Performing el Rap el ʿArabi 2005-2015: Feeling Politics amid Neoliberal Incursions in Ramallah, Amman, and Beirut

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PERFORMING EL RAP EL ‘ARABI 2005-2015: FEELING POLITICS AMID NEOLIBERAL INCURSIONS IN RAMALLAH, AMMAN, AND BEIRUT

by

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Abstract


by

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This study is about politics in Arabic rap. Specifically, it is about affective dynamics and material negotiations during rap concerts in three cities in the Levant. I analyze Arab hip hop culture in the context of three different but related histories of cosmopolitan, middle class growth, and gentrification. Using an ethnomusicological framework rooted in participant observation and performance theory, I compare concert conditions, audience behavior, and accessibility of music production in Ramallah, Amman, and Beirut.

In Chapter One, I elaborate the discursive and theoretical frameworks that have pinned the political valences of Arab youth, Arab artists, and Arab rappers in particular into representations of “resistance.” A confluence of energies I call “neoliberal orientalism” drives the recent, widespread attribution of “resistance” to Arab youth and cultural production, especially rap and hip hop in the aftermath of local protests over the past decade. As an alternative, in Chapter Two I propose tracing the emergence of what I call *political feeling* when the music is performed live. In this chapter, I argue that *tarab* can be built and does emerge in contemporary Arabic rap. Based on this proposal, I build an ethnographic model for analyzing this subcultural music production that is attentive to the holding in tension of political feelings as *politics in process*. This is one answer to the
question: how can we talk about politics in cultural production without talking about resistance?

Chapters Three, Four, and Five are case studies centered on concerts in Ramallah, occupied Palestine; Amman, Jordan; and Beirut, Lebanon, respectively. They apply the theoretical frameworks built in the first two chapters in each context. In all three cities, I locate the overwhelming majority of hip hop concerts within the provenance of increasingly cosmopolitan middle class culture. Tracking how neoliberal urban changes like gentrification affect concert venues and programming, I consider how material realities influence the choices that rappers and their fans make. This puts musicians and audiences in the material context of the political concerns they relate without assuming their work is “resistance” to them.
Acknowledgements

That Palestinians expect of their children a particular commitment to education is a widely recognized phenomenon. I grew up keenly aware of the focus on studies that my immediate and extended family demanded of all of us cousins. However, it was perhaps only over the course of this degree that I clearly recognized the everyday diligence this commitment to education required from the family of the student – the shape of which is not constant from one individual to another, nor from one generation to the next. My parents, my sister, my partner, and his family looked for, found, and expressed remarkable patience and support in hundreds of their own ways. Their commitment to me allowed me to commit to this degree.

In most unanticipated ways, the research and writing of this dissertation brought me closer to my maternal grandparents, Isma‘il Faruqi and Lois Ibsen Faruqi, than I ever imagined. Finding their names in references and studies I pursued here, reading their work, and in different ways following their footsteps has been of the most surprising, challenging, but rewarding pursuits of the past years. I wish to dedicate this dissertation to my family: to the examples, academic and otherwise, that they have set and the lessons their experiences continue to provide.

The generosity of my funders and their investment and trust in this project in its early phases made the research the follows possible. Dissertation research grants from the Palestinian-American Research Center (PARC) and the Wenner Gren Foundation supported my research in Ramallah. An IIE Fulbright Student Research Fellowship provided for my research in Amman. A Graduate Center Doctoral Students’ Research
Grant and two travel grants from the American University of Beirut’s Center for American Studies and Research facilitated travel to and from Beirut for my research in that city. In addition, the June Bennett Larsen Theatre Alumni Award and generosity from Professor Judith Milhous’ chair helped to round out research in both Palestine and Lebanon. The assembly of these grants took three years of applications. The awards thus also speak to the tenacity of my chair and recommenders (who included at different points – in addition to Maurya Wickstrom, Jean Graham-Jones, and Christa Salamandra – Marvin Carlson and Judith Milhous). I am grateful for the opportunities these awards opened and for the support of the advisors who encouraged me to stay the course when my applications were initially not successful.

Primarily, the research awards allowed me to travel and freed me from the loving constraints of the classroom. This manuscript was composed in five cities, outlined and edited in close to ten, based out of a seemingly endless stream of hotel lobbies, airport terminals, cafés, and shared apartments. Without their knowing, dozens of people contributed to my thinking. What follows is an incomplete, partial list.

Barrak Alzaid was the first person to push me to write about the events shaking the Arab world in 2011. This research likely would not have been conceived without his encouragement, coupled with the invitation to collaborate with ArteEast in 2011. Rima Najdi has been a trusted confidant and constant interlocutor from the very beginning. Hamza Mahmoud and Khaled Al-Hilli offered initial (very patient) Arabic tutoring before I left New York.

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If this research resonates it is because of the trust my interlocutors deemed me worthy. Their lives, reflections, contacts, ideas, and their work is the substance of this work. Many went out of their way to meet me, talk to me, correct me. Many tolerated my fumbling as I taught myself ethnographic practice, learned about the specifics of their industry and their work, and haltingly improved my Arabic. Their patience and corrections have taught me much; I am indebted to them all and most eager for their reactions to this write-up. I want in particular to recognize the attentive respect with which Boikutt and Shahid ʿAyan treated me and this project from the very beginning.

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* * *

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because she insisted that I be committed to it. Her willingness to repeatedly engage with both my ideas and my written expression pushed me beyond what I thought I was capable. Maurya’s commitment to mentorship would have been a gift at any time and in any place. But in the trying past few years that she has navigated personally and through the continual pinching of public education that characterizes CUNY of late, the preciousness and tenacity of her commitment are all the more obvious.

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Rayya Sunayma El Zein

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Arabic Transliteration

Readers should note that almost without exception, the Arabic in this study is Palestinian, Jordanian, Syrian, or Lebanese colloquial, not Modern Standard Arabic. In rendering this Arabic into the Roman alphabet, I have followed the simplified transliteration schema now common in academic studies in English of the Arab world, which follows the guide of the International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies but leaves off the diacritics. When the letter ١ appears in the middle or end of a word I have used the common French transliteration pattern “ou” to differentiate from the sound of the plain “u” without having to resort to diacritics. So, the Syrian playwright would be transliterated as Mohammed al-Maghout, not Mohammed al-Maghut. Except in the prepositions fi and bi, the long ى is for the most part rendered “ee.”

The rest of my adjustments reflect the phonetics of the colloquial in question and local spellings for commonly transliterated words and names. The letter ݝ appears as “g” in the name of Gamal Abd Al-Nasser, following the Egyptian colloquial adopted in this instance. (Here, it sounds like the “g” in “game.”) The letter ݝ also appears as a “g” in the common transliteration used in Lebanon of “Gemmayzeh” and in Gaafar Touffar’s stage name, as the artist himself uses. (Here the “g” sounds like the g in “George.”) The rest of the time, ݝ is transliterated as “j.” I retained the qaf, even if it was not aspirated. I reflected the elision of some letters in definite article constructions, so as-siyaseh, not al-siyaseh. The ٣ I rendered ah or eh, reflecting pronunciation. Al and el are used interchangeably for the article [ال].
The letter ʿ I have transliterated as [ʿ] with the exception of the musicians that have already romanized their names by using the number “3,” as is common on social media. El Far3i, Morabba3, Bil3ax, and Mashrou3 Leila follow this transliteration pattern. Readers should infer the Arabic letter ʿain, not the English number three. Similarly, the Lebanese protest movement “You Stink” is transliterated as “Tol3et Ri7etkom,” following the additional substitution of the number seven for the letter ha [ح]. Commonly transliterated words are rendered without the [ʿ], as in “Amman” and “Abdullah.” Finally, when musicians transliterate their own names without an additional marker for the letter ʿain (as in Asifeh and Shua), I followed their preferences. When musicians include an apostrophe [ʿ], I used the [ʿ], as in Muqataʿa and Sheʿrab.

When lyrics were provided by the artists I did not change or adjust the texts. When I transcribed lyrics myself or included transliterated excerpts from interviews, I reproduced the dialect heard in the recording. Which is to say, I made no attempt to make spoken or written Arabic conform to MSA. In notes and bibliographic entries, titles of songs and video clips given in Arabic are in italics. When the title is given in romanized script, it is not italicized. Full-length translations are collaborations with the artists, whereas excerpted lines of tracks are my own translation, unless otherwise noted.
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Introduction
“Politics Pulls at Me”

Overview

This study is about politics in Arabic rap that are manifest in the affective dynamics and material negotiations during rap concerts. I analyze Arab hip hop culture in the context of three different but related histories of urban, cosmopolitan, middle class growth, and gentrification. In this dissertation, I build an ethnomusicological framework rooted in participant observation and performance theory in order to compare concert conditions, audience behavior, and accessibility of music production in Ramallah, Amman, and Beirut.

The introduction that follows sketches the general terrain within which I consider the theoretical and ethnographic research that follows to operate. Research questions guide my use of feeling as a theoretical tool in the study of cultural production. In asking these, I begin to situate how I use “feeling” – both as a noun (a specific affect engendered by specific pieces or by particular live concerts) and as a verb (a process of sensation, used to discern what I call politics in process). In the first section, I identify the theoreticians of affect and cultural studies with whom I consider myself in dialogue in proposing this approach to rap performances in the Arab world.

I also contextualize my pursuit of “politics” in a study of Arab cultural production. In the second section, I outline some of the stakes of locating the “political” in both Arabic and English language studies. This traces the emphasis on “modernity” as well as “politics” in Arab cultural production while also acknowledging the geo-political
atmosphere in which most English language research on the Middle East has taken place. I conclude this introduction with brief outlines of each of the five chapters that follow.

Part One: Affective Research

"حاول أطفئ بس السياسة يتشنجي يقولوا فتاني ما بدي، بتقولي أنا جزء من حياتك، مش حنن فشي صدي.

I try to ignore it/ but politics she pulls at me/ I tell her, let go, I’m not interested!/ She tells me, I am part of your life, you won’t be able to resist me.

~The Ramallah Underground¹

A 2008 recording by the Ramallah Underground, “From the Cave” [“Min il kaheff”] closes with a refrain that prefigures an internal monologue between the speaker and a woman, “Politics.” Stormtrap raps, “I try to pay no heed, but Politics, she draws me back. I tell her, ‘Let go of me! I am not interested.’ She responds, ‘I am a part of your life, you won’t be able to resist me.’” Others have identified this refrain as indicative of political ambivalence. For example, while arguing for the need to trouble the “resistance” attributed to Palestinian rappers, Ted Swedenburg suggests that this refrain communicates ambivalence about the artists’ political convictions (which they spend the preceding verses laying out) or even a certain “regret” about the conditions in which they

live (wouldn’t it be easier to be a musician somewhere else?).  

Somewhat differently, I suggest it is a particularly excellent example of the capacity of this musical genre to conduct very powerful political feeling.

This need not construct a framework for a binary interpretation of this refrain or others – a debate about whether or not it is political. Rather, I want to point to different ways that politics may be located, felt, and understood via the emotions and sensations aroused by interacting with this content. Ramallah Underground’s refrain frames the emotional pull that is present in political deliberation. It spins and inverts the Palestinian proverb “Politics runs in our blood,” instead illustrating a political process that does not champion (a) specific political objective(s). In doing so, it calls for the recognition of a feeling or emotional experience that can have a powerful affect on the listener.

I remember that I was in public the first time I heard “Min il Kaheff” and I could not stop myself from crying. The recognition and voiced articulation of an internal debate over political engagement was both comforting and devastating. At other moments, different verses in this piece elicited other strong emotional or physical reactions – elation, clenching my fists, grinding my teeth, the urge to shout, the need to be alone, the desire to be with others. Conversations with other fans and performers of the genre suggest this personal experience is not unique to me or to this track. Others relate similar private experiences with other pieces of Arabic rap, and artists recount the impact of more public displays of these feelings during live performances. This process of

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2 Swedenburg’s chapter has been influential in spurring many of the questions that I pursue in this project. Ted Swedenburg, “Against the Struggle Paradigm,” in Popular Culture in the Middle East and North Africa: A Post-Colonial Outlook, eds. Mounira Solimon and Walid El Hamamsy (New York: Routledge, 2013), 17-32.

interacting with the material is not only affective but productively political, not
withstanding the fact that, like the refrain quoted above, the lyrics do not always clearly
articulate a specific political project.

The experience interacting with this track in recording and others during live
concerts drives in part the theoretical approach to ethnographic research I have pursued in
this dissertation. The feeling generated listening to tracks like Ramallah Underground’s
“Min el Kaheff” I call political feeling. These are instances of “emotional blending”
generated by the various sonic elements in a recording – the samples, the beat, and the
lyrical content – together with elements of performance – the tone of the rapper’s voice,
and (in live performance) the gestures that accompany the verbal “spitting” of lyrics.
These, as in the example I have offered here, evoke what the eighteenth-century scholar
Murtada al-Zabidi called “the stirring of both joy and sorrow in the listener.”\(^4\) Al-Zabidi
called this tarab – an ethnomusicological term with considerable history in Arab musical
performance, religious recitation, and spiritual contexts. Tarab may seem alien to the
 technological “modernity” of hip hop and rap musical production, or the “post-modern”
hybridization that rap in Arabic seems to embody.\(^5\) My proposition that tarab may exist
in some Arabic rap concerts is the subject of a lengthy exploration in Chapter Two:


Feeling Politics. Before we consider this proposal in more detail in that chapter, I identify here the trajectory of affective research which has led me to it.

Political feeling

“A mysterious force that everyone feels and no philosopher has explained… a force, not a labor… that surges up from the soles of the feet.” This is how Frederico García Lorca described the duende, the “dark sounds” that he argued reverberate with anarchic energy in Andalusian music and Spanish poetry. Ethnomusicologist A.J. Racy compares the duende with tarab. Both duende and tarab are concepts that speak to emotional engagement with embodied or vocalized creative expression (music, poetry, and dance) and have been analyzed in various musical and poetic contexts. One of the interesting intersections between duende and tarab is philosophers’ hesitancy to define them as a single emotion, sensation, or feeling. As such, the historical debates around tarab and duende are examples of the attempt to theorize affects generated by

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6 I acknowledge that the ethnomusicological literature on music and trance is extensive, a review of which I return to in abbreviated form in Chapter Two (see for example, Gilbert Rouget, Music and Trance: A Theory of the Relations between Music and Possession [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985]; Judith Becker, Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing [Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2004]; and David Aldridge and Jörg Fachner, eds., Music and Altered States: Consciousness, Transcendence, Therapy, and Addictions [London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2005]). I single out duende and tarab of many other terms that refer to heightened emotion in different musical practices around the world because of the political resonances Lorca ascribed to the duende and the long and engaged history of traditional Arabic music and classical poetry and its attention to the arousal of an emotional state. As my analysis will make clear, it is less the loss of consciousness typically discussed in the arousal of “trance” that I am interested in analyzing here than how the rational processes of interpreting political ideas that are communicated as emotions or consumed as pleasurable bodily sensations.


8 For a concise summation of this debate around tarab see A.J. Racy, Making Music in the Arab World: The Culture and Artistry of Tarab (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 198-208.
performance. Tarab is frequently described as a mix of melancholy and elation.\(^9\) Lorca says the duende brings “totally new and fresh sensations” and “never repeats itself.”\(^10\) Racy suggests both terms try to explain an affective “transformative blending,” where “new blends that are no longer identifiable in terms of their inner, mostly emotional, ingredients, or are no longer emotional in the familiar sense.”\(^11\) In other words, tarab and duende describe an affective process that plays with emotion and transforms it into something else.

But what something else? The curiosity that attempts to track the evasiveness of this content drives an interdisciplinary approach in my research and is influenced by the so-called “affective turn” in critical thought.\(^12\) Borrowing from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s explorations of the machinic body and built off the philosophical work of Baruch Spinoza and Henri Bergson, the critical concept of “affect” explores the “straddling,” as Michael Hardt has put it, of the long-held, cleanly segregated categories of mind and body, reason and emotion.\(^13\) Constructed as opposite ends of unbridgeable poles in the Cartesian philosophical tradition, the harkening back to Spinoza has been used to open up critical thinking to an investigation of the subject as an open, as opposed

\(^9\) Ibid., 205.
\(^12\) Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean Halley, eds., *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Durham: Duke UP, 2007), 1-33.
\(^13\) Michael Hardt, “What Affects are Good For,” in ibid., xi.
to closed, system.\textsuperscript{14} The philosophical as well as political aspects of this trajectory of thought as productive in how I conceive of the theoretical constructs in my project.

“Emotion,” “feeling,” and “sensation” are almost used interchangeably in this literature. “Emotions” typically refer to a state of mind or a mood, often involving a physical reaction or state (shaking, tears, etc), or a particularly intense feeling. “Feeling” is frequently associated, as Teresa Brennan notes, with “sensations that have found the right match in words”: love, shame, or anger, for example.\textsuperscript{15} “Sensation,” in turn, is sometimes used to describe physical manifestations of those feelings: the light step in love, the heavy heart in shame, or the hot head in anger. It is in particular the definitions of “sensation” that I find particularly evocative in these studies – what Brian Massumi describes, following Leibniz, as the “perception of perception.”\textsuperscript{16} Teresa Brennan deepens an understanding of this \textit{awareness of} feelings, emotions, and affects by developing the concept of “discernment” – “a process whereby affects pass from the state of sensory registration to a state of cognitive or intelligent reflection.”\textsuperscript{17} My attention to \textit{feeling politics} builds upon Brennan’s and Massumi’s work, furthering their elaborations of “sensation” and “discernment” with the formulation of my own theoretical concept that calls attention to the ways that certain affects are felt and discussed in cultural

\textsuperscript{14} In addition, the so-called “affective turn” has elaborated discussions of power and ideology. This analysis combines Marxist critique with Foucauldian and post-Foucauldian analyses of control. Feminist studies’ theoretical focus on the body and queer studies’ theoretical emphasis on emotion are clear precursors of this aspect of the “affective turn.”


\textsuperscript{17} Brennan, \textit{Transmission of Affect}, 120.
production. I suggest theorizing affective engagements (the experiences of tarab or duende) as political processes in order to unsettle, and offer alternatives to, dominant models of locating “politics” in cultural production. Doing so pushes discussions of political agency in cultural production as well as theorizations of the transmission of affect in live performance in new directions.

In other words, the presence of a political feeling is important. In the case studies that follow, I identify feelings of disgust, resignation, ambivalence, caution, and others in the concerts and recordings of the artists I study. But I also suggest that the awareness or sensing of this feeling are equally important in that it points us to politics in process. Analyzing these political feelings by feeling politics is an ethnographic method that factors the material realities of urban change and contextualizes concerts and concert venues within them. As I elaborate in more detail in Chapter Two, feeling politics is an ethnographic procedure to discern, analyze, and understand political feeling, or affective content. Pointing to politics in process, feeling politics borrows from Raymond William’s formulations of “emergent” and “pre-emergent” forms while it is in dialogue with other affectively grounded approaches to music and poetry in the Arab world.

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18 Brennan, Transmission of Affect; Massumi, Parables of the Virtual. I also lean on Sara Ahmed’s efforts to pay attention to how emotion and affect are implicated in the rational assessments of politics. (Ahmed, The Cultural Politics of Emotion [New York: Routledge, 2004].)

