian symbol of loss and return with his line [0:30-0:32], “Pick up your keys at the lost and found.” Keys stand for the

house keys that so many Palestinians kept when forced from their homes in 1948. Keys may be all they have left of those homes, and they also represent their hope of one day returning to them. Suleiman also emphasizes *dabkeh* when he sings the song title [0:28] “Dabke System,” and references its dance steps when he sings [0:21-0:23] “You hear it now stomp on the ground.” Further, I interpret his line [0:37-0:38] “Hold on Look what we Created”⁵¹ through Freya Schiwy’s concept of prefigurative politics. Suleiman tells his listeners to focus on what the global Palestinian community has already built, instead of only what they have lost. Suleiman also points directly to issues of Indigeneity. With [0:39-0:41] “Refugee overseas still I’m a Native,” he nuances the concept of Palestinian Indigeneity by emphasizing that those forced to leave their homelands still count as Indigenous. With his line [0:44-0:46] “Don’t question the land she tell you her name,” he asserts the central importance of the land to Indigenous communities and to decolonization work. In these ways, “Dabke System” interweaves the joy of *dabkeh* with the wider work of decolonization.

Overall, I interpret the sounds and steps of “Dabke System” as a performance of joy by 47Soul and their nearly fifty collaborators. Not joy as an individual feeling of happiness, but instead, drawing on Montgomery and bergman (2017:284), as a social quality: a choice to be open to affect others and be affected by them in the context of strengthening an activist community. This community of Palestinians contributes to political projects of decolonization, I argue, because every stomp of their feet physically asserts their presence on Palestinian land, despite active Israeli attempts to erase them (McDonald 2013:18-20). Further, their joyful performances resist colonial stereotypes of Palestinians as merely violent, or victims of violence. Young dancers wear *kuffiyeh*-s not in a harmful context, but instead as they proudly dance with one of the most popular Palestinian bands in alternative

⁵¹ The capitalizations made in this phrase are by 47Soul, as shared with the [official music video](#) for the track on

Arabic music today. In a vibrant music video that compels audiences to listen, they dance a fuller spectrum of Palestinian identity. I now turn to consider an additional band in alternative Arabic music that powerfully performs *dabkeh*.

Introducing Ayloul

Like 47Soul, Ayloul is an alternative band founded in Jordan in 2013. Rather than having reached the global popularity of 47Soul, Ayloul is an emerging band full of promise, having garnered strong support from key members of Amman's alternative music scene. Further, unlike any other alternative acts I have seen perform in Jordan besides 47Soul, the members foster joy by dancing *dabkeh* with their audiences at every performance of theirs that I have attended. I choose to focus on Ayloul's two album launch performances in this chapter because they represent the triumphant celebration of the band members' long years working to release their first album. My research presented here on Ayloul aims to center understudied Arab popular music in English-language academic work.

Ayloul has six members: lead vocalist and electric guitarist Ra'ad Tabari; acoustic guitarist and vocalist Mounif Aref Zghoul; violinist Yosour Al-Zou'bi; keyboardist Ma'in Mheidat; bass guitarist Abdel Fattah Terawee; and percussionist on drum set Hayyan Jouqqa. Zghoul told me that drummers Khalid Takrouri (*Khālid Takrūrī*) and Methgal Al-Shammary (*Mithqāl al-Shammari*) previously played in the band, but each had to leave at different points in 2014 when moving to other countries (pers. comm., August 19, 2016). Al-Zou'bi describes Ayloul's music as "socially engaged indie rock" and adds, "We believe the content is just as important as the music" (pers. comm., May 11, 2019). Tabari and Zghoul agree, explaining, "Coming from different origins, we all grew up in a time of tough challenges,

where a lot of changes happened in a short period of time due to the regional crises,” and they continue, “These events had a direct effect on all of us personally, which strongly reflects in our music. We believe this is why a lot of people see our music and our style as a socially engaging band” (Dupire 2018b). On Ayloul’s homepage, other ways they describe their sound include “cinematic;” “Arab roots crossed with oriental music;” and “combining indie rock with the emotional and dramatic power of the east” (Ayloul, n.d.).

Key to the identity of the band is Zghoul, Mheidat, and Al-Zou'bi’s shared roots in the Hauran plain, a region now divided between northern Jordan, southern Syria, and the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights (pers. comm., May 11, 2019). On their homepage, Ayloul writes strongly about the importance of Hauran,

In the northern city of Irbid there is a plain no longer thought of - the Hauran Plain. The plain whose borders have been constricted by politics, scattered across countries. The plain whose socioeconomic status has been diluted to depletion. The plain whose fertile soil once bore bread now exhausted!

Within this tired plain, Ayloul was born!

Between Hauran and the farmers’ song at the time of the harvest, Ayloul was born with its six members. Contemporaries of the Arab spring revolutions, Ayloul is influenced by the history of their region and the intermingling of members of the Jordanian society with those who have been forcibly displaced. (Ayloul n.d.)

Ayloul’s reference to the constriction of the Hauran Plain’s borders by politics is a historical one. When World War I ended, the Allied Powers divided up the Ottoman Empire into different zones of control. This planning began in secret during World War I, most notably in the Sykes-Picot Agreement between the Great Britain and France. Sykes-Picot granted present-day southern Israel and Palestine, the ports of Haifa and Acre, Jordan, and southern Iraq to British control, and granted Syria, Lebanon, northern Iraq, and southeastern Turkey to French control (Grey 1916). When Ayloul draws attention to the Hauran region as central to the band’s identity, it contributes to processes of decolonization. For those listening, the band

members bring to the forefront how British and French imperial, colonial powers drew the borders that now define the region. Further, Ayloul refuses to be defined by them, instead setting the terms for the band's own identity.

Ra'ad Tabari, Ayloul's lead singer and electric guitarist, is Palestinian-Jordanian⁵² on both his mother's and his father's side. Tabari pointed to the falsetto vocal style of Tunisian singer and *'ūd* [short-neck lute] player Dhafer Youssef as a strong influence on his own singing (Alkhatib 2019:166). After receiving his bachelor's degree at Jordan University of Science and Technology in Irbid, he began a master's program in public administration at Yarmouk University (2019:161). Tabari now lives in Amman and also performs as a vocalist with the Amman alternative group Ghaem Jozi (*Ghā'im Juz'ī*) [Partly Cloudy].

Vocalist and acoustic guitarist for Ayloul, Mounif Aref Zghoul, got his start with music in sixth grade, at a music summer camp (pers. comm., August 19, 2016). His father is Jordanian and his mother is Palestinian-Jordanian (Mheidat, pers. comm., September 9, 2020). More open-minded than most families in Irbid, his parents often encouraged Zghoul to experience the arts, whether through movies, books, or music (Alkhatib 2019:160-1). He took two or three years of guitar lessons at the National Music Center in Irbid, at the same time that Al-Zou'bi took violin lessons there (Alkhatib 2019:161). The two have known each other since 2006 (pers. comm., May 11, 2019). Zghoul started his first band with Al-Zou'bi, playing a mix of pop covers and originals, though that band did not last (pers. comm., August 19, 2016). Zghoul studied graphic design in college, and now lives in Amman and works for the NGO Save the Children (Alkhatib 2019:161). Zghoul has also spent many Saturdays giving music lessons to underprivileged children and youth in Jordan through the Music

⁵² Locals use Palestinian-Jordanian to refer to those born in Jordan who are of Palestinian descent.

Works program. The program was established by Bisher Abu Taleb's company Izif (*I'zif*) [Play!],⁵³ which frames itself as the first online music school in Arabic (Sanchez 2017).

Ayloul's violinist, Yosour Al-Zou'bi, shared that his Jordanian father and Syrian mother raised him (Mheidat, pers. comm., September 9, 2020). As he told me, his parents gave him his first violin lessons as a birthday gift (pers. comm., May 11, 2019). Musicologist Hani Alkhatib was his teacher for a couple of years at The National Music Center in Irbid. In his dissertation, Alkhatib describes the center as providing children with the best musical education in the city (2019:160). Al-Zou'bi now lives in Amman, having found work there as a free-lancer for the film industry (2019:160).

Ma'in Mheidat plays the keyboard for Ayloul. He comes from a Jordanian background on his father's side and a Palestinian-Jordanian background on his mother's side (Mheidat, pers. comm., September 9, 2020). He now lives in Dubai, where he works at Cisco Systems (Alkhatib 2019:161). Ayloul's bass guitarist, Abdel Fattah Terawee, was raised by parents of Palestinian-Jordanian backgrounds (Mheidat, pers. comm., September 9, 2020). The band has rehearsed in a small rental property that his family owns (Alkhatib 2019:162). He has worked in 3-D printing for a software company in Amman, and more recently has been living in Berlin (Al-Zou'bi, pers. comm., May 11, 2019). Hayyan Jouqqa, who plays the drum set in Ayloul, comes from a Syrian background on his mother's side and a Palestinian-Jordanian background on his father's side. His sister, Lubna Jouqqa, has worked as the band's manager (Alkhatib 2019:161). According to Al-Zou'bi, he studied business administration and has lived in Amman since joining Ayloul (pers. comm., May 11, 2019).

The members of Ayloul were all college students at Jordan University of Science and Technology in Irbid. Zghoul and Al-Zou'bi, who have known one another since their

⁵³ This is the command form of the verb *'azafa*, which in this case means, to play a musical instrument.

childhood music lessons, met Mheidat and Khalid Takrouri (percussionist in the band until 2014) and jammed together for a couple of years at their university's music room (Mheidat, pers. comm., September 9, 2020). As Al-Zou'bi told me, they started playing as a group around 2011, enjoying having jam sessions, playing covers, and performing small gigs here and there (pers. comm., May 11, 2019). Still, Zghoul adds that it is hard to make music in Irbid, as there are very few venues (pers. comm., August 19, 2016). He added that people are less interested in and supportive of the arts there, and the schools do not include music in the basic curriculum—instead only offering extra classes in music that no one takes. Someone working at Ayloul's May 2, 2019 album launch in Irbid told me that Karaj [Garage], the city's first independent music space, opened recently. Before Ayloul formally started, multiple members also volunteered together at Al Balad Theater in Amman and for its biannual music festival, Al Balad Music Festival; Zghoul has volunteered with them since 2011 or 2012 (pers. comm., August 19, 2016).

In September 2013, explained Al-Zou'bi, the band received an offer to perform at Amman Art Week. After receiving the invitation, they rapidly composed three or four songs together for their upcoming performance, and formally named their group after the month of September when this burst of creative work took place. Al-Zou'bi called September in Jordan a balanced month: not too cold or too hot (pers. comm., May 11, 2019). As Mheidat said, “most of the important milestones for the band happened in September” (Mende 2016). As part of the art festival, their first show was held in the park outside the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts in the Amman neighborhood of Weibdeh. Mheidat said that they played well together that night, and the audience responded positively to their songs (Mende 2016). They rehearsed at Tabari's home in Irbid until Terawee joined the band in 2014, who offered a rental property that his family owned in Amman as a practice room (Alkhatib 2019:167).

Ayloul then met and played at the Terawee's property consistently for around seven hours a week on Fridays and Saturdays (which is the weekend in Jordan and other Muslim-majority countries) (Alkhatib 2019:167). Jouqqa also joined the band either in late 2014 or early 2015 (Mheidat, pers. comm., September 9, 2020). Many emphasize the band members' chemistry as an important factor in their development. Al-Zou'bi mentioned that their chemistry arose from spending so much time together (pers. comm., May 11, 2019). Alkhatib writes that the group makes decisions together easily because of their strong friendships with one another (2019:167).

Amman's alternative Arabic music community has noticeably supported the members of Ayloul as their music careers have developed. This support has come from bands, individual musicians, and from the independent arts institution Al Balad Theater. In terms of support from bands, Zghoul gave me the following example: members of El Morabba3, a well-established and respected alternative Jordanian band, let them borrow two of their guitars for their third concert (pers. comm., August 19, 2016). Zghoul remembers that he played the show using Tareq Abu Kwaik's guitar. I discuss Abu Kwaik primarily as a member of 47Soul in this chapter, but he was a member of El Morabba3 before 47Soul got its start. Other more established musicians have helped Ayloul organize concerts in the past as well, such as Odai Shwaghfeh (*'Uday Shuwāghfa*), another former member of El Morabba3 (Alkhatib 2019:167).

In terms of institutional support, longtime Al Balad Theater festival organizer Mu'ath Isaeid explained that members of Ayloul have gained arts industry experience by volunteering at the theater (pers. comm., August 20, 2016). The theater has provided rehearsal space for the band in the past as well. Isaeid also mentioned that Ayloul's first performance at the theater had a massive turnout and was a success. In 2015, the theater

chose to feature Ayloul in its biannual Al Balad Theater Music Festival, held from July 29 to August 3 at Amman’s Roman and Odeon Theaters, exposing thousands of new listeners to their music (pers. comm., August 20, 2016). The festival lineup also featured two other Jordanian bands, El Morabba3 and Za'ed Na'es (*Zā 'id Nā 'iṣ*) [Plus Minus], along with musicians from Tunisia, Palestine, Iraq, and Lebanon (Freij 2015). Zghoul emphasized the importance of Al Balad Theater to their band when he told me,

They have always been so supportive of us, and I believe they are supportive of everyone in the scene. It’s the only official cultural place where they can support you without getting into wanting to control something. They do it just because they don’t want anyone to control it. They fund and support the independence of the art. Otherwise you can find a lot of sponsors, but usually they want to have it the way they want, especially when it comes to sponsoring with direct funding. But at Al Balad it’s different. They’ve always been so supportive. When we had concerts and didn’t have any place to rehearse, they gave us the space to rehearse for free, and we had concerts there for free, and I think they’ve been doing this because they have believed in us as a project, and now it’s started growing. (pers. comm., August 19, 2016)

Zghoul highlighted for me the many ways that Al Balad Theater, under the direction of Raed Asfour, has financially supported them—a true testament to Asfour and his organization’s dedication to the arts. Zghoul’s powerful statement that “they fund and support the independence of the art” shows their commitment to fostering creativity and ingenuity in their community.

In 2015, Ayloul also performed their song “Bahr Mayyet” (*Baḥr Mayyit*) [Dead Sea] for the *Roya TV* program “Caravan” (Alkhatib 2019:168). While the song’s lyrics do not mention specifics, Al-Zou'bi explained to me that the song was based on an actual incident of femicide where a brother drowned his sister in the Dead Sea (pers. comm., May 11, 2019). The lyrics elude to the femicide in the following two lines [0:37-0:42],

Baḥr Mayyit wa itnīn ‘ayyishīn

بحر ميت واتنين عايشين

A Dead Sea, and two alive⁵⁴

and later [3:41-3:49],

inta 'ayyish wa anā wa al-baḥar
mayyitīn

انت عايش وأنا والبحر ميتين

You are alive, but me and the sea are
dead

The lyrics indicate that at first, there were two people in the narrative, and then later, one had died. Knowing Jordan's relatively strict censorship standards, Alkhatib calls it very brave of Ayloul to refer to this actual event in the song (2019:163). Additionally, Alyoul performed for *BalaFeesh*, a live concert series founded by Hana Malhas (*Hanā' Malḥas*), a singer-songwriter in Amman. On January 7, 2016, the *BalaFeesh* YouTube channel shared a selection from Ayloul's performance as well.

The Ayloul band members continued to receive community support as they worked on their first album. They were new to the recording process, Zghoul told me, and so Amman's well-established rapper Satti happily helped them with their first recording session (pers. comm., August 19, 2016). Al-Zou'bi explained that Al Balad Theater funded fifty percent of the album costs (pers. comm., May 11, 2019). These highlights demonstrate that Amman's arts community has believed in Ayloul's project, enough to continue supporting the band's development for years.

In the lead up to Ayloul's first album release, notable performances included the band's May 2018 concert at Amman's Odeon Theater as part of Europe Day, organized by the EU Network of Cultural Institutes (EUNIC) and the European Union in Jordan. Ayloul was one of only two bands featured at the event, the other being the Swedish pop group

⁵⁴ Ayloul posted the Arabic lyrics and translation of "Bahar Mayyet" in the text below the [official lyric video](#) for the track on YouTube on November 24, 2019.

Diskopunk (Dupire 2018a). In August 2018, Ayloul performed at the Zara Expo in Amman in support of a fundraiser for Gaza, after some 18,000 people were wounded in the “Great March of Return” protests (Dupire 2018b). In January 2019, Ayloul played in Egypt as part of the Middle East Music Event (MEME) held at ZED Park (*Arab News* 2019) in Cairo.

Ayloul released their first album, the nine track *Salute to Al-Ghor* (2019) [Salute to the Jordan Valley], on March 7, 2019. On the Facebook event for their first album launch, Ayloul members wrote that they partly self-funded the album, with additional financial support from Al Balad Theater (Ayloul 2019). They recorded the album at The Studio in Amman, with additional collaboration, recording, and mixing by David Scott, the city’s veteran sound engineer. Once Scott moved to Jordan in the 2000s, he also produced some of Jordan’s most iconic alternative albums, such as El Morabba3’s first self-titled album. *Salute to Al Ghor* was mastered in Karlsruhe, Germany at 24-96 Mastering Studio.

The album garnered attention for Ayloul outside of Jordan’s alternative music scene as well. For example, Universal Music MENA reached out to Ayloul to set up a distribution deal for the album through a contact of theirs that works for them, explained Al-Zou’bi (pers. comm., May 11, 2019). In April 2019, Apple Music featured Ayloul on their streaming service as part of an initiative to feature music from the Middle East’s “underground scene” (*Al Riyadh* 2019). Unlike 47Soul, Ayloul’s members are not full-time musicians. Having fewer hours to dedicate to their music, it took them longer to release their first album. Impressively, they have still managed to release a well-received album, gain a distribution deal, and start rising in fame.

In the next section of this chapter, I will focus on the album’s opening track, “Nazel Al Ghor” (*Nāzil ‘al-Ghūr*) [Going to Al Ghor]. As a case study, it will demonstrate the

band's skill in bringing joy to their listeners. It interweaves Arab traditional music and dance with rock music and lyrics that speak to the challenging realities of their homeland. Other album tracks feature these different elements as well. Evoking Arab tradition, Al-Zou'bi plays *maqām ṣabā* on the violin in his opening *taqsīm* [solo instrumental improvisation] for the track, "Arraf" (*Arrāf*) [Fortuneteller], for example (Alkhatib 2019:166). Addressing the region's challenges, "Shu Bekoun Jamil" (*Shū Bikūn Jamīl*) [How Beautiful It Would Be] points to the tragedy of war with the line [0:46-1:03],

*shū bikūn jamīl.. law būz ad-
dabbabe l-tanshīf al-ghassīl*

شو بكون جميل.. لو بوز الدبابة لتنشيف الغسيل

How beautiful it would be, if the tank's
barrel was for drying laundry⁵⁵

The choice to use the conditional tense in this line emphasizes that sustained peace is not the current reality in MENA.

Unlike any other band I came across in my fieldwork, Ayloul chose to hold the first of two album launch events in the northern Jordanian city of Irbid. As Al-Zou'bi explained, "It's a thank you for the place that gathered us and made this band work" (pers. comm., May 11, 2019). Band members called their shows in Irbid and Salt some of their most enjoyable to perform. They said, despite sound quality challenges, their audiences had amazing energy, and continued, "The attention of the crowd was unbelievable. They were focused on the music and the lyrics, and discussed the messages in the songs with us after the shows. It was a very rewarding and rich experience and it made it worth the hassle and the technical issues" (Mrad 2019).

After the album launched, Ayloul also performed at Al Balad Music Festival on June 26, 2019, and played shows in Rabat and Casablanca, Morocco; Copenhagen, Denmark; and

Berlin, Germany. In October 2019, the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts hosted them for a show. On January 10, 2020, they performed again in Cairo at the Middle East Music Event at Zed Park, which the band called on a December 14, 2019 Instagram post, “one of the biggest festivals in the region” (Ayloul 2019). On September 30, 2020, veteran Ammani rapper, Satti, posted Ayloul’s live performance for his YouTube series *The Closet Sessions*, modeled after NPR Music’s Tiny Desk Concert performances. After the global outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, Ayloul spent four days recording “Ma Enkafa” (*Mā Inkafā*) [They Did Not Run]⁵⁶ as a tribute to frontline workers (Silva 2020).

Dabkeh, Joy, and Decolonial Politics in Ayloul’s “Nazel El Ghor”

Alkhatib writes that “Nazel El Ghor” (*Nāzil ‘al-Ghūr*) [Going to Al Ghor]⁵⁷ was the first of Ayloul’s tracks to garner wide attention for the band (2019:162). I argue that the audio and live performances of this song foster joy and decolonial politics through *dabkeh*. Alkhatib writes that “Nazel El Ghor” is based on an old traditional song known to Jordanian farmers (2019:162). Later, Alkhatib directed me to the song and explained that musicians typically perform it at wedding parties, accompanied by *dabkeh* dancing (pers. comm., August 20, 2020). The old song goes by nearly the same title, “Ya Nazel El Ghor,” he said. He added that the regionally-beloved Jordanian composer Tareq Al Nasser recorded it with his ensemble Rum for the album *Ya Bu Rdayen - Songs from Jordanian Folklore* (2008) (*Yā*

⁵⁵ Ayloul shared the Arabic lyrics and translation of “Shu Bekoun Jamil” below the [official lyric video](#) for the track on YouTube on November 24, 2019.

⁵⁶ Ayloul shared the Arabic lyrics and translation of “Ma Enkafa” embedded in the band’s [lyric video](#) for the track on YouTube on April 23, 2020.

⁵⁷ Ayloul posted the Arabic lyrics and translation of “Nazel Al Ghor” below the [official lyric video](#) for the track on YouTube on November 24, 2019. “Al Ghor” refers to the Jordan Valley.

Bū Rdayyan) [Oh Woman who Wears Long Dangling Sleeves].⁵⁸ The YouTube channel Jordanian Folklore posted Rum’s recording of the song on November 26, 2011, and as of April 28, 2021, it had over 76,000 views. Rum’s version adds “*dabkeh urduniyya*” [Jordanian *dabkeh*] to the track title as well.

Arguably, “Nazel Al Ghor” is all the more effective at fostering joy through its artful blending of a traditional Arab song with rock music. That way, Ayloul can quickly connect with fans familiar with only one kind of music or the other. The song opens with only one instrument: an electric guitar [0:00-0:09]. Zghoul [0:35] sings the prominent vocal line of the song, then Tabari [0:43] joins him an octave higher for the rest of the chorus, just as the vocal melodies of Rum’s “Ya Nazel Al Ghor” are doubled. David Scott explained to me that Ayloul features the *mijwiz* in live performances of the song, and then found that a pitched-up *arghūl* blended better for the audio recording [enters at 3:02] (pers. comm., May 2, 2019).

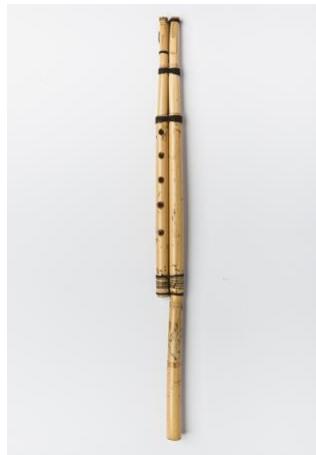


Figure 16. “Arghūl, Luxor district, Egypt, c1975. Edinburgh University Collection of Historic Musical Instruments (2097)” (Conner and Howell 2014)

⁵⁸ The Jordanian Folklore channel embedded the Arabic lyrics of Rum’s “Ya Nazel Al Ghor” on a [YouTube video](#) on November 26, 2011. Any translations of words in this song that are not found in Ayloul’s version are my own.

Like the *mijwiz*, the *arghūl* is a double clarinet. While the *mijwiz* has two pipes of the same length, the drone pipe on the *arghūl* is much longer than the melody pipe (Conner and Howell 2014). While the *arghūl* is known as an Egyptian folk instrument often played at weddings and other social gatherings (Conner and Howell 2014), and the *mijwiz* is associated with the Levant (Poché 2001), these instruments travel across borders just as the musicians who play them do.

As percussionist and ethnomusicologist Dr. Randy Drake told me, the percussion line in Ayloul's version of the track is very much a style of drum set playing that is common in popular music forms in the US and Europe (pers. comm., August 25, 2020). The mix foregrounds the kick drum and snare. The kick drum plays a two-bar pattern and the snare plays beats 2, the fourth sixteenth note after 2, and 4. Drake added that the drum set outlines the key rhythmic parts of the song, which further drives its momentum along. Soft clapping also enters towards the end of the audio recording [3:49].