In excavating the political feelings generated by some Arabic rap, I position the experiences of listening to and performing this creative content as tantamount. That is, my study of the development of politics in Arabic rap is an analysis of the processes of cultural production – as opposed to a more traditional analysis of cultural products as political artifacts. In contrast to much contemporary scholarship on the so-called “Arab Spring” that celebrates in rap lyrics, graffiti tags, and other products of youth culture the sudden appearance of new politics, my research instead analyzes how the practices of some of these creative expressions contribute to the development of other politics. That is to say, I am less interested in the presentation of works of art, within which it is possible to read symbolic or literal politics (what Williams called the “fixed, finite, receding forms”) than in the political experiences of audiences and performers when they engage with each other under the context of this genre of cultural production.\textsuperscript{20}

In this, my approach finds productive traction with William’s location of the “active and pressing but not yet fully articulated” that he frames as “structures of feeling.”\textsuperscript{21} In this research, paying attention to politics in process is not pinning lyrical or performative work in some Arabic rap to a specific correlate in political action or political efficacy. Rather, it testifies to the particular textures of deliberation, negotiation, and hesitating that rarely are accompanied with spectacular political action. I explore political action and visibility as politics in Chapter One: Locating Politics. My theoretical

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 129.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 126.
engagement in that chapter is related to my conceptualization of agency in the listening behavior of rap audiences.

Studies of performance have recently identified the limitation that expectations to overcome spectator passivity have placed on determining a piece’s political effectiveness. An emphasis on the affective experiences during performances of Arabic rap allows me to consider the dynamics between spectators, and between spectators and performers, without reducing these interactions to readings of their “passivity” or “activity.” This follows Jacques Rancière’s encouragement that

Everywhere there are starting points, intersections and junctions that enable us to learn something new if we refuse, firstly, radical distance, secondly the distribution of roles, and thirdly the boundaries between territories. We do not have to transform spectators into actors… we have to recognize the knowledge at work… in the activity peculiar to the spectator.

Focusing on affective exchanges in live performances of Arabic rap thus allows me to consider the generative politics present as not confined to the genius of the art product (the lyrical rap), the person of the performer, or the radical action of the spectator taken as a result.

My attention to affect in the experiences of performers and fans also differentiates the study that follows from literature on subcultures or “scenes” that emphasize the transgressive power of “resistance” in the execution of individual style. My own approach diverges from this dominant model in subculture studies (I will return to this

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below). However, unlike the “post-subcultures” critiques that reify (intersectional or inter-subcultural) identity,24 I lean on Jasbir Puar’s work on queerness as “assemblage” as a way to reassess performances of agency. Puar’s postulation of assemblage as a way to “underscore feeling, tactility, ontology, affect, and information” in the construction of “self” and “other”25 (and the blurring of the boundaries between them) is useful in the theorization of the affective experiences of audiences and performers that I offer in this dissertation. I suggest understanding politics in Arabic rap not through the representations of resistance through style, or agents’ performances of visible political positionings, but in an analysis of emotional excess produced in live performance.

In the development of this affective model I am influenced by the pioneering work of several scholars who have built in the theorization of cultural production in the Arab world invigorated models for the location and assessment of politics. The attention to affect in Tarek El-Ariss, Charles Hirschkind, and Marc Schade Poulsen’s studies of Arab literatures, listening cultures, and music respectively have proved inspirational to this project. El-Ariss’s development of the notion of “hacking” as a strategy of modern living, Hirschkind’s respect, in advocating for listening as political practice, for what he calls “visceral modes of appraisal,” and Schade-Poulsen’s explorations of not only what “people have done [to rai music, but]… what it does to people” have been for me


examples of inventive and curiosity-driven ways to invent terminology that gropes for the
something else felt in cultural production.  

The model that I propose in this research proposes paying particular attention to
the ways in which performances produce affect. That is, I focus on how performances of
Arabic rap affect bodies and the interactions between them and point to the generative
“inbetween-ness” between bodies and consciousnesses that Spinoza considered emotion
and affect to be capable of defining.  

Focusing on affect, on the ability to affect and be affected, is central in the philosophical recalibration of the subject as an open system.
Beyond the capacities of a single body or the symbolic actions of a collective,
considering affect encourages the recognition of the significance of a prescriptive grid or
force-field within which a single body may be found. Massumi suggests “adding
movement to stasis is about as easy as multiplying a number by zero and getting a
positive product.”  

The likelihood, in other words, of cultural production to rouse
audiences from apathetic slumber and direct them into political action is improbable.
Locating the ability of Arabic rap to conduct political feeling instead asks how
performance can be understood to be involved in the disintegration of this prescriptive
grid, leaving bodies and relationships aware of each other in different ways. What would
a youth politics that was not “resistance” look like in Palestine or in Lebanon? Can such a

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28 Massumi, Parables for the Virtual, 3.
thing be conceived of? And if not why? What might forcing the question do to a conceptualization of “politics” in the Arab world?

Before moving on to elaborate further what these “politics” may look like, two general research questions further guide what I consider the significance of this affective approach to the research that follows. Moving into the next section of this Introduction, which considers an overview of politics in Arab cultural production, I elaborate how a theoretical emphasis on the recognition of emotion and feeling in live performances of Arabic rap and hip hop can be put to the service of understanding political production in this genre. I begin by asking: how is political feeling is located?

This question underlines a very basic distinction. It points to the critical difference between studying the process of the appearance of a political feeling and studying political feeling tout court. This distinction is important in how I see the politics of my own research functioning. That “some” groups seem to possess greater or lesser degrees of emotion is a cultural conundrum that Sara Ahmed has addressed while emphasizing what emotion does. In the study that follows, I too am reflecting on the processes of sensing emotions, as opposed to the simpler admission or location of their presence.29 This is important in a study of Arab youth culture where agents are already assumed to be more political or more emotional (susceptible to affect) than agents elsewhere.30 In chapter one I elaborate in further detail how histories of representing the “authentic” and

29 Sara Ahmed, Cultural Politics of Emotion.

30 In his recent study on “authenticity” in Syrian music, for example, Jonathan Shannon argues that a comprehension of Syrian modernity is incomplete without understanding the “Oriental spirit” and the enhanced emotionality it provides Syrian subjects: “Indeed, emotion if not emotionality is in many ways the centerpiece of the aesthetics and kinesthetics of musical and other modes of performance in Syria, and this accounts for the centrality of sentiment in what I am arguing are the outlines of a Syrian alternative modernity” (Shannon, Among the Jasmine Trees: Music and Modernity in Contemporary Syria [Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2006], 17).
the “exotic” play into interpretations of Arabic rap in the neoliberal global media and I explore how trajectories of Orientalism may apply to the relatively recent attribution of “political” and “resistant” as positive qualifiers to Arab youth.

In asking how political affect is located, I can thus ask more specifically: what are the implicit presumptions when one declares, in positive terms, that Arab rappers “resist”? What is so immediately laudable about an Arab youth who raps, yet so easily dismissible (as commercialized, violent, misogynist, among others) about a black or Latin@ youth who engages in the same type of performance? These questions point to the need to understand what is happening when certain cultural agents are identified “as” political. What is the Arab rapper presumed to be resisting and how? Asking these questions leads me to wonder if the framework of laudable “resistance” applied to Arab artists has the potential to alter or even mollify pointed criticisms and productive affects they offer in their work. Further: how does it affect how one may read critical differences between performers? These questions stem from asking how political affect is located.

The second general question that frames my approach to affective research is: *how are politics recognized in specific cultural production?* This is similar to but distinguishable from the first question in that while the former asks how politics come to be associated with specific players (in this case, Arab youth), the latter asks how politics are recognized in specific genres (namely rap and hip hop). I wonder, for example: why has electronic music in Beirut not garnered the political attention that rap has – despite being performed at many of the same venues, relying on the creativity of many of the same producers, and attracting similar audiences? Asking this question recognizes that political feeling is incrementally developed during live performances via specific
strategies. It does not just exist, but is built, communicated, and shared through specific experiences.

In this research, localizing Arabic rap aesthetically helps to address this question. I acknowledge that rap builds and borrows from other international as well as local art and music cultures and has expanded beyond the traditionally identified originators of hip hop’s beginnings in the Bronx. Electronic and experimental music, traditions of Arabic poetry, more “commercial” hip hop sounds form the corpus of influence of contemporary Arabic rap. I place particular emphasis on embodied practices during live performances and the shared and different qualitative affects in Arabic rap and its neighboring performance genres. I elaborate in particular the affective choreography of live rap performances. This is not an analysis of break dancing sometimes associated with hip hop culture, but rather an attempt to locate the gestures by which political feeling is made manifest. By paying attention to gestures and to a wide range of influences, I recalibrate a definition of hip hop or rap “culture”\footnote{“Hip hop culture” refers to the intersecting energy made manifest in lyrical raps, beat boxing, graffiti, and break dancing. See, among others: Jeff Chang, \textit{Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation} (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005); Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, eds., \textit{That’s the Joint! The Hip Hop Studies Reader} (New York: Routledge, 2004); H. Samy Alim, Awad Ibrahimi, Alastair Pennycook, eds. \textit{Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language} (New York: Routledge, 2009).} in each of the cities studied here. In so doing, I construct an alternative framework for understanding some contemporary Arabic rap as political activity, one that is particularly attune to corporeal practices and techniques and habits of reception.

How is political feeling located? and how are politics affiliated with certain forms of expression? are questions to which I have returned over the course of this study, when attempting to shake out the particularities of the political feelings I describe. Having
elaborated an initial field of theory within which this study is situated, I now move to sketch another. The question of politics has been a regular concern of cultural theorists writing about the Arab world. In the next section I consider the different but connected Arab and Anglophone intellectual contexts which illustrate the stakes surrounding the near constant assessment of “politics” in Arab cultural studies.

**Part Two: Politics in Arab Cultural Studies**

Debates about modernity – how to enter it, how to re-invent it, and what it may mean in the Arab world – have been central currents in Arab thought since the *Nahda*. Recent analysis has argued that this preoccupation with modernity is a product of – sometimes directly responding to, sometimes indirectly influenced by – global configurations of power in which the Arab world has frequently found itself at the contested center. Ibrahim Abu-Rabiʿ suggests “…[I]t is quite impossible and indeed unrealistic to grasp the social and intellectual dynamics of the modern Arab world in isolation from other world factors.” These factors have consisted of the struggles to overthrow imperial occupations; fights against continued colonial presences even after the evacuation of those imperial powers; contests over local control of resources in post-colonial contexts; struggles against poverty, corruption, and weak states; or against nepotism, cronyism, and authoritarian states (frequently propped up by neocolonial

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32 *Nahda*, literally “awakening,” describes the cultural and intellectual renaissance that spread across the Arab world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.  
The debates over Arab modernity have been waged by political, cultural, sociological, economic, and religious players in intellectual, state, and popular discourses. Here I want to look at what debates over and about modernity in analyses of cultural production signal in the ways Arab intellectuals have located the political possibility in literature, theatre, music, and other cultural production.

Tarik Sabry suggests the preoccupation with “modernity” among Arab intellectuals has effectively delimited interest in non-literary or more everyday cultural production. “Dominant discourses in contemporary Arab thought,” he argues “are more concerned with structuring and orchestrating narratives of becoming than with the kind of being they are anxious to deliver from wretchedness and ahistoricity.” In so doing, seemingly “non modern” practices and habits that do not fit this narrative are necessarily sidelined and ignored. At the same time, Arab scholars have found in the poetry of Nizar Qabbani and Adonis, tarab musical culture, turath folklore, and the politico-religious discourses of the Muslim Brotherhood, among others, the seeds or the tools for a homegrown resistance against a stronger, usually Western, increasingly USonian, opponent. In these analyses, Arab intellectuals have found essential traits of Arab

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34 For a more detailed overview, see Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective (New York: Columbia UP, 2010), 2.

35 Indeed, as Sinan Antoon, Boaz Shoshan, and others have suggested, the sidelining of an entire history of more popular literature for centuries can be understood in this light. See Antoon, The Poetics of the Obscene in Premodern Arabic Poetry: Ibn al-Hajjaj and Sukh (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) and Boaz Shoshan, Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993).

36 Sabry, Cultural Encounters, 23-42.

37 The configuration of power that asserts itself across the Arab world today is no doubt international. However, the central role and the uncontested power of the US, especially perhaps in the context of the US-led invasion of Iraq, has led many scholars to identify US power and culture identify in particular as a hegemonic force. Ibrahim Abu-Rabi' summarizes, “Pax Americana seems to be a de facto system of hegemony that no one in the area dares challenge.” This applies to cultural analysis as well as
culture and identity in particular forms or cultural products. As such, they are hailed as powerful tools with which to counter the cultural effects of globalization and neocolonialism. These studies quickly attain pointed and powerful political significance, specifically because they frequently adopt established political narratives. As Sabry explains:

Due to the external threats from Western imperialism and Zionism, it was, and still is, much more fashionable for Arab intellectuals to contextualize their work on ‘culture’ and ‘identity’ within frames of nationalistic, pan-Arab and pan-Islamist discourses... Attempts to de-essentialize Arab ‘culture’ and ‘identity’ have also been equated with treason, abandonment of the Palestinian question and the pan-Arab project.

Often within the context of a debate about modernity, the contemporary analysis of Arab culture in Arabic has been frequently conceived of as a specific kind of political project: where culture is a tool with which to, or which reveals the means to, counter US-Western hegemony.

Despite a chasm that has long separated Arab and US/European intellectuals, and very different institutional structures, it is significant that scholars writing in other languages also identify “what modernity is” for the Arab subject as a major concern in economic/political critiques. (Abu-Rabi’, Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History, 5, see also note 21, 376).


39 Sabry, Cultural Encounters, 48.

40 To encourage the visibility of frequently sidelined, alternative approaches, Kassab devotes a volume’s worth of energy on what she calls the “growth of critique” (Kassab, Contemporary Arab Thought, 2); Sabry outlines scholarly work he calls “anti-essentialist,” which champions the concept of “tajawuz – a philosophy promising to surpass the duality problematic between modernity and heritage,” led by the works of Abdellab Khatibi (Sabry, Cultural Encounters, 33); and Abu-Rabi’’s edited volume works to bring greater attention to the work of what he calls the much ignored scholars of “critical thought” (Abu-Rabi’, Contemporary Arab Thought, xiv).

41 An intellectual quandary that both Kassab and Abu-Rabi’ explicitly foreground and strive to address in their volumes on contemporary Arab thought.
sociological, literary, and other cultural analyses. Even when the author’s stakes are not countering or defeating US-Western power, dozens of texts in English make arguments for particular types, incarnations, or performances of Arab “modernity.” Many of these studies include assessments of various media – travel, the Internet, television, film, social media, music, etc.; in them, authors attempt to describe or redefine how Egyptians, Lebanese, Syrians, Algerians, and others relate to the contemporary world vis-à-vis the production and circulation of various media.

Importantly, in defining “modernity” or hadatha, authors in both Arabic and English languages frequently juxtapose this concept with that of “tradition” [asala] or “heritage” [turath]. Even when authors argue for a hybrid approach to these concepts, combining new and old elements to create a particular “modernity” unique to a specific part of the Arab world in a particular moment, the emphasis on the rapprochement between two poles on a binary is clearly felt. In English, many of these analyses, alongside other postcolonial scholarship, have worked to expand the hegemonic perceptions of “the modern” associated with the so-called “Global North” to include certain kinds of being emanating from the so-called “Global South.” For example, Jonathan Shannon theorizes “alternative Syrian modernity” in his study of emotion and music.42 Studies of Arab media in particular have engaged questions of modernity in a globalized context since the 1990s.43

In both languages, thus constituting a significant global understanding of Arab poets, musicians, and audiences, Arab culture is frequently understood to stage a contest

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42 Shannon, Among the Jasmine Trees. See note 30.

43 Marwan Kraidy elaborates on this in his Reality Television and Arab Politics: Contention in Public Life (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 4-8.
between competing pulls of tradition and modernity.\textsuperscript{44} This overwhelmingly central polemic has profoundly affected the ways in which an Arab cultural product’s “politics” might be interpreted. Different nuances of the arguments not withstanding, political resonances have frequently been determined by the degree to which a culture or cultural practice incorporates or discards tradition or technology. Arguments about “resistance” are easily construed in myriad ways along this binary: youth “resist” conservative state practices via any number of hybrid music or leisure routines; simultaneously, conservative players may “resist” commercialization or commodification by reclaiming or reinforcing religious rites; etc. Debates about modernity and tradition thus structure one significant way “politics” have been interpreted in studies of cultural production in the Arab world.

In Arab cultural studies in Arabic, it is significant to note that theorized studies of “subculture” and “popular” culture are extremely rare, the preoccupation being instead with culture of a more “respectable” (i.e., neither commercialized, or shaʿabi [popular]\textsuperscript{45}) nature.\textsuperscript{46} While English language scholarship on Arab subjects has historically also favored assessments of “high” culture, a growing body of work on Arab “popular” and subcultures is emerging, which constitutes a significant development in the ways in

\textsuperscript{44} Throughout Contemporary Arab Thought, Kassab does well to point out this cultural quandary and intellectual “obsession” is not unique to the Arab world. Similar interrogations are found in many “post-colonial” contexts.

\textsuperscript{45} I discuss the resonances of the Arabic “shaʿabi” in relationship to the English “popular” below.

\textsuperscript{46} The noteworthy exception to this may be the work of Saudi Arabian scholar Abdullah al-Ghathami, who calls for a jump or qafzah from literary criticism to cultural criticism, which would include critical attention to “everyday” culture otherwise sidelined. An excerpt of his Cultural Criticism (Qiraaʿ fi annaqd a-thakafi [Casablanca: The Arab Cultural Center, 2000]), in which he makes this argument, is translated by Muhammad Ayish as “Cultural Criticism: Theory and Method” in Arab Cultural Studies: Mapping the field, ed. Tarik Sabry (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012], 255-274). Sabry elaborates on the significance of al-Ghathami’s work in Cultural Encounters, 51-54.
which politics are assessed and understood in this scholarship. I will address this shift and the effect of intellectual models that have influenced the frameworks of many of those studies shortly. I want to point first to institutional developments that have allowed for Arab cultural studies in the US academe in particular.

Institutionally, the course of studies of Arab culture in English over the past several decades has been significantly influenced by the development of “Area Studies” disciplines across the social sciences since the end of World War II. The financial resources devoted by the US government and US-based private foundations to fund international area studies before and during the Cold War has in large part made the growing cultural studies of today possible. The thrust of this endeavor was initially to facilitate the knowledge of US scholars and institutions of numerous international “others,” in order to lessen the threats of the unknowns lurking between the US and the USSR. This is not to suggest that the political motives of the State Department in the


48 While funding for US-based academics has come increasingly from the US government and private institutions, general trends in Europe also indicate that the mounting scarcity of traditional forms of academic funding have encouraged scholars to pursue more obviously politicized alternatives. For example, in the context of French scholarship on the Middle East, Gilbert Achcar suggests that drops in income among French academics in the post-1968 period have led them to seek complementary sources of income: “A feature (not common to all, of course, but extensive enough to be a key feature) – was to become a ‘consultant’ to foreign-affairs and defense institutions… the other way was through the mass media, whether in the form of direct honoraria for the scholars’ ‘expertise’ or as a means to increase the sale of their books – intensive mediatisation being the third distinctive feature of present-day researchers on Islam and the Arab world.” (Achcar, Marxism, Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism [New York: Verso, 2013], 47.)

49 See Robert Hall, Area Studies: With Special Reference to Their Implications for Research in the Social Sciences (New York: Committee on World Area Research Program, Social Science Research Council, 1948). Vicente Rafael suggests, “The disciplined study of others ultimately works to maintain a national order thought to be coterminous with a global one. Area studies thus have a civic vocation: to make
1940s have influenced or presided over all studies undertaken with these resources since, but to note the global political environment in which the opening of the US academe towards these parts of the world took place. Moreover, the overwhelming emphasis in the tradition of “area studies” has necessarily been on the particular “locality” of a given population, region, or demographic.\(^5\) Coinciding with the rise of post-colonial studies, area studies scholarship has largely worked to understand a given “Other” – but often by reifying that very Otherness.\(^5\) Indeed, the incorporation of specific area studies disciplines into the academy, despite the increased visibility of this material, has nevertheless ensured that cultural production from these regions (Africa, South and Latin America, the Middle East, Asia) or of other traditionally marginalized demographics (including Native Peoples, women, and LGBTQ populations) need not enter the normative cannon of traditional “literature” or “cultural studies” departments, nor effect the theories for analyzing the material “native” to those disciplines.\(^5\) It is in this context

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\(^5\) Rey Chow has demonstrated how Asian area studies have had the tendency to reproduce Orientalism (Chow, *Writing Diaspora*, 120-143).

\(^5\) Rafael notes the double energy in area studies in the “proliferation and containment of Orientalisms and their critiques” (Rafael, “The Cultures of Area Studies,” 91). This is a central argument of Vivek Chibber’s *Postcolonial Theory and the Spectre of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2013).

\(^5\) Ella Shohat’s discussion of feminism in transnational contexts develops this argument pointing out how “third world” feminism is rarely incorporated into US–based theory and critique (Shohat, “Area Studies, Transnationalism, and the Feminist Production of Knowledge”). Building off Shohat, Chandra Talpade Mohanty connects this directly to the institutionalization of area studies in the US academy. She suggests that courses on feminism in Southeast Asia, the Middle East and elsewhere are “added on to the predominantly US-based curriculum as a way to ‘globalize’ the feminist knowledge base… [They] can be quite sophisticated and complex studies, but they are viewed as entirely separate from the intellectual project of US race and ethnic studies. The US is not seen as a part of ‘area studies.’” (Mohanty, “‘Under Western Eyes’ Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles,” *Signs* 28 [2003], 520.) Gayatri Spivak suggests, “The Third World can enter the resistance program of an alliance politics directed against a ‘unified repression’ only when it is confined to the third-world groups that are directly accessible to the First World.” (Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Colonial Discourse and post-Colonial Theory:*
that enthusiasm about Arab culture as “political” or “resistant” in English language scholarship must be understood and critiqued. By this I mean: in the context of an institutional (which does not presume authorial intention) perpetuation of the exotic “Otherness” of the Arab (and other post-colonial) subject. In this context, the “political,” among other, qualities of Arab cultural production are necessarily seen in contradistinction to cultural production in other places, namely US/Europe.

The common configuration of the study of Arab culture as “political” in English language scholarship is especially well-illustrated in the context of Palestinian cultural studies. A closer look at this subfield is informative for understanding the stakes of this attribution of political resonances to cultural production in the Arab world. Helga Tawil-Souri suggests that in the context of both this burgeoning field of study and Zionist policy (which declares in the legacy of Golda Meir, that “Palestinians do not exist”) every study of Palestinian people and culture that shows that they do is necessarily political. The deplorable lived reality of the Palestinians and the international political environment in which these conditions are discussed outside the Arab world have thus led to the preconfiguration of politics in analyses of Palestinian cultural production.

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A Reader, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman [New York: Columbia UP, 1994], 84, original emphasis.)

53 Rebecca Stein and Ted Swedenburg provide a history of the gradual opening of the US academy to different discussions about “the Palestine Question” since the late 1970s in their introduction to the edited volume Palestine, Israel, and the Politics of Popular Culture (Durham: Duke UP 2005), 4-7.

54 Tawil-Souri actually makes this argument to counter critical expectations that Palestinian art practice should “only” or ideally depict Palestinian political reality. By suggesting that all artwork and cultural production (and its study/analysis) is political, she tries to alleviate pressure on creative expression that is trapped repeating tired symbols of political resistance (like the kaffiyeh, the red, green, and black of the Palestinian flag, and other easily identifiable symbolism). I appreciate and respect what she does with her argument with regard to the development of aesthetics under occupation. I am exploring here other effects of the pre-configuration of politics in cultural studies, specifically perhaps within the Anglophone academe (Tawil Souri, “The Necessary Politics”).
I affirm the desire and the accompanying urgency to deliver and protect declarations about the existence of Palestinians, a reality the Israeli state consistently and violently attempts to erase. But I find problematic the wholesale celebration of Palestinian life as political, especially implied in contradistinction to, say, US, Belgian, or Kuwaiti life as not or less political. I hesitate first because of the growing contradictions engendered by the advance of neoliberal incursions in Palestine, a discussion I return to later in this dissertation. Put simply, I am skeptical that the celebration of all activity under occupation as “resistant” is able to advance radical politics – especially, perhaps, in the context of intense neoliberal urban growth.55

But the wholesale celebration of Palestinian cultural practice as “political” is damaging for a second reason. The preconfiguration of politics engenders a dependent relationship between “resistance” and the study of Arab cultural production more generally. An implicit value judgment is appearing here: wherein subjects or cultures that are not demonstrably “resistant” are of lesser interest or critical import. Furthermore, the definition of what marks something as “resistant” is critically not neutral, as a generation of scholars critiquing methods of subcultural analysis in the UK and the US have

55 Lisa Taraki, Joseph Massad, and Nasser Abourahme, among others have described how economic growth since the Oslo Accords (1993) has contributed to a “bantustanization” of Ramallah and its suburbs, where a consumer culture has created neoliberal conditions not unlike other cosmopolitan cities elsewhere in the region and around the world. I am not interested in denigrating that consumer culture as “not resistant” or “not political” enough (as if such a threshold exists), but in the pursuit of a radical critique. I return to these concerns in Chapter Three. (Lisa Taraki, “Urban Modernity on the Periphery: A New Middle Class Reinvents the Palestinian City,” Social Text 95 26 [2008]: 61-81; Joseph Massad, “Pinochet in Palestine,” Al-Ahram Weekly Online 819 [2006], accessed September 28, 2013, http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2006/819/op2.htm; Nasser Abourahme, “The Bantustan Sublime: Reframing the Colonial in Ramallah,” City 13 [2009]: 499-509.)
demonstrated since the late 1980s. Contemporary discussions in the Anglophone academe that affirm the necessity of “politics” in the analysis of Arab cultural production may stem from and frequently attempt to address the lacunae formed by political biases in the academe. But, as I will now explore, the intellectual framework they impose may nevertheless be limiting how politics can be understood and interpreted. They do this by shrinking political diversity to applications of a specific kind of “resistance.”

Understanding how analyses of “politics” in cultural production have been reduced to locations of a specific kind of “resistance” requires a consideration of the methodological tendencies in and ideological influences upon much of this literature. It is not insignificant that critical consideration of an increased range of Arab cultural products as “resistant” comes concurrently with recent recognition in this scholarship of “popular” Arab culture and “everyday” practices as worthwhile subjects of study. Nor is it coincidental that this literature has been all but dominated by analysis in the tradition of the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham (CCCS). Indeed, the value attributed in this model to the capacity of cultural practice for political “resistance” against the mainstream has frequently been invoked to validate these new (popular, subcultural) subjects of study. Scholarship that focuses on everyday culture has slowly shifted understandings of agency and power in the Arab world as confined to ruling elites, and the intellectuals associated with those classes, to the political capacity (and implicitly the value) of marginalized segments of Egyptian, Algerian, Moroccan,


Lebanese, and Palestinian populations. However, at the same time, the sociological model of agency and “resistance” has tended to: privilege young, cosmopolitan, visibly “alternative” agents as active; emphasizes certain kinds of creative activity (music, dress, or other style elements) as (“the right kind of”) political; and/or recognizes specific collectivities (secular, extra-labor, non-gender normative) as empowering. To put it more explicitly, the emphasis on “symbolic violation” and “style,” so central in the Birmingham approach, has the tendency to reinforce particular, neoliberal values of individuals, their choices, and their relation to the collective that may actually hamper explorations of alternative meaning/politics engendered by cultural practice. I will argue in more depth in Chapter One that an analysis which distills divergent political experimentation in Arab cultural production into a simple symbolic “resistance” fails to assess the actual, sometimes contradictory political energy in these city streets. In the context of the Arab uprisings generally – or Tahrir Square, Pearl Roundabout, and other city sites specifically – to call creative choices “resistant” fails to add depth or particularity to an understanding of what cultural production may do or mean. At the same time, neither has it helped researchers, students, or critics to discern between

58 Dick Hebdige’s work is of course central here: “The challenge to hegemony which subcultures represent is not issued directly by them. Rather it is expressed obliquely, in style. The objections are lodged, the contradictions displayed, at the profoundly superficial level of appearances: that is, at the level of signs.” (Hebdige, *Subculture and the Meaning of Style* [Florence, KY: Routledge, 1979], 17, emphasis added.)

59 Hai Ren has suggested that “[T]he accumulation of knowledge on subcultures in the past century not only reflects but also is inherently part of the development of neo-liberalism.” He continues, “Not only does a subculture express meanings of style (through clothing, decoration, color, and music), but it also communicates a personalized way of conducting one’s life, one that especially emphasizes being active (being eccentric, decoding and recoding), calculative (managing risks and costs), subjective (accepting discourses, media representations, and capital accumulation), and intelligent (believing and deciding what counts as reasonable).” (Ren, “Subculture as Neo-Liberal Conduct of Life in Leisure and Consumption,” *Rhizomes* 10 (2005), accessed March 13, 2014, [http://www.rhizomes.net/issue10/ren.htm](http://www.rhizomes.net/issue10/ren.htm).}
different emerging voices and aesthetics. For now, its should suffice to recognize that in much English language scholarship on Arab cultural production, studying politics by looking for “resistance” has limited the ways in which these politics can be understood.

Without denying the real material realities that affect the lives of Palestinians, Lebanese, Egyptians, and others, what should an analysis of “politics” in Arab cultural production look like? Given the discursive contexts just outlined, is it possible to conduct an analysis of politics in cultural production without reinforcing the trajectories – that is, the conceptualizations of political possibility – suggested in these histories of scholarship? Asking as much clearly does not suggest stripping political analysis from Arab cultural studies. Nor does it argue against the observation that cultural production, as the work of living women and men in actual societies anywhere in the world, is always, necessarily political. On the contrary, being cognizant of the particular intellectual histories of locating “politics” within Arab cultural production notes the limiting patterns within which these politics have been understood, precisely in order to advance alternative political analysis.

I am concerned throughout this dissertation that attributing “politics” to Arabic rap be done in such a way that reflects ongoing political discussions in these youth cultures. That is to say, in a way that complicates, dislocates, and disregards the binaries

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60 Shehab Fakhry Ismail has suggested this crisis extends to artists themselves: “Egyptian revolutionary artists have succumbed to the temptation of seeing their art as subservient to a higher cause, which neither really helps this cause nor offers anything artistically novel, this unnecessarily limits them to an impoverished aesthetic vision.” (Ismail, “Revolutionizing Art,” Mada Masr, October 25, 2013, accessed March 13, 2014, http://www.madamasr.com/content/revolutionizing-art.)

61 As Boal puts it, “All theatre is necessarily political because all the activities of man are political, and the theatre is one of them.” (Augusto Boal, Theatre of the Oppressed, trans. Emily Fryer [London: Pluto Press, 1973], ix.)
of East/West; traditional/modern; secular/religious; global/local; passive/active; and commercial/authentic. Instead, political energy in some Arabic rap struggles towards what Lebanese, Palestinian, Syrian, and Iraqi rappers called in a recent collaboration “khat thaleth” (literally, a “third rail”, or a “third option”). It is this productive unsettling of existing structures that I am interested in theorizing. A khat thaleth does not explode or erase existing binaries. Rather, a third rail, like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s dismissal of scholarly pleas for “beyond,” encourages instead the formulation of an option that operates beside in order to unsettle and grow over the restricting pull of binary politics.

Such a formulation of what this might look like theoretically in Arab cultural studies might start with a revaluation of the “popular” in popular culture. The meanings of the word “popular” in Arabic are notably distinct from those attributed to the word English. This consideration is not usually taken up by Anglophone cultural scholars working on the Arab world, however, in whose literature it is occasionally not at all clear what “popular” might mean in the local context. “Popular” is directly translated into Arabic as shaʿabi, an adjective derived from the word shaʿab, and meaning literally “of the people.” Unlike in English, the word in Arabic has connotations that associate it with modesty and humility, as opposed to success or riches (perhaps closer to “populist” than a celebrity’s “popularity”). A “popular” [shaʿabi] cinema or cafe is not so because it attracts the largest number of clientele, but because it is located in hay shaʿabi, or a

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“working class quarter and frequented by working class audiences.”

Sabry suggests that in the Arabic context, “To be popular is to be one of the people.”

Importantly, then, shaʿabi need not only refer to class identity. A rich politician or intellectual can be shaʿabi, if s/he can connect to and be embraced by the people. When I asked the Lebanese rapper Gaafar, for example, what “shaʿabi” meant to him, he said, “haqiqi” – or, literally, “real.”

Furthermore, the word “shaʿabi” has further political resonances in Arabic because of the way the noun shaʿab [people] is used in state discourse. Politicians invoke a-shaʿab [the people] to unify the electorate (something most politicians in the US would be abhor to do, lest they be accused of arousing “populist” sentiment). Similar to much nationalist sentiment all over the world, shaʿab can thus also be used to “mask the particularities of the very voices, heard or unheard, which make up Arab popular cultures.”

In other words, the word meaning of the people can and is used to distort the diverse needs and desires of those very populations. Referring to “popular” culture in the Arab world thus has political intonations that are both charged with class and infused with state discourse. It may be that there is a consistent enough set of associations that link the Arabic “shaʿabi” to a specific kind of political “resistance.” But an

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64 Sabry, Cultural Encounters, 55.
65 Ibid., 54.
66 Interview with the artist, Beirut, January 2014.
67 Sabry, Cultural Encounters, 55.
accompanying analysis of what this might be or imply for cultural practice and political possibility within it is, as of yet, unclear.68

Furthermore, I think the enthusiasm to read “popular” [shaʿabi] as “resistant” has likely been encouraged (paradoxically perhaps) by the prominent use of the word shaʿab in the Arabic slogans heard in 2010-2013 protests. But the consideration that the concept shaʿab masks difference in a false unity is actually all the more relevant in the context of the widespread chants: “a-shaʿab yureed isqat a-nizam” [“the people want the fall of the regime”], as evidenced in what has been the devastating disintegration in more than one instance of protest movements into sectarian and other divisions in the wake of these uprisings. Considering notions of the collective invoked by shaʿab and shaʿabi may complicate understandings of symbolic resistance, belonging, and “politics” in Arab (pop)cultural studies.

I refer to Arabic rap as “subcultural” not “popular” culture. Marking this out in part identifies the political histories of scholarship to which I see this work contributing. I refer to Arabic rap as “subcultural” production because my research suggests its market share is quite small relative to other musical production in the region and because of its frequently antagonistic relationship to “mainstream” music in both English and in Arabic. Furthermore, as I demonstrate in my case studies, rap in Arabic also capitalizes on an “experimental” or avant-garde cache that would make its qualification as “popular” in the US/European sense quite inaccurate. That said, while I do not consider Arabic rap “popular” in the English sense, I do pursue questions of its shaʿabi nature. Interlocutors’

68 Salah al-Rawi has begun this conversation by discerning instead between shaʿabi and jamaheeri (public) discourse. (Falssafat al-wa’y a-shaʿabi: derassat fī attakafat ashaʿe beyah [Cairo: Dar al-Fikr al-Hadith, 2001].) Summarized in English by Tarik Sabry in Cultural Encounters, 56.
answers, like Gaafar’s above, indicate particularities about how they see the politics of the work functioning that are revealing. This pursuit of shaʿabi resonances within a subcultural study allows me to trouble some of the historical emphases in US/UK studies: subcultural models of responding to accusations of “degeneracy,” “non-normativity,” and social “marginalization” figure specific political resonances. Exploring the shaʿabi in subculture pushes on the terms “subculture,” “popular,” and the location of “politics” therein.

In general, I am not trying to counter claims of degeneracy in a subculture of Arab youth by arguing that Arabic rap is political. Indeed, in contrast to a number of global musical subcultures from jazz to hip hop, politics has already been attributed to rap in Arabic. Since its fans and producers corroborate these claims, my aim is rather to develop a concept to theorize how Arabic rap functions politically. Towards this end, and quite differently from much cultural scholarship invested in political resonances, I am not interested in debating whether or not these agents have agency. I believe they do. Nor am I invested in discussing how agents’ activity (as opposed to passivity) defines them as political subjects.69 In my theoretical work in this subcultural study, I propose moving away from discussing agency and instead towards theorizing affectivity.

I also begin from the assumption that Arabic rap is a hybrid genre – it has deep roots in many places: the US, the trans-Atlantic, the Arab world, and various diasporas. I am less interested in what is for me the fact of Arabic rap’s aesthetic and cultural hybridity than in its ability to communicate specific political feelings. In truth, sometimes it is hybrid aesthetics that help it do so, but it is not the simple presence of hybridity that

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69 I return to Rancière’s elaboration of the perceived inherent passivity of the spectator (The Emancipated Spectator, 2-23).
communicates politics. The frequency and ubiquity of hybrid cultural production both within the Arab world and outside it suggests that the practice of cultural borrowing and appropriation is widespread. Fetishizing hybridity, contrary to frequently stated interests in assimilation, collaboration, and integration, has the tendency to reify difference, further delineating as distinct the different “Others” involved.\textsuperscript{70} This study does not work to establish where this cultural production comes from – historically or culturally – and use those findings to make a claim about agents’ resistance to various cultural and political factors. Rather it attempts to interrogate what this particular experimentation does to the people and environments with which it immediately interacts.

Finally, for my analyses of politics and affect to resonate, I position these players within the material, urban contexts in which they produce their work. In other words, I pursue the generation of affect in the particular urban, neoliberal contexts in which it is found. Here I am building from recent theatre scholarship that connects the conditions of performance to manifestations of neoliberalism.\textsuperscript{71} Like these scholars and critics, I too find it increasingly disingenuous to discuss the political resonances of performances in Beirut, Ramallah, and Amman today without addressing the neoliberal configurations that in part determine how that content is produced, presented and consumed. The relationships between art institutions, real estate development, NGOs, and the state are different in each city, but the similarities in neoliberal structure cannot be ignored. It is in establishing and understanding these contexts that the affective resonances can actually


be felt. My conceptualization of the intersection of affect and material reality is influenced here by Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick’s elaborations on “the whole issue of texture.” She argues: “The sense of touch makes nonsense out of any dualistic understanding of agency and passivity; to touch is always already to reach out, to fondle, to heft, to tap, or to enfold, and always also to understand other people or natural forces as having effectually done so before oneself…”72 I follow how Arab rappers and audiences reach for other political possibilities, knowing that in these interactions, they encounter the particular urban texture of neoliberal incursions.

I develop more completely what I mean by neoliberalism and its incursions in Chapter One: Locating Politics, where I address the ongoing debate over the relevance of the term “neoliberal/ism” and especially its application to economic and political power in the Middle East and North Africa. Here, I point to the resonances in this dissertation with a growing body of scholarship that is now contextualizing the political events of the Arab Uprisings within a larger historical trajectory that dates back to the 1970s. Doing so furthers the discussion I elaborated in this section about the intellectual trajectories of locating politics in Arab cultural production generally by contextualizing the recent enthusiasm about Arabic hip hop and rap more specifically in the wake of the so-called “Arab Spring.” As should be clear, this is a tendency the present study acknowledges and tries not to reproduce.