Sonically, the melodies used in Rum's version do not match with Ayloul's, but both do evoke *dabkeh* by featuring the *arghūl* or *mijwiz*. Rum's "Ya Nazel Al Ghor" begins with a short *arghūl taqsīm*, with the instrument providing both the melody and the drone, followed by a short vocal improvisation. Then the *darbūka* enters, playing a fast *īqā' malfūf*, accompanied by an *arghūl* melody. The lyrics initially do not match Ayloul's version, but by [3:40], a four line chorus begins that does align closely with Ayloul's. The first two lines of the chorus in both songs are identical aside from the final word in the second line, which use synonyms for the phrase, "in front of you." The third line of the chorus is the same except for the final word as well: Rum's version ends with "to its water" and Ayloul's with "to its cultivation;" both are celebrations of Hauran's natural resources. The fourth line is identical

in both songs. Here is Rum's version of the chorus [3:39-4:14],

nāzil 'al-Ghūr yā khuwya niyyalik
sallim 'al-Ghūr wa al-may qadāmak
sallim 'al-Ghūr silim 'āmayyātah
yillī ahal al-Ghūr taḥalif bi-hayyatah

نازل عالغور يا خويا نياالك
سلم عالغور والمية قدامك
سلم عالغور سلم عامياته
ياللي أهل الغور تحلف بحياته

Brother - who is going to Al Ghor,
Lucky you!
Salute to Al Ghor and the water in
front of you
Salute to Al Ghor, salute to its water
That which Al Ghor people swear by
its life⁵⁹

Ayloul's version of the chorus is [0:35-1:01],

nāzil 'al-Ghūr yā khuwya niyyalik
sallim 'al-Ghūr wa al-may illī gibalak
sallim 'al-Ghūr silim 'azar 'ātah
yillī ahal al-Ghūr taḥalif bi-hayyatah

نازل عالغور يا خويا نياالك
سلم عالغور والمية للي قبالك
سلم عالغور سلم ع زرعاه
ياللي أهل الغور تحلف بحياته

Brother - who is going to Al Ghor,
Lucky you!
Salute to Al Ghor and the water in front
of you
Salute to Al Ghor, salute to its
cultivation
That which Al Ghor people swear by its
life

Al-Zou'bi described these as Jordan heritage lyrics (pers. comm., May 11, 2019). I

understand them as decolonial as well, in the sense that they joyfully celebrate the naturally rich farmland of Al Ghor [the Jordan Valley]. Ayloul celebrates their community's sustained presence in the Hauran plain, despite schemes by the British and French empires following the end of World War I and increasing Israeli encroachment.

Alkhatib states that Ayloul added lines to the traditional song that point to more overtly political issues (2019:162). One example is [1:31-1:34],

'al-thalāth jussūr 'ānaqūl al-bārūda

عالثلاث جسور عانقوا البارودة

⁵⁹ My translation of the fourth line in both versions is, "Whose life people of the Valley swear by."

On the three bridges they hugged their
rifles

Jordanian PhD Candidate in Comparative Literature at University of California, Santa Barbara, Ghassan Aburqayeq, interprets the line as a reference to the Battle of Karameh on March 21, 1968, which took place near three bridges between Jordan and the West Bank: Damia bridge, King Hussein bridge, and King Abdullah bridge (pers. comm., January 20, 2020). Fought between the Jordanian army and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) on one side, and the Israeli Defense Force on the other, the short battle lasted no more than a day, and both sides declared victory. While the Israeli forces destroyed a majority of the PLO camp in Karameh and claimed hundreds of prisoners, the battle became part of the Palestinian political mythology (Terrill 2001). Aburqayeq explains the importance of this moment in history when he explains that Jordanians and Palestinians understand it as a victory that prevented Israel from occupying the Jordan Valley.

Ayloul also evokes the settler-colonial politics of the land [2:36-2:39],

yā nāzil ‘al-baḥar al-masrūga
mayyatah

يا نازل عالبحر المسروقة مياته

Brother - who is going to the sea
whose water is stolen

This line critiques the fact that parts of the Jordan Valley in the larger Hauran plain are now controlled by Israel, such as the Golan Heights (Al-Zou'bi, pers. comm., May 11, 2019; Alkhatib 2019:162). I got a small sense of this new reality when I was invited to visit my friend's father's farm near Irbid: he has to show a special permit at a checkpoint in order to go to his own farm, due to its proximity to the Golan Heights.

I attended Ayloul's album launch in Irbid on the evening of May 2, 2019 with my friend and fellow Fulbright researcher, Dr. Brian J. Bowe, professor of journalism with

longtime experience performing and reporting on music. From what we could tell, Bowe and I were the only two audience members who came to the launch that were not also living in Irbid at the time. The performance was held in the enclosed courtyard of the historic Dar Al Saraya Museum, originally built in the nineteenth-century by the Ottomans, and used as a prison until the late 1990s. The four walls surrounding the courtyard included both the dark gray volcanic stones frequently found in historic structures in northern Jordan, and the sandstone blocks found in historic buildings throughout Jordan as well.

My friend, Myrna Al Tal, whose family has a long, respected history in Irbid, explained that the museum is not typically used for music events, making the album launch unusual (pers. comm., May 2, 2019). Indeed, Zghoul told me that they had been planning the event for the last three months, and it required them to obtain permits from more or less every government ministry (pers. comm., May 2, 2019). On the Facebook event for the launch, the band members thanked the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, the Department of Antiques, and the Ministry of Youth, as well as the Dar Al Saraya museum for hosting them (Ayloul 2019). I heard from someone working the show whose name I did not catch that they did not receive final confirmation that the show could go forward at the museum until twenty-four hours before it was scheduled to begin.

The band members funded the event with support from Al Balad Theater and Medearts. Audience members attended free of charge. On the Facebook event for the concert, Ayloul wrote:

We're happy to come back to Houran to launch our Album #Salute_To_Al_Ghor from the heart of the meadow. From Irbid, the city that inspired our first lyrics and heard our first tunes.

Happy to come back to the origin to set out from here not anywhere else. Inviting our people in Irbid and Houran to share the joy of achievement and the passion for music. Inviting our people all over #Jordan to visit Ayloul at its home, hoping that this can be a step towards decentralization of Art and culture in Jordan.

We launch our album in #Dar_AlSaraya_Museum in Tell Irbid, in a building that's over a hundred years old, containing many of its artifacts and culture, and breathing in the smell of wheat that it yearns for, this building was once a prison and became a space for culture and art. (Ayloul 2019)

By “decentralization,” Ayloul hints at the fact that the vast majority of Jordan’s alternative Arabic music is performed in Amman. Instead, Ayloul purposely chose to hold their first album launch performance in the city where the band was founded, Irbid. Their description strongly emphasizes the importance of the city, its history, and the Hauran plain’s rich farmland, as central to their conception of the group. The olive trees in the Dar Al Saraya courtyard also highlight the area’s agricultural bounty as well, in addition to being a symbol of Palestinian heritage.

A range of ages made up the Irbid launch audience, from young people to those who could be their parents. The band seemed to capture the full audiences’ attention: people joyfully clapped, swayed, and sang along. Ayloul’s members expressed their joy with big smiles and dances: their only member who could not stand to dance, Jouqqa, swayed along enthusiastically from his seat behind his drum set.



Figure 17. From left to right, Mounif Zghoul and Ra'ed Al-Tabari at Dar Al Saraya Museum, Irbid, Jordan.

Photo by the author, May 2, 2019.

With bright-colored lights projected on the wall behind them, Ayloul performed aspects of Arab traditional music with the use of a *darbūka* drum, Tabari's melismatic vocal improvisations on a single syllable, Al-Zou'bi's highly ornamented violin solos to the claps and cheers of the crowd, and most strikingly, by featuring a *mijwiz* player and dancing *dabkeh* with their audience in "Nazel al Ghor."

The next night, May 3, 2019, Ayloul held a second album launch at Dali, a new restaurant and performance venue in Weibdeh, Amman. The band members again expressed their joyous enthusiasm on stage, smiling and dancing, as the audience jumped, danced, and sang along. Tabari again performed short melismatic vocal solos on a single syllable over a drone, and in other short moments, Mheidat evoked *mijwiz* on his keyboard. In contrast to the Irbid album launch, the majority of the audience looked to be in their twenties and thirties, many got alcohol from Dali's bar, and some were less attentive to the show, perhaps turning their back on it at times in order to talk to one another.

When Ayloul performed "Nazel Al Ghor" live at the two album launches in Irbid and Amman, the band members and many audience members joyfully danced *dabkeh* when the *mijwiz* player began his solo. Unlike in Amman, the dancing in Irbid was more striking, in that the full audience was caught up in the moment. A line formed in front of the stage of mostly young men, along with one middle-aged man in a suit jacket, and later one young woman. They held hands and formed a rough circle. I saw big grins on many faces, including those who stood up to take videos of the dancing on their phones. One young man became the *lawīh* [lead dancer] at the front of the line, and added flourishes and extra steps to the *tahmīl* [foundation or base] steps danced by the rest of the line. While other band members danced *dabkeh* as they played their instruments on stage, Al-Zou'bi and Mheidat came down to join the line of dancers, and Al-Zou'bi then joined the *lawīh* to dance flourishing steps in

the center of the circle. A young man hugged Al-Zou'bi before he went back on stage, which struck me as another sign of joyous affection. As Rami Delshad, comedian and the leader of the Jordanian band Qabeela, told me,

We need to express. When you express, people feel like they want to express as well. I feel like we are a culture that lacks the ability to express. Men, they can't show agony, they can't show sadness, it's not manly, and that itself is pressuring. So when you go to gigs, you'll see how the guys are expressing the music. (pers. comm., March 7, 2019)

Delshad highlights the way that male musicians on stage give their male audience members unspoken permission to express emotions by first initiating such expressions themselves. Ayloul encourages outpourings of affection and joy by featuring *dabkeh* and the *mijwiz*, supporting Racy's point that the instrument compels enthusiasm among many Near Eastern Arabs and strongly draws them to dance (1994:50). I have experienced these outpourings of joy at Ayloul shows as infectious.

Whether at their album launches or previously at Amman's Al Balad Music Festival, I have felt the joy and pride involved when Ayloul band members join their audiences to dance *dabkeh* while performing "Nazel Al Ghor." At a foundational sense, the infectious enthusiasm comes from the deep link *dabkeh* has with celebratory occasions in Eastern Arab cultures. In another sense, the joy of *dabkeh* requires a social openness to participate in not only a traditional dance form, but also in a decolonizing process. "Nazel Al Ghor," for example, is a *dabkeh* song that resists colonial understandings of Arab identities as simply defined by British and French-designed nation-states. It instead celebrates the continued Hauranian presence in the region. Now that Ayloul has signed with Universal Music MENA and performs more widely, they invite growing audiences to join in this celebration as well.

Conclusion

I opened this chapter by describing the first ten seconds of the music video that introduced 47Soul to the world, “Intro to Shamstep” (2015). From the first ten seconds, the band members demonstrate how important *dabkeh* is to them by playing a number of traditional instruments and sounds associated with the joyful dance form. As I show in my later case studies, 47Soul continues to feature the sounds and steps of *dabkeh* even more prominently in their 2020 music videos “Border Ctrl” and “Dabke System.” Ayloul does similar work with the track, “Nazel Al Ghor,” which draws its chorus from a traditional Jordanian *dabkeh* song. Having watched band members and their fans dance *dabkeh* at both groups’ concerts, I know that 47Soul and Ayloul foster joy when they perform *dabkeh* traditions.

I suggest that these performances of *dabkeh* are decolonial in multiple senses. First, through *dabkeh*, the bands express the perseverance of Palestinians and those from the Hauran plain, groups that imperial and colonial projects have worked to erase. Second, their expressions of joy do decolonial work by representing Arab identities and cultures complexly. They help unravel essentializations of Arabs as merely enactors or victims of violence. In the words of 47Soul’s Walaa Sbeit, on Palestinians, “we are not just a people who cry and suffer, we are people who create and enjoy” ([Haddad 2015] 2018:191).

Finally, joy helps nurture activist work like decolonization. As Karkabi demonstrates, dancing *dabkeh* together, led by bands like 47Soul and Ayloul, can help build solidarity across difference. Montgomery and bergman and Schiwy also emphasize that when activist groups foster joy, it does essential work to sustain their causes in the long-term. Through *dabkeh* especially, 47Soul, Ayloul, and their fans enact the more-equal world they call for in

their art. Their stomping feet say, “We are here,” and these bands invite their diverse audiences to dance that assertion with them.

Chapter 3. “Let Everyone Resist in His Own Way”: El Far3i’s Ambiguous Lyrics and Expressions of Palestinian Indigeneity

On January 23, 2019, I saw Tareq Abu Kwaik (*Ṭāriq Abū Kuwayk*), better known by his stage name, El Far3i (*al-Far ‘ī*) [The Branch], perform his solo act at Buffalo Wings & Rings in Abdoun (*‘Abdūn*). As a solo artist, El Far3i sings and raps often abstract, political lyrics while accompanying himself on the acoustic guitar. The venue is a sports-focused restaurant chain founded in 1984 in Cincinnati, Ohio (Buffalo Wings & Rings 2018). The restaurant’s Abdoun branch is situated in a wealthy Amman neighborhood that houses the US Embassy and is often scorned by locals for its elite-class associations. Later in an interview, Abu Kwaik explained to me that he did not choose the venue—The Buffalo Wings & Rings manager is a big fan, and invited him to play there during his month or so in Jordan before he returned to London (pers. comm., January 22, 2019).

When I first got to the crowded venue, I had to buy a new ticket. It turns out the lower-priced one I had purchased in advance was for a seat on the restaurant’s second floor, which had no direct view of the stage, only of TV screens. Instead of the usual football match, the TVs throughout the restaurant would stream El Far3i’s performance. I forked over more Jordanian Dinars (JD) for a seat on the ground floor, and a staff member wearing a sports jersey seated me in the back of the enclosed outdoor seating section. My shared table was in sight of the stage and four screens: two in this back portion of the floor, and two on either side of the performance space. The audience chattered loudly and excitedly in anticipation of the show beginning.

That night, El Far3i played his guitar, rapped, and sang on a low stage in a cloud of smoke from the cigarettes of the audience members seated at low tables right in front of him.

High above the stage was a bright neon sign with the restaurant’s slogan, “Game Time Just Got Better!”



Figure 18. El Far3i at Buffalo Wings & Rings in Abdoun, Amman, Jordan. Photo by the author, January 23, 2019.

The screens on either side of El Far3i projected the show at a slight delay. This created the visual effect of a handful of El Far3i’s performing together, but not in unison.

Among all the songs in his set, El Far3i’s “Estishraq Dakhily” (*Istishrāq Dākhilī*) [Internal Orientalism] struck me the most that night. He closed his eyes during his entire performance of the track, holding an intense, sometimes fierce, focused look on his face, as if he felt and meant every word and every note deeply. As he reached the end of the last verse⁶⁰ before his final chorus, El Far3i rapped more emphatically. Pointing his finger for emphasis, El Far3i hit each word of the following line like drum beats, almost reaching a shout in his assertion of Palestinian land rights,

⁶⁰ I use “verse” in this chapter to refer to any portion of song lyrics besides the chorus. This usage follows common popular music terminology.

*bi-tḡal al-arḡ hay kulhā illī lū bi-
'usmūhā miyyat marra*

بتضل الأرض هاي كلها إلي لو بقسموها مية مرة

All of this land is mine even if it was
divided 100 times

The audience cheered and clapped loudly in response—their strongest reaction during the song.

This concert experience sparked my thinking on the productive possibilities that emerge when an Indigenous Palestinian chooses to dwell in ambiguity. There I was, in a wealthy, US-centric neighborhood of Amman, Jordan, at a sports restaurant chain from Ohio, listening to El Far3i's complicated, nuanced performance of decolonial Palestinian themes in “Estishraq Dakhily” from his album *El Rajol El Khashabi (al-Rajul al-Khashabī)* [The Wooden Man] (2017).⁶¹ Perhaps others dedicated to the Palestinian cause may have turned down this performance opportunity, given the venue's and the neighborhood's connections to the US, one of Israel's strongest supporters. El Far3i, on the other hand, was flattered that the restaurant manager likes his music and played a powerful show there (pers. comm., January 22, 2019).

Prior to the concert, El Far3i generously sat for an interview with me, and I asked him what he meant by the title phrase of his song that struck me the most, “internal orientalism.” He answered by first linking it to a previous track of his, “E-stichrak” (*Istishrāq*) [Orientalism] (2012), which he recorded with Lebanese rapper Mazen El Sayed (*Māzin al-Sayyid*), known by his stage name El Rass (*al-Rās*) [The Head]. He said,

It refers to... I released a track called “Orientalism” with El Rass. He's a Lebanese rapper. And the track is pretty harsh on any visitors to the Arab world, you know what I mean? Especially from the West. It talks about all these things—it's kind of weird because you do research—it's how researchers could be used by governments

⁶¹ The Arabic lyrics are by El Far3i. He posted them with the [track audio](#) on YouTube, March 28, 2017.

and that whole conspiracy thing. “Estishraq Dakhily” means we view ourselves from the eyes of the outside anyways, because there is no choice. Hey man, you can’t keep dissing the Western culture because a lot of the things you already do and believe in, you’ve got from them and they’re embedded. And then they feel like, well, but that’s for everyone, and then my argument becomes, well, yes, and before Enlightenment in Europe, also some of the information coming from Arabic and Islamic cultures have been embedded and it’s normal. It’s an anti-blame song. Let’s stop blaming each other. I talk in it about the whole idea of, I’m not with the idea of Jordanians getting Israeli visas, it’s normalization, but at the same time I feel like there’s a double standard about that. So I’m telling them, I’m sorry but look at your ID, can’t you see the occupation in that as well, your national ID. Which is pretty harsh for Jordan and the Palestinian PA, but still. The whole song is not about orientalism, but it’s about the mentality of blaming, not blaming ourselves. It’s about taking responsibility. (pers. comm., January 22, 2019)

In this selection from our interview, El Far3i explained that he understands his tracks “Orientalism” and “Internal Orientalism” relationally. In other words, he defined the title concept of “Internal Orientalism” by referring back to his previous track “Orientalism.” My choice to analyze these two songs in this chapter follows El Far3i’s lead.

In his explanation quoted above, I was struck by his ease in holding multiple, seemingly contradictory realities together. On the one hand, he candidly brought up “Orientalism” and its critique of researchers from the US and Europe in the Arab world to me, a researcher from the US in the Arab world. On the other hand, when I thanked him at the end of our interview, he also said, “To be honest with you, I enjoy talking to researchers” (pers. comm., January 22, 2019). I found it wonderful food for thought, El Far3i sharing both that he enjoyed the interview and his earlier critique of people like me in the region, without any tone of blame. He likewise framed “Internal Orientalism” as an anti-blame song that acknowledges how intertwined the so-called “East” and “West” are. I read these statements and his performance at Buffalo Wings & Rings as reflecting El Far3i’s talent for expressing nuance and ambiguity. El Far3i is not unique in his choice to prioritize ambiguous expression in his work, but what sets his art apart, I suggest, is its strategic possibilities for Indigenous Palestinians.

In this chapter, I consider the productive potential of El Far3i's choice to write ambiguous lyrics as an Indigenous Palestinian specifically. I do so drawing on current critical Indigenous studies scholarship by three authors—Vicente M. Diaz (2016), Māori Ngāti Pūkenga scholar Brendan Hokowhitu (2016), and Kanaka Maoli scholar Stephanie Nohelani Teves (2018)—who each critique the ways that colonizers have weaponized “us versus them” binaries against Indigenous peoples. Like Diaz, Hokowhitu, and Teves, El Far3i clearly uses his lyrics to critique the legacies of US and European colonialism and neocolonialism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). In addition, both El Far3i and these critical Indigenous studies scholars encourage their audiences to move past a mode of critique by refocusing their attention on the complexities inherent in expressions of Indigeneity.

I focus specifically on “E-stichrak” and “Estishraq Dakhily” as song lyric case studies to consider what nuanced Indigenous expression looks like in the context of El Far3i's solo career in particular. At a foundational level, one nuance to El Far3i's writing is the in-between space it occupies. He does not feel the need to choose between either critiquing colonization or focusing on the complexities of Palestinian Indigeneity in his repertoire: he does both. Representing El Far3i's art complexly is one way to honor and respect Indigenous Palestinians. I intend my close reading of his lyrics to contribute towards the larger project of highlighting a full spectrum of Indigenous identities. Again and again, colonizers have spread damaging misrepresentations of Indigenous peoples in order to control them, drawing on “us versus them” binaries. I argue for the importance of studying open-ended, intentionally ambiguous Indigenous performances such as El Far3i's, to help undo the legacies of such harm. I further contribute to broad efforts to decolonize knowledge production in academia by prioritizing Indigenous scholarship and performance in my analysis.

Theorizing Ambiguity in Indigenous Studies

In this chapter, I base my argument on the works of current critical Indigenous studies scholars, who both critique legacies of colonization and call for the importance of carefully attending to the ambiguity of Indigenous expression. I first draw on two chapters from *Critical Indigenous Studies: Engagements in First World Locations* (2016), edited by Aileen Moreton-Robinson, a scholar and activist of the Goenpul tribe in Australia. In the chapter by Vicente M. Diaz, he explains that processes of colonization have repeatedly depended on what he calls the “colonial binary”—the colonizer’s assumed enlightened superiority over the colonized (2016:121). Some with this worldview have understood a solid division between the apparently civilized Christian colonizer and the so-called savage, irreligious native, and have used it to justify countless colonial projects (2016:121).

Citing the work of Vicente Rafael (1993), Diaz explains a historic process in which colonizers have cracked down on Indigenous linguistic flourish in an effort to maintain control, especially over language related to religious meanings to entrench the colonizer’s sense of moral superiority (2016:121). Notably, Diaz does not stop at the level of critiquing this history. In his own work to unravel colonial binaries, Diaz focuses his chapter on the wide range of meanings inherent in a single Indigenous-language word, “mátapang.” This term comes from the Austronesian language group, the second largest and the most geographically widespread in the world, with speakers found across four-fifths of Earth’s oceanic surface (2016:119-120). For the Indigenous Chamorro people of the Mariana Islands, mátapang means outrigger canoe, the technology that enabled this sociolinguistic Indigenous network to spread so widely (2016:120). Further, in seven instances of the word mátapang in the Austronesian language group, Diaz explains, the term at once encompasses at least three polar opposite meanings, such as “hyperabsence *and* presence, saturation *and* emptiness”

(emphasis by Diaz) (2016:120). He frames this word as an example of what he calls Indigenous discursive flourish or linguistic play. Diaz uses these terms to refer to “the penchant for meaning making and multiplication” which he assumes “is a fundamental, signature aesthetic and logic of Indigenous discourse and identity” (2016:120). I apply Diaz’s argument to my analysis of the nuances in El Far3i’s lyrics, that accounting for multiple, often ambiguous meanings is essential to understanding Indigeneity.⁶²

Second, I draw from critical Indigenous studies scholar Brendan Hokowhitu’s chapter in Moreton-Robinson’s edited volume. Hokowhitu articulates two central consistencies of colonization processes across Indigenous contexts: annexing Indigenous lands and working to erase Indigenous systems of knowledge (2016:84). In Hokowhitu’s words, “In the universe of Enlightenment rationalism, it was assumed that reason (i.e., European reason) could differentiate between truth and falsehood, and thus, that the world was inherently decipherable, universal” (2016:93). Hokowhitu continues,

The fact that Indigenous epistemologies challenged that knowable world was all the more reason to categorize them. The violent synthesis of one culture into another typically involved encompassing and reconfiguring the incomprehensible into comprehensible forms, the classification of Indigenous forms of knowing into Western ontological catalogs, and/or the simple denial that many practices even existed. (2016:93-94)

Here, Hokowhitu not only identifies the “the colonizer/colonized binary,” but further critiques scholarship that depends on it by anchoring Indigenous worldviews to the condition of being colonized (2016:88-89). Hokowhitu’s work poses the powerful question of what it

⁶² Since its inception, most often attributed to Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), interdisciplinary scholarship in postcolonial studies has critiqued the ways that colonial systems have used language as a tool of hegemonic control over the colonized, including through systems of codifying and modernizing local vernacular languages (Said 1978; Bhaba 1983; Spivak 1987; Viswanathan 1989). Critical Indigenous studies, as represented through the current scholars I engage with in this chapter, challenges the inquiries of postcolonial studies to move past a mode of critique. These scholars call for a break with the practice of understanding Indigeneity in relation to processes of colonization, and instead prioritize the Indigenous languages and worldviews that colonizers have not codified, but violently erased.

means to be Indigenous without defining Indigeneity in relation to colonization (2016:86-87). His proposed answer is a “radical” Indigenous studies “that is unintelligible to the Western academy, that refuses Western classification via its lexicon and taxonomic cataloging” (2016:84). In this chapter’s case studies, I use song lyric analysis to foreground El Far3i’s Palestinian Indigenous worldviews, which do not remain tethered to a colonial relationality.