Political enthusiasm and neoliberal critique

Drawing on the irony of the International Monetary Fund (IMF)’s praise for Egyptian, Libyan, and Tunisian “sound economic policies and market reforms” weeks before the outbreaks of revolutions, Koenraad Bogaert argues that understanding recent events necessitates contextualization of the “pressing economic grievances and uneven development that are a result of more than thirty years of neoliberal policies” in those countries.73 Not doing so, he suggests, actually exacerbates miscomprehension of the region and its shifting politics.

...In an attempt to explain political change and authoritarian persistence, many approaches to Arab political life mainly highlighted endogenous political legacies (e.g., corruption, clientilism, etc.), thereby constructing stereotypes of the ‘Arab regime’ that actually got in the way of understanding the complexity of the social forces and capitalist agency that are manifesting themselves in the current political orders of the region.74

In other words, while the enthusiasm about these paradigmatic changing events is understandable, the onus is now upon criticism to pay attention to what is being constructed and elided by this excitement.

In a similar vein, Alain Badiou coined the phrase the “phenomenon of Western inclusion” to describe the transformation of recent political resistance in the Arab world into a desire for “the West.”75 By this he refers to the narrative process wherein the unruly and anti-despotic ethos of the Arab crowd is translated by Western state

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74 Ibid.

departments and the global mass media into a desire for “freedom.” This “freedom” is embodied politically in the trappings of liberal democracy and economically in the opening to/of “free” markets. Translated and transmitted in this way, an eruptive popular movement and populous moment “has every chance of ending in very modest constitutional reform” with the ushering into power of regimes that will come to “the general surprise of supporters of the riot.”

(In other words, in results that do not address, on a structural level, corruption, gross inequities of wealth, the stripping of resources, or the refusal of IMF loans and their debilitating stipulations, and that neither include an increase in representation, self-determination, or any number of other demands vocally stated and physically embodied by ongoing protests.) “What would be a genuine change,” Badiou suggests, “would be an exit from the West, a ‘de-Westernization’, and it would take the form of an exclusion.”

This exclusion might embody a menace, in Homi Bhabha’s sense of the term, to the neoliberal and neocolonial order as it stands. Bhabha’s formulation of colonial mimicry – a mixture of “resemblance and menace” – points to the construction by the colonial subject of an identity or of desire that is “almost the same [as the colonists’] but not quite.” This menace is the same threat that Badiou locates in the mounting “anxiety” of “Cameron, Sarkozy, [and] Obama” in their assessments of the Arab

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid., 52, emphasis in original.

78 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 122-123.
uprisings. Badiou says the uprisings “contain an Idea, as yet unformulated, which is highly displeasing” to the governments and those heads of state.\(^7^9\)

One of the hypotheses of my research is that a consideration of this “displeasing” “unformulated” exclusion –of a potential exit from neoliberal practice and policy, or the admission of a certain colonial menace – is being actively stripped or at least tangibly occluded from contemporary narratives. This is happening not only, as Bogaert, Armbrust, and others have suggested, in discourse about political developments in the region, but also in discussions about how “politics” or “resistance” appears in different kinds of cultural production. Hundreds of articles have been written about various aspects of youth culture in Egypt, Tunisia, and the Levant in recent years, including about Arabic rap. Virtually all champion its “resistant” qualities. But almost none discuss the actually alternative political possibilities that subcultural producers and audiences wade through. I develop affective models to discern precisely the development of these politics. Doing so also allows me to question and pursue the tenuous bonds of “solidarity” invoked by artists and activists in different cities.

\section*{Part Three: Chapter Breakdowns}

The dissertation that follows is structured in five chapters. The first two are theoretical in nature, not taking a specific geographic location as their focus. They are designed to build the affective and political model I began to contextualize in this

\(^{7^9}\) Badiou, \textit{Rebirth of History}, 51, emphasis added.
introduction. I then implement this model in each of the three case study chapters that follow.

“Chapter One: Locating Politics” takes issue with the discourses of resistance that I suggest all but categorically frame understandings of Arab rap. Building on specific examples of the presentation of Arab rappers and other performance artists in New York City, I suggest that neoliberal orientalism on international art stages, in academic literature, and in the neoliberal media depoliticizes Arab rappers. This plays on a racialized imagination, approximating Arab and Muslim subjects to African and African American history, culture, and musical expression, while stripping the politics from both Arab and black experiences. Having identified the depoliticizing work of discourses of resistance in specific examples, I propose a theoretical elaboration for understanding the political implications of the dominance of “resistance literature” in anthropological and cultural studies. Hannah Arendt’s concept of “political action” underpins my investigation. Her emphasis, which has been critiqued of late, on activity in the *polis* as indicative of agency grounds my critique of the approaches to resistance in both Subcultural Studies and Subaltern Studies, two fields of literature intimately connected to this project.

Having exposed the limitations of frameworks of “resistance” for understanding politics in cultural production, “Chapter Two: Feeling Politics,” sets out to offer an alternative. In this chapter, I build the models of *feeling politics* and *political feeling* that I began to sketch in Part One of this Introduction. I elaborate my use of tarab as political feeling by proposing a framework for tracking its emergence specific to rap concerts. I further the explorations of urban change and neoliberal incursions elaborated in the
previous chapter by suggesting a “spatizalized” approach to the materiality of concert venues. Leaning on the late Doreen Massey’s work, I propose that recognizing “the very fact of spacing” between audiences in specific concert venues in cities navigating cosmopolitan and neoliberal incursions deepens the political implications of the feeling conducted during rap concerts. This chapter also includes an outline of my methodology and outlines how I considered my scope and approach as researcher.

“Chapter Three: Ramallah – The Second Wave of Palestinian Rap” contextualizes Palestinian rap production since the end of the Second Intifada (2006/7). My research in this chapter pushes back against the dominant understanding of Palestinian rap as an embodiment of the changing forms of youthful “intifada,” that is, as an enactment of resistance against the Occupation. My own findings did not corroborate this narrative. Instead, I argue Palestinian rap today largely does not engage or (re)produce an ethos of uprising, revolution, or resistance. In this chapter I explore how the material negotiations of concert makers and concert-goers continue to be political despite not being “resistance.” Importantly, exploring the political feeling in second wave rap concerts in Ramallah quickly became less about finding a subcultural answer to the Occupation in rap concerts and more about comprehending one of the myriad ways in which life continues under it.

“Chapter Four: Amman – Resignation and Longing in an Emerging ‘Cultural Hotspot’” documents the recent emergence of the Jordanian capital as a regional cultural hub – in particular its development into something of a concert hub – together with an overwhelming, articulated desire of young people to leave Amman behind. I build from assumptions of Jordanian “stability,” central to its attraction as accessible regional host
for cultural production, to explore a political feeling of resignation in reaction to a host of social and political situations produced in some Jordanian rap lyrics. This chapter engages notions of performed cosmopolitanism in addition to performer and audience testimony and thick description.

In “Chapter Five: Beirut – Poetics of Disgust,” I propose understanding the dynamics held in tension in rap in Beirut as a product of affective disgust. Affectively different from the performed resignation I identified in some rap in Amman, it points to similar grasping for and working through both material and affective realities in Beirut. Disgust is the recognition that the city is being stolen from its inhabitants; the frustration with the status quo; the utter dissatisfaction with the government; resentment towards people who leave; and the identity crises that result upon return. As such, I consider that expressions of disgust are specific, active navigations of politics. By distancing themselves from dysfunction, corruption, neglect, and racism in a particular affective register, the speaker of disgust works around available political affiliation by refusing and circumventing in specific ways the trite, disappointing narratives of politicians, the humanitarian aid industry, and local as well as regional nostalgia. In this chapter, spitting disgust engages with performative analyses of political disgust like Sara Ahmed and Imogen Tyler’s, while diverging from these studies in ways contingent to my own context.  

In the study’s “Conclusion - Politics, Positions, Presence,” I offer a final reflection on the political use of a concept like political feeling at the time of the completion of this study – a context which is considerably different than the geopolitically

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situation that framed and encouraged the proposal of this research. From here I offer a critical engagement with the concept of “solidarity” as informed by both my interlocutors’ testimonies as well as their lyrical work. I close the study with a consideration of the technology via which this music is primarily consumed.

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In this Introduction, I have sought to provide an initial intellectual contextualization of the research that follows in terms of both studies of feeling (affect) and politics. The affective tension of “politics pulls at me” in the Ramallah Underground’s track succinctly frames the confluence of politics and feeling that I explore in this genre of subcultural production. I take the opportunity to conclude these initial thoughts on affectivity and politics in this research with a qualification about the relationship between affective processes – or the location and study of feeling – and the contemporary Arab demographic that is my focus.

While my study takes as its subject specific subcultural production by and for young Arabs,81 I do not consider that the theoretical model I am building is salient because of an inherent political or cultural nature that these agents possess. Given the intellectual debates I hope this research will engage, the importance of this specification cannot be overstated.82 It is crucial to me that the discussion of affective dynamics in

81 The demographic reach of this genre is growing and concerts and events analyzed in Chapter Three demonstrate the appeal of this work to a range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. However, conversations with artists confirm the overwhelming audience consists of predominantly Arabic speakers.

82 The lively debate around Vivek Chibber’s recent book Postcolonial Studies and the Spectre of Capital has been instrumental in identifying and articulating this distinction.
Arabic rap that I provide not be construed as validation for the Orientalist or “reverse-Orientalist” claims⁸³ that Arabs are simply more emotional, more susceptible to emotional arousal (and by extension, in this study, “more” political) than “Westerners”; or that musical practice in this part of the world is *in essence* less cerebral, more illogical, or more interactive than “Western” musical practice. It is foolish to argue that cultural differences do not exist; they do. But it is equally ridiculous to impose onto cultural *production* cultural *essences* that are devoid of considerations of the material conditions in which they are found. Especially in a discussion of the “global” form of contemporary hip hop and the urban environments in which it is intervening with such vitality, such an interpretation of this research would be most out of sync with my intentions as an author.

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⁸³ Sadik Jalal al-ʿAzm proposed the phrase “Orientalism in reverse” to describe a vein of scholarship that responds to critiques of Orientalism by suggesting unique (frequently “textual”) tools with which to assess the culture, religion, and political structure of “the East.” In doing so, he suggests, “‘Orientalism in Reverse’… simply imitates the great Orientalist masters – a poor imitation at that – when it seeks to unravel the secrets of the primordial Arab ‘mind,’ ‘psyche,’ or ‘character’… But the novel element is the conclusion of Orientalism in Reverse that comparative philological and linguistic studies prove the ontological superiority of the Oriental mind (the ‘Arab mind’ in this case) over the Occidental one.” (Al-ʿAzm, “Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse,” *Khamsin* 8 (1980), accessed January 31, 2014, [http://libcom.org/library/orientalism-orientalism-reverse-sadik-jalal-al-ʿazm#footnoteref20_93ck6iy](http://libcom.org/library/orientalism-orientalism-reverse-sadik-jalal-al-ʿazm#footnoteref20_93ck6iy).) Indeed this simple reversal of a study of “essences” just to get the opposite result (“the East” is, in actuality superior, not inferior, to the “West”) is something Edward Said himself warned against (Said, *Orientalism*, 322). Gilbert Achcar expands al-ʿAzm’s study of “reverse Orientalism” to French thought in *Marxism, Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism*, 40-56. I address this discursive intersection of Orientalism, affect, politics and contemporary hip hop in Arabic in more detail in the next chapter.
Chapter One
Locating Politics

Overview

This chapter lays the first part of a theoretical foundation I will rely on in the subsequent case study chapters. It consists of a critique of a “discourse of resistance” which I identify exists in discussion and analysis of Arabic rap. In the first half of this chapter, I identify this phenomenon, which I acknowledge builds and diverges from “resistance literature” in the humanities. In order to establish the particular implications I see in these discussions of “resistance,” I explore how what I call neoliberal orientalism structures these representations of Arab cultural producers.

Having established what the “discourse of resistance” is and what its implications are, in the second half of the chapter I aim to illustrate how it works. To do so, I turn to Hannah Arendt’s theory of political activity in the polis, and its critiques. I use Arendt’s theorization of political activity as indicative of political subjectivity to point to how the discourse of resistance pins agency into a representative framework where it is incumbent on spectacular displays of resistance. Critiques of Arendt’s model help to illustrate that this framework depends on the continued existence of individuals without agency, against whose background only some may be celebrated as active political subjects. I follow this theoretical exploration in two subfields of sociological and anthropological literature: subcultural study in the tradition of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies and post-colonial theory, especially as manifest in subaltern studies.
The lengthy theoretical discussion in this chapter works to clear the space in order to be able to add something new to existing debates and analysis about rap in Arabic and the political behavior of its producers and consumers. This theoretical elaboration should allow my case studies, and the theoretical alternative to the discourse of resistance I propose in the next chapter, to work against the exoticizing of these agents that I find prevalent in much existing literature.

Part One: Discourse of Resistance and Neoliberal Orientalism

On April 14, 2013, Columbia University in New York hosted an event entitled “Art as Resistance.” It was advertised as a panel discussion between two actors from the Freedom Theatre in Jenin, Palestine and a professor of theatre at the University of Connecticut. The email blasts and the website of the Center for Palestine Studies include short bios of the three panelists, wherein the first thing noted for both Palestinian actors are their ages. Faisal Abu Alhelja was 23; Ahmad Al-Rokh was 24. The age of Gary English, the third panelist, a Distinguished Professor of Theatre (and current director of the Freedom Theatre) was not listed. The advertising suggested that the “expertise” the first two panelists boasted was their Palestinian youth. The credentials of the third panelist (presumably not Palestinian and older) were his established career as a theatre
professional and scholar. “Resistance” only appeared in the event title. It was unclear from the promotional materials who or what these artists resisted, or how.¹

As pointed to in this dissertation’s introduction, critics and scholars have identified that the abstract framing of Palestinian artists and their work as “resistant” may be problematic. Helga Tawil-Souri has suggested that the expectation that Palestinian artists exclusively depict or address their political reality has limited the aesthetic possibilities available to them.² Speaking of Arab artists more generally, Daanish Faruqi has suggested that even when Arab artists display works of high quality, their work may be neglected, even in their countries of origin, because it “fails to inform our political impulses.”³ In the wake of the political events since 2010 and the incredible attention to creative expression within the “Arab Spring,” Arab artists themselves have also begun to question and in some cases reject demands that they produce or perform “resistance” in galleries and concerts, and the presumption their work be framed as such.⁴ What is the


proclivity towards “resistance” about? Why are critics and artists distancing themselves from it?

If Arab artists and critics in general are bristling against expectations that they produce “political” artwork all the time, the case of rap and hip hop in Arabic provides an especially dense archive of this phenomenon. A discussion of rap in the Arab world in English or French that does not lay claim to its political or resistant nature, or its affiliation with political behavior, simply does not exist. The few analyses in Arabic that do not celebrate its imminent resistance tend to decry the genre for the same reasons others find it powerful (and political). This constant framework of representation is not the case with any number of Lebanese, Syrian, Egyptian or other filmmakers, poets, theatre directors, or other musicians, who encounter expectations that their work is political or questions about how it is so, among other considerations. In the genre of Arabic rap in particular, I argue that we can see distilled the elements that drive the problematic political gesturing in other art and music arenas where Arabs are also involved. It is my argument that in Europe, in North America, and in the Middle East, the enthusiasm about this genre is inescapably bound up in a juxtaposition of African American influence, and progressive Arab “street” energy. These factors, taken singly or together, dominate the representative framework of these rap musicians and their work. The framework of political resistance attributed to Arab rappers is unique to this region among other studies of rap around the world. It may also be understood as a condensation


6 Many rappers who also perform in other genres, who act as producers, or who otherwise engage in art or literature production affirm that it is their rap work that is foremost identified as political.
of a larger neoliberal framework of representation of Arab youth in general.⁷ It is at the intersection of these spheres of influence of African American, Islamic, and Arab Spring energies that, for example, the Tunisian rapper El Général was named one of TIME magazines top 100 influential people of 2011, that press like CBS and the New York Times pontificated about the rap “soundtracks” of the 2011-2012 revolutions, and that the BBC and others wondered if “hip hop was driving the Arab Spring.”⁸

The converging spheres of influence in the body of the Arab rapper and his work are not arbitrary. They are driven by specific economic and imperial concerns and a particular racial ideology. Moreover, the “discourse of resistance” I identify builds from a trajectory of humanistic literature. I turn to that literature first, before elaborating that the discourse of resistance I am specifically concerned with is structured by neoliberal orientalism. With this phrase I attempt to define the “regime of power-knowledge-pleasure” that structures the ways in which Arab rappers are celebrated for producing political music.⁹

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⁷ The study of “global” hip hop is frequently conducted through a frame of subcultural study and therefore is often celebrated for the agency of its subcultural subjects that it affirms. The deliberate association that rap in the Middle East is political is more unique to the region. See also Ted Swedenburg, “Imagined Youth,” Middle East Research and Information Project 245: 2007, accessed November 1, 2014, http://www.merip.org/mer/mer245/imagined-youths.


Discourse of resistance

Recent reactions by Arab artists and critics against the invitation that their work perform “resistance” should be understood within a larger discussion about the usefulness of the concept of resistance in analyzing the political effects of cultural production. That resistance may be celebrated in cultural production, and that this celebration may be problematic is not a new debate in humanistic literature. Donald Moore identified what he called a “boom industry” in “resistance studies” in the 1970s and 1980s. Moore was referring to the emergence of “ethnographies of resistance” and the proliferation of studies of “everyday forms of resistance.” In the 1990s, a slew of astute critiques reacted to this trend. Lila Abu-Lughod warned about “romanticizing resistance”; Douglas Kellner worried about its “fetishization”; Sherry Ortner remarked upon an “ethnographic thinness” in “resistance” literature; Roy D’Andrade bristled at the “moral model” anthropologies of resistance presented; and Michael Brown even suggested that, among anthropologists, “resistance” had become “theoretical hegemony.”


concept persisted despite these critiques, however, and the 1990s and 2000s have seen invigorating attempts to re-energize the ways in which resistance might be located and studied. For example, Scott’s emphasis on “indirect resistance,” what he calls “weapons of the weak,” borrows from Claude Levi-Strauss’ concept of “bricolage.” The construction of agents as *bricoleurs*, constantly negotiating forces of oppression in expressing resistance, attempts to explain what appear to be inconsistencies in the political behavior of participants. Studies like Scott’s both build on Dick Hebdige’s formulation of resistance as bricolage in *Subculture and the Meaning of Style* (1979) and foreshadow the most astute studies of resistance today, especially attention to apparent “ambivalence” in political behavior.\(^{13}\)

Within the realm of theatre and performance studies, “resistance” has also appeared with some regularity. It frequently appears in the framework for the study of non-US/European performance cultures.\(^{14}\) But it has also guided explorations of politics in especially avant-garde, community-based, and non-commercial theatre in the latter contexts as well. Marvin Carlson suggests that the rise in the study of the anthropology of performance has encouraged the development of alternative political analyses in

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\(^{14}\) See for example, Glenn Odom, *Yorùbá Performance, Theatre, and Politics: Staging Resistance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Terence Chong, *The Theatre and the State in Singapore: Orthodoxy and Resistance* (Oxon: Routledge, 2011); Belinda Bozzoli, *Theatres of Struggle and the End of Apartheid* (Columbus: Ohio UP, 2004); Jean Graham-Jones, “Rethinking Buenos Aires Theatre in the Wake of 2001 and Emerging Structures of Resistance and Resilience,” *Theatre Journal* 66(2014): 37-54. Of course, the prevalence of this tendency to understand “other” cultures as political or as demonstrating “resistance” is one of the theoretical concerns of this dissertation. (See Introduction.) This is not to detract from the compelling research presented in these studies.
conventional theatre study and practice. He tells us that especially Victor Turner’s work, on “the potential of liminoid activity to provide a site for social and cultural resistance and the exploration of alternative possibilities has naturally been of particular interest to theorists and practitioners of performance seeking a strategy of social engagement not offered by the more cultural-bound structures of the conventional theatre.” Dozens of compelling works of theatre and performance theory have been written in this vein: Randy Martin’s work on the performance as “political act,” Baz Kershaw on the “radical” in performance, Jill Dolan on the “utopic”; Alan Read on “the everyday” – to name only a few. A longer elaboration of politics as conceived in theatre practice is outside of my scope here.