I additionally draw on critical Indigenous studies scholar Stephanie Nohelani Teves’s monograph, *Defiant Indigeneity: The Politics of Hawaiian Performance*, which also critiques the prominent ways that colonizers have mobilized binaries to the detriment of Indigenous peoples (2018:4). Teves outlines what she calls “a modern Indigenous contradiction” (2018:2). By this, she means that Indigenous cultures are a precious source of pride to countless Indigenous peoples. Yet at the same time, colonizers have too-often understood these same cultures as fixed expressions of tradition. They have positioned Indigenous cultures as the inferior half of the colonial binary, and then have used this perceived inferiority to justify their colonial projects, understanding their efforts as bringing their so-called civilized, enlightened cultures to Indigenous peoples.

Teves calls for resisting such damaging, limited colonial understandings of Indigenous cultures in the context of her research on Hawai’i. Her ethnography focuses on Indigenous Kānaka Maoli⁶³ performances of aloha in urban Honolulu from 2006-2012. Teves explains that aloha is the most important organizing principle for her community, the Kānaka Maoli (2018:1). She continues, “Aloha is a performance, negotiated at the intersection of ancestral knowledge and outsider expectations, manifest in the daily contradictions and complexities of Kanaka Maoli indigeneity” (2018:2). However, Teves points to histories of the commodification of aloha and state-sanctioned versions of performing it, which have

placed limits on expressing this fundamental part of what it means to be Kanaka Maoli (2018:4). She writes that these conditions produce “an increasing stranglehold on what Hawaiian indigeneity is supposed to look like and mean” (2018:xiii). Dominant traditional Kānaka Maoli performers ignore or even ostracize Kānaka Maoli who do not perform obvious “tradition” (2018: xiii).

Teves focuses on performances that confound the oversimplified binaries prominent in processes of colonization (2018:4). She introduces her term “defiant indigeneity” to capture “how aloha can be reclaimed as a practice of insurgent world-making that exceeds the limits set by the colonial order of things” (2018:2-3). The two Kānaka Maoli performers she focuses on in her study, rapper Krystilez and the theater scholar, performance artist, and drag queen Cocoa Chandelier, both willfully “resist easy categorization” in their performances of aloha (2018:4). In other words, they do not perform the common commodified or state-sanctioned versions of aloha, and therefore help deconstruct oversimplifications of this foundational Kānaka Maoli concept. Teves points to Cocoa Chandelier’s performances of aloha in drag, featuring pop songs by Madonna for example, rather than cultural aspects that can easily be identified as “Hawaiian” (2018:81, 85).⁶⁴ Teves explains that her focus on these Indigenous performances in everyday life takes stock of the diverse ways that her community cultivates Indigeneity and defies the expectations perpetuated by Hawai’i’s colonization (2018:xiv). I follow the example of Teves’s work in my analysis of El Far3i’s lyrics, which both critique colonization and offer diverse expressions of Palestinian Indigeneity. His lyrics contribute towards moving beyond limiting stereotypes of Palestinians as merely victims of Israel’s colonization. Before my song lyric

⁶³ “Kānaka Maoli” signifies the plural usage, whereas “Kanaka Maoli” refers to the singular.

⁶⁴ See [this video clip](#) from Cocoa Chandelier’s YouTube channel for a brief introduction, posted April 25, 2013.

analysis, I will next give background on El Far3i's solo career and that of his collaborator for "Orientalism," El Rass, to provide readers with a richer understanding of their contributions to alternative Arabic music.

El Far3i's Solo Career

The Palestinian-Jordanian⁶⁵ musician El Far3i is one of the foundational names in alternative Arabic music today. I first introduced his musical background in Chapter 2, which also provides a detailed analysis of some of his most recent releases with 47Soul, including his contributions of vocals and percussion to two of the most highly praised alternative bands to emerge out of Jordan. Although El Far3i eventually left the first, El Morabba3 (*al-Murabba`*) [The Square], in order to focus on the second, 47Soul, he still occasionally collaborates with El Morabba3, including for a much-anticipated concert I attended in Amman in 2016. Here, however, I focus in greater detail on El Far3i's solo career.

El Far3i first started performing his solo act in Amman in 2008, before going on to help found El Morabba3 in 2009 (El Far3i n.d.). While many venues in Amman remain hesitant to host rappers or have a setup ill-equipped for it, El Far3i worked around these challenges by developing an in-between genre category. As I described in the opening to this chapter, he often performs an acoustic rap set, meaning he raps and sings while seated, accompanying himself on the acoustic guitar. In January 2019, I saw him perform in this style at *Masrah al-Shams* [Sun Theater] in the Shmeisani (*Shmīsānī*) neighborhood of Amman, at Corner's Pub in Jabal Amman (*Jabal 'Ammān*), and at Buffalo Wings & Rings in Abdoun.

⁶⁵ Locals use Palestinian-Jordanian to refer to those born in Jordan who are of Palestinian descent.

El Far3i's use of stage names demonstrates one way that as a solo artist, he dwells in an in-between space of ambiguity. Technically, he uses the stage name El Far3i for his acoustic rap set, and the stage name Far3 El Madakhil (*Far' al-Madākhil*) [Side Street] for his performances as a "Hip-Hop MC" (Bedirian 2020), rapping to synthesized beats and electronic sampling. He performed the latter at Good Pub in Abdoun in February 2019, accompanied by Hicham Ibrahim (*Hishām Ibrāhīm*), a DJ better known by his stage name DJ Sotusura (*Ṣawt wa-Ṣūra*) [Voice and Picture]. However, in the lyrics of "Estishraq Dakhily," he does not choose one stage name or the other. Instead, he includes both in this single song, despite it being a part of his acoustic repertoire.

El Far3i released his first two solo albums in 2012. He categorizes the first, *Sout Min Khashab* (*Ṣawt Min Khashab*) [Wooden Voice] (2012), as "acoustic folk rap" on his SoundCloud page; he accompanies himself on the acoustic guitar throughout. The album includes "Dallik Malak" (*Dallik Malāk*) [Stay My Angel], a bouncy love song with over 500,000 plays on SoundCloud that remains a fan favorite. The second 2012 album, called *Far3 El Madakhel* [Side Street] (2012) features electronic samples and synthesized sounds supporting his rap verses. El Far3i co-credits almost every track with his recorder and sound engineer for the album, El Jihaz (*al-Jihāz*) [Equipment]. El Jihaz (also spelled El Jehaz) is the stage name used by Hamza Arnaout (*Ḥamza Arnā'ūt*), who went on to co-found 47Soul with El Far3i.

El Far3i released his third solo album, the *Kaman Dafsheh* (*Kamān Dafsha*) [Push Again] in 2014, contributing to his hip-hop material. He describes it on his homepage as an "Arabic sample-based boom bap album" (El Far3i n.d.). Both this and El Far3i's 2012 album have far fewer plays on SoundCloud than his other releases, and indeed, El Far3i does perform his acoustic rap material more often in Amman. This could be for the practical

reasons I discuss in my introduction, such as the lack of venues willing to rappers in the city. El Far3i has worked around this unwillingness by cultivating his acoustic rap set. He calls his fourth solo album *El Rajol El Khashabi* (*al-Rajul al-Khashabī*) [The Wooden Man] (2017) his “defining acoustic record” (El Far3i n.d.). This album includes the song that sparked this chapter, “Estishraq Dakhily.”

The promotion leading up to El Far3i’s upcoming solo album releases incapsulates the wide-ranging influences he draws on as an artist. He has teased two different upcoming albums set to be released in 2021: an acoustic album *Nas Min Khashab* (*Nās Min Khashab*) [Wooden People]⁶⁶ and the now-released trap album *Lazim Tisa* (*Lāzim Tis ‘a*) [Must Be Nine] (2021) that draws on the latest genre of Egyptian electronic popular music, mahraganat (*mahrajānāt*) [festivals]. In an interview with Ramzi Salti, Stanford University lecturer and host of the online series *Arabology*, Abu Kwaik said that he worked with Egyptian producer Molotof on one album track, who is known for producing both trap and mahraganat (Salti 2020). On his homepage, El Far3i describes *Lazim Tisa* as “a project that weds Arab sound with electronica... Flux” (El Far3i n.d.).

El Far3i also describes on his homepage a new stage name he will use to encompass both of his former ones, El Far3i Flux,

Known for his dichotomous solo act El Far3i/ Far3 El Madakhil, he enmeshes Arab acoustic folk and hip-hop and continues to experiment sonically, evolving into the more recent forked axis, El Far3i Flux. This brand encapsulates the essence of both the versatility of styles and the complexity of ideas. It is a space within which a sense of freedom exists, enabling experimentations with different tools, instruments, and writing techniques... A vision rooted in the ideals of independence, yet branches out to reflect the journey. Those concepts race between censorship and exaggeration, concealing at times, and pushing hard at others. (El Far3i n.d.)

⁶⁶ The album title likely references the musical play *Nās min Waraq* [Paper People] (1972), featuring the iconic Lebanese singer, Fairouz (*Fayrūz*) (b. circa 1934), staged by the Rahbani (*al-Rahbānī*) Brothers, Assi (‘*Aṣṣī*) (1923-1986) and Mansour (*Manṣūr*) (1925-2009) (Stone 2007:106). *Nās min Waraq* is now also the name of a Syrian state television show, a comedy first broadcast in 2019 (Halabi and Mellor 2020:436).

Here El Far3i describes how he both uses dichotomies and now begins to move past them in the context of his stage names. The ambiguity comes from the fact that El Far3i does not feel the need to choose.

On December 12, 2020, I attended a virtual event that El Far3i hosted from T.E.N. Studios in London titled “El Far3i Real-time” to promote his upcoming albums. The online event platform Crowd Cast ran the livestream, viewable for a minimum donation of fifteen dollars and sponsored in part by Toyota. Arab Drumz produced the event. “El Far3i Real-time” included select pre-recorded footage, live performances by El Far3i of some of his most well-loved songs, and a question and answer period. El Far3i began the event by performing “Dallik Malak” live in the London studio, with the same focus and feeling that he brought to all of his live shows that I have attended in person in Amman. After playing another song from *El Rajol El Khashabi*, El Far3i welcomed and thanked the audience in Arabic, then aired pre-recorded footage from the making of the event and promotional shoots for it. Later, he performed a few unreleased songs from what will be his 2021 acoustic album *Nas Min Khashab*. This event and his upcoming releases point to El Far3i’s increasing dedication to his music, despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. I will next introduce El Rass, the rapper El Far3i collaborates with on “E-stichrak,” my first case study.

Introducing El Rass

As activist and music scholar Chris Nickell writes, El Rass is one of the main rappers in Beirut today (2020:186). In three years of research and requests, Nickell clarifies that he was unable to interview El Rass due to the rapper’s deep mistrust of foreign Arab speakers. He especially associates those from the US with the CIA (2020:199). El Rass’s refusal to be interviewed by Nickell represents a difference between him and El Far3i. While El Far3i has

demonstrated his comfort with an in-between space where he both critiques researchers like myself and enjoys talking with them, El Rass firmly chose the side of critique. As Nickell highlights, El Rass's work is quite nuanced, but unlike El Far3i, he does not grant such nuance to the US or Europe.

Originally from Tarablus (*Ṭarābulus*) in northern Lebanon, El Rass worked in banking in Paris for part of his professional life. In 2008, he returned to Lebanon and later helped found the online journalism platform Ma3azef (*Ma 'āzif*) [Musical Instruments] (2020:120). As a rapper, he has collaborated with Beirut electronic musician Jawad Nawfal (*Jawwād Nawfal*) for two albums, *Kashf el Maḥjūb* [Unveiling the Hidden] (2012) and *Ādam, Dārwin wal Baṭrīq* [Adam, Darwin, and the Penguin] (2014) (2020:199). Nickell identifies Homs, Syria native Hani Al Sawah (*Hānī al-Sawwāh*), stage name El Darwish (*al-Darwīsh*), as El Rass's most prominent collaborator. El Darwish collaborated with El Rass on his debut album *Arḍ al Samak* [Land of the Fish] released in January 2016 (2020:200). El Rass and El Darwish release their music for free on BandCamp and SoundCloud, meaning that their only profits derive from live performances in Lebanon every month or two (2020:200).

Nickell's detailed research demonstrates the linguistic nuance of El Rass's work. In Lebanon today, Nickell estimates that eighty percent of artists rap in English, or less often, in French, and the remainder rap in Arabic dialect (2020:201). This makes El Rass's lyrics in the formal register of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) unusual among his peers in Lebanon's rap scene. His linguistic choice challenges many of his Arabic listeners as well, who may not be as comfortable with MSA (2020:201).

In a thorough analysis of El Rass' track "*Islāmī*" from his album *Idarat Al Tawahosh* (*Idārat al-Tawaḥḥush*) [The Administration of Becoming Monstrous] (2016) (2020:202),

Nickell emphasizes El Rass's linguistic ambiguity in the title alone. He translates three potential meanings of the title: "my Islam," "my submission," and "Islamic." Sonically, the opening audio samples evoke Bollywood soundtracks. Nickell writes, "Before his rap even begins, El Rass is unsettling any straightforward listening by creating a thick density and diversity of possible meanings" (2020:203). Nickell interprets these Bollywood-esque sounds as a gesture to the large Muslim population on the Indian subcontinent. These opening signs, Nickell explains, also foreshadow the track's engagement with questions on the relationship between Islam and colonization (2020:202-204).

Nickell identifies nuanced meanings in his gendered analysis of El Rass's work as well, arguing that he and his crew "perform a pluralistic, intellectual masculinity" (2020:198). One example comes from a live concert in Beirut featuring El Rass where a belligerent audience member kept coming up on stage and disrupting the show (2020:196). At one point, El Rass pulled the disruptive man into a hug and whispered in his ear to encourage him to get him off stage, rather than attempting to physically force him off in a show of stereotypically masculine aggression, as may have been expected.

Overall, Nickell quotes El Rass speaking in detail on the wide-ranging influences he draws on in his work. El Rass said in Arabic:

Maybe I intersect with the Jihadists in that I return to the text, but I go back to it as I wish and as I have need, so this text finds itself in my service and I am not created to serve it. I intersect with the leftists, for instance, in my methods of deconstructing and the contexts of polemics, but I have my own priorities, as well, to these literarinesses (*adabīyāt hā'ulā'*) and their networks of ideas and terminology. Similarly, I find much worthwhile in numerous schools of thought including many Sufi currents, East Asian philosophies, existentialism, etc. (2020:201) (Arabic translation by Nickell with assistance from Ziad Dallal)

Here El Rass shows that he resists settling himself into any one particular category. He finds a point of similarity between himself and Islamic extremists even, sharing their frequent study of the Qur'an. He draws strong influence from Islam, but only takes from it what he

wants, rather than embracing it fully. He brings the same approach to what he calls leftists, finding influence, but all the while guided by his own priorities, not theirs. Or in Nickell's words, El Rass and his crew,

value an oblique approach to Western cultural and political imperialism, violent Islamic fundamentalism, and Lebanese sectarianized capitalism. They use what serves them from each of these and other formations to create art—and lives—that do not fit neatly within any of these formations. They are not taking the status quo as their object of critique, nor are they borrowing tropes informed by current practice elsewhere so much as they are fusing some of the raw musical materials with their own to create a new idiom. Not about fighting the West or disavowing ISIS/da'esh or pushing for democracy or peace in the Middle East. (2020:217)

As Nickell shows, El Rass prefers nuance overall, rather than shaping his entire career around a chosen side with clear boundaries. It is possible that his refusal to be interviewed by Nickell, his verse in “E-stichrak,” and his eventual feud with El Far3i are exceptions, representing moments when he did choose a side. In each of those moments, he did not allow for ambiguity in his critique of US and European colonialism and neocolonialism. I now turn to focus on that case study.

Negotiating Ambiguity in El Far3i and El Rass's “E-stichrak”

El Far3i and El Rass released their track “E-stichrak” (*Istishrāq*) [Orientalism] on Soundcloud in (2012).⁶⁷ “E-stichrak” has been played over 124,000 times on El Far3i's Soundcloud page and over 59,000 times on El Rass's page. To my ear, the sounds of a merry-go-round underline the track, bringing to mind the endless dizzy circles of the ride's closed loop. El Zein also highlights a whistling element in the audio, comparing it to the sound of a rocket (2016:413). As I discuss in my introduction, I hear this as a subtle example

⁶⁷ El Rass posted the Arabic lyrics for his verse only on his [SoundCloud page](#), in the comments section for the track in 2012. El Far3i shared the track on his [SoundCloud page](#) as well. I have found no Arabic transcription of El Far3i's verse specifically online. See the appendix for my transcription of El Far3i's verse, which is a revised version of one that an anonymous Reddit user created and shared with me.

of the ways that MENA musicians process the sounds of war in a region often subject to intense violence. Overall, the mix foregrounds the lyrics over other sonic aspects, hence my mode of song lyric analysis. While the caricatures in El Rass's verse provide a straightforward critique of the US and Europe in the mode of postcolonial studies, I argue that Far3i goes further, by both posing critique and often subtly encouraging a more complex understanding of Indigenous Palestinians and political issues. Unlike El Rass, El Far3i engages in a more open dialogue that does not choose one mode or the other.

The title of the track *Istishrāq* [Orientalism] is an outdated term for US or European academic study of the "Orient," the Middle East and North Africa as well as South and East Asia. The meaning of the term has expanded largely thanks to *Orientalism* (1978) by the Palestinian-American comparative literature scholar Edward Said (*Idwārd Sa'īd*), which is now widely considered the foundational text of postcolonial studies. Said argues that orientalism is not a body of scholarship that reveals the "truth" about the Orient. It is instead a sign of European-Atlantic imperialist power over the region, who deemed themselves the authorities on how to define and represent the cultures and histories encompassed in their empires (1978:6). Therefore, rather than providing accurate scholarship, Said states that orientalism reveals far more about European-Atlantic imperialists than the people their work represents (1978:12). While Said's famous work has been criticized for falling into the same essentializations it aims to critique (see for example, Clifford 1988), its legacy continues in academic scholarship as well as in alternative Arabic music lyrics. Postcolonial literary and film theorist Anthony Alessandrini, for example, outlines the fundamental binary behind orientalist thinking. As part of the Middle East Studies Pedagogy Initiative, Alessandrini writes, "*Orientalism* is a patient unfolding of the narrative by which a round globe was divided into a 'West' and an 'East'" (n.d.). Surely, such narratives have not disappeared.

In their track, El Far3i and El Rass use the term orientalism to critique those from the US or Europe who continue to benefit from legacies of imperialism and colonialism. In doing so, the rappers align with a postcolonial studies mode of critique. Said illustrates this mode, for example, in *The Question of Palestine* (1979), which critiques US indifference to the Palestinian cause and common prejudices towards Arabs (1979:xvii). I encountered this critical usage of orientalism once during my fieldwork, when I was speaking with a friend on the subject of 47Soul's members moving to London. The speaker imagined that another friend of theirs would describe the situation as 47Soul going to "feed the orientalists." Later, El Rass would go on to critique his former collaborator El Far3i using the same logic.

Anthropologist Rayya El Zein analyzes the public falling out between El Far3i and El Rass's in January 2016. In their diss tracks⁶⁸ directed at each other, El Zein shows that El Rass accused 47Soul of using Palestinian tradition to cater to orientalist fantasies, and he deemed the band less authentic for moving to London (2016:414). El Far3i responded by criticizing El Rass for his intellectual and class-based elitism, and by suggesting that these attitudes have had major consequences, including El Rass and other middle-class protest leaders' failure to sustain Beirut's "You Stink" garbage protests in summer 2015 (2016:417).⁶⁹ As El Zein highlights, El Rass and El Far3i used their feud to debate what

⁶⁸ In rap, diss (abbr. for disrespect) tracks have the primary purpose of criticizing another artist.

⁶⁹ To provide context for these accusations, in spring 2015, the main landfill used for depositing Beirut's trash closed after exceeding its capacity, and the government, paralyzed by sectarian divides, repeatedly failed to find a solution (Barnard 2015). As a result, the private waste management company stopped collecting trash all together, since there was nowhere to put it. After months of no trash pickup, protests arose in late August. Police responded with violence, killing a protestor with live ammunition, which sparked even greater demonstrations (Nickell 2020:79). El Rass emerged as a leader of the protests and is part of Lebanon's middle-class, having chosen to return to Beirut in 2008, bringing with him his savings from his work in banking in Paris (2020:120). As Nickell identifies, middle-class activists mistrusted the motives of working-class protestors, assuming that sectarian leaders sent them to infiltrate the movement (2020:83). One night, they called the police on working-class protestors, reporting them as infiltrators (2020:85). In terms of the accusation that El Rass and his fellow activists are self-absorbed, El Zein points to the fact that Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut and surrounding the city have long suffered from a lack of consistent garbage pickup services, a situation that did not catch middle-class activist attention (2016:342) (Stel and el Hussein 2015). In the end, Nickell identifies these protest leaders' inability to overcome their class and sectarian biases as one factor that contributed to the protest's overall failure to prompt any transformative change in Lebanon's political system (2020:25).

counts as political and who can perform Palestinian traditions. In his public rejection of El Far3i's work with 47Soul, El Rass attempted to police performances of Palestinian Indigeneity, a dynamic that Teves analyzes when identifying the different actors seeking to control what it means to perform Hawaiian Indigeneity as well (2018:xiii).

In a 2016 interview with English scholar George Potter, El Far3i discusses some of the sociopolitical issues that motivated his contribution to the track. He explains that he begins his verse by identifying the fact that there are so many people from abroad in Jordan, referring in particular to those from the US and Europe. He opens [0:19-0:23],

*nās katīr bi-titsā`l mīn kull hal-nās illī
fi-`ammān*

ناس كثير بتتسائل مين كل هالناس اللي فعمّان

Lots of people are wondering, who are
all these people in Amman?

In the interview, El Far3i continues,

And there's nothing wrong with that, but you want the people to understand what it is. And I think a lot of people come here to understand this part of the world. At the end of the day, in this area of the world, there's occupation. There's an obvious conflict with—I don't wanna say—we live in postmodern times, so you can't really call things West. But if you wanna really get real into, the US occupied Iraq. The US is the biggest supporter of Israel, which occupies this area. And you never know who's an activist, who's someone who's just studying Arabic because they like the language, who's a potential CIA agent, who's being paid. I've had people tell me from Europe that you can give information and get paid, your university fund, if you wanna give like an exchange program. It's not a huge conspiracy. It's what countries do. So the song talks about, a kind of back and forth, every kind of person from whatever place, not in Jordan, 'cause it's a conversation between me and a Lebanese guy. It ends with, my people are thinking that all these international companies are here to improve our life conditions, and people have the idea of Jordan becoming like Dubai. So it ends when we don't have water and we don't have a lot of resources, so get out of this weird, Gulf dream. (Potter 2016)

El Far3i demonstrates his inclination towards nuanced thinking in the interview selection above. He resists East/West binaries for example when he says, “you really can't call things West.” El Far3i instead speaks specifically about the US as a neo-imperialist force in the region, and expresses a distrust similar to El Rass's, as to whether US or European citizens

covertly pass information to their governments. What is strikingly different from El Rass, however, is that El Far3i shared his critique in English with US-based English scholar George Potter. He engaged in this open dialogue and encouraged a more complicated understanding of the issues he raised.

In his verse, El Far3i also names a range of locations in the MENA region, which offers more nuance than the vague terms that El Far3i critiques such as “West.” In the second line for example, he introduces a dialogue between himself in Amman, and his Beirut-based collaborator in the track, El Rass [0:23-0:25],

sa'lt im sī min lubnān 'an waḍa' al-wayt mān

سألت إم سي من لبنان عن وضع الوايث مان

I asked an MC from Lebanon, what's up
with the white man

El Far3i ends the line with the phrase “white man” in English, which creates an end-rhyme with the concluding word of the first line, “‘ammān” [Amman], as well as an internal rhyme with *lubnān* [Lebanon]. Elsewhere in the verse, he also mentions Jerusalem, Ramallah, Beirut, Cairo, and Dubai. Still, as El Far3i explained in his interview with George Potter, his reference to Dubai is different, serving to contrast the comparative lack of resources in the Levant versus in the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. El Far3i works to complicate his representations of the region, rather than referring to MENA as if it were one coherent whole.

In contrast, El Far3i does not mention any specific locations in the US or Europe by name in the song. He does reference the late US citizen Rachel Corrie (1979-2003), a peace activist killed by an Israeli Defense Force bulldozer demolishing Palestinian homes in Gaza (Myre 2003). He raps [1:26-1:29],

lāzim tafhamū anū kul mutaḍāmin zayy rītshīl kūrī wa-bitūlī

لازم تفهمو أنو مش كل متضامن زي ريتشيل كوري و
بتولي

You all have to understand that it's not

all solidarity like Rachel Corrie and Bitūli⁷⁰

Corrie was killed protesting with others from the International Solidarity Movement, an organization sympathetic with the Palestinian cause that was composed mostly of US and European citizens in their 20s and 30s at the time. She and her fellow protesters were attempting to stop the demolitions by acting as human shields (Myre 2003). El Far3i's reference to Corrie represents his nuance as a writer. He at once warns that not everyone from the US or Europe in the region should be praised for their solidarity, while also highlighting the solidarity of a specific US activist.