Instead, my focus here is on the trajectory of this debate about resistance in cultural production in the humanities. Looking at this history, we can glean that a discussion of the political aims and agency of the ethnographer, critic, or theorist have been a central part of studying “resistance.” Since the mid 1990s, these debates have considered, and indeed have been particularly charged, around the question of the relationship of political engagement to scholarly practice. For example, Nancy Scheper-Hughes proposed a “barefoot anthropology” as “a more womanly-hearted” way of conducting ethnographic research where one is both scholar and companheira. Her

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17 Scheper-Hughes writes, “Witnessing, the anthropologist as companheira, is in the active voice, and it positions the anthropologist inside human events as a responsive, reflexive, and morally committed being,
assertions that the anthropologists must “become alarmists and shock troopers…” [producing] morally demanding texts”\textsuperscript{18} offended colleagues who considered the procedures of objective, scientific observation central to the sustenance of the integrity of the field.\textsuperscript{19} Hers is perhaps only the first in a string of calls for “militancy” in humanistic critique. Jeffrey Juris, for example, advocates a “militant ethnography” that merges practice and research.\textsuperscript{20} I will return to engage how these different articulations of scholarly endeavors inform my own positioning vis-à-vis political questions and engagement in the next chapter. I find them significant because they point to the often personal stakes that are involved in the choice of the researcher and theorist to engage the concept of “resistance.” For now, however, it will suffice to mark that the relationship of the social scientist’s political practice to the observation and theorization of resistance in the lives of her research subjects has been a significant part of the development of the recent debate around the concept of “resistance” and its use in the academy.

What can we gather from this trajectory in humanistic literature? This history indicates the existence of a phenomenon we might call, following Michel Foucault, “the putting into discourse” of resistance.\textsuperscript{21} Significant for my own work, recognizing a

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\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 417.

\textsuperscript{19} See D’Andrade’s counter argument to Scheper-Hughes in the same issue of \textit{Current Anthropology}: D’Andrade, “Moral Models in Anthropology.”


\textsuperscript{21} Foucault, \textit{History of Sexuality}, 12. Many have commented on a depoliticization of intellectual activity, despite claims to uncover “resistance,” “politics,” and “agency,” roughly since the late 1970s, a period which coincides with the trajectory of literature just outlined. Aijaz Ahmad writes for example, “We have
discourse of resistance works to open up studies of politics in cultural production by insisting on exploring the relationship of this discursivity to power. By this I mean paying attention to what discussing resistance, representing it, celebrating it, does. Paying attention to a “discourse of resistance” is different from analyzing the political strategies of agents themselves. In my case study chapters, I get to individual cases and different political strategies. And in the next chapter, I explore different ways to access and understand those strategies. In this chapter, however, I am considering the representation of the activity of these agents as political content. I do this in order to clear the space for subsequent theoretical and political explorations. In addressing this discourse, I am, like Foucault, interested in “instances of discursive production (which also administer silences, to be sure), [instances] of the production of power… and [instances] of the propagation of knowledge (which often cause mistaken beliefs or systematic misconceptions to circulate).”  

Identifying how acts of resistance are “put into discourse” is productive in that it moves the discussion past a deliberation of the truth or falsehood of the studies. I am largely not concerned with the question whether or not a musician’s work resists. As Foucault recommends, “the essential aim will not be to determine whether these discursive productions… lead one to formulate the truth… or on the contrary falsehoods witnessed, in all the bourgeois countries, the ascent to dominance of an entirely new kind of intellectual within a formation which continued to call itself a Left. The characteristic posture of this new intellectual was that he or she would gain legitimacy on the Left by constantly and fervently referring to the Third World, Cuba, national liberation, and so on, but would also be openly and contemptuously anti-communist; would often enough not affiliate even with that other tradition which had also descended from classical Marxism, namely social democracy, nor be affiliated in any degree with any labor movement whatsoever, but would invoke an anti-bourgeois stance in the name of manifestly reactionary anti-humanisms…” (Aijaz Ahmad, In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures [New York: Verso, 1992], 192.)

22 Foucault, History of Sexuality, 12.
designed to conceal the truth.”\textsuperscript{23} In other words, I am less concerned with whether or not the artists I will later discuss in detail are actually producing political strategies, than I am with the production of power and knowledge that accompanies the discourse about them and their work. The question at the moment is not the political or social efficacy of rappers' lyrical and performative work; it is how representative frameworks limit how we understand that efficacy in the academy.\textsuperscript{24}

\textit{Rap and resistance}

In March 2013, the Brooklyn Academy of Music hosted an event entitled “Mic Check: Hip Hop from North Africa and the Middle East.” The event literature described it as follows:

From the recent revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East, rappers have emerged as torchbearers of the movement’s progressive energy and restless defiant spirit. For \textit{Mic Check: Hip-Hop from North Africa and the Middle East}, BAM brings together a host of these intrepid anthem writers—Amkoullel (Mali), Deeb (Egypt), El Général (Tunisia), Shadia Mansour (Palestine/UK)—alongside more traditional musicians Brahim Fribgane and Yacouba for an evening of contemporary music born from radical social and political change.\textsuperscript{25}

The event and the artists’ roundtable that preceded it was a noteworthy showcase of Arab musicians on one of New York’s most prestigious stages. The curation by Zeyba Rahman brought rap in Arabic to an international stage as perhaps its live performance had not yet been. The innovative curation of this concert is both interesting and curious for a few

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 11, emphasis added.

\textsuperscript{24} I owe much here to Lila Abu-Lughod’s suggestion that we might better use resistance as a “diagnostic of power.” (Lila Abu-Lughod, “Romance of Resistance,” 42.)

\textsuperscript{25} “Mic Check: Hip Hop from North Africa and the Middle East,” accessed November 9, 2014, \url{http://www.bam.org/music/2013/mic-check}. 
reasons. Looking at these closely sets the stage for a discussion of the neoliberal orientalism I see at play in the attributions of resistance to these artists.

First, there were the dynamics in the opera house itself. For an event focused on “intrepid anthem writers” it is interesting that the lyrics of the anthems themselves were, for a majority of the gathered audience, impossible to follow. Even though BAM regularly hosts events in this venue with supertitles, the singers sang in their Arabic and African dialects without the assistance of simultaneous translation. Lyrics were printed in the program, but the house was not lit during the event. Audience members remained seated for the considerable majority of the evening. The “radical social and political change,” whose music had been discovered and showcased by BAM, was thus for the most part communicated through the addresses to the audience by the artists fluent enough in English to do so and the framework BAM provided. Deeb used call and response during his set. Shadia Mansour gave an impassioned and expansive address about Palestinian prisoners, and Amkoullel encouraged the audience to join him in dance. Ultimately, the political reach and meaning of these gestures was formed or limited by the general framework constructed to bring these artists together.

In the artists’ roundtable two days before the concert, Mansour, Deeb, and Ben Amor (El Général) admitted they were not familiar with Amkoullel’s work before having been invited by BAM to New York. The inclusion of this musician from Mali on billing that reads “from North Africa and the Middle East” and implies direct connections with

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26 The musicians sang in different dialects without supertitles. Even if a majority of the audience – unclear from audience responses if a majority was Palestinian, Egyptian, Tunisian, or from Mali – understood one dialect, it is extremely unlikely that more than a handful of people could understand multiple performers, much less all of them, just by listening.

27 El Général’s poor English made a direct linguistic address to the audience difficult.
the revolutions of 2010-2013 is decidedly curious. First, Mali is not typically included in
the umbrella of “North Africa.” It has a different history, ethnic makeup, linguistic
currents, and patterns of economic development than its northern neighbors. Claiming
Amkoullel is North African because he is from Mali is at best unusual and at worst
patently false – this is so regardless of the decidedly problematic racial and economic
considerations that have accompanied the division (by the “West” or the UN) of the
African continent into regions. Second, even though Mali is, approximately speaking,
near Tunisia, a country which did witness quite radical “social and political change”
recently, the unrest in Northern Mali in 2012-2013 cannot be said to even remotely
resemble the revolutions of the “Arab Spring.” Of course, this would not matter if the
event were billed as anything but a celebration of music “from the recent revolutions of
North Africa and the Middle East.” Since the event was billed as such a celebration,
however, and since the lyrical meanings of the artists’ music were obscured in
performance, these curatorial choices are important. The umbrella provided by BAM had
the effect of collapsing these important differences into one muddy, political soup. My
point is that this is not accidental, even if it was not intentional, but ideological.

The problematic reduction of the artists to a shared common background and
politics can also be seen among the three Arab musicians. A practice of collaboration
among rappers in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and the Arab diaspora had by
2011 become impossible for fans or critics following the genre to ignore.28 These
collaborations allow artists to experiment with sounds and political expressions, reach

28 A well-publicized example of this is the collaborative album Khat Thaleth, produced by Stronghold
Sound, released January 22, 2013, accessed November 18, 2014,
new audiences, and strengthen both aesthetic and political alliances. Even so, the Arab artists invited to perform in this event (Deeb, El Général, and Mansour) had never before collaborated. There is a rich history of borrowing and exchange between Tunisian, Algerian, and Moroccan rappers. But their work has a notoriously limited reach in the Levant and Egypt. Mansour, a resident of the UK, has collaborated extensively with Egyptian and Palestinian crews, but not with Deeb. The artificial collaboration imposed by the curation on these artists by bringing them together under one umbrella of “music born of… change” has the effect of collapsing the very specific politics each musician addresses and the very different aesthetics in their work. Deeb, Mansour, and Ben Amor do not have similar histories in performing their music or in the subjects they address in their lyrics. The sense one gets from the curation is a little bit of tokenism, looking for wide representation: Deeb as a sort of liberal hipster, Mansour as a woman, and El Général as imprisoned rebel rapping against the machine. Moreover, the artists reacted to the reality of being thusly abstracted.

For example Deeb closed his set with the following call and response, “When I say Egypt, you say Free! Egypt – ” and then the audience responded “Free!” He repeated it with Syria and Palestine (which received the heartiest response). This exchange is

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29 Journalists like Moe Ali Nayel and Mohammed Jabali and many of the musicians I interviewed have suggested to me that this historical lack of interaction and collaboration is due to the wide discrepancies in local dialects between the Eastern Mediterranean and the North African coast, something rappers within the Levant, or between the Levant and Egypt encounter to a much lesser extent. There is a considerable exchange between North African artists and French musicians of Moroccan, Algerian, and Tunisian descent. These artists share French in addition to local dialects. Interestingly, despite the persistence of French language education in some parts of Lebanon, and despite the diasporic experiences in France of some Lebanese musicians during the Lebanese Civil War (I am thinking primarily of El Rass and Rayess Bek), the collaborations between them and their North African colleagues in this genre is still negligible. I have yet to encounter a compelling explanation for this. My own hypothesis is that the differences are more aesthetic and economic than linguistic. Finally, it is worth noting that this may in fact have begun to change ever so slightly since the Tunisian Revolution, as those events sparked a renewed interest in pan-Arab collaborations, political debates, and communication in addition to a surge in Arabic rap production.
recorded on the track and in recordings of other live events. At BAM, however, he rounded out the exchange with “the World –”/“Free”; a choice that seemed to mute the powerful resonance of the refrain “Palestine/Free” that preceded it. But the most remarkable indication of the political washing out of the event came in Amkoullel’s closing set.

Amkoullel’s most popular track is perhaps “SOS”: a piece which recounts the difficulty of fighting off violence and extremism in Northern Mali. This number, which he performed at BAM in the midst of the expedition of French troops to its former colony (in just another iteration of the world-wide “War on Terror”), 30 basically asks for help. The chorus of the song is in French. The curatorial choice to conclude an evening born of the radical politics of the “Arab Spring”31 with a SOS to French power was simply a remarkable appropriation of the local, radical energy of this period. The curation risked translating the radical critiques of corruption, nepotism, and racism in the preceding musicians tracks into a plea for Western aid. Allowing the chorus of “SOS” to conclude the evening was a specific – and very political – interpretation of the “radical and social change” sweeping “the region” between 2010 and 2013.32 In this way, the curatorial team, while pretending objectivity, imparted political meaning on the kind of change and the means of that change that the lot of presenting artists supposedly share.


31 The Arab Spring was always the implied context of this event, if not declared outright.

32 Anti-foreign intervention energy and mobilization was a significant part of political mobilization and rhetoric in every single Arab country (from Tunisia to Yemen) that experienced political and social upheaval in 2010-2013. The most contested of these of course has been in Libya, where Western powers did intervene, and in Syria, where (at time of writing) they have yet to, in an official capacity.
Having sung “SOS,” Amkoullel changed the mood. Reminding the audience that “we musicians,” while sometimes engaging politics, also need to have fun, he proceeded to remove his traditional vest and began to dance, topless, asking the audience to shake their hips with his. He then sang his song “Farafina” a song with the message, underscored in call and response, that “We are all Africa.” Hisham Aidi calls this “blackwashing”: the attempt to tame political expressions with appeals to African American or trans-Atlantic African diasporic culture.33

Indeed, what is significant about the curation of the BAM event is that it makes very obvious an imagined correlation between Arab politics and black bodies. More than this, the curation relies on this connection in order to produce a sense of cohesion between the artists. Here the confluence of black and Arab is enacted and performed by an art institution, but it exists in mainstream journalism, in efforts of the state department and their research and cultural programming, and in popular culture.34 This imagined correlation between black bodies and Arab politics draws together exoticized images of both black and Arab experiences.

Moustafa Bayoumi writes about the emergence of “the African American” as “intermediary” with the Muslim World. Bayoumi suggests this correspondence between


34 Moustafa Bayoumi suggests that the black man (he doesn’t specify gender, but I am – because in his analysis it is obvious he means black men), because of his own lived history of oppression, has emerged as the figure capable of empathizing with Arabs today. Films like The Siege, The Kingdom, and The Traitor portray “blacks at the helm” of liberal American empire. (Bayoumi, “The Race is On: Muslims and Arabs in the American Imagination,” Middle East Research and Information Project, March 2010, accessed November 9, 2014, http://www.merip.org/mero/interventions/race.)
blackness and Arabness represents a significant shift in a US racial imagination.\textsuperscript{35} Whereas a post-World War II US racial imagination frequently conflated Arabs and Jews in a sort of general anti-Semitism, and the 1980s saw ubiquitous images of Arabs as terrorists and oil sheikhs,\textsuperscript{36} in the post-9/11 period, Arabs have taken more of the spotlight as the denigrated racial “other” – leading to the popularized formulation “Arab is the new Black.”\textsuperscript{37} This latter phrase refers to a noticeable shift in surveillance and profiling – especially in heavily policed cities like New York City – from African American populations to Arab and Muslim ones. Most of the focus in literature that explores this new racism perhaps understandably emphasizes the effects on Arab and Muslim communities and the changing negative representations of Arabs.\textsuperscript{38} The transformation of the representations of African Americans however, in particular their emergence as iconically \textit{American}, is just as significant. Bayoumi asks, “What could be more American today, after all, than the African American?”\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{35} I am aware of a certain fluidity in this section in my use of “Arab” and “Muslim.” They are obviously not the same thing. Many have taken pains to parse this, especially in order to counter an increasingly acrid Islamophobia in the public sphere of many European and American countries. The thread of this latter critique is that all “brown”—looking people, Asians, Latin@s, and of course Arabs, are being cast as dangerous “Muslims” in cities grappling with the effects of increased immigration. Since I am talking about this imagination that frequently collapses the two, I permit myself the same fluidity in order to address the scope and reach of the phenomenon. It should not be construed as an endorsement, however, of this problematic ignorance. (See Steven Salaita, \textit{Anti-Arab Racism in the USA: Where it Comes from and What it Means for Politics Today} [London: Pluto Press, 2006], 10.)


\textsuperscript{37} Bayoumi, “The Race is On.”

\textsuperscript{38} See for example, Moustafa Bayoumi, \textit{How Does it Feel to Be a Problem: Being Young and Arab in America} (New York: Penguin HC, 2008). The book specifically uses a framework of African American experience and history (the title is taken from W.E.B. Du Bois’ \textit{The Souls of Black Folk} [1903]) but only discusses the experiences of Arab youth in this transformation of racial prejudice.

\textsuperscript{39} Bayoumi, “The Race is On.”
Despite the different histories of Arabic poetic expression that Arab rappers regularly invoke as influential, rap in Arabic has nevertheless provided an especially fertile soil for this racial imagination.\(^{40}\) It has already been exploited by the State Department. Hisham Aidi explores blackwashing in the context of the Rhythm Road Tours, a program developed by the State Department in partnership with Jazz at Lincoln Center. In 2004, in the wake of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, the tours revived a strategy of cultural diplomacy used during the Cold War. Then, jazz superstars stars like Dizzy Gillespie, Louis Armstrong, Benny Goodman, and Duke Ellington were dubbed “Jazz Ambassadors” and sent by the State Department to the Middle East, the former Soviet block, Africa, and southeast Asia to play their music and to spread what they hoped would be a political imagination uniquely tied to the US. Politicians and musicians alike concluded that this experimental program was “powerfully effective against Red propaganda.”\(^{41}\) Results of the Rhythm Road program have been more mixed. Originally featuring rap crews, the millennial incarnation of the Cold War strategy was sent to appeal to Arab and Muslim youth across North Africa, the Middle East, and the parts of Asia most susceptible to extremism, through the message of hip hop.

The tool of hip hop seemed to appeal to these cultural policy makers for two reasons. First, for its aesthetic qualities of “speaking truth to power” or, in the words of the State Department, “promoting dissent.” And second for a perceived opportunity to

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\(^{40}\) Timothy Taylor writes that the dominance of American popular music, itself influenced heavily by African American sounds, from Jazz to Rock-and-Roll, leads to the effect that “African American sounds [are] taken to signal ‘western’ more generally.” (Timothy Taylor, *Beyond Exoticism: Western Music and the World* [Durham: Duke UP, 2007], Kindle edition, location 2909.)

connect with Muslim youth via hip hop’s history with Islam in the US. In fact, Aidi links the choices of the State Department to use hip hop and rap to reach out to Arab and Muslim youth directly to the transnational history and political legacy of Malcom X. The latter is frequently referred to in rap lyrics, and held in high esteem. Noting this, Aidi argues that the State Department sought to capitalize on aspects of Malcom’s thought and experience, while attempting to align his figure more closely with the interests of the US state.\(^{42}\) That is, they attempt to recast his political legacy: framing Malcom X as a hero of the post-Civil Rights Era, one celebrated by a “post-racial” US, presumably one that does not torture. Aidi points out that the Rhythm Road program recognized the long history of Islam in rap music as it developed in the United States and hoped to use this musical genre, home-grown in the US, as a tool against Islamic extremism abroad. Aidi connects this interest in “soft diplomacy” to the concurrent energies of different politico-religious partnerships that worked to secure funding and investment in schools of Islamic thought in the US that they found most amenable to US policies.\(^{43}\)

If the Jazz Ambassadors were sent to counter “Red propaganda” and defeat communism, the “hip hop envoys” (as participants in the Rhythm Road tours were called) were sent to stave off religious extremism. And if the free experimentation of jazz offered an imaginative escape from the rigid confines of Soviet communism, US hip hop was packaged to promote the “free expression,” “democracy,” and “dissent” that were at once denied by fundamentalist Islam, and which US policy makers hoped would undo it.\(^{44}\)

\(^{42}\) Aidi, “The X Factor,” Rebel Music.