El Far3i's critique in the verse revolves around a pattern: vague characters likely from the US or Europe act upon an unnamed, second or third-person Arab, whether through academic attention, betrayal, or physical harm. Through this pattern, El Far3i at once poses postcolonial critique and encourages empathy and interconnection through the use of the second-person. The second-person urges listeners to imagine themselves as the victims of such injustices, whoever they are. For example, one line in El Far3i's verse suggests that the friendliness of embassy staff is only a façade [0:26-0:29],

bi-tshūf muwazzifīn al-sifāra bi-l-sūq
bas bukra bi-tafsūk

بتشوف موظفين السفارة بالسوق بس بكرأ بطفسوك

You see the embassy employees in the
market, but tomorrow they'll disappoint
you

The fourth line continues this pattern of hidden intentions [0:29-0:32],

bi-tash`ar bi-rtiyah ma`al-siyyah wa-
hum`am yadrusūk

بتشعر بارتياح مع السياح وهم عم بيدرسوك

You feel relaxed with the tourists while
they're studying you

⁷⁰ A number of native Arabic speakers have explained to me that Bitūli is a name, but no one I asked knew of a specific public figure that El Far3i could be referring to by that name.

These lines also suggest to me El Far3i's talent for holding together multiple truths. In an interview that he said he enjoyed, which was conducted by me, a researcher from the US, he brought up this song, which associates academic study with harm. I bring up our interview again to show how El Far3i's comfort with ambiguity happens not only within the confines of one song, but across time and in dialogue with his past self as well. Maybe the El Far3i who recorded this track in 2012 would not have agreed to the interview with me, but in 2019, he still brought up his track "Orientalism" in the process of defining "Internal Orientalism."

As El Far3i's verse goes on, he continues the pattern of vague characters from the US or Europe enacting harm on an Arab, with increasing violence [0:35-0:39],

<p><i>'am bi-yartbūlak fa 'āliyya taḍāminiyya</i> <i>'ashān lamma bayt sittak bi-l-quḍs</i> <i>yahrasū</i></p>	<p>عم بيرتبولك فعالية تضامنية عشان لما بيت سنك بالقدس يهرسوا</p>
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They're organizing a solidarity event for
you for when they crush your
grandmother's house in Jerusalem

This line suggests that some group from the US or Europe organizes a solidarity event to distract from other destruction at the same hands. It also relates to Israel's systematic depopulating and demolishing of Palestinian villages since 1948, as documented by Walid Khalidi and his research team (1992). Later, El Far3i directly addresses the song's title concept, orientalism. He does so clarifying that the topics of this track are not drawn from distant history but are instead immediate realities [0:51-0:54],

<p><i>wa-hādī mish farḍiyya ma 'khūda min</i> <i>kitāb 'an tāriḵh al-istishrāq</i></p>	<p>وهادي مش فرضية مأخوذة من كتاب عن تاريخ الاستشراق</p>
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This is not a hypothesis taken from a
book about the history of orientalism

Having clarified that his verse is not about history, El Far3i answers what the song is about in the last lines of his verse [1:30-1:36],

*akhlāqiyyat ḥusn al-ḍiyyaf bi-damnā
hādā ishī asāsī
bas hādā al-maqṭa ‘an khabth al-
musta ‘mir wa- bisāṭa nāsī*

أخلاقيات حسن الضياف بدمنا هادا إشي أساسي
بس هادا المقطع عن خبث المستعمر وبساطة ناسي

The excellent morals of hospitality are
in our blood, this is essential
But this piece is about the viciousness of
the colonizer and the simplicity of my
people

At a general level, El Far3i ends his verse by expressing the betrayal inherent in processes of colonization. Arabs are known for their hospitality, and Indigenous peoples more broadly have too often welcomed foreigners with respect, only to be brutally exploited in response. Through his spotlight on the present, El Far3i emphasizes that such betrayals are not over.

El Far3i adds another layer of complexity to his lyrics by interweaving a reference to Islam with an exploration of damaging double standards. The context is a protest, and El Far3i points to the substantial resources at US and European disposal to extract citizens from crises abroad. To represent this ability, he uses “*burāq*.” As defined in *The Oxford*

Dictionary of Islam, *burāq* is a,

winged creature, usually depicted as a horse, which Muhammad mounted and rode to Jerusalem, through seven heavens, hell, and paradise, into the presence of God, and back to earth, according to the story of his Night Journey. Legends state that other prophets before Muhammad also rode Buraq. (Esposito, n.d.)

Here are the lines in question [1:01-1:07],

*humma ḥukūmāthum ‘ashān yarawwiḥū
hum ‘abilādhum bi-y‘atūlhum burāq
wa-min thumma afāq ba‘d ghaybūba
min istinshāq al-ghāz*

هم حكوماتهم عشان يروحوهم عبلادهم ببيعتولهم براق
ومن ثم أفاق بعد غيبوبة من استنشاق الغاز

Their governments sent them a *burāq* to
help them go home
Then he woke up from a coma from
inhaling gas

In these lines, El Far3i represents global inequities in access to resources, where some can practically fly away from risky situations, while others nearly die. Still, he hints at the ways that the so-called “East” and “West” are interconnected, for *burāq* comes to the implied-US or European citizens’ aid, not to the lone Arab, in a region where the majority identify as Muslim.

Now I will focus on the track’s second verse, rapped by El Rass. El Rass more firmly situates his lyrics in a mode of postcolonial critique, speaking against the continued legacies of imperialism and colonialism in the region. From his first words, El Rass mocks US citizens or Europeans with weak Arabic speaking skills by mimicking their poor pronunciation of the ever-present Arabic greeting [1:44-1:45] السلام عليكم (*salāmu alaykum*) [peace be upon you]. He continues the mockery throughout his verse using a caricature of someone from the US or Europe in the MENA region named Jimmy. El Rass points to what Jimmy represents [2:02-2:04],

jīmī mitlu katīr istishrāqu mustaghrab

جيمي مثله كثير استشرق مستغرب

Jimmy is a lot like Westernized
orientalism

Orientalism here could refer to those from the US or Europe who frame their caricatures of MENA, South Asian, or East Asian cultures as authoritative representations. El Rass does the same thing with Jimmy, while flipping the script of who is representing whom. Now it is one of the historical subjects of the orientalist gaze creating a caricature of the US or Europe. He also likely keeps his lyrics purposefully vague as to exactly where Jimmy is from in order to enable broader critique. For instance, El Rass implies Jimmy could be from the US [2:21-2:25],

*jābū akhraḡ amrikānī tay ‘limnī hu ‘ū’
insānī
ba ‘d kul kilimey bi-yaqūl dūūūd*

جابوا اخرق امريكاني تيعلمني حقوق إنساني
بعد كل كلمة بيقول دووود

They brought a stupid American to
teach me human rights
After every word, he says duuude

Though after mocking an American and US slang, El Rass also implies that Jimmy could be European [1:58-2:02],

ma 'ala' fū' takhthu bi-lundun šūrat
Lūrins al-'Arab

معلق فوق تخته بلندن صورة لورنس العرب

Hanging above his bed in London is a
picture of Lawrence of Arabia

While El Far3i says that his verse is not about the history of orientalism, here El Rass brings up one of orientalism's key historical figures, World War I British army officer T.E.

Lawrence (1888-1935), most famously depicted in David Lean's classic film *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962). I will expand on the history El Rass evokes, due to the parallels between it and the critiques El Rass and El Far3i pose in the track. While El Far3i critiques Euro-Atlantic scholars in the region in the present, El Rass has decorated Jimmy's walls with a historic one. Lawrence first came to the MENA region as a researcher in 1911 (Anderson 2014). For his history thesis at Oxford, Lawrence walked 1,200 miles across Syria in the summer to study Crusader castles, and later returned to Syria to work at an archeological site (Anderson 2014).

However, Lawrence is most famous for his role in the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire during World War I. As a second lieutenant in military intelligence, acclaimed Lawrence biographer Scott Anderson depicts the increasingly conflicted position that Lawrence found himself in, advocating for Arab independence while aware of the British Empire's duplicitous relations with Arab leaders (2014). Lawrence knew that Great Britain had promised the leader of the Arab Revolt, Sharif Hussein (*al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī al-Hāshimī*) (c. 1854-1931) the Emir of Mecca (*Makka*) in the Hejaz (*al-Ḥijāz*) region of the Arabian

Peninsula (r. 1908-1924), full independence for nearly the entire MENA region [see The Husayn-McMahon Correspondence (Khater 2011:104-107)].⁷¹ They did so while at the same time making covert plans with France (such as in the Sykes-Picot agreement, discussed in Chapter 2) to divide the region into primarily British and French spheres of influence.

Anderson details various moments that Lawrence disobeyed his superiors to the benefit of the Arabs, such as by informing Emir Hussein’s son Faisal (*Fayṣal al-Awwal ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī al-Hāshimī*) (1885-1933) of the otherwise secret Sykes-Picot agreement. Ultimately however, Anderson demonstrates that Lawrence was not able to entirely separate his own reputation from that of the mistrusted British Empire. For instance, Anderson asked southern Jordan tribal leader Sheik al-Atoun (*Shaykh al-‘Atūn*), whose grandfather helped Lawrence sabotage segments of the Ottoman-controlled Hejaz Railway, how Lawrence is perceived today. Al-Atoun said, “May I speak frankly? Maybe some of the very old ones still believe he was a friend of the Arabs, but almost everyone else, we know the truth. Even my grandfather, before he died, he believed he had been tricked” (2014). Al-Atoun suggests that Jordanians of his tribe commonly view Lawrence as duplicitous. This is the same pattern that El Far3i utilizes in his verse, of a European or American double-crossing an Arab. They may greet you in the market, says El Far3i, but tomorrow, they will disappoint you.

El Rass continues El Far3i’s pattern as well, depicting Jimmy as above-the-law at a checkpoint [2:44-2:47],

*jīmī ma ‘ahu kūkāīn bas mish rah
yiftishu al-‘mīd akīd*

جيمي معه كوكابين بس مش رح يفتشه العميد أكيد

Jimmy has cocaine with him, but the

⁷¹ Sharif (*sharīf*) is an honorary title signifying direct descent from Muhammad, the prophet founder of Islam. This lineage has conferred religious authority on the Hashemites in the region. As Emir of Mecca beginning in 1908, Sharif Hussein held additional religious authority as the custodian of sacred sites of Muslim pilgrimage. In 1916, he declared himself King of Hijaz, a position he held until he was forced to abdicate in 1924 (Strohmeier 2019:734).

colonel is definitely not going to search
him

In contrast, a Sudanese engineer has been imprisoned [2:26-2:30],

wa-l-muhandis as-sūdānī ‘am bi-ya ‘fīn والمهندس السوداني عم بيعفن بزنانة وقفوه علحدود
bizinzāni wa ‘fūhu ‘al-ḥudūd

The Sudanese engineer is rotting in a
cell, they stopped him at the border

El Rass uses the two lines to indicate a double standard between MENA residents and US or European citizens. At the heightened space of tension that is a checkpoint or border crossing, he imagines, an engineer can get profiled, arrested, and imprisoned because he is Sudanese, while a North American or European can get away with carrying drugs. Additionally, El Rass adds to El Far3i’s commentary on colonization’s betrayal of Arab hospitality [2:11-2:14],

iḥdhar al-karam al-‘arabī mumkin احذر الكرم العربي ممكن ضيفك سكين
ḍayfak sikkīn

Be wary of Arab generosity, maybe
your guest is a knife

The imagery of comparing a guest to a sharp weapon speaks to the duplicity inherent in too many US and European actions in MENA from historical contexts to the present.

El Rass also adopts the so-called “high art” versus “low art” dichotomy through his Jimmy caricature. As I discussed in my introduction, those dedicated to alternative Arabic music often define it in opposition to pan-Arab pop. In this track, El Rass positions pan-Arab pop as inferior “low art” by making Jimmy a fan of it, or at least he is attracted to one of its stars, Lebanese singer Haifa Wehbe (*Hayfā’ Wahbī*), known for her sexualized image. However, in the following line, it is not alternative Arabic music that El Rass places in the superior “high art” position, but instead *ṭarab*. As I explain further in the introduction, *ṭarab* refers both to the tradition and repertoire of Arab urban art music and “the extraordinary

emotional state” (Racy 2003: 5-6) that music and poetry can evoke, especially through the feedback loop at live concerts between skilled, receptive listeners and performers. To portray this art divide, El Rass raps [1:55-1:58],

*muhayyaj ‘alā hīfā mā bi-ya ‘nīlu shī al-
ṭarab*

مهيج على هيفا ما بيعنيه شي الطرب

Jimmy is turned on by Haifa, he doesn’t
care about *ṭarab*

Rather than implying that Arab hip-hop or alternative Arabic music more broadly is the music that someone superior to Jimmy would care about, El Rass’s placement of *ṭarab* in that position speaks to his deference to this genre and its associated emotional state.

El Rass brings himself into the verse in the context of religion. He seems to ask listeners how they expect him to pray with a McDonalds close to the Kaaba, the holiest site in Islam in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. He implies that US corporations have over-extended their reach nearly to Islam’s most sacred space [2:38-2:44],

*kīf biddak yu ‘anī ṣallī wa-ftī Mākdūnāldz
ḥad al-Ka ‘aba?
lāzim ‘alā al-madākhil yuwazza ‘ū kutub
Idwār S ‘aīd*

كيف بدك ياني صلي وفي ماكدونالدز حد الكعبة؟

لازم على المداخل يوزعوا كتب ادوارد سعيد

How do you want me to pray while
there’s a McDonalds near the Kaaba?
They should distribute at the entrances
the books of Edward Said

Here El Rass offers the suggestion of handing out Edward Said’s books at McDonalds entrances. He could be intending to insult Said’s work by associating it with US fast food, given El Rass’s resistance to fully align with any particular thinker or ideology, as Nickell demonstrates (2020:201). El Rass could also mean the line to suggest that the act of representing MENA through caricature is spreading as rapidly as corporations such as McDonalds are. Alternatively, El Rass may respect Said’s works, and envisions handing

them out as a way to educate readers on the postcolonial mode of critique that El Rass also conveys in his lyrics.

Of the two verses that make up “Orientalism,” El Rass more firmly situates his in a mode of postcolonial critique, primarily through his Jimmy caricature. While El Far3i poses strong critique as well, what sets him apart from El Rass is the fact that he does not stop there. Instead he constantly makes subtle shifts to encourage his listeners to complicate their thinking on political issues. I broadly understand El Far3i’s more open-ended, flexible approach as working to unravel the binary thinking that lingers from colonialism. Letting go of binaries can help enable a more complex understanding of Indigenous Palestinians and Arabs more broadly as well. Despite the public feud between the two artists later, El Far3i continued to consider the track influential enough in his thinking to bring it up to me, when I asked him to explain the second song I will now analyze in this chapter.

Expanding Nuance in El Far3i’s “Estishraq Dakhily”

I now turn to analyzing ambiguities in El Far3i’s solo track “Estishraq Dakhily” (*Istishrāq Dākhilī*) [Internal Orientalism] (2017). When compared with his verse in “Orientalism,” El Far3i’s lyrics are more nuanced, as if over time, he has increasingly welcomed this writing approach. Here I will highlight how his lyrics dwell in an in-between space, where he both strongly critiques legacies of colonization and represents Palestinian Indigeneity complexly. By doing so, he aligns with the current critical Indigenous studies scholarship I engage with in this chapter. Both these scholars and El Far3i do not stop at a mode of critique, or feel the need to choose between one mode or the other. Instead they both critique colonialism and highlight a fuller spectrum of Indigenous expression. This

contributes to broader processes of decolonization by moving away from the lingering “us versus them” binaries that colonizers have deployed against too many Indigenous peoples.

El Far3i’s sung chorus for the track, which includes the title phrase “Internal Orientalism,” highlights his ability to encourage multiple interpretations. If I had not had the chance to ask El Far3i directly what he means by internal orientalism, I would have understood it to describe a process where the subjects of orientalist caricatures internalize those harmful misrepresentations. However, as I quoted in the opening of this chapter, El Far3i’s explanation is much more nuanced. He began by summarizing the strong critique of the “West” that his and El Rass’s track “Orientalism” poses,

The track is pretty harsh on any visitors to the Arab world, you know what I mean? Especially from the West. It talks about all these things—it’s kind of weird because you do research—it’s how researchers could be used by governments and that whole conspiracy thing. (pers. comm., January 22, 2019)

He then identified the fact that the so-called “East” and “West” are interwoven with one other, and have been historically as well. This interconnectedness, said El Far3i, makes criticizing “Western culture” in part a self-criticism for those like himself,

“Estishraq Dakhily” means we view ourselves from the eyes of the outside anyways, because there is no choice. Hey man, you can’t keep dissing the Western culture because a lot of the things you already do and believe in, you’ve got from them and they’re embedded. And then they feel like, well, but that’s for everyone, and then my argument becomes, well, yes, and before Enlightenment in Europe, also some of the information coming from Arabic and Islamic cultures have been embedded and its normal. (pers. comm., January 22, 2019)

He ended by strongly emphasizing that the song is about putting an end to “the mentality of blaming.” He say, “The whole song is not about orientalism, but it’s about the mentality of blaming, not blaming ourselves. It’s about taking responsibility” (pers. comm., January 22, 2019).

Still, much of El Far3i’s complex explanation of “internal orientalism” would not be immediately clear from the song lyrics alone. His chorus, where the title-phrase appears,

implies a heavier critique by highlighting the human cost of the US-led war in Iraq. El Far3i sings in the chorus [1:47-2:12],

*istishrāq dākhilī.. wa-istighrāb min al-jamī‘
istishrāqu w-irāq id-dam..kān fī-l- ‘irāqi
id-dam*

استشراق داخلي.. واستغراب من الجميع
استشراق و إراقة الدم.. كان في العراق الدم

Internal orientalism.. and confusion
from everyone
Orientalism and the shedding of blood..
there was blood in Iraq

Reddit user @AchingMind identified for me an additional meaning of the word *Istighrāb* in the first line. Commonly referring to “confusion” in their experience, they told me it can also be translated as “Westernization.” Through his sorrowful vocals, I hear El Far3i’s chorus in part as a sonic mourning of those lost at the expense of US and European aims in the region. In our interview, El Far3i explained the term internal orientalism in a way that resists dichotomous ways of thinking such as “us versus them” and “East versus West,” and instead argues that groups often perceived to be distinct are in fact inextricably linked. Taking El Far3i’s lyrics and interview comments together, I suggest that El Far3i’s priority is not to express one clear fundamental meaning, but instead, to enable many layers of interpretation through nuanced lyrics.

I will explain two more instances of words from El Far3i’s lyrics that encourage multiple interpretations. First, my song translation tutor in Amman, Omar Battikhi (‘*Umar Baṭṭīkhī*), explained another double meaning to me in the following line, which evokes both the season of spring and the so-called Arab Spring [2:26-2:30],

*fāṭḥamasnā ‘alā al-rrabī‘ zayy dūdāt
al-qazz*

فاتحمسنا على الربيع زي دودة القز

We got excited for spring like a silk
worm

Battikhi added that spring is the season that silk worms emerge from their cocoons (pers. comm., March 12, 2019). El Far3i likely uses past-tense in regards to the Arab Spring given that events such as the Syrian Civil War and Egypt’s return to authoritarian rule overshadowed many hopes for constructive change. Second, various native speakers pointed out different potential meanings to me of a term in the following line, where El Far3i expresses the importance of music in his own process of self-betterment [2:52-2:55],

*al-lahn thawra ‘alā al-dhāt izā šār illī
shabīhtī*

الحن ثورة على الذات إذا صار إلي شبيحتي

The melody is a revolution against the
self in case I become a bully

I translate the last word of the line, *shabīhtī*, as “bully,” based on a suggestion from Jordanian PhD Candidate in Comparative Literature at University of California, Santa Barbara, Ghassan Aburqayeq (pers. comm., January 13, 2021). Still, other native Arabic speakers interpreted the word as a reference to Syrian-state sponsored militias. However, Aburqayeq felt it was unlikely that El Far3i referred to Syrian militias specifically here, given that there are a range of country-specific terms for civilians paid by their governments to instigate conflicts. Because El Far3i does not add specifics, his writing keeps open the possibility for multiple interpretations.

El Far3i also encourages ambiguity in the track by referencing both of his longtime stage names, El Far3i and Far3 El Madakhil (*Far‘ al-Madākhil*) [Side Street], in the same song. At a surface level, they refer to his acoustic rap and hip-hop sets, yet he references both names in this song from his acoustic repertoire. The first line referencing a stage name is [1:02-1:05],

*Far‘ al-Madākhil kuntu ‘aṣhān la’ayt
yanbū‘*

فرع المداخل كنت عطشان لقيت ينبوع

Far3 El Madakhil, I was thirsty and I

found a fountain

Later, he adds [3:21-3:24],

Akhūk al-Far‘ī al-ishī al-‘arabī illī ‘am أخوك الفرعي الإشي العربي اللي عم بتحس فيه من فترة
bi-ṭhiss fīh min fatra

Your brother El Far3i, this Arab thing
that you’ve been feeling for awhile

Musicologist Hani Alkhatib also interprets the stage name Far3 El Madakhil as a reference to the alternative music that El Far3i creates in the Arab world, comparing it to a side street unlike the more trodden roads of mainstream music genres in the region (pers. comm. December 13, 2020). El Far3i’s evoking of both stage names implies that he does not understand his two personas as fully distinct from one another, but rather, that they are interwoven and overlapping.

One of the major themes El Far3i raises in “Internal Orientalism” is the Palestinian cause in the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict. At one moment in the track, he calls on his listeners to approach the cause with understanding and nuance, rather than blame [1:34-1:1:40],

khallū kull wāḥid yīqāwim bi-ṭarī’thu.. خلوا كل واحد يقاوم بطريقته.. لأنه الاحتلال بكل الأحوال
liānnu al-iḥtilāl bi-kull al-aḥawāl wā’if واقف بطريقه
bi-ṭarī’hu

Let everyone resist in his own way..
because in any case, the occupation is
standing in his way

This line is an imperative from El Far3i. He insists that there is no single way to resist the Israeli occupation, and instructs his listeners to acknowledge that ambiguity. El Far3i raises many facets of the topic, such as the question of what constitutes normalizing relations with Israel [1:08-1:11],

anā mish ‘am bibī‘ taṭbī’..ḍurūrī taṣīr أنا مش عم ببيع تطبيع.. ضروري تصير تميز
tamayyiz

I'm not selling the idea of normalizing..
you have to start making a distinction

Here El Far3i likely references a pattern where Arab performers who choose to perform in Israel or the Occupied Territories often face backlash from activists in the Palestinian cause such as from members of BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) who consider such concerts normalizing relations with Israel. He may be calling for greater nuance when listeners decide who acts in support of Palestine and who works against it. However, El Far3i's choice not to mention a specific activist group, for example, or a specific incident, represents his mode of open-ended, ambiguous lyrics. As Diaz notes, Indigenous expression that enables a multitude of linguistic meanings can come in the form of holding seeming-contradictions together (2016:120).

Elsewhere in the song, El Far3i raises the issue of travel restrictions, which abound in the MENA region depending on citizenship status. El Far3i plays lyrically with Shakespeare's famous line from *Hamlet*, Act III, Scene I, "To be, or not to be: that is the question," to encourage his listeners not to allow visa issues to cause them to lose sight of the broader context of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. For example, activists can debate the ethics of whether or not a musician should perform for their Palestinian fans there, but neither choice would end the Israeli occupation. Nor would it end Jordan's relations with Israel, such as the controversial natural gas pipeline project. It has been exporting natural gas from Israel to Jordan as of January 2020, pumped by the Texas-based company Noble Energy (Al-Khalidi 2020). El Far3i also raises his own ancestry as a Palestinian born and raised in Jordan, whose family mourns their lost homeland [1:15-1:24],

hatfayyiz mā tafayyiz mish hadhā
huwwa s-su'āl
bi- ḥalla' bit-taṣrīḥ.. hadhā al-iḥtilāl
anā ibin lāji' 'alā as-sakīt ḥabb yashūf

تفَيِّزْ مَا تَفَيِّزْ مَش هَذَا هُوَ السُّؤَال
بِحَلْقٍ بِالتَّصْرِيحِ.. هَذَا الْاِحْتِلَال
أَنَا ابْن لَاجِيْ عَلَى السَّكِيْتِ حَب يَشُوْف الْبَيْتِ

al-bayt

To get a visa or not get a visa, this isn't
the question
Stare at the permit.. this is the
occupation
I'm the son of a refugee who quietly
wants to see home

Within three lines, El Far3i has deftly interwoven Shakespeare with the Israel-Palestine conflict, travel restrictions, and the persistent, unresolved longing to return that Palestinian refugees carry across generations.

Likewise, El Far3i has at once said that he would never perform in Israel (Potter 2016), and in the context of this track, also imagines himself as a narrator in Israel or the Occupied Territories as a prisoner of Israeli jailers. He follows this by connecting his Indigenous Palestinian ancestry to the foundations of Christianity, stating that he is part of the family of Joachim, the father of the Virgin Mary. According to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Mary gave birth to Jesus in Bethlehem, a city which is now part of the Palestinian West Bank. He then makes a strong assertion of Palestinian rights to the land, the same line that received strong audience cheers and applause when I saw El Far3i perform it at Buffalo Wings & Rings in Abdoun [3:37-3:46],

*anā mish sā`ih sajjān.. anā wāḥid min
al-asrā
anā min āl `Imrān fa-ukhtī bi-takūn al-
'Adhrā'
bi-tḍall al-arḍ hay kulhā illī lū bi-
'usmūhā miyyat marra*

أنا مش سائح سجان.. أنا واحد من الأسرى
أنا من آل عمران فأختي بتكون العذراء
بتضل الأرض هاي كلها إلي لو بقسموها مية مرة

I'm not here visiting the jailer.. I'm one
of the prisoners
I'm from the family of the Joachim, my
sister is the Virgin Mary
All of this land is mine even if it was
divided 100 times

The last of these lines expresses Palestinian perseverance. It reasserts the Palestinian claim to the land despite decades of colonization, from the British mandate period to Israel's increasing dominance from 1948 onwards.

More of El Far3i's vivid imagery could relate to Palestinian land claims [3:11-3:13],

*barr al-amān khashaba maktūb 'alayhā
bi-ayyat wasīle*

بر الأمان خشبة مكتوب عليها بأية وسيلة

The land of safety is a piece of wood,
written on it by any means

This brings to mind the Palestinian desire not only for a homeland, but for a homeland of peace and security. Further, Native Arabic speaker @Smol Kiki interprets the line as a reference to Palestinians' determination to leave their mark on their land by any means, including by carving it in wood (pers. comm., March 6, 2021). The Israelis, @Smol Kiki added, often plant trees in each new territory they gain control of, meaning to symbolize solidifying their roots there, given that trees often live for many generations (pers. comm., March 6, 2021) (Rinat and Zikri 2020). Knowing this practice, Palestinians could carve into Israeli-planted trees to resist their encroachment. Still, El Far3i's does not specify a particular land, enabling multiple interpretations. He also chooses ambiguity in the following line, hinting at regional instabilities [2:24-2:27],

aḥna sha 'b mahzūz.. sha 'b mustafazz..

إحنا شعب مهزوز.. شعب مُستفزز..

We are an unstable people.. a provoked
people..

Although by "we," El Far3i likely refers to Palestinians, his choice to keep "we" undefined leaves the door open for a wider range of readings.

Elsewhere, El Far3i achieves an open-ended quality with poetic language on themes of music and migrancy [2:46-2:49],

al-iqā' ṭīr mhājir akhid istirāḥa bi-

الإيقاع طير مهاجر أخذ استراحة بحديقتي

ḥadi'tī

The rhythm is a migrant bird that takes a
rest in my garden

El Far3i's reference to rhythm connects to his long career as a percussionist, whereas a migrant bird serves as a potent metaphor for refugees. While the Palestinians are among many who cannot return to their homeland, a migrating bird flies free of geopolitical barriers, and instead makes the same journey home year after year. A garden can also evoke the Palestinian cause. In general, planting a garden requires land ownership. For Palestinians, owning land carries a sense of power to counter Israeli practices of razing Palestinian-cultivated land (Simaan 2017:510). Yet because El Far3i does not specifically mention his own percussion career or Palestine, it enables listeners to make broader connections.

El Far3i can also evoke nostalgia in certain migrants by quoting from “‘*Andak Baḥariyya yā Rayyis*” [Your Navy, Oh President!], sung by the iconic Lebanese vocalist Wadih El Safi (*Wadi' al-Ṣāfi*) (1921-2013) [1:12-1:14],

*rakkiz yā kuwayyis al-baḥar kuwayyis
yā rayyis*

رگّز يا كويس البحر كويس يا ريس

Focus, oh good man, the sea is good, oh
captain

El Safi's lyrics are by Lebanese poet Omar El-Zaani (‘*Umar al-Za'ynī*) (1895-1961), known for his orientation towards social justice and his critique of Lebanese authorities. According to Ghassan Hage, no other male singer in Lebanon has reached the heights of stardom that Wadih El-Safi achieved there (2010:422). Because of his acclaim and the fact that his works are so frequently broadcast in Lebanon, Hage calls El Safi's songs and voice part of Lebanese folklore. It therefore triggers feelings of nostalgia for Lebanese migrants when they hear El Safi's recordings (2010:422). It could do the same for listeners from the wider Levant, as well.

In a number of instances in the song, El Far3i jumps quickly from one subject another, which I identify as representing his choice to create an in-between space with his lyrics. He does not feel the need to choose between a postcolonial mode of critique or a focus on nuanced Indigenous expression: he does both. For example, the following moment in El Far3i's song adds hope to its many dimensions, only to immediately state the potential for future conflict [0:23-0:36],

*mish raḥ naḍhallnā taḥt.. raḥ nuṭla ' li-fū' wa-na 'lā
raḥ nudḥash eydinā bi-l-musta 'bal..
natanāwal 'āisha aḥalā
mā tansū innu dam al-shahīd zayy al-
nabīdh.. lamma bi-tmurr al-ayyām wa-
as-sinnīn bi-yata 'ta' wa-bi-dallahu
yaghlā*

مش رح نضلنا تحت.. رح نطلع لفوق ونعلى
رح ندحش إيدنا بالمستقبل.. نتناول عيشة أحلى
ما تنسوا إنه دم الشهيد زي النبيذ.. لما بتمر الأيام و السنين
بيتعتق وبضله يغلى

We will not remain below.. we'll rise up
and go higher
We'll thrust our hands into the future..
we'll get a more beautiful life
Don't forget that the blood of martyrs is
like wine.. as the days and the years
pass, it will age and will become more
valuable

The first two lines sound like a rallying cry of solidarity in an unspecified struggle for positive change. The third line appears to predict that more will succumb to committing acts of violence, inspired by past perpetrators. It again demonstrates how quickly El Far3i moves from one idea to another in his lyrics, which I highlight as representing a more complex Palestinian Indigeneity than lingering colonial binaries want to allow.

El Far3i also topically shifts to evoke a love song [3:27-3:33],

*fī binit baīn al-jumhūr zāki wa- 'aynayhā
hūr . . lāzim ta 'rraf innaha munsajma
li-annaha hāmla bi- 'albhā jamra*

في بنت بين الجمهور زاكية وعينها حور.. لازم تعرف
إنها منسجمة لأنها حاملة بقلبها جمره

There's a woman in the audience, she's
sweet and her eyes are beautiful.. you

must know she's so into it because she's
got a burning ember in her heart

These two lines portray a moment when El Far3i admires the beauty and engagement of an audience member while he performs. It points to the multiple subject matters of the song: while he evokes the Palestinian struggle and the death and destruction of the Iraq War, he describes a fleeting moment of attraction. El Far3i also keeps the possibility open for interpretation in the following line, where he refers to the global circulation of hookah, a water pipe for smoking [3:17-3:21],

*fa 'am nintashar 'alā kull al-aqtār zayy
al-argīley*

فعم ننتشر على كل الأقطار زي الأرجيلة

We're spreading all over the world like
hookah

El Far3i does not specify who he means by “we” here, but possibilities include Indigenous Palestinian refugees, refugees more broadly, or people from the MENA region. The comparison to hookah also evokes the subtle, quiet way that smoke spreads.

I will end my analysis by pointing to a number of moments when El Far3i critiques binary thinking and defines his own approach differently: to represent issues with ambiguity, nuance, and complexity. He highlights “us versus them” mentalities [3:05-3:08],

*al-hawwas bi-l-ākhar.. at-ta 'aṣṣub lil-
lqabīle*

الهوس بالآخر.. التعصب للقبيلة

Obsessed with the other.. devotion to one's
tribe

With the first half of the line, El Far3i implicates the US or Europe by evoking orientalism's preoccupation with the other. In the second half, he points to the MENA region where tribal loyalties remain greatly important to the operation of societies such as Jordan's. He also expresses frustration with generalizations [3:24-3:26],

bakrah as-ṣūra an-namaṭiyya

بكره الصورة النمطية

I hate the stereotype

While El Far3i leans towards ambiguity by not specifying which stereotype he is referring to, he has expressed his strong dislike of oversimplifications, such as those inherent in orientalist and colonial thought. He suggests his continued frustration with the imagery [2:30-2:36],

*tata 'addud at-ṭuruq bi-ta 'addud al-
masālik.. līsh da 'iman biddkum al-
akthar 'amūman min dhalik*

تتعدد الطرق بتعدد المسالك.. ليش دايماً بذكماً الأكثر عموماً
من ذلك

There are as many roads as there are
ways to cross them.. why do you want
any more than that?

Here El Far3i appears to impatiently wonder why anyone would be discontent with all the possibilities and schools of thought already available to them. He asks a similarly structured question elsewhere in the song, and this time adds his own answer [2:55-3:03],

*alwāni katīra wa-makhlūṭa.. l-ayya lōn
bi-tmīl
ayy ashī bi-taḥāwil tarūjhu raḥ a 'mal
minnu badīl
sammīhā musīqa badīle*

ألوان كثيرة ومخلوطة.. لأي لون بتميل
أي إشي بتحاول تروجه رح أعمل منه بديل
سميها موسيقى بديلة..

There are many mixed colors.. which
color do you lean towards?
Anything you try to spread, I'll come up
with an alternative
So call it alternative music..

Battikhi interprets El Far3i's questioning around color alignments as a reference to political party affiliation (pers. comm., March 12, 2019). El Far3i's answer to his own question is to offer complex, ambiguous representations through music. Whatever information spreads, he will respond in his own way through his lyrics.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I considered what can be productive about the open-ended ambiguity in El Far3i's song lyrics as an Indigenous Palestinian musician, specifically. My analysis has built on current work by critical Indigenous studies scholars Vicente M. Diaz (2016), Brendan Hokowhitu (2016), and Stephanie Nohelani Teves (2018). Like El Far3i, these scholars do not feel the need to choose between critique and a focus on representing Indigeneity complexly. They both critique prominent histories of colonial powers using binary thinking used against Indigenous peoples, and push past critique to explore what is productive about diverse expression for Indigenous people, "to move beyond the limits of being fully human as defined by colonization" (Hokowhitu 2016:87). Diaz explores these limits through what he calls Indigenous discursive flourish or linguistic play, opening analytical possibilities beyond what Indigenous peoples are typically granted (2016:120). Hokowhitu describes a radical Indigenous studies that refuses Western systems classification (2016:84). Teves frames "radical indigeneity" as Indigenous world-making that exceeds the limits of colonization (2018:2-3). In my own case studies, I highlight song lyrics by alternative Arabic music's beloved Indigenous Palestinian solo artist, El Far3i, which both critique and encourage open-ended interpretations. While El Far3i is by no means unique in his work breaking down binaries, I argue that his ambiguous lyrics, expressed as an Indigenous Palestinian, help unravel entrenched binaries repeatedly used against Indigenous peoples in processes of colonialism.

Among El Far3i's many songs, I chose to focus on two to support my analysis: "Internal Orientalism" and "Orientalism," which El Far3i recorded with El Rass. I began by describing a live performance of "Internal Orientalism" in Amman, where the audience cheered most loudly at El Far3i's assertion of Palestinian land rights. That night, El Far3i

comfortably inhabited an in-between space, where he expressed lyrics that included critiques of US actions in the region at a venue in the shadow of Amman's US Embassy. I provided a detailed analysis of both songs in this chapter following El Far3i's statements in our interview, who shared his relational understanding of the two with me; in other words, he explain the term "Internal Orientalism" to me by first describing "Orientalism." While in "Orientalism," both El Rass and El Far3i pose strong postcolonial critiques, El Rass stops there, while El Far3i writes from a greater position of openness, subtly encouraging his listeners to add nuance to their understandings of political issues. "Internal Orientalism" highlights El Far3i's increasing talent for dwelling in an in-between space, where he both critiques legacies of colonization and nuances the Palestinian experience. I intend for this detailed look to help present Indigenous expressions complexly, sounding far more than mere victimhood at the hands of colonization. Finally, my citational practice of centering critical Indigenous studies scholars seeks to contribute to the broader project of decolonizing knowledge production in academia.

Conclusion. Grant Us Our Complexity: Representation and the Future of Amman's Alternative Arabic Music

The fundamental aim underlying each aspect of this dissertation has been to represent alternative Arabic music complexly. I have aimed to do so while addressing the questions, what is alternative Arabic music in Jordan? What role do affects (meaning, emotions experienced socially) play in alternative Arabic music? Further, what does being political mean in these music contexts, and do these meanings complicate common understandings of resistance? My dissertation as a whole can be understood as an answer to my first research question, including through broad overviews of alternative Arabic music in Jordan in the Introduction and through specific case studies. As to the role of affects, in Chapters 1 and 2, I argued that musicians choose to perform joy and melancholy as important ways to elevate political messages and present a fuller spectrum of who they are. Issues of politics run throughout the dissertation as well, including through sociopolitical contexts outlined in the Introduction. Through the case studies in Chapters 1, 2, and 3, I proposed that musicians in alternative Arabic music enact politics by breaking with the status-quo to express often-silenced voices; by asserting Indigenous Palestinian and Hauranian⁷² identities in the face of Israeli settler colonial erasure; and by expressing nuance and ambiguity through lyrics, rather than merely the limiting binaries that colonists have used against Indigenous peoples. Musicians in the scene use their work to express that their challenges have not defeated them; they compel listeners to hear a fuller spectrum of who they are as they dance in the dark.

I next take a moment to credit the different artistic creators who have strongly influenced my aim to represent my research subjects complexly. I then contextualize

different aspects of my dissertation work under this broader goal. Later, I consider future directions for scholarship related to my research. I end by adding further answers to the question of what alternative Arabic music in Jordan is, by providing recent updates from select members of Amman's scene that point to its bright future.

Grant Us Our Complexity

Speaking at The Assembly on Literature for Adolescents conference, John Green told the audience, "Literature is in the business of helping us to imagine ourselves and others more complexly, of connecting us to the ancient conversation about how to live as a person in a world full of other people" (Green 2008). Green is a multimedia creator and bestselling author of young-adult fiction. His brother, the science communicator and entrepreneur Hank Green, has also hit the best-seller list for his science fiction writing in recent years. Across their many creative platforms, from novels to podcasts to YouTube videos, the Green brothers have continued to emphasize the importance of learning to nuance the ways we understand ourselves and others. Their media education company is called "Complexly," which directly illustrates this point (Complexly 2021).

DarkMatter once wrote, "grant us our complicatedness." These words that stayed with me are by a former performance art activism collaboration between artist and researcher Janani Balasubramanian and Alok Vaid-Menon, an internationally known gender non-conforming writer, performer, and public speaker (Balasubramanian 2021) (Alok 2021). Balasubramanian and Vaid-Menon became politically active together, including through their solidarity work with queer advocacy in Palestine (Nichols 2015). In a blog post titled "grant us our complicatedness," Vaid-Menon also wrote,

⁷² The Hauran (*Hawrān*) plain is a region now divided between northern Jordan, southern Syria, and the Israeli-

I started think about what it would mean for us to acknowledge and appreciated our mutual complicatedness—to truly commit to the sticky and uncomfortable collage of history and feeling and body that constitute each and every one of our lives. The world I want is one in which we constantly transformed by one another’s complicatedness. The world I want is one in which we do not allow language to constrain all of our infinite possibilities. (Alok 2015)

Based in San Francisco, California, Thao Nguyen and Adam Thompson of the band Thao & The Get Down Stay Down wrote a song called “Temple” (2020). The song is about Nguyen’s mother’s experience as a Vietnamese refugee in the US. As Nguyen writes,

My parents are refugees of war. I have at times subscribed to the exclusive narrative of refugee sacrifice, abject loss and grief; those are there too, but they are not the only things. My mom is light and joyful and she has always loved dancing. The performers in this music video were enlisted from community dance groups in the Vietnamese diaspora in Orange County, California. My favorite part of this video is when the dancers let loose. I see them let loose and I think of people’s capacity to experience everything at once, I think of my mom’s capacity for joy, I think of our whole extended family's capacity for joy and reinvention, and I cry every time.

Part of my mission in writing this song was to honor and celebrate my mom's entire journey, to afford her the luxury of a complex humanity and history. (Thao & The Get Down Stay Down 2020)

Together, these five creators have shaped my research aim: to grant alternative Arabic music its complexity.

Representing Alternative Arabic Music

Jordan Akour first introduced me to the term “alternative Arabic music” as the name of the Facebook page he started on June 1, 2010. It serves as a hub for sharing song lyrics, as well as links to audio and music videos, and now has upwards of 180,000 followers (pers. comm., July 12, 2016) (@AlternativeArabicMusic 2021). While my terminology is not widely fixed, in all but two of my interviews, participants resonated with my usage of

controlled Golan Heights (Al-Zou'bi, pers. comm., May 11, 2019),

alternative Arabic music to describe the scene. Rapper Satti (*Sāṭī*) [Robbery]⁷³ [given name, Ahmad Yaseen (*Aḥmad Yāsīn*)] and jazz bassist, bandleader, and composer, Yacoub Abu Ghosh (*Ya 'qūb Abū Ghūsh*), prefer a different well-suited word, “independent” (pers. comm., March 19, 2019; March 15, 2019). Another related term, “underground,” can refer to a music scene forced into secrecy due to intense political pressure. While more than one of my interviewees has described the situation for Jordan’s metal musicians this way, it does not reflect the circumstances of the wider, public-facing scene that has been the focus of my work. Largely, alternative Arabic music in Amman takes place both out in the open and under constant surveillance; El Zein writes that she saw both uniformed police and the *mukhābarāt* (secret police) at every show she attended for her dissertation research, which includes a chapter on hip-hop in Amman (2016:272).

Over time, I learned that in Jordan, alternative Arabic music serves as an umbrella category for a number of genres performed in both virtual and physical spheres: rock, rap, electronic music, metal, and jazz. Arab musicians interpret these global music genres in highly nuanced ways. They play shows at venues such as Al Balad Theater and Corner’s Pub, and release audiovisual material on virtual platforms such as YouTube and Instagram. Overall, alternative Arabic music receives minimal support from major music industries, and often get defined in opposition to pan-Arab pop, which does benefit from major music industry backing and larger mainstream audiences. Sound engineer and founder of the country cover band Pinewood Rift Sari Abuladel defines Amman’s scene for its perseverance through rough circumstances (pers. comm., March 27, 2019). These include high costs, gender biases, a lack of venues—especially large indoor ones for the winter months—government roadblocks, and bureaucracy. Despite all this, dedicated contributors to

⁷³ Satti shared the translation, “robbery,” with me in an interview (pers. comm., March 19, 2019). Another

alternative Arabic music have a talent for finding creative solutions. As I explore elsewhere in this conclusion for example, when lockdowns in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic forced all venues to close their doors in Jordan, scene leaders worked intensely to create and maintain new virtual spaces.

Also, “alternative” in my research context is not shorthand for music genres that first flourished in the US or Europe. The Jordanian National Orchestra (formerly known as the Amman Symphony Orchestra) illustrates my point, having followed a Western European art music tradition, but it is not considered part of Amman’s alternative music scene. This orchestra has faced precarity, shifting in and out of dormancy due to funding shortages, but the sponsorship it has received has been far more official than alternative Arabic music has secured so far. Initially called the Amman Symphony Orchestra, the Greater Amman Municipality funded the orchestra from its founding in 2007 through 2012, then Jordanian businessman Dr. Talal Abu-Ghazaleh provided financial backing from 2014 to 2017 (Alkhatib 2019:86). In contrast, Alkhatib suggests that in short, the Jordanian Ministry of Culture has never effectively supported contemporary arts in the country (2019:98).

Despite differences, Alternative Arabic music takes place as one facet of the wider arts and culture sphere in Amman. Al Balad Theater represents the diversity of artistic expression in the city, by hosting not only a biannual music festival and a plethora of other concerts, but also annual storytelling and street art festivals as well. Darat al-Funun (*Dārat al-Funūn*) [House of the Arts] in Weibdeh offers another example of a diverse arts institution. Among its six historical buildings and gardens, it hosts artists in residence, permanent and rotating visual art exhibits, workshops, talks, and outdoor concerts on its balcony. Current cultural anthropology scholars Aseel Sawalha, Colin McLaughlin-Alcock

possible translation would be “burglar.”

and Kyle B. Craig have focused on the visual arts scene specifically in Amman as well. These scholars both enrich bodies of knowledge on the arts in the city through detailed case study analysis and through broader contextualization.

McLaughlin-Alcock and Sawalha trace major shifts over the decades that helped create the current arts scene in Amman. Part of this work centers around the neighborhood of Weibdeh, where I lived during my fieldwork from 2018-2019 due to its reputation as an artist hub. One of Amman's oldest neighborhoods, McLaughlin-Alcock writes that Weibdeh was established over the course of the 1920s to the 1950s as a diplomatic center to house many middle-class embassy employees. In the 1970s and 1980s, the neighborhood started to decline, as wealthier families left the apartments of Weibdeh for more stand-alone style homes (2020:706).

Sawalha writes that Amman started emerging as a cultural and economic hub in the early 2000s, influenced by a series of economic policies that shifted populations out of rural areas into the capital (2019:454). Starting in 2006, Sawalha marks a significant increase in the number of art galleries and arts-related activities in Amman, which she attributes in part to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and later, to the ongoing Syrian Civil War beginning in 2011 (2019:451). Refugees who fled to Jordan from these wars doubled Amman's population in a decade, and included artists and patrons of the arts from the historic cultural capitals of Baghdad and Damascus (2019:454). Sawalha also identifies the government policy that sparked population shifts to historic West Amman neighborhoods like Weibdeh. In the 2000s, authorities granted Iraqis the opportunity to gain long-term residency permits by investing the equivalent of 150,000 dollars in Jordan. To gain permits, Iraqis who could afford to bought property, thus driving up housing costs and causing many young middle-

and upper-class Jordanians to move to older, lower-cost neighborhoods such as Weibdeh (2019:455).

Both Sawalha and McLaughlin-Alcock outline the role of cultural cafés in giving Weibdeh its artist hub reputation. Professional photographer Linda Khoury founded Fann wa Chai (*Fann wa Shay*) [Art and Tea] in Weibdeh in 2013 in order to provide an otherwise missing space for artists to hang out in the neighborhood (2020:706). Fann wa Chai functions an art gallery with food and drinks, space to work and socialize, and at times live music, Sawalha notes (2019:456-7). McLaughlin-Alcock focuses especially on Rumi café, founded in Weibdeh in 2014. He identifies a major shift in the social practices of visual artists over the course of his ethnographic fieldwork from 2014-2017, from home visits to socializing at Rumi (2020:694-695). His analysis indicates that this new concentrated location for artists led to an increase in their productivity, now that they could access one another's social resources largely all in one space (2020:695).

McLaughlin-Alcock and Sawalha interweave power dynamics into their visual arts scene analysis as well. Historically, women have founded nearly every notable visual arts institution in Amman, including the National Gallery by Princess Wijdan Ali in 1980 and Darat al Funun by Suha Shoman in 1993 (2020:710-711) (2021:232). As Sawalha identifies, middle- and upper-class women also continue to lead the Amman visual arts scene. They own and run most galleries, buy the majority of art, and organize and attend arts and cultural events (2019:451). In a sense, Rumi has made artists more accessible to the public than they were in the past, gathering at private homes. Accessibility is a major factor in an art world that McLaughlin-Alcock describes as deeply separated from Jordan's wider society, though the artists also actively seek ways to connect with a broader public through their work (2021:244). Still, McLaughlin-Alcock notes that overall, popular cafés in Amman are largely

male-dominated spaces. As Weibdeh gentrifies and the visual arts increase in popularity, he suggests that Ammani women in the scene often face more pushback from men as well (2020:710).