\(^{43}\) Ibid.

\(^{44}\) Aidi writes the tours were designed to “promote democracy and foster dissent” (ibid.).
What is significant to me in this use of hip hop in the Arab world is the reworking of “dissent” as a tool of US imperial power. This fashioning of “dissent” was achieved through the imaginative blending of Arab and black experience. The Rhythm Roads Tours hoped to use elements of African American culture as a tool to seduce and appeal to Arab and Muslim youth, who, once won over by US culture, would presumably be less likely to dissent against capitalist exploitation and occupation by US forces.

I refer to the BAM concert as an example of a discourse of resistance structured by neoliberalism in the context of a history of cultural programming like the Rhythm Road tours to suggest that this one concert was not an anomaly. Rather, its curation built off of energies and expectations generated through other cultural institutions, programming, and support. I have been using the example of the BAM concert to lay out the elements of neoliberal orientalism that structure the discourse of resistance in arts programming I wish to critique. These elements include: collapsing the background of different artists and different politics under one rubric of “radical change”; substituting a distinctly liberal political message (like the call for foreign intervention) for the ethos of otherwise untranslated political expression; and blackwashing – tapping into imagined African or African American experience in order to access Arab subjects. While Hisham Aidi’s work highlights how blackwashing works when the State Department used a sanitized perception of Malcom X in order to reach Arab audiences, the curation of the BAM concert as discussed here illustrates how blackwashing works by tapping into an imagination of African diasporic experience to frame for audiences the Arab performers in front of them.

45 I explore how these demonstrate neoliberal orientalism below.
The curation of “Mic Check” built on the dynamics Aidi describes, but it added another dimension. BAM’s event, held in the predominantly (since the 1970s) African American and Puerto Rican and rapidly gentrifying neighborhood of Downtown Brooklyn, encouraged the imaginative confluence of Arab politics with black culture in the US via the medium of hip hop. But it also conjured a more global imagination, one tied with the aesthetics of “World Music,” wherein performances of tribal authenticity were melded with ideas of change, struggle, and politics in this region of the “Third World.” This Third World “otherness” was conjured by the “authenticity” and “tradition” performed by the two ʿoud musicians who played between the rap sets and had a visual counterpart in the costume choices of some of the artists. (Mansour wore an embroidered Palestinian gown, or thob and Amkoullel wore a wide brimmed straw hat and Malien vets and pants.) These elements of “authenticity” were deliberately juxtaposed with the “modern” sounds of hip hop to create an aesthetic of “hybridity.” Hybridity, what Timothy Taylor has called the “new exotic” in the genre of world music, tends to feature blackness centrally and also feeds into narratives of resistance and change. Taylor notes that blackness has the tendency to fall out of narratives or analysis of resistance, even though its presence helps to conjure it. This would explain how Amkoullel could not

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46 Hillary Miller has explored how BAM has been at the heart of contests over what constitutes culture, funding, and public space in Downtown Brooklyn. She shows convincingly how the “revitalization” of Brooklyn since the late 1960s has always been conceptualized as a contest between and along class and race lines. See Hillary Miller, Drop Dead: Performance in Crisis, 1970s New York City (Evanston: Northwestern UP, forthcoming 2016).


48 Taylor writes: “Blackness represents a peculiar area in the hybridity discourses: sometimes it is so fetishized as a mode of affiliation and resistance that hybridity is constructed as the combination of blackness and something else; or blackness is subsumed into a larger category of ‘western’ or ‘modern,’ thus obscuring the reasons for its presence in particular instances. There are plenty of discussions of how
only fit into billing “From the Middle East and North Africa” and how his music could be understood as being borne of the struggles of the Arab Spring – it points to how he was centrally necessary for it. Noting that “blackwashing” exists in the discourse of resistance around Arabic rap maintains focus on the productivity of these racial imaginations.

To be very clear, it is not that there is no similarity between Arab and Black struggles or no solidarity between these agents. It is that this solidarity desperately needs to be deliberated; it cannot be projected. There is good reason to be hopeful about these alliances, but there is also considerable reason not to project ideas of solidarity, as the alliances are very much not clear. Imposing a framework of solidarity, or of simple commonality, as BAM did, enacts a washed-out, liberal understanding of oppression, liberation, and change. In this vision of the world, these voices “from [North] Africa” are understood in terms of projects that “oppressed” people must need: like the right to education, to individual freedom, and above all to the freedom of expression. Within the curation proposed by BAM, even Shadia Mansour’s impassioned lecture about the condition of Palestinians in Israeli jails risked being understood as a problem of abstract censorship and oppression, completely severed from US influence or power.

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African American musics have influenced musicians around the world, but if the discussion in question is about ‘world music’ and is framed by questions of authenticity or hybridity, blackness frequently falls by the wayside.” (Taylor, Beyond Exoticism, Kindle locations 2838-2842).


In sum, the effect of the curation, which was facilitated by an appeal to overlapping racial imaginations, was to depoliticize both these musicians’ work and the struggles they claim they address. This happened despite, indeed through, a deliberate and overt framework of “radical and social change.”

Event literature deliberately invoked the “Arab Spring” while pitiful efforts were made to illuminate those political enjeux (and several were seemingly made to obscure them). The event, which overtly championed “progressive energy,” a “restless defiant spirit,” and “radical change” relied on a through-line of black culture and one literal black body, culminating in the refrain “we are all Africa.” This curatorial framework appeared to be invisible (read: neutral), benevolently encouraging the artists to “speak for themselves.” In fact, however, the framework directly structured how meaning could be made from these artists’ work. Through BAM’s curatorial frame, political change was best understood as a multicultural call for a “free world,” in which we all recognized our similarities (and our urge to dance) and grooved a little. Aidi called this phenomenon “blackwashing” and I locate it in the “discourse of resistance” I identify around rap in Arabic. The putting into discourse of cultural resistance – in this case, the literal putting on stage of these political artists – builds on specific racial imaginations. As I’ve begun to deliberate here, this imagination is informed by the specific, material conditions of the status-quo politics that maintain them.

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51 It deserves mention that the title of the event (“mic check”) further capitalized on a protest strategy during “Occupy Wall Street,” with which many New Yorkers may have been familiar with at the time. This further feeds the impression of protest politics that audiences were invited to explore during the concert. (See Edward D. Miller, “Authoring the Occupation: the Mic Check, the Human Microphone, and the Loudness of Listening,” in Media Authorship, ed. Cynthia Chris and David A. Gerstner [New York: Routledge, 2013], 180-193.)
Moreover, it is worth pointing to the general political milieu in which the
“discourse of resistance” I’ve been discussing is found. Central to Michel Foucault’s
deliberations on sexuality is his attention to an “endlessly proliferating economy on the
discourse of sex.” Foucault suggests that this expansive discourse, the mandate to
discuss sex, obscures the liberation such speech is meant to enact. We talk of sex to prove
we are no longer repressed. But this insistence creates a loop wherein Western society
(according to Foucault) continues to enact the same anxieties, but in the form of sexual
liberation. Foucault’s focus is thus not on the existence or disappearance of repression but
on the “mechanics of these incitements” to speak.

A proliferation of talk about “resistance,” about creative dissent, and about free
speech in the face of censorship can be similarly understood. The discursivity around
resistance and politics in cultural production has emerged at a time when the debate and
consideration of actual political strategies has retreated from universities and intellectual
life. Many have pointed out the depoliticizing effects of the so-called “cultural turn” over
the past few decades. Nicky Gregson calls this “the evacuation of the social”; Donald
Mitchell has argued that the cultural emphasis in “postmodern” approaches in humanistic
literatures has rerouted research away from analysis of and intervention in sociopolitical
struggle; and Vivek Chibber accuses strands of post-colonial studies in particular of
refusing to actually engage in class or material analysis. Understanding that a

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52 Foucault, History of Sexuality, 35.
53 Ibid.
“discourse of resistance” exists derives its significance from acknowledging that its use enacts something. In the “appearance of a deliberate transgression,” the celebration of “resistance” reflects on the speaker. “We” talk of resistance everywhere in order to prove that we do not condone censorship or repression – in order to prove that our societies are free – unlike those from which the resistant artists hail – and in order to affirm our own tolerance. The celebration of “dissent” that has pervaded art programming in recent years is an especially rich archive of the confident anxiety around political alternatives where neoliberal power has taken hold. The concert at BAM and the talk at Columbia discussed above are both examples of events showcasing Arab politics, resistance, and dissent. As I have argued here, both depoliticize the artistic subjects they present. Which is to say, enthusiasm for narratives of “resistance” fills in where the debate of political alternatives has abated. The political and racial landscape in which the discourse of resistance is found now deserves further attention. “Neoliberal orientalism” makes specific a particular framework of representation of Arab youth in particular. It is informed by the jockeying for power between players in the Global North and South, in

55 Foucault, History of Sexuality, 6, emphasis added.


57 Another example is the “Creative Dissent: Arts of the Arab World Uprisings” exhibit, curated by Christiane Gruber and Nama Khalil, on display at the Arab American National Museum (Dearborn, Michigan) November 8, 2013 through February 9, 2014.

which contest over control of resources in the Middle East has for some time been a central theatre.

*Neoliberal orientalism*

What can be discerned about the intersecting efforts of the academe, art institutions, and the state department that sustain this “discourse of resistance”? What is the relationship between racial imagination and material dispossession? The discourse of resistance I am identifying around rap in Arabic relies on, indeed is managed by, the convergence of contemporary orientalism and contemporary global capitalism, or neoliberalism. Neoliberal orientalism imagines exoticized others by incorporating, augmenting, and adjusting racial imaginations. It does so as part of a political regime that is built on the expansion of capital between north and south, which expands its material power vis-à-vis dispossession and the dismantling of the services traditionally provided by the state. The discourse of resistance is one kind of knowledge production that sustains this phenomenon.

In choosing the phrase “neoliberal orientalism” to describe what the discourse of resistance serves, I am admittedly slamming two concepts together: one which has been used to discern a contemporary iteration of late capitalism; and one which has been used to deconstruct a racist, colonial mentality projected onto the “East” by the “West.” To readers familiar with Said’s work on Orientalism, it will be clear why Foucault’s work on discursivity has been useful to me up to this point. Said leans on Foucault’s concept of a
discourse to make his case for the existence of orientalism. 59 At the same time, it may seem less clear how Foucault’s work on discourse and the production of knowledge will serve a critique of neoliberalism, especially considering the overtly Marxist vein that runs through what follows. My urge to combine the critique of a particular discourse with a material analysis and critique of neoliberalism into a single, productive phrase comes from frustration with both: Marxist critiques of late capitalism that leave little room for an analysis of racism alongside that of class, 60 as well as post-colonial critiques of “colonized/colonial mentality” that hesitate to recognize the machinations of class and material, institutional power in the perpetuation of racism and discrimination. 61

59 Said writes, “Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it […] I have found it useful here to employ Michel Foucault's notion of a discourse, as described by him in The Archaeology of Knowledge and in Discipline and Punish, to identify Orientalism. My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient...” (Edward Said, Orientalism [New York: Penguin Books, 1977], 3.) Aijaz Ahmad thoroughly critiques what he sees as Said’s sloppy use of Foucault, a critique to which I will return to shortly. (Ahmad, In Theory, 166-167.)

60 Vivek Chibber has suggested a common thread in this postcolonial literature centers on Marx’s notion of “abstract labor” which is seen as “a prime example of the deficiencies of universalizing theories.” (Chibber, Postcolonial Theory, 130. In this passage, he is in particular talking about Dipesh Chakrabarty’s Provincializing Europe [Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2000].) Scholars like Lisa Lowe and David Roediger have argued that Marx’s abstract analysis of social difference is incompatible with the reality of racial difference in the workplace. In other words, Marx’s theory doesn’t explain how racial discrimination effects capital. (Lisa Lowe, Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics [Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1996]; David R. Roediger, How Race Survived US History: From Settlement and Slavery to the Obama Phenomenon [London: Verso, 2008].) Cornell West has also analyzed a trajectory of African American socialist thinkers, whose early deficiencies, he points out, were that they confined their analyses of racism to the workplace. (See West, “Toward a Socialist Theory of Racism,” Chicago Democratic Socialists of America, accessed November 9, 2014, http://www.chicagodsa.org/CornelWest.html.)

61 Said wrote, “[I]n the relationship between the ruler and the ruled in the imperial or colonial or racial sense, race takes precedence over both class and gender.” I do not share this belief of his. If orientalism as a concept or way of understanding the representation of Arab youth on global stages is to be useful, it must be qualified to bring an analysis of material reality – of class at least, though eventually this is indecipherable without also considering gender – on par with that of race. (Said, “Media, Margins, and Modernity: Raymond Williams and Edward Said,” ix; Raymond Williams, The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists [London: Verso, 1989], 196-197.) Others have made this critique of Said (see Ahmad, In Theory, 197), most of which fall in line with the critiques of the “cultural turn” referred to earlier. For example Neil Smith has argued that basic social categories (such as gender, race, and class) have been recast as subjectivities and identities, obscured from the material processes of their construction.
In arguing for and recognizing neoliberal orientalism in the representation of artists, musicians, and performers who are also, predominantly, Arab youth, I attempt to describe the interconnected material and affective frameworks that continue to produce racist representations and unequal opportunities. I also attempt to bring together and respond to critiques of Marxist analyses which accuse the latter of “reducing everything to political economy” and critiques of post-colonial analysis which “blame everything on the West.” It is certain that a compelling analysis must address both race and class (or at least if not class, than material inequality). But how to do this? That is, without essentializing race or class, how can the intersections of material exclusion and racist discrimination be understood? Theorizing “neoliberal orientalism” is my attempt to do this.

“Neoliberal – ”

The debate over the relevance of the term “neoliberalism” in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA Region) has been a heated one. I want to clarify what I mean when I refer to the term in this study and why I find locating “neoliberalism” useful. I understand neoliberal power as characterized by three central features.

First, it does not originate in one part of the globe. It builds its power and extends its flexibility because of a reciprocal relationship it embodies between “north” and “south.” In associating this fluidity with neoliberalism, I position myself in the current debate about the relevance of the term “neoliberalism” to studies of the contemporary

Middle East. I am distancing myself from the argument that “neoliberalism” cannot be used to understand grievances or changes in this region because local particularities trump global trends. This argument, more prevalent in popular usage than in published work, has become considerably less popular since analyses of social movements during Arab Uprisings consistently pointed to shared economic grievances across the region – grievances protesters share with others across the Global South and in the slums and ghettos of the Global North. The argument against the relevance of neoliberalism in the MENA suggests that the region’s economic growth (different sites within it at varying degrees) is primarily being hampered by local corruption, religious conservatism, and autocracy innate to the culture of the region and not global trends in financial capitalism. As Koenraad Bogaert describes, in pre-2011 studies of ruling elites in the MENA region “a misleading subdivision is made and everything that falls under neoliberalism is situated within the realm of economics while the ‘regime’ is situated within the realm of politics.” Like Bogaert, I refuse the bifurcation of “politics” and “economics” – where the former is local, cultural, and historical and the latter informed primarily by the global present. The argument that a blanketing “neoliberalism” like a similarly encompassing “capitalism” should not and cannot be read onto the diverse and different cities of the Global South shares many features in common with post-colonial theory that seeks to establish that the reach of capitalism into Asia in particular in the twentieth and twenty-

62 But it was still current enough in 2013 to send academic roundtables into heated debate. “Neoliberal Urbanizations in the Arab World,” roundtable, organized by Alaa’ Al-Hamarneh. (Middle East Studies Association Annual Conference, October 12, 2013, New Orleans, accessed February 18, 2016, Louisiana.) https://mesana.org/mymesa/meeting_program_session.php?sid=774d7fa6343cb7fd8e13091518e7d3c3.

63 Bogaert, “What Do We Mean When We Talk about Neoliberal Urbanism in the Arab World?” paper presented at “Neoliberal Urbanizations in the Arab World,” https://mesana.org/mymesa/meeting_program_desc.php?pid=ba68cc2f3e303cfdb5f2e2979a888a7, accessed February 18, 2016. (See previous note.)
first century must be understood as wholly distinct from the development of capitalism in Western Europe and the Americas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{64} I want to distance myself from this argument.

My own analysis follows the Marxist critiques coming out of Beirut, Cairo, Mumbai, and elsewhere that underscore a faulty essentialism in these refusals of capital as a framework for understanding power.\textsuperscript{65} I find problematic the idea that capitalism in the “Global South” is \textit{essentially} different from that in the “Global North.” In particular, I reject the hesitancy to identify and analyze neoliberal incursions as such based on the belief that the Global South develops at a different pace than the Global North. Different regions develop differently; but it is in fact the exchange of capital, and indeed the negotiation of it between North and South, that defines the different experiences between neoliberal societies.

Following Stephen Graham, I instead consider that neoliberal incursions in the so-called Global South in fact inform how neoliberal power moves and operates in the Global North.\textsuperscript{66} Neoliberalism thus refers to a configuration (theoretical and practical) of late capitalism that cannot be relegated to the cities of Europe, Japan, or North America.


\textsuperscript{65} Partha Chatterjee’s work is a good example of this trend. I will return to his work later in this chapter. See previous note.

\textsuperscript{66} Graham writes that through “processes of imitation, explicitly colonial models of pacification, militarization and control, honed on the streets of the global South, are spread to the cities of capitalist heartlands in the North. This synergy, between foreign and homeland security operations, is \{a\} … key feature of the new military urbanism.” (Stephen Graham, \textit{Cities Under Siege: The New Military Urbanism} [New York: Verso, 2001], xvi-xvii.)
While Paul Amar has called this reciprocal relationship the “end of neoliberalism,”67 I consider this in fact a most powerful distinguishing feature of neoliberalism. Amar explores how strategies in urban securitization, for example, are tried out in the occupations of Baghdad and Ramallah, and in the favelas of Rio, and then imported to New York or the US-Mexico border.68 In fact, the traversing of the South/North division – the construction of “core” and “periphery” through the increased contact between the two – has been central to how neoliberal ideology and practice has functioned since the first experiments of the so-called Chicago Boys in Chile in the 1970s.69

Secondly, I understand that neoliberal power is characterized by shrinking states and the non-governmental energies developed to fill in this deficit. This may be the result either of policies imposed on countries by creditors (as in the case of Lebanon); by military force (as in Iraq); or by elected representatives (as in Tunisia); or a combination of any of these (as in Egypt).70 That is, neoliberal orientalism appears in starkest relief when states and the services they provide are shrinking and the non-governmental

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67 Amar frames the “end of neoliberalism” as the rise of or increased concentration of facets of “international humanism,” to impose a “moralized” security on unruly publics, via the intersections of non-governmental efforts (which he calls in a most useful formulation, parastatal formations). Focused on specific case studies of Egypt and Brazil, his are uniquely focused analyses of many processes that others have attributed directly to neoliberalism. My assessment is that Amar’s declaration of the “end of” neoliberalism stems from fatigue conjured by the debates around “neoliberalism” in political science and developmentalist circles as opposed to an interest in drawing finite distinctions between the modes of governmentality he discusses and those that are found “in” neoliberalism. (Paul Amar, The Security Archipelago: Human Security States, Sexuality Politics, and the End of Neoliberalism [Durham: Duke UP, 2013].)