McLaughlin-Alcock also points to the ways that the newly concentrated visual arts scene in Weibdeh overlaps with the music scene. He describes how one musician at Rumi, looking to soundproof a room, easily found answers to his questions about where to buy the materials at the best price when experienced rapper and producer Jazz Tha Process (given name, Mohammad Hijazi) arrived at Rumi by chance and assisted him (2020:698). Having sat drinking coffee with many experts in alternative Arabic music at Rumi, who often paused to greet friends and coworkers as we talked, I can attest to the role the café still serves as a social hub for the wider arts scene. PhD Candidate in Anthropology at Northwestern University Kyle B. Craig also highlights beat boxer Abood Aladham's new podcast on music, the arts, and Amman's hip-hop culture, *Wallah Miaow Podcast* (2020), which provides an up-to-date account of how Ammani creators have endured the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷⁴ Aladham shared with me that on a personal level, he feels lucky to have savings from his work performing, managing events, and teaching private classes as a hip-hop artist, which has enabled him to get by despite over a year without live music events in Jordan (pers. comm., June 6, 2021).

Within the visual arts sphere, Craig studies graffiti and street art in Jabal Amman and Weibdeh.⁷⁵ In a recent academic conference presentation, Craig shared that his ethnographic work in part centers on a large subset of graffiti and street artists, who focus on bright colors

⁷⁴ Aladham loosely translated "Wallah Miaow" for me as "Let's Be Deep." Wallah is Arabic slang meaning "Let's Do It" in this case, and "Miaow" refers to the sound a cat makes. He drew the podcast name from the boldtext of a meme he found funny: the image features a cat gazing out a window as if deep in thought, wearing a *ghutra* (white scarf) held in place by an *igal* (black cord), the traditional headdress worn by men in the Arab states of the Persian Gulf (pers. comm., June 6, 2021).

to contrast with the monochromatic white, beige, and yellow facades of so many Amman buildings (2021). More than an aesthetic choice, color becomes a value for these artists, one to foster excitement and opportunity now and for Amman's future. These artists also strategically avoid content in their work that could prompt negative consequences from the public or the authorities. Such strategies can be essential for survival given the often despondent circumstances in Jordan caused by high unemployment—even higher for youth—only exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated decrease in tourism revenue. Youth in Amman, Craig explains, also commonly express that they lack sufficient accessible public space to be social and create. Though motivated by discontent, these artists create and share brightly-colored works as political acts of care and love for their city, Craig demonstrates, creating the more vibrant future they seek, now. Further, their avoiding-controversy approach makes this love and care possible, enabling artists to openly connect with their communities as they produce (2021).

In addition to understanding alternative Arabic music as part of the city's broader arts scene, in my research, I now also define it as a practice of political dissensus. Amidst a lengthy list of challenges that now include a global pandemic, the musicians and other dedicated scene contributors I feature manage to persist. They may not be able to solve the massive problems they are subjected to, but through their music, they constantly call attention to them, from Israeli settler-colonialism to refugee crises. They constantly find ways to expose the precarities they face through their art, reminding their audiences not to passively accept their circumstances as forever fixed. Even more so because of COVID-19, the virtual sphere has been critical, allowing music and conversation to flow far more freely than across most national borders. In spring 2021, many from alternative Arabic music have

⁷⁵ Here, Craig clarifies that “graffiti” refers to the typographical aesthetic tradition and “street art” refers to

actively utilized social media to call attention to the plight of the Palestinians in response to Israel's intensified siege on Gaza and continued to do so after the official ceasefire. In addition to political dissensus, I next expand on the importance of the other major analytical lenses used in my case study chapters: melancholy, joy, and ambiguity.

On October 3, 2019, I attended a concert at the Regent Theater in Los Angeles by the band Mashrou' Leila (*Mashrū' Leylā*) [Night Project or Leila's Project]. During the show, lead singer Hamid Sinno introduced the track "Radio Romance" from *The Beirut School* (2019) by saying, "Honestly I think it took us ten years of playing together to get to a place where we trust ourselves to write a happy song. No, seriously. This next song is about love, it's about good love right? It's about how love can be redemptive, how love can open you up to things you didn't even know existed." For me, Sinno's comments communicate a great deal. It not only points me to a new affect I would consider in future work, love, but his statement in the broader context of the performance that night also captures each of the major themes in my case study chapters. First, melancholy: Sinno shared that it has taken Mashrou' Leila a decade to write a song that the band considers "happy." Second, joy: the band created an exuberant audience atmosphere in Los Angeles by performing high-energy, cathartic dance music. Third, ambiguity: Mashrou' Leila's members called upon the audience to grant them their complexity as they performed nuanced Arab identities that do not align with damaging English-language tropes. Overall, ambiguity captures the fact that I could never accurately reduce the show to a single affective experience shared by everyone in the venue. Instead, I give my interpretations while at once acknowledging the plethora of diverse experiences always around me, shaped by individual histories.

Through this dissertation, I make the case that melancholy, joy, and ambiguity, and political dissensus are essential lenses through which to understand alternative Arabic music. Of the many concerts I have attended in Amman, the majority have felt like big parties where the joy was infectious. Still, whether bands performed sad songs at those concerts I attended or not, melancholy is a key part of the complex of affects underlying the Amman concert experience, due to deeply entrenched sociopolitical realities. Ambiguity becomes a key strategy that musicians in alternative Arabic music use to respond to their difficult circumstances. While Jordan's security apparatus has not been a focal point of my work, people in Jordan undoubtedly face daily expectations to self-censor in public in order to avoid backlash from authorities. Ambiguous lyrics can enable bands to express themselves politically without using the specific language around issues such as religion and politics that would put them at risk. Ambiguity is a balancing act musicians walk in Jordan between expressing themselves and doing what they need to in order to continue making a living. I focus my analysis of political dissensus on Mashrou' Leila's career especially because it demonstrates the tragedies that musicians who choose not to self-censor face in the region. Still, political dissensus applies to countless moments by numerous scene contributors who find ways to call attention to the status-quo, often as a reminder of the fact that societally accepted norms are not permanently fixed.

In my work I also purposely avoid selecting broad themes that could serve to reinforce the same damaging misrepresentations of Arabs that I counter through my research. Anger, for example, was not a prominent affect I experienced during my research on alternative Arabic music. Even if it had been, a focus on anger could perpetuate stereotypes that portray Arabs as violent actors. This is not to suggest that no one felt angry around me, but instead, to speculate that people may have purposely refrained from expressing anger in

public as a part of regular self-censorship. Feminist theorist Elizabeth Spelman analyzes a pattern that I suggest applies across contexts, in which dominant groups do not permit the marginalized to freely express anger (1989:264). According to Spelman, to be angry at someone is to judge their behavior negatively, and therefore, to take on the position of a moral agent. Dominant groups seeking to maintain their power may block marginalized groups from expressing anger to prevent them from assuming the moral agency to judge the actions of the dominant (1989:270). Instead of anger, my focus instead on political dissensus serves to highlight how marginalized people subjected to authoritarian forces still find moments to highlight and question often invisible power structures.

Turning now to my case study chapters, the first centered around the example of the Mashrou' Leila, a Lebanese rock band. Simply put, alternative Arabic music in Jordan is not only performed by Jordanians. The Lebanese members of Mashrou' Leila have performed in the country multiple times, but as I first started to follow alternative Arabic music from the US, the band had a concert get controversially canceled at the last minute in April 2016. I began the chapter by describing the band's final encore performance of "Marikh" (*Mirrīkh*) [Mars] at Los Angeles's Regent Theater, since an escalating series of cancelations have made it increasingly difficult to see the band perform in MENA (Middle East and North Africa).

After an LA set filled with high-energy dance music, Mashrou' Leila chose to end the show with a slow, melancholy song. I argued that the band's melancholy encore stands out as one of many political examples from Mashrou' Leila's career that enacts what philosopher Jacques Rancière calls "dissensus." Dissensus, according to Rancière, refers to a process when a society's marginalized in particular choose to act in a way that breaks with the status-quo, or in Rancière's terminology, "the partition of the sensible" (2010:152). Rancière defines a political subject in terms of the capacity to stage scenes of dissensus (2010:69).

Supporting my interpretation, Hamid Sinno shared that he found Rancière's work influential when he was in college (pers. comm., April 12, 2021). I further drew on feminist theorist Sara Ahmed (2010; 2015) and ethnomusicologist Denise Gill (2015) to emphasize Mashrou' Leila's agency in choosing to perform in a way that resists larger power structures, including through their performances of melancholy. I also considered the band's music video for "Aoede" through these concepts of political dissensus and melancholy. Sinno validated my analysis by mentioning that he was reading Sigmund Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917) while writing the song after his father's passing (pers. comm., April 12, 2021).

Enacting the momentary disruptions that Rancière terms dissensus is one of the defining features of Mashrou' Leila's career, a band whose members have strategically chosen to engage with controversial subjects in MENA, such as issues of sexuality and religion, in their work. As a result, angry mobs, religious leaders, and governmental figures have risen in opposition to them. In Jordan, such opposition was what led to two last minute cancelations of the band's concerts. Following a Mashrou' Leila concert in Egypt in 2017, the government carried out a wave of arrests and abuses of people they perceived to be LGBTIQ+, some of whom had been in the concert audience. In Lebanon in 2019, Christians converged on social media in opposition to an upcoming Mashrou' Leila concert, making such violent threats that the event was canceled out of safety concerns. In Qatar in 2020, the band had a talk canceled at a university museum, again in response to threats of violence online. Two members of the band have since moved to the US, likely in response to these escalating risks. Mashrou' Leila's choice to perform the melancholy of marginalized experiences represents the band's refusal to be silenced.

In Chapter 2, I focused on the works of two bands founded in Jordan, 47Soul and Ayloul (*Aylūl*) [September], for my case studies. I described how these two bands have distinguished themselves in the field of alternative Arabic music through their featuring of *dabkeh*, an Eastern Arab song and line dance tradition, in their electronic and rock music performance. *Dabkeh* has strong associations with celebration. I put music videos, live performances, and audio recordings by 47Soul and Ayloul into dialogue with recent theorizations of joy's powerful potential in the context of activist circles. For example, after reading Hamid Sinno's reference to the authors in an interview (Wetmore 2019), I drew on Nick Montgomery and carla bergman's understanding of joy as social openness, where activists working together are open to affecting one another, rather than being closed and guarded (2017:284). Likewise, *dabkeh* is a social dance and music; one cannot stand up and join in without being affected by other participants in some way. As I showed in my case studies, dancing *dabkeh* is a consistent part of 47Soul and Ayloul shows. Given the bands' Indigenous Palestinian and Hauranian identities and resistance to Israel's settler colonialism, I also applied scholarship on Indigenous activist media to my analysis (Ginsburg 2018; Córdova 2018), primarily through Freya Schiwy's work highlighting joy in Indigenous decolonization efforts (2019:17). Further, my case studies extended Nadeem Karkabi's argument that 47Soul's joyful performances can help build solidarity across difference, by using *dabkeh* as an invitation to participate (2018:192). 47Soul has only increased this aspect of their work in recent music videos, and Ayloul members readily leave the stage to join their fans in the dance.

In this chapter, I broadly argued for the political impact of joy in these musical contexts. I drew on Schiwy in my framing of 47Soul and Ayloul's performances of joy through *dabkeh* as enacting prefigurative politics: they perform the united world they are

calling for in their activism (2019:33). I also highlighted these performances as contributing towards processes of decolonization. As David McDonald demonstrates, *dabkeh* is a way that Palestinians assert their presence on the very land that the Israeli state seeks to seize from them (2013:18-20). In this way, every performance of *dabkeh* by Palestinians and Hauranians, whose land has also been seized by Israel, is a celebration of survival. More than powerless victims at the hands of the Israeli state, they are thriving on the dancefloor. Further, I explained that performances of joy such as these are decolonial in the sense that they decenter the over-representations of Arabs as simply victims in violent conflicts, and recenter a more complex representation of Arab identities that includes joy and agency.

In Chapter 3, I foregrounded case studies from El Far3i's rap lyrics as a solo artist. I focused on the relationality between two pieces from his repertoire, "E-stichrak" (*Istishrāq* [Orientalism] (2012), which El Far3i recorded with the Beirut-based rapper El Rass (*al-Rās*) [The Head] [given name, Mazen El Sayed (*Māzin al-Sayyid*)], and "Estishraq Dakhily" (*Istishrāq Dākhilī*) [Internal Orientalism] (2017). I chose this focus after being struck by El Far3i's comfort with ambiguity in his performance at Buffalo Wings & Rings in Abdoun (*'Abdūn*). There, at a venue located around the corner from the US Embassy in Jordan, he played "Internal Orientalism," a song that asserts Palestinian land rights and critiques US neo-imperialism in the region. I suggested that El Far3i's lyrical ambiguity as an Indigenous Palestinian works to unravel colonial binaries. While binary thinking can be identified in a multitude of contexts, I draw on current Indigenous studies scholarship (Diaz 2016; Hokowhita 2016; Nohelani Teves 2018) to demonstrate how binaries have been weaponized in particular by colonizers. Further, these scholars reach past a mode of postcolonial critique in order to also emphasize the open-ended multitude of meanings inherent in Indigenous expression. El Far3i's highly nuanced, ambiguous lyrics represent himself as an Indigenous

Palestinian complexly, and at once can be understood as part of a greater collective of Indigenous creators. I will now link my project to future avenues for academic work related to alternative Arabic music.

Areas for Future Research

I envision future music-focused research in Jordan that centers around locations besides the West Amman hub of alternative Arabic music. While some current publications already exist that center refugee camps as sites of musical experiences in Jordan, there is an even greater need for English-language work on music in other parts of the country aside from West Amman and the camps, areas about which little has been written. These studies could aim to consider informal, private spaces of music-making, in order to overcome the lack of venues outside the capital. For example, when I attended Ayloul's first album launch in Irbid in May 2019, someone helping to put on the event was proud to tell me about the city's first permanent venue for alternative music shows that had recently been established, Karaj [Garage]. This of course does not mean that Karaj is the only place music gets made in Irbid. For instance, key sound engineer in the scene David Scott has suggested that the wedding industry has driven up sound equipment rental costs in Jordan (Rawashdeh 2017). This furthers the idea that wedding music cultures would be a fruitful area for future study. Weddings would offer rich contexts for expanding my work in Chapter 2 on *dabkeh* music and dance performance as well. I would hope that by turning to informal or otherwise private spaces of music-making, such scholarship could feature a greater diversity of contexts than can be found in West Amman's alternative scene.

Given the fact that currently, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to disrupt global life, including the long-term travel involved in traditional ethnographic fieldwork, Internet

ethnography would be an excellent approach for further studies on alternative Arabic music. A plethora of material is available, from livestreamed and pre-recorded performances to dialogues and debates on various music-focused social media spaces. Even in less disruptive times, the Internet may be the best location for studying rap in Jordan today. Given the extra challenges of performing rap live, artists are more active online, whether in terms of uploading recordings or interacting with fans through mediums such as Instagram stories. The Internet would also be a well-suited starting point to understand the broader networks that alternative Arabic music is situated within. Scholars could consider for example, the causes and effects of recent global shifts, including the fact that major music streaming platforms such as Spotify and Apple Music direct increasing attention to alternative Arabic music (AO 2020).

Future academic writing will also join a discourse—already lively in journalism and in a number of online spaces—on Mashrou' Leila's growing body of performances, recordings, music videos, social media commentary, and graphic design. To my knowledge, my chapter is among few to focus on the band in this degree of depth in academic work. Additional projects on Mashrou' Leila would help to fill the current dearth of English-language scholarship on alternative Arabic music in general, and on this band in particular. It would further help to even the predominance of US and European subjects in popular music studies. Despite all the challenges they face, Mashrou' Leila's band members continue to inspire their fans around the world. Internet access continues to give fans the opportunity to engage with the band, even if their countries will no longer host live performances. The Jordan-based online magazine of LGBTIQ+ culture, My.Kali, another subject awaiting detailed academic attention, has the potential to highlight the importance of online cultural hubs, especially when public, in-person spaces are too heavily policed. I suggest that

focusing on these spaces, whether online or in person, where communities are flourishing in the MENA region despite their challenges will help to fill another scholarly gap—to at once bear witness to suffering while also attending to the full diversity of MENA communities.

Further, the lyrics of alternative Arabic music can offer immense possibilities for scholars of Levantine dialect, even without in-person fieldwork. Of the solo artists and bands that I consider in-depth in my dissertation, Mashrou' Leila is the only one that has shared extensive English song translations. In many cases, Arabic lyrics are readily available online, where enthusiastic fans are quick to assist with gaps. Choosing to focus on translating Arabic song lyrics is a powerful way to honor and respect the countless everyday people who write them and listen to them. Additionally, alternative musicians who target their specific language group by writing lyrics in Levantine dialect, for example, frequently use their pieces to address issues that are directly relevant to those dialect speakers. It provides translators with a way to access the word on the street. Broadly speaking, these choices in terms of a research focus can aid in the larger project of decolonizing academia, meaning the work of undoing the legacies of colonialism and imperialism that English-language scholarship carries with it. Choosing to dedicate English-language academic study to everyday culture in MENA centers voices left too often at the periphery. I began my research with the question, what is alternative Arabic music? I will now conclude this dissertation by highlighting key actors who are answering that question by creating their futures in Amman's alternative Arabic music scene.

What's Next?

Late one afternoon, I sat in Dimitri's Coffee, a café in Weibdeh, Amman for an interview with drummer Zaid Faouri (*Zayd Fāwūrī*), electric guitarist and bassist Mohammad

Ali Eswed (*Muḥammad ‘Alī Iswīd*), and electric guitarist Khalil Al Beitshaweesh (*Khalīl al-Baytshawīsh*). The trio founded the band Ertidad (*Irtidād*)⁷⁶ in Amman in winter 2017 and gave it the tag line, “alternative Arabic rock band from the heart of Jordan” (Ertidad 2021). I had first seen Ertidad perform at *Masrah al-Shams* [Sun Theater] on February 22, 2019.



Figure 19. From left to right, Khalil Al Beitshaweesh, Zaid Faouri, and Mohammad Ali Eswed of Ertidad at *Masrah al-Shams*, Amman, Jordan. Photo by the author, February 22, 2019.

I appreciated the punk influences on the band’s sound, which I have not heard elsewhere on stage in Jordan. I was also struck by the fluid synchrony between the band members as they performed.

After I spoke with Ertidad’s members at Dimitri’s Coffee for some time, something unusual happened compared to my other interviews in Jordan. Al Beitshaweesh said, “I have an idea if everybody agrees, are you free tonight? We could go to the place where we composed all our songs, which is basically our room. We can play all our songs and explain” (pers. comm., March 26, 2019). While most musicians had so far shied away from my requests to sit in on private spaces of music-making such as rehearsals, music video shoots, or recording sessions, Ertidad’s Al Beitshaweesh volunteered an invitation, in order to continue explaining the band to me through a different mode of communication than speech:

⁷⁶ Ertidad’s members have an open-ended approach to translating their band name. They first translated it as “Rebound” and now include three additional meanings, “Frequency,” “Reflection,” and “Revolution.” Faouri offered me his different interpretations of “Rebound” as well, such as rebounding sound, or when a person rebounds from a decision, or rebounds in response to their social environment (pers. comm., March 26, 2019) (pers. comm., February 26, 2021).

playing music. I accepted, and so Ali Eswed drove us to Al Beitshaweesh's family home, stopping along the way to pick up a guitar. Once we arrived, Al Beitshaweesh introduced me to his parents and siblings, and then the four of us convened in Ertidad's rehearsal space, Al Beitshaweesh's bedroom, where I had the chance to listen to them play some of their new material and to hear more about each of their backgrounds. It meant a great deal to me to be invited to listen.

Why was such an invitation so precious and rare in my experience of fieldwork? While in Jordan, I sensed that most other musicians in Amman's alternative scene built walls to separate professional spheres (such as the stage and interviews with researchers) from their private, informal spaces of music-making. I also suspect that many permanent residents in Jordan have grown weary of the constant comings-and-goings of those from the US and Europe in the country. Jordan is an expanding hub for international aid organizations serving the region, and these organizations' employees become temporary residents. In contrast, it seemed to me that many of Amman's permanent residents would prefer to leave due in part to high costs of living and extremely low rates of employment, but cannot. I can see why some may choose to keep a certain distance from those temporarily in Jordan like myself who had the luxury of returning to a more economically prosperous home country after a job concluded. In the introduction, I also discussed my sense that my female gender identity could have been another reason that most musicians brushed aside my requests to sit in on rehearsals or recording sessions, given the tighter constraints that Jordanian society tends to place around women's actions overall. Given these complex circumstances, it was greatly moving that Al Beitshaweesh of Ertidad seemed totally untroubled by them when spontaneously inviting me to attend an impromptu jam session and meet his family.

During the rehearsal, members of Ertidad shared occasional details with me about their backgrounds that related to their musical lives. Ali Eswed and Al Beitshaweesh said that they met for the first time at university. To their shock, they realized that they were cousins—the two could easily pass as brothers in appearance (pers. comm., March 26, 2019). Later, Ali Eswed clarified for me that he is Palestinian on his father’s side and Jordanian on his mother’s side; Al Beitshaweesh and the two newer band members Motaz Dababseh (*Mu’tazz Dabābseh*) and Mahmoud Sallam (*Mahmūd Salām*) are Palestinians who were born in Jordan; and Faouri is Jordanian from the more conservative city of Salt (*Salt*) (pers. comm., February 26, 2021). Still, Ali Eswed continued to explain, these specific aspects of identity are not a focus of Ertidad’s work. He said,

It sometimes feels like we are on the next level of struggles and issues. We do relate to a lot of the problems of our previous generations, but we focus on speaking the voice of the future. I personally would love for Ertidad to be an inspiration for the generations to come. What drives society is culture, and what drives culture is revolutionary art. So let that be Ertidad. (pers. comm., February 26, 2021)

Overall, what I think distinguishes Ertidad from other alternative rock acts in Jordan is Faouri, Ali Eswed, and Al Beitshaweesh’s extensive amount of experience performing live together. Ertidad’s members started off their career as a band by performing together every day for a year at a small café in downtown Amman called Jameeda Khanum (*Jamīda Khānum*) [Beloved Yogurt] (pers. comm., March 26, 2019). *Jamīd* is the tangy yogurt sauce that is the classic topping for Jordan’s immensely popular national dish *mansaf* [lamb and rice], traditionally served on Fridays at family meals. Faouri was the first member to have a connection with the café, having performed regularly there in the past. Once he returned to Amman after graduating from university, Jameeda Khanum’s owner invited him back as a drummer to perform nightly with Ali Eswed and Al Beitshaweesh. Ertidad started off these performances by working with covers of songs by other bands in Jordan’s alternative scene.

The three of them developed two versions for each song, a direct cover and their own interpretation of it. At the café, they had the artistic freedom to improvise, compose, and practice together on stage.

All of this experience playing together has had the effect of dispelling any stage fright: Faouri now calls stage home. Rather than be stressed and nervous backstage before a show begins, Al Beitshaweesh adds, they have fun there (pers. comm., March 26, 2019). Faouri said that in his ten years performing, Ertidad is the first band he has been a part of where he has truly enjoyed playing music live. With Ertidad, the chemistry between its members is so strong that they can look at one another during a show and know what they are trying to say (pers. comm., March 26, 2019). The band members' shared experience comes across to the audience, as well. From my seat at multiple of their shows, Ertidad's members had big smiles on their faces and seemed so relaxed. The band also gained experience performing shows at Ali Eswed's art school along with other university bands when he was still a student.

Ertidad describes the band's music as a mix of rock and oriental sounds on Facebook (Ertidad 2021). At the impromptu informal jam session that Al Beitshaweesh invited me to attend, they shared their deep understanding of the Arab *maqām* [melodic mode] system that they incorporate into their playing. They also listen widely to other genres, and Faouri draws influence from his past experiences contributing drums and vocals to metal bands, as I discussed in the introduction. Each band member contributes vocals at different times as well. When we met in 2019, much of the band's music remained unrecorded, given the high costs involved (pers. comm., March 26, 2019).

Since my field research term concluded, Ertidad has expanded. Motaz Dababseh joined the band in 2019 on synthesizer, who also works in the Information Technology (IT)

industry fulltime. He met the other members of Ertidad while helping the band set up for one of its smaller gigs, Ali Eswed told me (pers. comm., February 26, 2021). They became friends, and appreciating his talents and skills, decided to invite him to join Ertidad. Recently the band gained a fifth member as well. Ali Eswed reconnected with an old friend Mahmoud Sallam, who was employed at an IT company that had also hired Ali Eswed to do graphic design work. Sallam's primary instrument is the acoustic guitar, and he also plays the bass guitar and the piano (pers. comm., February 26, 2021). Sallam will be playing bass guitar on Ertidad's upcoming album, Ali Eswed said, but the group is also considering experimenting with different instrumentation, such as featuring Ali Eswed on bass guitar, Sallam on piano, and Dababseh on synthesizer and drum pad (pers. comm, February 26, 2021). Now they plan to release their first album in spring 2021 (Ertidad 2021).

In the lead up to their first album release, Ertidad has increased its performance presence on YouTube as well. Longtime Ammani rapper Satti has featured Ertidad on his YouTube series *The Closet Sessions*, where he invites artists to perform acoustic versions of their songs (The Closet Sessions 2018). In 2019, Tyrian Art released three YouTube videos that feature Ertidad performing live. In one of the videos, Ertidad's then-three members perform the track "Badleh Btlmaa" (*Badla Bitlamma*) [Shining Tuxedo] (Tyrian Art 2019). Ali Eswed describes the song as capturing the thoughts and struggles that a Jordanian man often experiences when he wants to get married (pers. comm., February 26, 2021). The happiness of the ceremony and reaching such an important life stage are also paired with high costs and potential debts that could last long after the event, Ali Eswed explains.

The track begins with an introductory section not included in the audio-only version, which features an arhythmic electric guitar solo in *maqām hijāz* on A, reminiscent of a *taqsīm* [instrumental improvisation] in Arab urban art music traditions [0:03-0:48]. The solo

expands outside of the *taqsīm* tradition as it progresses, gaining rhythmic accompaniment from the drum set as the tempo builds [0:49-3:00] Ali Eswed says that the band adds these improvisatory openings to live performances to help establish an atmosphere for the audience, and to make the main song sound all the more groovy in contrast once it begins (pers. comm., February 26, 2021). After the improvisatory opening ends, Faouri plays *īqā‘* [rhythmic mode] *ayyub* on hi-hat and snare, alternating between this and *īqā‘ ṣa‘īdī* throughout most of the track, supported by electric guitar and bass in *maqām hijāz* on A [3:01-4:21]. The most striking aspect of Arab tradition that Ertidad integrates into the track happens when all three members join in *zaghūrta* [ululation], a high-pitched trill that is expressed especially by women at celebratory occasions such as weddings, accompanied by the slow *zaffa* wedding rhythm [4:22-4:28]. This practice is a longstanding part of MENA tradition (Zecher 2018:270). After this brief sonic evocation of Arab weddings in reflection of the lyrical subject matter, the song shifts to D minor. Ali Eswed confirmed that this track will be featured on Ertidad’s first album (pers. comm., February 26, 2021).

In March 2020, the Jordan-based program *Cups The Podcast* featured an extended, primarily English-language informal interview with Ertidad on their YouTube channel, filmed at Plug Studio in Amman. In addition to lot of teasing one another, the band sang a brief harmony selection from an as-of-yet unreleased cover track, accompanied by Ali Eswed on the acoustic guitar. Before he began playing, Ali Eswed praised the help he has received from a Plug Studio employee in repairing the guitar he played. While it still had a fret missing, Ali Eswed explained, now it is playable even after having been damaged four different times. This kind of support is critically important in a country where the costs of being a musician are so high. Faouri has told me that although he has been a percussionist for ten years, for example, he still does not own a drum set (pers. comm., March 26, 2019).

Three of Ertidad's members also shared the day jobs they work to help support their musical pursuits on the podcast: Ali Eswed works as a multimedia graphic designer, Faouri recently signed a contract to begin teaching science, and Al Beitshaweesh works as a mechanical engineer.

I spoke with Ali Eswed again recently. He said that Ertidad plans to release the contents of the band's first album track-by-track, as a marketing strategy in order to more effectively reach audiences and maintain enthusiasm (pers. comm., February 26, 2021). They have recorded five of the twelve tracks so far and are making fast progress, including their work on four music videos. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Ertidad has not been able to perform live concerts for roughly a year now. Theaters have been closed for the extent of the pandemic, and even when bars have been open, the heavy restrictions on performances have affected all of Amman's musicians, he said. Ertidad has reframed that immense challenge, however. As Ali Eswed said, "It was a great chance for us to actually experiment with recording and finding ways to make and polish our music without the help of third-party studios" (pers. comm., February 26, 2021). This is what defines Amman's alternative Arabic music scene: refusing to be defeated by challenging circumstances.

Mais Sahli (*Mays Sahlī*) is another key part of the scene's future. Since we last spoke in Amman in 2019, Sahli has founded a number of new promising projects. One of these projects is her Instagram page @LiveMusicJo, which hosted more than one hundred livestreamed concerts from March 20 to April 15, 2020, aiming to keep people entertained during Jordan's strict COVID-19 lockdown (pers. comm., February 26, 2021) (LiveMusicJo 2021). Working many fourteen-hour days, Sahli co-organized the concerts with two other leading women in Amman's alternative Arabic music scene, who remarkably managed to launch the concept only four days after they started discussing it in a WhatsApp group

(Salmaan 2021). The first was Lama Hazboun (*Lamma Ḥazbūn*), who founded both the music events management company OrangeRed in 2004 and the Amman Jazz Festival in 2013 (Hattar 2020). Hazboun still directs both projects. In 2020, she successfully led the jazz festival in a shift of focus based on the needs of the time. While it previously has featured an international lineup of performers, in 2020 it instead highlighted local musicians by pre-recording performances and then streaming them live during the event on the Amman Jazz Festival YouTube channel (Amman Jazz 2020). The second of Sahli's co-organizers was Mirna Nizar Khalfawi (*Mīrna Nazār Khalfāwi*) who leads the music marketing company Abrez Music that she founded in January 2019 (pers. comm., February 26, 2021) (Hattar 2020). Her company fills a much-needed gap in the industry by aiding artists in career development and social media promotion. Hana Malhas (*Hanā' Malḥas*), a singer, songwriter, and producer of another online concert series in 2013 called *Balafeesh (Balā Fīsh)* [Unplugged] also helped with the initial four-day launch of the project.

Sahli initiated this concert series in response to what some have called one of the strictest COVID-19 lockdowns in the world (Arraf 2020). With sixty-nine reported cases as of March 19, 2020, Jordan took strict pre-emptive measures, including the closure of businesses, all government institutions besides hospitals, as well as its air and land borders, and deployed army troops to enforce the ban on travel within the country (Younes 2020) (*Human Rights Watch* 2020). Driving was not permitted and most residents were required to stay inside, with no exceptions for walks, taking pets outdoors, or even going grocery shopping in the beginning (Arraf 2020). Ertidad was one of many bands featured on @LiveMusicJo's concert series during this time period. Ali Eswed shared that he was glad to be a part of this project that brought together a multitude of musicians during the lockdown (pers. comm., February 26, 2020).

Sahli recently shared more about her own musical background and her experiences in Amman's music scene in a remote interview that was released on YouTube with Beirut-based Anthony Semaan, who hosts music industry conversations that he calls "Music XP." Sahli said that her parents sent her to Jordan's National Conservatory to receive violin lessons as a child, though she did not connect strongly with that particular musical path (Semaan 2021). After high school, she started working as a waitress in pubs. Over time, her career progressed from entry level work to pub management, to eventually co-ownership of more than one bar in Amman, including Corner's Pub in Jabal Amman (*Jabal 'Ammān*), which is also one of the city's essential music venues. Sahli started featuring concerts at her bars in 2003 and has been a concert organizer ever since. She describes owning Corner's as a dream, and the venue has now featured more than four hundred shows on its stage (Semaan 2021). Semaan also asked Sahli about her sound system at Corner's, and her answer also demonstrates the importance of maintaining strong connections with others in the industry. Sahli explains that while some think a small venue is easier to navigate in terms of acoustics, in fact it is more difficult. Her approach involves valuing local expertise over equipment. In praise of her in-house sound engineer Sari Abuladel (*Sāri 'Abul 'Adil*), she said, "I did not invest in a sound system, I invested in a good relationship with a sound engineer" (Semaan 2021). In addition to her work in the bar scene, Sahli also executes large-scale music events in Jordan under the label of her music production company, Scene, such as the "What the Hills" music festival (Hattar 2020).

When asked how COVID-19 has affected Sahli's work, she said that before the virus, she had been planning to host the second iteration of "What the Hills" in 2020 (Semaan 2021). She also remembered having to call a Beirut-based band that she was about to host for a performance at Corner's, letting them know that Jordan's international airport was about to

shut down. The air travel ban was part of Jordan's complete lockdown for three months in March, April, and May of 2020 (Semaan 2021). After the three-month strict lockdown, they experienced a series of openings and closures under an 8pm curfew that made it difficult to host events, even in periods of business openings. Sahli explained that in December 2020, the government eased the curfew somewhat, and she was able to host three live shows at Corner's that month, limited to forty people to accommodate social distancing rules. Finances have been an underlying challenge throughout as well, said Sahli, often causing her to question how she could find the funds to pay musicians (Semaan 2021). Still, Sahli not only continued but also expanded the scope of her creative projects through these challenges.

Sahli also recently launched another major project that represents the future of Amman's alternative music scene, the Jordanian Female Artist Collective, a support network and performance ensemble of roughly twenty-four Jordan-based musicians. Sahli told *The National* that part of her motivation for the group was the resistance she and others have faced in their industry in the past. She explained, "We experienced a lot of sexism. They said it could never be done, or if we managed to do it we would fail," and continued, "Since we are women, a lot of male musicians said we would just argue all the time and nothing would get done" (Saeed 2020). In December 2019, Sahli decided to invite all of the women in Amman she knew that make music to come to Corner's for a drink and a conversation (Salmaan 2021). To her surprise, at least twenty-three or twenty-four people accepted the invitation. Some were musicians with established careers, and others were new: Sahli had requested their phone numbers after noticing their vocal abilities at Corner's open mic nights (Salmaan 2021).

Given this range of experience levels, Sahli has arranged a series of master classes on songwriting and production for the collective. One instructor is collective member Yara Al

Nimer (*Yārā al-Nimir*), one of Jordan's first female conductors and a composer of works performed by Jordan's National Symphony Orchestra (Saeed 2020). On the experience of leading these classes, Al Nimer described having "a support I never experienced before," feeling comfortable and free of worry (Saeed 2020). Once the master classes have established a foundation for the collective, Sahli next plans to take them to the studio to record a thirteen-track album, so that each vocalist currently performing with them can be featured on a single (Salmaan 2021).

The Amman Jazz Festival 2020 featured at least half of the collective for its debut performance, which they pre-recorded one evening on the large outdoor patio at Darat al-Funun (*Dārat al-Funūn*) [House of the Arts] in Weibdeh under a backdrop of city lights (Amman Jazz 2020). They performed a medley of many English and Arabic-language song covers, rich with vocal harmonies, opening with Al Nimer singing a selection from "*Jafnuhu al-Ghazal*" [His Flirtatious Eye]. Egyptian singer Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab (*Muḥammad 'Abd al-Wahhāb*) (c. 1900- 1991), one of the most renowned MENA vocalists of the twentieth century, made this song famous (Danielson 2020). The medley also included a rousing chorus of "When the Saints Go Marching In," an African-American spiritual best known for the great jazz trumpeter and vocalist Louis Armstrong's recording of it in 1938 (Jacks 2015).

In addition to Sahli's launching of the Jordanian Female Artist Collective and the livestreamed concert series on @LiveMusicJo, other women in Jordan's music industry have started promising new projects as well. Russul Al-Nasser (*Russūl al-Nāṣir*) is one such founder. In 1998, she joined her brother Tareq Al-Nasser (*Tāriq al-Nāṣir*) in co-founding Rum, a beloved ensemble in Jordan that has performed at the Kennedy Center in Washington DC (Hattar 2020). In recent years, Russul Al-Nasser founded a non-profit called Tajalla

(*Tajalla*) [Materialize], which has established small traditional cultural centers across Jordan with a focus on young people. Like Sahli, Al-Nasser managed to shift her focus to the online sphere due to the pandemic. Through *Tajalla*, she hosted a traditional singing festival for youth and children in November 2020 and started a children's choir called "I Am My Voice" (Hattar 2020).

Another member of Amman's alternative Arabic music scene who shared updates with me in February 2021 was Sari Abuladel, sound engineer and founder of the country cover band Pinewood Rift. At that time, he said that live music in Amman has been coming back gradually with limited capacity off and on, depending on the number of COVID-19 cases any given week (pers. comm., February 26, 2021). Still, over much of the past year, Abuladel explained, the government has not permitted live concerts and has required all music venues to close. He agreed completely with this ban, but it also hit him hard as a front of house and live sound engineer. On the other hand, Abuladel shared that his studio work mixing and producing songs tripled in 2020. Musicians who were suddenly limited in terms of live performances instead dedicated their time to writing new material during lockdowns. Some of these musicians recorded themselves in their homes, sent multitracks to Abuladel, and he then turned those recordings into radio-ready songs (pers. comm., February 26, 2021). Another shift that Abuladel noticed occurred on the management side. Companies started hosting livestreamed concerts on YouTube and other forms of social media to reach audiences in their homes. I asked Abuladel about Mais Sahli's livestreamed concert series on her Instagram channel @LiveMusicJo, and he said, "Yes it was huge honestly! I haven't seen anything like it happening here before. Mais Sahli and her team did a great job putting it together" (pers. comm., February 26, 2021). Like Sahli and the members of Ertidad,

Abuladel managed to continue his sound engineering work through a pandemic's circumstances.

In this dissertation, I have represented the outsized place that Jordan holds in MENA alternative music. While Amman may not have a longstanding reputation as a “culture center,” as do cities such as Cairo or Beirut, its alternative musicians, concert organizers, and sound engineers have increasingly influenced the region for over a decade. Especially in the case of 47Soul, and with new attention from streaming platforms and labels such as Spotify and Universal, this scope is becoming increasingly global. Through detailed case studies from my ethnographic research in Amman from 2016-2019, I analyzed how Mashrou' Leila expresses political dissensus through melancholy, how 47Soul and Ayloul perform decolonial joy through *dabkeh*, and how El Far3i represents the nuances of Palestinian Indigeneity through ambiguous lyrics. Finally, the updates that I shared in this conclusion from Ertidad, Mais Sahli, and Sari Abuladel have demonstrated to me that a global pandemic is not enough to stop these creators. While future authors will address a more representative account of the effects of the global pandemic on Amman's arts and culture spheres, I am inspired and humbled by these creators' tenacity.

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Appendix

El Far3i, “Taht il Ard” (*Taht al-Ard*) (Underground) from *El Morabba3 (al-Murabba’)* (The Square) (2012)⁷⁷

تحت الأرض

[El Far3i]:

ما تقوليلي ..تحت الأرض..إلي أسبوعين واقف على الأرض ..عم بحكي و بشكي ..مصافي و قوانين طاقة و علوم ..ما
تطلعي فوق..عالم مجنون..عم بحفر..نازلك عم بحفر..في عالم عم تؤمن و عالم عم تكفر..و كلهم هون ..بشوفهم كل يوم
إشي بيكره حاله و إشي بيكرهني..أنا بس لو سيّارة لبعيد تاخدي..طب تكسي! يوقّلي..طب ضلك ..ضل رايح..لبعيد
.....نّياله!.. أو الله إيعينه على حاله. كئيب من كل نمرة طلعتله قرفان

..تحت الأرض خليك..بركان بيتغزل فيكي..خلي الجنور تحميكي..بترجى فيكي

مشكلتي أنا بحكي كثير...أنا بحكي كثير..بس بدّي أفلك قصة أسير..ضل يحفر تيوصل و يهرب ..و بس شاف الشمس كانت
عم تغرب..قال الحرية مبيوعة و الناس ما بتوعى..كل واحد سكين و بيطن بأصله و كل ما بخف ..في صوت
بيندهله...بقّله تعال!..تع ننسى الأحوال..يابا مافي احتلال..هاي هي الحرية..هذا فرد مي و دبابة و همية..عشان يصعب
...التفسير..عشان يصعب التفسير

Underground

[El Far3i]:

⁷⁷ El Morabba3 shared the Arabic lyrics with the [track audio](#) on YouTube, April 13, 2013. The first English translation below is my own, with assistance from Dwight F. Reynolds. El Morabba3 shared the second English translation along with the Arabic lyrics on YouTube, April 13, 2013.

Don't tell me

Underground

For two weeks now I've been standing on the surface

I've been just talking

And complaining

About refineries ... energy laws ... and science.

Don't go up on top

A crazy world

I'm digging down... down to meet you... I'm digging down.

There are people who believe,

And people who are unbelievers,

And they're all here

I see them every day

Some hate themselves

Some hate me.

If only a car would take me far away... or a taxi, okay...

He stops for me, or keeps on going... far away, lucky him!

God help him, he's probably disgusted from all the rides he gave today.

Stay underground...a volcano's flirting with you...

Let your roots protect you...I beg of you!

My problem is I talk a lot

I really talk a lot

But I want to tell the story of a prisoner

Who kept on digging 'til he broke through and escaped.

When he finally saw the sun...it was setting.

He said, "Freedom's up for sale,

But people aren't aware.

Each person is a knife, stabbing at its origins.

And when the wound heals, there's a voice calling out to him,

Saying, "Come on! Let's forget everything...

Hey man, there's no occupation!

This is freedom!

This is nothing but a squirt gun...and an imaginary tank!"

It gets harder and harder to explain...

Harder and harder to explain.

Stay underground...a volcano's flirting with you...

Let your roots protect you...I beg of you!

Under the Ground

[El Far3i]:

Don't tell me... under the ground... I have been standing on the land for two weeks... I'm just talking and complaining... refineries, energy and science laws... don't go above... a crazy world... I am digging.. Coming down to meet you ..I am digging... there are people who are believing and people who are becoming non believers...and all of them are here... I see them every day, some of them hate themselves and some of them hate me... if only a car could take me far away... or a taxi!

Please stop for me... or just keep going... far... he is lucky! may God help him... he is probably disgusted from everyone that rode with him today...

Stay under the land... a volcano admires you... let the roots protect you... I am begging you...

My problem is that I talk a lot... I really talk a lot... but I want to tell you a prisoner's story... the prisoner keeps digging until he reaches and escapes... and he finally sees the sun, but it is setting... he says freedom is sold and the people are not aware... everyone is a knife, stabbing his descent, and when that cures... there is a voice calling him... it tells him, "Come!... Come, let's forget the condition... hey man, there is no occupation... this is freedom... this is a water gun and a fake tank..." and the explanation becomes more difficult... and the explanation becomes more difficult ...

Mashrou' Leila, “Marikh” (Mars) from *Ibn El Leil* (2015)⁷⁸

مَرِيخ

[Hamed Sinno]:

داويني بشي حبة لما أنزل

لا تحرمني القتيبة لما أنزل

عم بطلع عم أطلع

عم بنزل عم أنزل

عم بطلع عم أطلع

نسييني إيدين بيّي لما أنزل

بتعاقبني لما أطلع حتى أنزل

عم بطلع عم أطلع

عم بنزل عم أنزل

عم بطلع عم أطلع

للمريخ. للمريخ.

Mars

[Hamed Sinno]:

Cure me

With a pill when i fall.

⁷⁸ The Arabic lyrics are by Hamed Sinno. The band posted them and the English translation with their official lyric video for the track on YouTube, December 14, 2015.

Don't deny me

The bottle when i fall.

I rise, I rise

I fall, I fall

I rise, I rise

Make me forget

My father's hands when i fall.

They chastise me

Into free-fall whenever i rise.

I rise, I rise

I fall, I fall

I rise, I rise

To mars

To mars

I rise, I rise

I fall, I fall

I rise, I rise

To mars

To mars

Mashrou' Leila, “Aoede” from *Ibn El Leil* (2015)⁷⁹

أبودي

[Hamed Sinno]:

خذ العباب عني

أنا أسير مرايتي

أبودي

أبودي

عم برج ناديلك

اعتقني شياطيني

بسقي بدمها ترابك

لعله ينمي لحني

أبودي

جازيني

سيطر على فمي

جازي العباد

الكلمات تنفّس

بس الحياة تنفّس

كلّمني

كلّمني

⁷⁹ The Arabic lyrics are by Hamed Sinno. The band posted them and the English translation with their [official music video](#) for the track on YouTube, April 14, 2016.

طيفك بير عبني
شفته عطول عمري
لو بس يسامرني
عسى الكلام يرعاني
أيودي
واسيني
درّ الكلام منّي
جازي العباد

Aoede

[Hamed Sinno]:

Wash this flood off of me

I am my mirror's prisoner

Aoede

Aoede

Again I summon you

Bleed out my demons to water your grave

Perchance to sow a melody

Aoede

Reward me

Conquer my mouth

Reward your acolyte

If words be breath

And life be breath

Speak to me

Speak to me

Your ghost frightens me

Though you've always been a ghost

If only it spoke to me, the words might raise me

Aoede

Comfort me

Bleed out the words within me

Reward those who pray

47 Soul, “Intro to Shamstep” from *Shamstep* (2015)⁸⁰

Intro to Shamstep

[Chorus]:

What’s the soul of the 47?

What’s the soul of the 47?

What’s that soul in the 47?

Sham put the soul in the 47

[47Soul]:

No agent no guarantee

No landlord on your back

No country no form

Back to the peasants to the falaheen born

ابن العين

ابن النهر

ابن النبع وابن البحر

ابن الزينكو والزنفقة

هاي الزنفقة وهاي احنا

⁸⁰ Indiemaj posted 47Soul’s music video, [“Intro to Shamstep.”](#) on YouTube on October 28, 2015. 47Soul previously shared the Arabic lyrics of the track on the band’s homepage, but it has since been taken down.

[El Far3i]:

ايش ذنبه الي ما انعرف

و ما غيَّبوا الروح

ردا ردا بوجه العدى

درب القوافي منعرفا

قطف الورود تلم تلم

ربي المعبود راسما

صون العهود وقت الحزم

حنا الجنود حرب وسلم

رغم الحدود عنا حلم

الغياب نستقبلا

[47Soul]:

ابن العين

وابن النهر

وابن النبع وابن البحر

ابن الزينكو والزنقة

هاي الزنقة وهاي احنا

بنت العين

وبنت النهر

وبنت النبع وبنت البحر

بنت الزينكو والزنقة

هاي الزقة وهاي احنا

[Chorus]:

What's the soul of the 47?

What's the soul of the 47?

What's that soul in the 47?

Sham put the soul in the 47

Find the fruit on the trees

Send it off to whoever you please

Make sure that the money comes back home

Back to the peasants to the falaheen born

Intro to Shamstep⁸¹

[Chorus]:

What's the soul of the 47?

What's the soul of the 47?

What's that soul in the 47?

Sham put the soul in the 47

[47Soul]:

No agent no guarantee

No landlord on your back

No country no form

Back to the peasants to the falaheen⁸² born

Son of the mountain spring

Son of the river

Son of the underground spring, son of the sea

son of the zinko⁸³ and the alley⁸⁴

This is the alley,⁸⁵ this is us

[El Far3i]:

His sin that wasn't revealed

And wasn't changed by the spirit

Death, death in the face of the enemy

We know the path of rhymes

Picking the roses, row after row

Designed by my lord, the worshipped one

Keeping promises in a time of determination

We're the soldiers in times of war and peace

⁸¹ The English translation of "Intro to Shamstep" is my own, with assistance from Dwight F. Reynolds, Ghassan Aburqayeq, Hani AlKhatib, and Omar Battikhi.

⁸² *fallāihīn* (peasant; farmer).

⁸³ Zinko refers to a thin metal material used for the roofs of refugee camp structures, such as those that house many Palestinians.

⁸⁴ "Alley" in Libyan dialect, which references a famous speech by the late former Libyan president Muammar Gaddafi (1948-2011) where he speaks about hunting down rebels in every alley (Aburqayeq, pers. comm., January 20, 2020) (AlKhatib, pers. comm., September 18, 2020).

⁸⁵ "Alley" in Palestinian dialect (AlKhatib, pers. comm., September 18, 2020).