68 My examples here are informed by Amar’s work, which looks at patterns of securitization and surveillance in Brazil and Egypt (Amar, The Security Archipelago). See previous note.


organizations (NGOs) that attempt to fill these gaps are proliferating.\textsuperscript{71} A critical consideration of debt at an individual and national level is a central part of understanding this aspect of neoliberalism. Moreover, at the same time that states are downsized at home, they attempt to expand their reach away from home, building a market for contractors, and NGOs.

Stephen Gill has argued that neoliberalism “is an epoch-making order” manifest in part in the “quasi-legal restructuring of state and international political forms.”\textsuperscript{72} My own study shares with his the understanding that neoliberal power is removed from central states and invested more directly into “quasi-constitutional regional arrangements,” the “multilateral regulatory framework of the new World Trade Organization,” and an economy of non-governmental organizations and contractors.\textsuperscript{73} Aiwha Ong has called this effect of neoliberal state formation as “overlapping” or “graduated sovereignties.”\textsuperscript{74} Especially relevant to the exploration I am conducting of neoliberal discursive power is that the state may no longer be either the central conduit of this power or the primary generator of this discourse. Indeed, the wholesale shrinking of the state that many theorists have described in neoliberal economy should not signal the absence of centralized power or the elimination of elite hegemony.\textsuperscript{75} On the contrary, as

\textsuperscript{71} See Koenraad Bogaert, “Contextualizing the Arab Revolts: The Politics Behind Three Decades of Neoliberalism,” \textit{Middle East Critique} 2013: 17-19.


\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{75} In her discussion of the transforming concept of “civil society” in relationship to NGO economies, Sibille Merz points out, “In development policy, the idea of civil society, mostly reduced to NGOs… is closely tied up with the notion of good governance and often equated with political as well as economic
David Harvey has argued, this shrinking of the state has ostensibly only removed the workings of power from public accountability, without significantly restructuring it as more egalitarian. In much of the Arab world, the shriveling of the state under the context of “failed,” “besieged,” and “promised” states has led to the proliferation of NGOs upon which denizens now depend as heavily as they may have on proper social security and other services provided by a traditional nation-state. Neoliberalism in this study also means considering the discourses that an economy of NGOs constructs.

The third and final defining characteristic of neoliberalism that I consider is colonial appropriation. This may be manifest either in outright military or police occupation, or alternatively as settler colonialism. Neoliberalism in the MENA region today is indecipherable from the contest between international and regional powers over the satellite control of resources and governance in the Arab world. The fact that I consider the structure of these colonial interventions to be inherently neoliberal does not pretend to negate the presence of different forms of racism, as I will elaborate in the discussion of “orientalism” below.

Colonial appropriation then, as Timothy Mitchell, Gilbert Achcar, and others have argued, considers the significance of the contest over oil in this region and the continued colonial dimensions therein. Recognizing this is not reducing Arab culture or politics (or resistance!) to the ambitions of multinational oil companies or the imperial behavior

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of the states that facilitate this predatory behavior. Rather, this recognition underscores that the occupation of states like Iraq, resistance against it, and regional dynamics at play in large part around those interests has irreparably affected local dynamics across the Levant, and have done so for nearly a century. Oil has placed the peoples of the Middle East center stage in the post-Cold War theatre. And it has made the region a central pawn in negotiations between the US, China, and Russia as each of these powers jockey for international influence and power. As Achcar has put it, “One can deny that oil is the stake of Western powers’ intervention in the region only at the price of ignoring that stake’s immense economic and strategic importance.”

Achcar, Adam Hanieh, and others even stipulate this is a major driving force behind the unequivocal support of the US for Israel. The investment in, development of, and conflicts over oil in the Middle East are both: the legacy of eighteenth and nineteenth-century colonialism; and the field in which the newest kinds of war and dispossession are tried out. This means that understanding “politics,” even in cultural production like rap concerts, must incorporate analysis of a legacy of orientalism that is both borne of the colonial period and adapting to neoliberal technologies and strategies.

My insistence upon qualifying as “neoliberal” the way power operates in MENA cities also reflects a way of thinking about and historicizing global power and politics, since the “end” of the colonial period after the Second World War. That is, the shift from categories of “first” and “third” worlds for global “North” and “South” not only relates to

78 Achcar, The People Want, 81.

globalizing economic and cultural strategies but also, significantly, relates to the political alliances structuring the post-Cold War landscape. Vijay Prashad recounts how following the Second World War and riding the wave of post-colonial independence struggles, the “Third World” emerged as a political pact and alliance between new states of former colonies. This pact joined to pressure Europe and the US for more representation in the new United Nations. The eventual dominance of terms like Global North/South mark the ultimate failure of the Third World pact to realize its political goals. It also marks the emergence of the UN as a devastatingly unequal representation of global interests.80

These three characteristics structure what I mean by neoliberalism in this study: a reciprocal relationship of power between “north” and “south”; shrinking states and the non-governmental energies developed to fill this deficit; and dispossession.81 Running through these central features are many of the terms and buzzwords of neoliberal critique that have circulated in the last decade. I will discuss specific examples of financialization, privatization, debt and credit, securitization, gentrification, and “Lebanonization” in the case studies that follow, unique as their manifestations are to each city.82

Considering the framework of power, especially vis-à-vis state power which I have just described as neoliberal, is it at all accurate to continue to speak of orientalism? Since the relationship between the US and its allies and the Arab world today does not resemble, in a structural way, the imperial interventions of the French or British of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, or US imperial interests in the same period in the Far East, is Said’s understanding of orientalism as a way of managing colonized populations vis-à-vis “vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, [and] colonial bureaucracy and colonial styles” still relevant?  

I believe that it is, though the term requires adjusting. The adjustment I offer via the term “neoliberal orientalism” serves not only to account for the neoliberal structure of power that has replaced imperial bureaucracy but also to incorporate and accommodate the critiques that have built on and further developed Said’s observations in the years since its initial publication. At its essence, neoliberal orientalism adapts – and limits, actually – Said’s understanding of orientalist discourse to the ways in which I just described neoliberal power as operating.

First, then, neoliberal orientalism acknowledges that the fabrication of denigrating and exoticized representations of “oriental” others is maintained, like neoliberalism’s reciprocity between “north” and “south,” vis-à-vis a reciprocal relationship between

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84 Aijaz Ahmad remarks that Said attaches “orientalism” both to imperial power and to a “European imagination” that reaches back to ancient Greece. I return to this discussion later in this chapter. (Ahmad, *In Theory*, 181.)
“east” and “west.” Neoliberal orientalism is not a product of the “west” alone. By referring to “neoliberal orientalism,” I want to recognize that Arabs themselves are playing a significant role in the perpetuation of orientalist representations, and that there are distinct class elements tied to the ability to “speak for” in this way. In considering this deepening of Said’s concept of orientalism, I recognize that many of the features of the “discourse of resistance” I highlighted during the “Mic Check” event in New York also appear in the presentation of artists in the Arab world.

In arguing for an understanding of orientalism as built reciprocally between “east” and “west” I am building on Lisa Lau’s concept of “re-orientalism.” Lau proposes this idea to describe a process she calls “Orientalism by Orientals,” which she associates most clearly with “diasporic Orientals.” Lau underscores and takes issue with these agents’ “speaking for and representing the Other,” “seizing voice and platform,” and thereby “consign[ing the Oriental] to subalternism.” 85 I take from Lau the emphasis she puts on “orientals” producing orientalism. 86 Departing from her work, however, I am again convinced this type of orientalizing energy has less to do with the location (diasporic nature) of these individuals as it does with their access to capital. In these Arab cities with which I am concerned, I find that re-orientalism is much more closely related to class than location of residence. Of course, there are considerable overlaps between the


86 Edward Said stated that it was never his intention with Orientalism to further reify “East” and “West.” That is, it was not his intention to mark that only Westerners can produce orientalist discourse. That kind of thinking, he writes, “adds to the sense of fixed identities battling across a permanent divide that my book quite specifically abjures.” (Said, Orientalism, 336.) His critics, even sympathetic ones, have remarked that this has nonetheless been an effect, despite Said’s intention, of the use of his theory.
two, but the tendency to “speak for” so central in Said’s articulation of orientalism is much more widespread within educated and monied classes, wherever they live, than it is among diasporic populations in general, which are comprised of a fantastic range of political ideas, access to capital, relation to their countrymen and women, and cities or countries of origin. As Hamid Dabashi has argued, “In an increasingly amorphous and boundary-less world, it no longer requires us to divide intellectuals along a fictitious center-periphery axis.” Considerations of exchanges of and access to capital are more relevant than location for understanding how both neoliberalism and orientalism operate.

Building off this idea of fluidity between zones of “East” and “West,” the most important adjustment in my use of orientalism is that it is based on an understanding of exchange and interaction, not of encounter. Said’s understanding of orientalism depends on the notion that the “West” encountered the “East” and through this encounter, developed the discursive means to manage and produce the Orient. Said’s framework denies, as Tarek el-Ariss and Nabil Matar (among others) have powerfully demonstrated, a rich history of transfer and exchange from the other direction: that is, of Arabs

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87 In establishing what he meant by orientalist discourse, Said famously takes the example of Gustav Flaubert writing about the Egyptian courtesan Kuchuk Hanem. Said writes, “…she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she was ‘typically Oriental.’” (Said, Orientalism, 6, original emphasis in italics, added emphasis underscored.)

88 Lau’s formulation “diasporic Orientals” ignores the consideration of class. She refers to a few diasporic authors, highly educated individuals with access to various kinds of capital. Impecunious refugees in exile, to conjure only the most obvious counterpoint, frequently do not have the opportunity to perform the characteristics of “speaking for” she associates with the “diaspora” in general.

89 In Brown Skin, White Masks, Hamid Dabashi refers to Joseph Massad’s writing on shifts in the Palestinian intelligentsia post 1967. Massad denounces those intellectuals in and out of Palestine, within or without 1948 or 1967 borders, or in the diaspora, who “traded in their national liberation goals for pro-Western pragmatism.” Dabashi concludes his discussion of Massad’s history by writing, “the category [of this kind of intellectual] can become perfectly color-blind, because capital and its changing ideologies are ultimately color-blind.” (Hamid Dabashi, Brown Skin, White Masks [New York: Pluto Press, 2011], 45.)
“encountering” the West and the knowledge they produced.\textsuperscript{90} For an understanding of “orientalism” to be productive today, it requires allowing for what Steven Salaita has called the “interaction of Arabism and Americana”\textsuperscript{91} – that is, paying attention to how an Arab community in the US (or in France, Germany, Belgium or elsewhere) “facilitate[s, or] indeed, inspire[s]”\textsuperscript{92} representations of Arabs on a globalized stage.

For orientalism to be useful it also needs to be able to reflect a more complicated and interdependent set of racial dynamics than the ones Said accounts for. This is especially important in my own study because any discussion of hip hop and power, considering the genre’s history in the US, is already racially charged. Contextually, acknowledging the shift from Said’s colonial encounter to the neoliberal exchange means accounting for how realities of immigration have effected the shape of inner city life in Europe and the US and how these are actively informing perceptions about the Arab world.

Moreover, I recognize that the existence and the treatment of increasing numbers of Arabs and Muslims in growing cities in the US and Europe over the past several decades accounts for changes in the styles and types of orientalist representation of Arabs. This interaction between “Arabism and Americana” influences the texture of orientalism today. Further, I am deciding to continue to speak of orientalism despite a clear trend in critical discussions of representations of Arabs in recent years to speak instead of either racism or Islamophobia. I opt to consider “neoliberal orientalism” and


\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 246.
not “neoliberal racism” or “neoliberal Islamophobia” primarily because of a positive as opposed to negative tone in much of the discourse I critique in this study. While Islamophobic discourse is almost always negative, orientalism – especially the neoliberal orientalism I am arguing structures the discourse of resistance I take issue with here – is more often than not couched in positive, enthusiastic, even celebratory language. If the ubiquitous celebration of Arab rap as “cultural resistance” is problematic, it is not so because the orientalizing speaker denigrates or intentionally degrades, but because she elevates and exoticizes. This formula, which Said also identified in orientalism, remains central in a discussion of neoliberal orientalism. Ultimately, while Islamophobia can raise its head in the discourse I suggest is structured by neoliberal orientalism, the history and context of its use are not particularly suited to the problems I am considering here.93

93 One primary difficulty in adapting the discourse of Islamophobia to the discourse of resistance in cultural production in the cities of Ramallah, Amman, and Beirut is the fact that this term has developed in large part to address the experience of Middle Eastern and South Asian immigrants to Europe. Most of this discussion has centered on the experiences of Muslim immigrants (from south Asia, Africa, and the Middle East) to England (in particular) and to varying degrees in France, Germany, Belgium, and northern Europe, in addition to the US. (See Salaita, “Beyond Orientalism.”) This history has produced a range of meanings for Islamophobia, from antipathy towards brown-skinned and Asian immigrants (regardless of religion); fear of religion in the public sphere; and anxiety about terrorism (see Fred Halliday, “Islamophobia Reconsidered,” Ethnic and Racial Studies 22[1999]: 892-902). Tariq Modood has pointed out, “Islamophobia” may be closer to “cultural racism” than religious intolerance (Tariq Modood, “Introduction: the Politics of Multiculturalism in the New Europe,” in The Politics of Multiculturalism in the New Europe: Racism, Identity, and Community, P. Werbner and T. Modood, eds. [London: Zed Books, 1997], 1-26). Vincent Greisser has productively suggested that Islamophobia may have less to do with Islam itself and may be more explicitly connected to an anxiety about the presence of religion in public, what he calls “religiophobia” (Greisser, La Nouvelle Islamophobie, [Paris: La Découverte, 2003], 12). These characteristics also describe some tendencies in NGO discourse. For example, Sibille Merz has discussed how, in the context of the post-Oslo West Bank, NGOs are encouraged by international funders to engage a language of peace and cooperation and to drop considerations of struggle, resistance or intifada [uprising, struggle] against the Israeli occupation (Merz, “Missionaries of the New Era,” 56). This has resulted in, among other things, the proliferation of a discourse that completely eschews, if it does not deny outright, local religious considerations. The refusal, in a post-Intifada landscape, to engage the major, grassroots, and Muslim players may in part be understood as trepidation about Islam in politics. The elements of this fear are the perceived connection of Islam with terrorism and of Muslims with violence, especially in the wake of the suicide bombings and other violence associated with Palestinians during the Second Intifada. Elements of Islamophobia do circulate in NGO discourse that I refer to in neoliberal orientalism; however I ultimately consider they are not central.
I am interested, as Said was, in recognizing a systemic way of representing the Arab world that makes Arabs objects of desire and the places they call home exotic spaces of experimentation. My adjustment comes from acknowledging that this imagination today comes from a more complex dynamic of overlapping racisms and of intercultural exchange. This means in part considering, as Mustafa Bayoumi has identified, a certain slippage between mainstream perceptions about marginalized communities, especially between African American and Arab American ones. It also means considering, as Hisham Aidi has established, how institutions and the US State have deliberately used perceptions about African American experiences in order to reach Arab youth. This adjustment to orientalism I propose provides the space to consider, for example, how blackwashing functions within a framework of representing and understanding the Arab world.

The third adjustment I propose stems from considering theoretical reproaches of Said’s construction of the concept of Orientalism. One of the most compelling critiques Aijaz Ahmad offers of Said is what he calls “the form of Foucault’s resurfacing in Said’s thought.” In this, Ahmad pushes the literary scholar on his use of “discourse,” questioning where orientalism comes from, or what kind of ideology we should understand it is attached to. Ahmad points out that Said ties his concept of “orientalism” to post-Enlightenment Europe, where “Orientalism appears to be an ideological corollary of colonialism.” At the same time, Ahmad notes, Said locates the origins of Western ideas about the Orient – what Said calls “the European imagination” – in ancient

94 Ahmad, In Theory, 165.

95 Ibid., 181.
Greece. Said uses this thousand-plus-year gap to argue that the strength of “the codes of Orientalist orthodoxy” is derived from their development over hundreds, not tens, of years. Said writes, “To say simply that orientalism was a rationalization of colonial rule is to ignore the extent to which colonial rule was justified in advance by Orientalism, rather than after the fact.” Ahmad takes reasoned issue with Said’s insinuation that a single through-line runs through “Western” imagination from Aeschylus to Flaubert, pointing to a discourse that has only intensified and condensed over time. Ahmad rightly denounces this as Said’s clumsy use of Foucault. Ahmad writes, “The idea that there could be a discourse – that is to say, an epistemic construction – traversing the whole breadth of ‘Western’ history and textualities, spanning not only the modern capitalist period but all the preceding pre-capitalist periods as well, is not only an un-Marxist but also a radically un-Foucauldian idea.”

The implications of this critique on the usefulness of Said’s notion of Orientalism need to be considered, all the more so because I have positioned the usefulness of a “discourse” (of resistance, that is fueled by neoliberal orientalism) centrally in my elaborations here. In using the phrase “neoliberal orientalism” I do not envision a further intensification of the racial imagination Said invokes. There is no single racial imagination in the “West” distinct from that in an “East” that can be traced from the defeat of Xerxes through to the occupation of Baghdad by US-led forces. I concur with Ahmad that this is a soundly essentialist notion that has little use in a material analysis of

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97 Ibid., 39.
98 Ahmad, *In Theory*, 166.
forces of oppression in the Middle East today. Neoliberal orientalism is not meant to indicate an intensification of colonial orientalism.99

It is meant to address how the shape of neoliberalism structures the contours of orientalist representations of the Arab world and its subjects. The world is much too fluid today to productively be split into sealed zones of “east” and “west.” That is, like Hamid Dabashi and Gayatri Spivak, I also am concerned with the tendency in Said’s articulation of orientalism to conjure “victims” and “oppressors” based on their location in the world or their ethnic identity.100 Neoliberal orientalism, as I structure it in this study, also considers the orientalising work within the Arab world by Arabs themselves as they try to enter globalized markets and international opportunities. The imperial context of the nineteenth century has changed considerably and as such, neoliberal orientalism as I’ve articulated here accounts for active reciprocity between “core” and “periphery,” challenging the validity of these concepts. By qualifying this orientalism as neoliberal, I also point to shifts from colonial bureaucracy to economies built on a coordination of for-profit interests and the NGO sector. Finally, I consider orientalism in this study to build on overlapping racial imaginations that rely on a neoliberal economy of exchange as opposed to a colonial logic of encounter.

99 Said writes, “… as one surveys Orientalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the overriding impression is of Orientalism’s insensitive schematization of the entire Orient. How early this schematization began is clear from the examples I have given of Western representations of the Orient in classical Greece. How strongly articulated were later representations building on the earlier ones, how inordinately careful their schematization, how dramatically effective their place in Western imaginative geography…” (Said, Orientalism, 68).

100 Dabashi is concerned in particular with the problem of oriental agency in light of Said’s construction of orientalism as the west always “speaking for” the East. (Dabashi, Post-Orientalism: Knowledge and Power in Time of Terror [New York: Transaction Publishers, 2008].)
The final critique of orientalism I must address revolves around the question of agency. Many astute critiques of Said accuse him of writing off “Oriental” populations as forever oppressed, without agency. Said attempted to respond to this accusation with what was in many ways a sequel to *Orientalism*, his *Culture and Imperialism*. Understanding my hesitations about the question of agency, looking for it, finding it, and then celebrating its presence, requires a theoretical detour. I turn to this in the next section.