Despite the borders, we have a dream

We endure absence

[47Soul]:

Son of the mountain spring

Son of the river

Son of the underground spring, son of the sea

Son of the zinko and the alley

This is the alley, this is us

Daughter of the mountain spring

Daughter of the river

Daughter of the underground spring, daughter of the sea

Daughter of the zinko and the alley

This is the alley, this is us

Border Ctrl

[El Far3i]:

دقدق ع المجوز و دقدقنا

ما ضل حدى الا تسلقنا

تقلقنا نعرف مين إحنا

و احنا مفرقنا الي مانحنا

[Chorus]:

و تفضل على الصف

الكل يتفضل على الصف

هاي طلبوا الهوية

يا با طلبوا طلبوا الهوية

[El Far3i]:

إجا يرمح و يقنعنا بصفقة

وانا واقف و بتصدى الصفقة

يا شعبي سمعني الصفقة

ولا تفتح و لا تقلب صفحة

⁸⁶ 47Soul posted the Arabic lyrics and translation of “Border Ctrl” with the [official music video](#) for the track on

[Chorus]:

و تفضل على الصف
الكل يتفضل على الصف
هاي طلبوا الهوية
يابا طلبوا طلبوا الهوية

[Z The People]:

This border control
Congesting our soul
Taking its toll on us all

We gonna dissolve
This Mexico-Bethlehem wall
If you hear us heed the call

[Shadia Mansour]:

هذا الصف كرا هيتهم
صف همجيتهم
صف بشاعتهم
يصف استقبال يوسف إذا جاء
بوصل على باب مغلق
بنوا اقفاص للأطفال لإثبات إنسانيتهم

لو بشوف الجمل حردبته بيوقع وبفك رقبتة
باختصار مش احنا عبرنا الحدود لا
يايا بلعكس الحدود عبرتنا
من غزة الضفة القدس للمكسيك، حنسط
جدار الخرساني ونبني محله جدار بشري

[Z The People]:

This border control
Congesting our soul
Taking its toll on us all

We gonna dissolve
This Mexico-Bethlehem wall
If you hear us heed the call

[Fedzilla]:

Bienvenido a la fila,
Que definirá tu vida
Que separa tu pasado de un futuro sin hawiyya
Condenado sin la visa, esta línea no se pisa,
Dicen jueces arbitrarios con razones imprecisas

[Chorus]:

و تفضل على الصف

الكل يتفضل على الصف

هاي طلبوا الهوية

يايا طلبوا طلبوا الهوية

[Fedzilla]:

Documento estampado, permiso rechazado

Juntos enfrentamos injusticias del Estado

Palestino Latino Andino no será callado

Palestino Latino Andino no será callado

[Chorus]:

و تفضل على الصف

الكل يتفضل على الصف

هاي طلبوا الهوية

يايا طلبوا طلبوا الهوية

[Z The People]:

This border control

Congesting our soul

Taking its toll on us all

We gonna dissolve

This Mexico-Bethlehem wall

If you hear us heed the call

[Fedzilla]:

Bienvenido a la fila,

Que definirá tu vida

Que separa tu pasado de un futuro sin hawiyya

[Z The People]:

I've been getting your answering machine for seventy-two years

Where's my papers?

Border Ctrl

[El Far3i]:

Play the mijwez, we played

Everyone tried to exploit us

We got paranoid trying to know who we are

While the one providing us aid is dividing us

[Chorus]:

Welcome to the queue

Everybody welcome to the queue

They're asking for IDs

They're asking, they're asking for IDs

[El Far3i]

He came running to sell us a deal
While I'm standing to block the slap
My people let me hear you clap
And don't open or turn a new page yet

[Chorus]:

Welcome to the queue
Everybody welcome to the queue
They're asking for IDs
They're asking, they're asking for IDs

[Z The People]:

This border control
Congesting our soul
Taking its toll on us all

We gonna dissolve
This Mexico-Bethlehem wall
If you hear us heed the call

[Shadia Mansour]:

This queue shows their hate

This queue shows their barbarity
This queue shows their ugliness
It describes how they would welcome Joseph
He wouldn't get further than the wall
They build cages for children to prove their humanity
If a camel could see his own hump, it would fall and fracture its neck
In brief, we did not cross the border
The border crossed us
From Gaza, The West Bank, Jerusalem to Mexico
We will bring down the concrete wall
And rebuild in its place a human one

[Z The People]:

This border control
Congesting our soul
Taking its toll on us all

We gonna dissolve
This Mexico-Bethlehem wall
If you hear us heed the call

[Fedzilla]:

Welcome to the queue
That will define your life

That separates your past from a future without an ID card
Condemned without a visa, this line cannot be crossed or stepped on,
Say arbitrary judges with imprecise reasons

[Chorus]:

Welcome to the queue
Everybody welcome to the queue
They're asking for the IDs
They're asking, they're asking for the IDs

[Fedzilla]:

Stamped document, rejected permit
Together we face injustices of the state
Palestinian, Latino, Andean, will not be silenced
Palestinian, Latino, Andean, will not be silenced

[Chorus]:

Welcome to the queue
Everybody welcome to the queue
They're asking for the IDs
They're asking, they're asking for the IDs

[Z The People]:

This border control

Congesting our soul

Taking its toll on us all

We gonna dissolve

This Mexico-Bethlehem wall

If you hear us heed the call

[Fedzilla]:

Welcome to the queue

That will define your life

That separates your past from a future without an ID card

[Z The People]:

I've been getting your answering machine for seventy-two years

Where's my papers?

47Soul, “Dabke System” from *Semitics* (2020)⁸⁷

Dabke System

[Z The People]:

Turn up the sound of the galilee loud
you hear it now stomp on the ground

Dabke system we coming to town
Pick up your keys at the lost and found

Hold on Look what we Created
Refugee overseas still I’m a Native
Call back the kids to remain
Don’t question the land she tell you her name

[Walaa Sbait]:

رسالة ما بعثتلي ، رسالة ما بعثتاك
رسالة ما بعثتلي ما بعثتلي ما بعثتاك
رسالة ما بعثتلي ، رسالة ما بعثتاك
وهسا جايي تلمني وانا من قبلا ياما حذرتك
لا بكتبي ولا بكتبك

⁸⁷ 47Soul posted the Arabic lyrics and translation of “Dabke System” with the [official music video](#) for the track on YouTube on June 11, 2020. The translation is embedded in the optional subtitles of the video.

لا بشرعي ولا بشرعك

دخلك هالحتشي كله

بيرضى فية ربي ولا ربك؟

[Chorus]:

.. يا منوقع تحت ..تحت ..تحت ..تحت

يا منطلع فوق ... فوق ... فوق

[El Far3i]:

.. احنا جسد واحد .. احنا نفس العصب

.. مرة اكلنا العصا ..مرة فلقوا الأرض

هاد الحل لاقوا غيره اعلنوا النفير

في الأرض سيروا ..مش مستاهلة سفير

مش شغلي آجي أغير صورة نمطية

بنقش فكرة بيتي فراسك زي النبطية

اليمن سعيد يمن بلوز ديزيرت فنكي صوتو

دانس مونكي مونكي دانس مونكي

.. يا منوقع تحت ..تحت ..تحت ..تحت

يا منعلى فوق .. فوق .. فوق

ولاد شتات ... ناس زوء ..بس إحنا ولاد بلد

مالنا رسالة من الي بتحكي انت فيه بنوب

فيا منوقع تحت منضل في الوحل
او مننجن منهنج الجهل .. بس لأ
شوية روق حجاب الحلم مخزوق
... ضلك معنا سوق منضلنا نطلع فوق

[Chorus]:

.. يا منوقع تحت ... تحت ... تحت
يا منطلع فوق ... فوق ... فوق

[Z The People]:

Turn up the sound of the galilee loud
you hear it now stomp on the ground

Dabke system we coming to town
Pick up your keys at the lost and found

Not clear run back the tape
Everyone claiming that they got the label
Too cool no fueling the flame
Don't question the land she tell you her name

[Walaa Sbait]:

رسالة ما بعثتلي ، رسالة ما بعثتك
رسالة ما بعثتلي ما بعثتلي ما بعثتلك

رسالة ما بعثتلي ، رسالة ما بعثتاك
وهسا جايي تلمني وانا من قبلا ياما حذرتك
لا بكتبي ولا بكتبك
لا بشرعي ولا بشرعك
دخلك هالحتشي كله
بيرضى فية ربي ولا ربك؟

Dabke System

[Z The People]:

Turn up the sound of the galilee loud
you hear it now stomp on the ground

Dabke system we coming to town
Pick up your keys at the lost and found

Hold on Look what we Created
Refugee overseas still I'm a Native
Call back the kids to remain
Don't question the land she tell you her name

[Walaa Sbait]:

You sent me no message
I sent you no message

You sent me no message, I sent you no message

You sent me no message

I sent you no message

And now you come and blame me

Even though I warned you many times before

Not in my books and not in your books

Not in my law and not in your law

Do you think all that talk

Will please my God or your God?

[Chorus]:

We either fall down...

Or we rise up!

We either fall down...

Or we rise!

[El Far3i]:

We are the same body... we are the same nerve

One time they split the earth...

Another time we took a beating

Find another solution... sound the alarm

Walk the earth, no need for an ambassador

It's not my job to change stereotypes

I'll carve the idea of my home in your head like a Nabataean

Happy Yemen, Yemen Blues... Desert funk

Dance monkey, monkey, dance monkey

We either fall down...

Or we rise up...

But we're children of this town, children of diaspora, we good people

Our message is in nothing that you say!

We either fall down and get stuck in the mud

Or we god mad... "The ignorance is systematized." But no!

Bear with us. There's a hole in what is covering up the dream

Keep riding with us and we keep rising up!

[Group]:

We either fall down...

Or we rise up!

We either fall down...

Or we rise!

[Z The People]:

Turn up the sound of the galilee loud

you hear it now stomp on the ground

Dabke system we coming to town

Pick up your keys at the lost and found

Not clear run back the tape
Everyone claiming that they got the label
Too cool no fueling the flame
Don't question the land she tell you her name

[Walaa Sbait]:

You sent me no message
I sent you no message
You sent me no message, I sent you no message
You sent me no message
I sent you no message
And now you come and blame me
Even though I warned you many times before
Not in my books and not in your books
Not in my law and not in your law
Do you think all that talk
Will please my God or your God?

Ayloul, “Nazel Al Ghor,” from *Salute to Al Ghor* (2019)⁸⁸

نازل عالغور

[Mounif Aref Zghoul]:

نازل عالغور يا خويا نياالك
سلم عالغور والمية اللي قبالك
سلم عالغور سلم ع زرعاته
ياللي أهل الغور تحلف بحياته

سلم عالغور سلم على أسوده
عائلات جسر عانقوا البارودة
سلم عالغور وعالي غرب حدوده
ياللي نوكل منهم زرعه مع دوده

يا نازل عالبحر المسروقة مياته
عالنقطة إجهز وحيد عن قناته
حيد عن السكة اللي يمشيها الترين
صوب ولاد العم المكحولين العين

نازل عالغور يا خويا نياالك
سلم عالغور والمية اللي قبالك

⁸⁸ Ayloul posted the Arabic lyrics and translation of “Nazel Al Ghor” below the [official lyric video](#) for track on YouTube on November 24, 2019.

سلم عالغور سلم ع زرعاته
وعاللي سارق منه سوقه ومياته

Going to Al Ghor⁸⁹

Brother - who is going to Al Ghor,⁹⁰ Lucky you!

Salute to Al Ghor and the water in front of it⁹¹

Salute to Al Ghor, salute to its cultivation

That which Al Ghor people swear by its life

Salute to Al Ghor, salute to its lions

On the three bridges they hugged their rifles

Salute to Al Ghor and what's to its west

whom we eat their crops⁹² even with its worms

Brother - who is going to the sea whose water is stolen

Get ready at the checkpoint and steer away from its Canal

Steer away from the railway

Going toward the adorable cousins

Brother - who is going to Al Ghor, Lucky you!

Salute to Al Ghor and the water in front of you

⁸⁹ My translation of the song title is "Heading Down to Al Ghor."

⁹⁰ The Jordan Valley.

⁹¹ Or in my translation, "in front of you."

⁹² Or in my translation, "whose crops we eat."

Salute to Al Ghor, salute to its cultivation

And to those who stole its market and water

El Far3i, “Estishraq Dakhily” (*Istishrāq Dākhilī*) (Internal Orientalism) from *El Rajol El Khashabi (al-Rajal al-Khashabī)* (The Wooden Man) (2017)⁹³

استشراق داخلي

[El Far3i]:

شوف.. صحيت لحالي كسرت كل منبهاتي

أخذت دوش عشان أعرف أفوت بحياتي

ضغطت زر الثقة بالنفس.. زبطت شعراتي

هادا كله بس عشان أعرف أوصل وأقلكم الآتي

مش رح نضلنا تحت.. رح نطلع لفوق ونعلى

رح ندحش إيدنا بالمستقبل.. نتناول عيشة أحلى

ما تنسوا إنه دم الشهيد زي النبيذ.. لما بتمر الأيام و السنين بيتعتق وبضله يغلى

فبوجه الحزين اللي فينا.. نخلي الغيوم تراضينا

نعلي العيوب اللي فينا... نقلل الديون اللي علينا

نتكاتف.. نتكاتف.. تختفي الطيارات لما تخش فينا

نطلع مشاعرنا على الهوا زي أبو مينا

القامع والمقموع.. ممانع الممنوع.. فكر انهزامي يُموّل ويصبح مزروع

بس الجيل الثالث في الداخل بدأ بالرجوع

!ما صحيتش اليوم عالفاضي.. قال شرعن المشروع

فرع المداخل كنت عطشان لقيت ينبوع

لا مستني موافقتكم ولا المرئي والمسموع

⁹³ The Arabic lyrics are by El Far3i. He posted them with the [track audio](#) on YouTube, March 28, 2017.

أنا مش عم ببيع تطبيع.. ضروري تصير تميز
رگز يا كويس البحر كويس يا ريس
تفیز ما تفیز مش هذا هو السؤال
بحلق بالتصريح.. هذا الاحتلال
أنا ابن لاجئ على السكيت حب يشوف البيت
فاتمسكت بطبون سرفيس الجسر على شارع الاستقلال
هاي الأغنية للكل.. أغنية زي الفل
مش ردة فعل.. ولا انفعال.. ولا فشة غل
خلوا كل واحد يقاوم بطريقته.. لأنه الاحتلال بكل الأحوال واقف بطريقه
وشوفي
استشراق داخلي.. واستغراب من الجميع
استشراق و إراقة الدم.. كان في العراق الدم
كان نفسي أكتب تدفق ما فيه ملام.. كل ما ألحن أغنيه بتطلع على نفس المقام
إحنا شعب مهزوز.. شعب مُستفز.. فاتحمسنا على الربيع زي دودة القز
تتعدد الطرق بتعدد المسالك.. ليش دايمًا بكم الأكثر عمومًا من ذلك
أنوار التفاؤل ميّلت قتلها كيف حالك؟ مين اللي فلك إنني لقيت لنفسي طريقًا سالك
هاي الموسيقى تحصر هاش بمسميات نصيحت..
الإيقاع طير مهاجر أخذ استراحة بحديقتي
مش رح أحصر العمر بعدد الدقات.. اللحن ثورة على الذات إزا صار إلي شبيحتي
ألوان كثيرة ومخلوطة.. لأي لون بتميل
أي إشي بتحاول تروجه رح أعمل منه بديل
سميها موسيقى بديلة.. مواقف نبيلة
الهوس بالأخر.. التعصب للقبيلة

أنا عم بحاول أبالغ بس بتضلها قليلة.. بر الأمان خشبة مكتوب عليها بأية وسيلة
برا عمان طلع الجمهور حافظ التفعيلة.. فعم ننتشر على كل الأقطار زي الأرجيلة
أخوك الفرعي الإشي العربي اللي عم بتحس فيه من فترة
بكره الصورة النمطية وبكره هاي النظرة
في بنت بين الجمهور زاكية وعينها حور.. لازم تعرف إنها منسجمة لأنها حاملة بقلبها جمرة
قال كيف كانت بيروت.. شايفني طالع سهرة
أنا مش سائح سجان.. أنا واحد من الأسرى
أنا من آل عمران فأختي بتكون العذراء
بتضل الأرض هاي كلها إلي لو بقسموها مية مرة
شوفني
استشراق داخلي.. واستغراب من الجميع
استشراق و إراقة الدم.. كان في العراق الدم

Internal Orientalism⁹⁴

[El Far3i]:

Look.. I woke up on my own, I broke all my alarm clocks

I took a shower to figure out how to get on with my life

I pressed the confidence button.. I did my hair

This is all so I can figure out how to reach out and tell you the following:

We will not remain below.. we'll rise up and go higher

We'll thrust our hands into the future.. we'll get a more beautiful life

Don't forget that the blood of martyrs is like wine.. as the days and the years pass, it will age
and will become more valuable

With sorrow inside us, we'll let the clouds comfort us

Let's increase our faults and decrease our debts

Let's stand together.. let's make so dense a crowd.. that if airplanes flew into us they would
disappear

Let's release our feelings live on air like Abu Mina

The oppressor and the oppressed.. resisting the forbidden.. defeatist thinking is funded and
becomes implanted

But the third generation inside has started to return

I didn't wake up today for nothing.. he said, we legalized the project

Far3 El Madakhil, I was thirsty and I found a fountain

Not waiting for your approval, visual or audio

I'm not selling the idea of normalizing.. you have to start making a distinction

Focus, oh good man, the sea is good, oh captain

To get a visa or not get a visa, this is not the question

Stare at the permit.. this is the Occupation

I'm the son of a refugee who silently wants to see home

Grab the bumper of a service taxi to the bridge on Independence Street

This song is for everyone.. a song like jasmine

It's not a reaction.. or an emotional outburst.. or venting anger

⁹⁴ The English translation of "Internal Orientalism" is my own, with generous assistance from Dwight F. Reynolds and the students of his Arabic Translation seminar, especially Ghassan Aburqayeq, as well as from Hani AlKhatib, Omar Battikhi, and Arabic speakers on Reddit and HiNative.

Let everyone resist in his own way.. because in any case, the Occupation is standing in his way

So look at me

Internal orientalism.. and confusion from everyone

Orientalism and the shedding of blood.. there was blood in Iraq

I wanted to write, to burst out without blame.. every time I write a song, it ends up in the same *maqām*

We are an unstable people.. a provoked people.. we got excited for spring like a silk worm

There are as many roads as there are ways to cross them.. why do you want any more than that?

Glimmers of hope, I leaned over and said to her, “How are you? Who told you that I found myself an open road?”

My advice is, don't reduce this music to specific names

The rhythm is a migrant bird that takes a rest in my garden

I'm not going to confine my life to the beats.. the melody is a revolution against the self in case I become a bully

There are many mixed colors.. which color do you lean towards?

Anything you try to spread, I'll come up with an alternative

So call it alternative music.. noble stances

Obsessed with the other.. devotion to one's tribe

I'm trying to exaggerate but it just stays small.. the land of safety is a piece of wood, written on it by any means

Outside Amman, the audience ended up knowing the verse by heart.. we're spreading all over the world like hookah

Your brother El Far3i, this Arab thing that you've been feeling for awhile

I hate the stereotype and I hate this perspective

There's a woman in the audience, she's sweet and her eyes are beautiful.. you must know she's so into it because she's got a burning ember in her heart

Someone said, "How was Beirut?" .. "What, you think I was out partying?"

I'm not here visiting the jailer.. I'm one of the prisoners

I'm from the family of the Joachim, my sister is the Virgin Mary

All of this land is mine even if it was divided 100 times

Look at me

Internal orientalism.. and confusion from everyone

Orientalism and the shedding of blood.. there was blood in Iraq

إستشراق

[El Far3i]:

ناس كتير بنتسائل مين كل هالناس اللي فعمان
سألت إم سي من لبنان عن وضع الوايت مان
بتشوف موظفين السفارة بالسوق بس بكرا بطفسوك
بتشعر بارتياح مع السياح وهم عم بيدرسوك
مراكز أبحاث عالطاولة اللي جنبك واسمك عم بيهمسوا
عم بيرتبوك فعالية تضامنية عشان لما بيت سنك بالقدس يهرسوا
الواحد منهم بياخد وظيفتك وهو جاية عالمنطقة يتسلا
طلاب علوم سياسية من برا بيغيروا ديموغرافية رام الله
وبتصور ببيروت إخواني بيعانو من نفس القضية
مقهى الحرية فالقاهرة فيه شباب بس ولا بنت عربية
وهادي مش فرضية مأخوذة من كتاب عن تاريخ الاستشراق
فرع مداخلك إجاك يفهمك ليش فش مردود من عمك الشاق
بيتظاهرو معاك بس لما تشتد الأمور انت بتنطخ بالساق
هم حكوماتهم عشان يروحوهم عبلادهم ببيعنولهم براق
ومن ثم أفاق بعد غيبوبة من استنشاق الغاز
وهم فبيت السفير عاملين حفلة وجايبين فرقة جاز
بيتناقشو بطلعة تصوير عالمخيم حوالين البوفيه

⁹⁵ El Rass posted the Arabic lyrics for his verse on his [SoundCloud page](#), in the comments section for the track in 2012. El Far3i shared the track on his [SoundCloud page](#) as well. I have found no Arabic transcription of El Far3i's verse online. The transcription is a revised version of one shared by an anonymous Reddit user.

إذا بنزل كمان تراك مع الراس بتقتلني السي أي إيه
ولاد البلد بيفكرو هاي الشركات الأجنبية رح تتطورنا شوي
بس إحنا مش زي دبي وعندنا مشاكل ماي
هي تقمصوا شخصيتي وبلشو ينظرو بجنوري
لازم تفهمو أنو مش كل متضامن زي ريتشيل كوري و بتولي
أخلاقيات حسن الضياف بدمنا هادا إشي أساسي
بس هاد المقطع عن خبث المستعمر وبساطة ناسي

[El Rass]:

السلام عليكم

جيمي بعده واصل أخذ فيزا علمطار
معه بطاقة مراسل جايي يسبر الأغوار
مهيج على هيفا ما بيعنيله شي الطرب
معلق فوق تخته بلندن صورة لورنس العرب
جيمي متله كتير استشراق مستغرب
ومش شايف الفرق بينه وبين صهيوني مستعرب
هودي اليهود ياللي بتظاهرات اخواتنا مندسين
احذر الكرم العربي ممكن ضيفك سكين
نحن ببلادهم ارقام بغيتوهات مكديين
وهني ببلاذنا حكام معززين مكرمين
جابوا اخرق امريكاني تيعلمني حقوق إنساني
بعد كل كلمة بيقول دوود
والمهندس السوداني عم بيعفن بزنانة وقفوه علحدود

كيف مجتمعي مقاوم بكون وانا تارك المجال لعدوي اللدود

يغير نظرة شعبي لشعبي؟

كيف بدك ياني أصلي وفي ماكدونالدز حد الكعبة؟

لازم على المداخل يوزعوا كتب ادوارد سعيد

جيمي معه كوكابين بس مش رح يفتشه العميد أكيد

هيدا مش حقد على الغير احترام الآخر مرعي

بس اذا عيشوا توباك و عرضوا اعمل معه تراك

بفضل اشتغل مع الفرعي

Orientalism⁹⁶

[El Far3i]:

Lots of people are wondering, who are all these people in Amman?

I asked an MC from Lebanon, what's up with the white man

You see the embassy employees in the market, but tomorrow they'll disappoint you

You feel relaxed with the tourists while they're studying you

Centers of research are at the table next you, whispering your name

They're organizing a solidarity event for you for when they crush your grandmother's house

in Jerusalem

One of them takes your job while he comes to the region to amuse himself

Political science students from outside have changed the demographic of Ramallah

Imagine in Beirut, my brothers, they're enduring the same issue

In the freedom café in Cairo there are young guys but not one Arab girl

This is not a hypothesis taken from a book about the history of orientalism
Far3 El Madakhil came to teach you, why is there no setback in your oppressive work
They demonstrate with you but when the situation becomes difficult, you get shot in the leg
Their governments sent them a *burāq* to help them to go home
Then he woke up from a coma from inhaling gas
While they're in the ambassador's house at a party and they're bringing a jazz band
They discuss having a photo shoot at the camp around the buffet
If another track with El Rass drops, the CIA will kill me
The country's people think these foreign companies will develop us a little
But we aren't like Dubai, we have water problems
Here they have impersonated me, and they have started to argue about my roots
You all have to understand that it's not all solidarity like Rachel Corrie and al-Bitūlī
The excellent morals of hospitality are in our blood, this is essential
But this piece is about the viciousness of the colonizer and the simplicity of my people

[El Rass]:

Peace be upon you
Jimmy has just arrived at the airport with his visa
He has a press badge with him, he's coming to explore
Jimmy is turned on by Haifa, he doesn't care about *tarab*
Hanging above his bed in London is a picture of Lawrence of Arabia
Jimmy is a lot like Westernized orientalism
And doesn't see the difference between himself and between Arabized Zionists,

⁹⁶ The English translation of "Orientalism" is my own, with assistance from Dwight F. Reynolds, Ghassan Aburqayeq, Hani AlKhatib, and Arabic speakers on Reddit and HiNative.

These Jews that infiltrated our brothers' demonstrations
Be wary of Arab generosity, maybe your guest is a knife
We are in their country, numbers crammed into ghettos
And here while they're in our countries, they're like leaders honored and esteemed
They brought a stupid American to teach me human rights
After every word, he says duuude
The Sudanese engineer is rotting in a cell, they stopped him at the border
How will my community be resisting, while I'm leaving the field because of my mortal
enemy
To change my peoples' view of themselves
How do you want me to pray while there's a McDonalds near the Kaaba?
They should distribute at the entrances the books of Edward Said
Jimmy has cocaine with him, but the colonel is definitely not going to search him
This isn't hatred of others, respect for others is considered
But if they spared Tupac and suggested I work with him on a track,
I prefer to work with El Far3i