### Part Two: Resistance and Politics

If the “discourse of resistance” is different from whatever political strategies individuals or communities employ, it is also not necessarily confined to instances where the word “resistance” itself is invoked. I have chosen the term “resistance” because of the frequency of its use, as pointed to above, and to which I return shortly. As I identified in the BAM example, the “discourse of resistance” is a way of pointing to a phenomenon I see at play when a number of words and concepts – “political,” “revolt,” “revolution,” “change,” “defiant,” “radical,” “rebel,” among others – are invoked. That being said, it is important to qualify that the “discourse of resistance” I identify is not the same as a history of ideas and debates about how to challenge power, many of which have been conceptualized as revolution, rebellion, and radical politics. The productivity of the

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“discourse of resistance” is directly attached to neoliberalism, and has emerged primarily since the latter has taken hold as a political and economic ideology.

In different centuries, and from every corner of the globe, theorizations of rebellion and revolution have addressed when and how uprisings should take place, under what conditions they are sanctioned, who is permitted to carry them out, and the possible effects of these changes, should they effectively be enacted. My ultimate concern with the “discourse of resistance” that I identify, and the reason I spend so much time in this chapter locating it, is because I fear it distances the subjects and contexts in which it is found from those radical theorizations. In my case studies, I explore how musicians and their audiences invert and deconstruct ideas of thawra [revolution], mouqawameh [resistance], ijthad [reasoned struggle], tamarod [rebellion], sabr [patience], sumoud [resilience], wataniyya [nationalism], and others. But before turning to these, I first want to explore how the neoliberal “discourse of resistance” I am identifying works. How does the depoliticization I identify happen? This theoretical exploration will help to guide my exploration of the concepts just mentioned in subsequent chapters, so as to not repeat the same mistakes that I identify as intrinsic to the “discourse of resistance.” I spend the rest of this chapter arguing that the discourse of resistance works by relying on a limited framework of recognizing and representing political action. These actions are in turn tied to a specific theorization of subjectivity, and with it, agency; a theorization which is necessarily reflected in the status quo. I turn to Hannah Arendt to begin this discussion.
Political activity

“Wherever you go, you will be a polis.” ~ Ancient Greek saying\(^\text{102}\)

In *The Human Condition* (1958), Hannah Arendt relegates politics to a space she calls the polis. She describes the polis as “the space of appearance.”\(^\text{103}\) Her conceptualization of political activity in the polis is the seed both of Arendt’s original contribution to political thought and the source of the most compelling critiques of it.\(^\text{104}\) In exploring Arendt’s definition of political activity in this section, I am not endorsing all the possible implications of her theory. I am, however, suggesting that Arendt’s theorizations of politics (political activity in the polis) can be used to illuminate the tendency to speak of “resistance” as representative of agency, if not incumbent on it.

The Greek word *polis* means city, or city-state. Arendt uses it as Aristotle and Plato did, to elaborate an ideal political community. She writes, “The *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be.”\(^\text{105}\) As both Plato and Aristotle, despite their differences, considered the members of the polis as removed from more worldly considerations, so too does Arendt separate the realm of politics from other human activity. That is, the first claim Arendt makes about political activity is that it is


\(^{103}\) Ibid.

\(^{104}\) I return to these critiques later in this chapter.

removed and different from the other spheres of human behavior.

Arendt’s theorization of political activity is thus based in her differentiation and separation of fields of human experience. Three categories – labor, work, and action – divide the activities of human beings by their function. Labor is the activity required to maintain life. Work is the activity that produces products for trade or sale – what enter human beings into worldliness. And political action is what happens in the polis – it is speech and action seen and heard by others. Political action performs the plurality intrinsic to the human condition.

Most critiques of Arendt take issue with her definition of the polis as a sphere removed from other aspects of human life. For example, in recognizing activity in the polis as distinct from that which is required to sustain life, Jacques Rancière accuses Arendt of expressing “the will to preserve the realm of pure politics.” He is concerned that Arendt perpetuates as apolitical, as incapable of politics, those whose lives are consumed with the labor of living, whose efforts are largely consumed by the sphere of activity she defines as labor. For Rancière, these categories of behavior endorse unequal categorization of political actors. Indeed, Rancière’s critique will prove salient in the next subsection, when I follow Arendt’s idea of activity to its corollary, agency.

Arendt’s separation of work, labor, and action is rooted in a critique and a proposition. The critique she makes is of the rise of the significance in “modern” political

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philosophy\textsuperscript{108} of “labor” as the intrinsically human activity.\textsuperscript{109} That is, she takes issue with the dominance of homo faber – or, the idea that what makes human beings human is that they can produce things, in political thought. Arendt critiques this notion and in its place she proposes something else. For Arendt, what makes human beings unique (what defines the human condition) is not their ability to labor nor to work, but their ability to carry out action. It is political activity that defines human beings as human beings. This is so because political activity affirms the plurality of the human experience – the condition of being among others. Through political activity, individuals recognize similarity among fellow men and women and distinguish themselves as individuals. This recognition and this distinction reflect the human condition of plurality, and they are enacted in the polis. Arendt suggests that the essential thing to understand about the human condition is not that the human being labors, nor that she works, but that her life is lived in the plural, among others.

The significance of this idea to my own study, and my elaborations in this chapter of how a discourse of resistance operates, lies in in the way in which Arendt ties plurality to an idea of politics. Her attention to plurality in the polis, via actions that are seen and heard by others, constructs a representative schema for politics. This is a useful tool for understanding how the discourse of resistance limits “resistant” subjects and the theorist who takes them on. To understand how Arendt’s work can help illuminate this, I consider more carefully Arendt’s distinctions of the three fields of human activity.

Arendt comes to the conclusion that it is action that defines the human condition

\textsuperscript{108} Basically Locke through Marx; in contradistinction to “classical” philosophy. Arendt, The Human Condition, 1-6.

\textsuperscript{109} I put “labor” in quotation marks here to distinguish it from one of the three spheres of activity that Arendt suggests.
after deliberating the difference between work and labor; a distinction she says has been ignored by modern philosophy.\footnote{She takes particular issue with the concept of “labor” in Marx’s work, see note 115.} Labor is the energy required to sustain life: what Locke called the “labor of the body.” This is in contradistinction to the “work of our hands.”\footnote{John Locke, Second Treatise of Civil Government, Chapter 5, Section 27. Qtd. in Arendt, The Human Condition, 79.} That there is a difference between the two, Arendt suggests, can be proven in the contrast between different words delineating ideas of work and labor.\footnote{Note the difference, Arendt suggests, in Latin between laborare and facere; in French between travailler and ouvrer; and in German between arbeiten and werken.} Arendt suggests that this difference has been interpreted in the development of the distinction between productive and unproductive labor; between skilled and unskilled labor; and even between intellectual and manual labor.\footnote{Arendt, The Human Condition, 79-81.} The development of the distinction between productive and unproductive labor in particular contains the “fundamental division between work and labor.”\footnote{Ibid., 87.} This distinction is found in the fact that the former consists of the fabrication of products, and the latter leaves nothing behind. The efforts of labor are completely consumed by living, while the efforts of work may be brought to market, bought and sold, or abandoned to decay. While the unique nature of laboring led Marx to conclude (according to Arendt) that human beings are essentially \textit{animal laborans};\footnote{Marx thought that labor produced a productivity of its own, a surplus value he calls labor power, namely the production of life. Arendt summarizes, “Unlike the productivity of work, which adds new objects to the human artifice, the productivity of labor power produces objects only incidentally and is primarily concerned with the means of its own production; since its power is not exhausted when its own reproduction has been secured, it can be used for more than one life process, but it never “produces” anything but life.” (Ibid., 88.) In his own words, Marx writes, “Given the individual, the production of labor-power consists in his reproduction of himself or his maintenance. For his maintenance he requires a given quantity of the means of subsistence. Therefore the labor-time requisite for the production of labor-power reduces itself to that necessary for the production of those means of subsistence; in other words, the}
was the unique nature of work that led others to propose *homo faber*, or the fact that our species can produce objects, as our quintessential essence.

Arendt looks at both of these frameworks and remarks that the tools and products of both these activities dissipate. The tools upon which human beings labor in order to sustain life – their own bodies – as well as the products human beings produce through work – the carpenter’s chair, or the farmer’s crops – all are ultimately negatively affected by our use of them. They wear out through consumption. But this is not so, Arendt suggests, for the “human artifice” itself. The sphere of action, what takes place in the polis, has a unique kind of durability. Speech and action are not consumed, even if they are affected by generation upon generation of human activity. As long as speech and action take place in the polis, they endure. This is the distinction between the spheres of labor and work and the sphere of action. Human actions recognized in the polis have a kind of durability not seen in the other spheres of human activity. Here it is worth quoting Arendt at length:

Distinguished from both consumer goods and use objects, there are finally the ‘products’ of action and speech, which together constitute the fabric of human relationships and affairs. Left to themselves, they lack not only the tangibility of other things, but are even less durable and more futile than what we produce for consumption. Their reality depends entirely upon human plurality, upon the constant presence of others who can see and

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The critique Arendt makes of Marx lies in her assertion that in his conceptualization of labor power, Marx conflated labor with work. Throughout Marx’s thought, Arendt suggests that “labor is endowed… with certain faculties which only work possesses.” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 102). She suggests that Marx conceived of labor as a process that has a productivity of its own, “no matter how furtive and non-durable its products may be.” (Ibid., 88.) The problem Arendt saw with this model is that Marx’s revolution proposed not emancipating the laboring classes but emancipating man from labor. This creates a paradox for Arendt. “The fact remains that in all states of [Marx’s] work, he defines man as an *animal laborans* and then leads him into a society in which this greatest and most human power is no longer necessary. We are left with the rather distressing alternative between productive slavery and unproductive freedom.” (Ibid., 105.)
hear and therefore testify to their existence...They themselves [action and speech] do not ‘produce,’ bring forth anything, they are as futile as life itself. In order to become worldly things, that is, deeds and facts and events and patters of thoughts or ideas, they must first be seen, heard, and remembered and then transformed, reified as it were, into things – into sayings of poetry, the written page or the printed book, into paintings or sculpture, into all sorts of records, documents, or monuments.  

Herein lies the essence of the schema of representation that can be found in Arendt’s conceptualization of politics. What distinguishes speech and action from labor and work is the sustenance that is maintained by their representation. Arendt does not argue that the intentions of political agents are sustained through actions once initiated or that the fallout of speech once uttered can necessarily be predicted or prescribed. What she does argue, what she insists upon actually, is that the significance of speech and action lies in the fact that others perceive and recognize them. To exist at all, political activity must be seen and heard by others. This is essentially an understanding of a representative schema of politics. Certain behaviors indicate the presence of politics and of political agents. Significantly, these behaviors don’t produce politics; they signal the arrival of political subjects to others. Through speech and action, political subjects emerge, and the “space of appearance” of the polis is the stage on which they do so.

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116 Ibid., 95.

117 Arendt does not broach the issue of Austinian performativity. That is, she does not seem concerned with what saying things does (She says, “They themselves [action and speech] do not ‘produce,’ bring forth anything, they are as futile” [ibid.]). Though in another sense, she does clearly recognize that speech and action are performative when she says they [speech and action] “signal a second birth,” as in: they bring into being political life, even if she does not define them as such. Her emphasis again is more on the reception and recognition of speech and action, what others do with them, in turn. It is important to remember that throughout this discussion, Arendt is making a case for plurality as the “human condition.” That is, being with others in the polis is what is essentially human and what makes politics possible: because others recognize, reify, and transform speech and action.

118 Again, this recognition implies that this speech and action will be remembered, and ultimately transformed. Arendt is keen to underscore that agents do not have control over the reverberations of their actions once performed.
I want to suggest that Arendt’s theory of the polis can be used to deconstruct how attributing “resistance” to marginalized actors functions. That is, it is a useful way to understand how looking for and finding resistance attributes agency to certain individuals while implicitly denying it to others. The discourse of resistance essentially consists of building a polis around given subjects, creating an audience that is able to see and hear their actions. The discourse of resistance recognizes and interprets political activities and in so doing attributes agency to given subjects. Some examples will illustrate how the narrating process of “resistance’ builds a polis around specific political actors. The examples I use here are referred to widely in the literature on both politics and cultural production in the Arab world.

*Example: the Birmingham School and “symbolic resistance” in subcultural study*¹¹⁹

Subjects of subcultural study (a significant subgenre of the boom in “resistance studies” referred to above) have traditionally been populations seen to be manifestly unproductive. Indeed the location of the “sub” in subcultural populations is necessarily tied to an idea that the subjects involved are removed, or somehow “below” normative society. In his historical overview of subcultural studies from the eighteenth century through the twentieth, Ken Gelder begins by defining what a “subculture” is. He suggests that, “Subcultures are always in some way non-conforming or dissenting,” and then

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¹¹⁹ A good historicization of how the Birmingham school effected Arab cultural studies, especially vis-à-vis Palestinian cultural studies can be found in Rebecca Stein and Ted Swedenburg’s introduction to the volume they edited *Palestine, Israel, and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Stein and Swedenburg, “Popular Culture, Transnationality, and Radical History,” in *Palestine, Israel, and the Politics of Popular Culture* [Durham: Duke UP, 2005], 1-26.)
suggests six key ways “in which subcultures have been generally understood.”\textsuperscript{120} The first of these identifying characteristics is the “negative relation [of its members] to work.”\textsuperscript{121} He points to Henry Mayhew’s \textit{Those Who Will Not Work} as a foundational text in the field.\textsuperscript{122} Gelder is concerned to point out that a primary, shared characteristic of subcultures is that they are perceived to be “‘idle’, ‘parasitical,’ hedonistic, criminal, etc.”\textsuperscript{123}

For Gelder, this negative relationship to the mainstream is what initially defines a subculture. The perceived distance from “productive labor” in the qualification of “delinquency” or “degeneracy” in subcultures is most significant in the sense of a perception of social alienation. This can be seen in the other characteristics of subcultures that Gelder identifies, such as an “ambivalent relationship to class” and “movement away from home into non-domestic forms of belonging.”\textsuperscript{124} That is, what defines a subculture is not primarily unemployment but alien forms of sociality – different ways that individuals identify with and distinguish themselves from others.

We might see this social alienation as an alienation from the sphere of action. “Delinquents” do not perform activities fit to be seen and heard by others. Their “degenerate” behavior, in dark alleys, and at odd hours, only proves their unfit nature for engaging with others in the polis. Significantly, subcultural studies, even before the Birmingham School, to which specific case I am arriving, almost uniformly seek to recast

\textsuperscript{120} Ken Gelder, \textit{Subcultures: Cultural Histories and Social Practice} (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), front matter.

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{123} Gelder, \textit{Subcultures}, front matter.

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.
the subjects of their study in brighter light. That is, the outside perception of the subjects of study as in one way or another “delinquent” or “degenerate” is frequently cast as a foil in this literature, which the researcher proceeds to counter. When researchers take communities that are perceived to be “idle” or “parasitic” as their subject, their concern – almost categorically – is to recast their behavior in a positive light. It is to reinterpret this behavior as productive, social, and meaningful.

Gelder suggests that subcultures are a “matter of narration.” And he also suggests that understanding subcultures consists of understanding how each of these social groupings “creates its own geography,” that is, how individuals imagine “a set of places or sites… through which [they] gain cohesion and identity.” Applying Arendt’s political theory as a way to deconstruct this gesture, we might say that this process in subcultural study consists of building a polis around subcultural agents. That is, the researcher attends to an audience that sees or hears the actions of these marginalized individuals. In this way, significance and meaning is restored to behavior the subcultural theorist suggests is misunderstood.

In recent decades under the profound influence of cultural studies theorists like Stuart Hall and Dick Hebdige, the trend has been to attribute significance or meaning by framing subcultural activity even more explicitly as “resistance.” In the tradition of some theory coming out of Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies at the university of Birmingham (CSSS), the work of the sociologist is frequently then one of a decoder that translates the seemingly unproductive into active choices that are symbolically resistant. For example, “style,” especially in Dick Hebdige’s work, became a way in which

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125 “Every subculture – every social group, large or small, which can be considered in some way subcultural – carries a set of narratives about itself, some of which are generated internally while others, usually more visible and pervasive, are developed and deployed in and by the society around it.” (Ibid., 2.)
political activity is enacted by subcultural participants. Sartorial choices, hairstyles, piercings, and tattoos transform working-class youth into individuals rallying against late twentieth century capitalism, nostalgic for the working-class *communitas* of his parents’ and grandparents’ generation. In Tony Jefferson and Stuart Hall’s work, activity that articulates a powerful “symbolic resistance,” permits these youth a political life otherwise ignored by parents, teachers, and the upwardly mobile middle classes. Whether or not a specific critique or sentiment of resistance existed before the stylistic choices appear is not something these theorists explored. Nonetheless, the ready presence of “resistance” is readily attested to, whether the subjects of study were mods, teddy-boys, punks, or in later studies influenced by this approach, hip hop heads, ravers, or world music fans.

Indeed, Stanley Cohen has argued that the “constant impulse [in sociological studies following the Birmingham tradition] is to decode the style in terms only of opposition and resistance.” It is the relegation of “resistance” to the appearance of recognizable activity that signals to me a representative schema of politics.


127 Stanley Cohen, in his *Symbols of Trouble* (1980) catalogs the proliferation of terms used to invoke this “symbolic resistance.” He writes, critiquing this approach: “Whether the objects for decoding are Teddy Boys, Mods and Rockers, Skinheads or Punks, two dominant themes are suggested: first that style—whatever else it is—is essentially a type of *resistance* to subordination; secondly, that the form taken by this resistance is somehow *symbolic* or *magical*, in the sense of not being an actual, successful solution to whatever is the problem… Sociologically more opaque than this notion of resistance is the reciprocal idea that this process (whether conceived as defense, re-working, re-assertion or whatever) is somehow a symbolic one. Again it is instructive to list the actual words used to convey this meaning: ritualistic; imaginary; mythical; fantastic; metaphorical; magical; allegorical; ideological…” (Stanley Cohen, “Symbols of Trouble,” reprinted in *The Subcultures Reader*, eds. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton [London: Routledge, 1997], 161.)


129 Cohen, “Symbols of Trouble,” 163, original emphasis.
The deliberations, hesitations, and feelings that lead a teenager to shave her head are ignored for the spectacular action itself. These are the deliberations I am interested in, but these cannot appear in this kind of discussion of resistance. In the search for “symbolic resistance,” spectacular activity is the primary evidence. Gang fights; spiked hair; even the seemingly banal is nevertheless still spectacular in its distinction from normative behavior. The best example of the latter is perhaps sociologist Paul Corrigan’s essay “Doing Nothing.” In this essay, he explores the “intense activity which is found” in Sunderland street-corner culture.\(^\text{130}\) Corrigan argues that activity that is seen by parents and teachers as a waste of time is actually teaming with activity. Readers of Corrigan’s study learn that the major elements of “doing nothing” are in fact talking and fighting – or, Arendt’s markers of political activity par excellence! Corrigan looked for and found speech and action. Through that speech and action, he narrates a significance he calls “resistance.”

That this gesture, in Corrigan’s study, of recasting the behavior of these young men is a (re)narration of specific activities should be clear. Corrigan takes street-corner loitering and turns it into working-class resistance. This is a good example of the narrating that Gelder attests is central to subcultural literature. We could also see it as a good example of the “remembering and transformation” Arendt suggests is intrinsic to political action in the polis. That is, by recognizing the activities of working-class Sunderland youth, Corrigan constructs a polis around them, an audience that sees and hears these agents. He narrates and commemorates their actions as political subjects, giving those activities new meaning.

\(^{130}\) Hall and Jefferson, editors’ introduction to Paul Corrigan, “Doing Nothing” in Resistance Through Rituals, 103, emphasis added.
Pointing to the construction of a polis is another way of referring to the erected context within which agents are found. But it is more than that. The contours of the polis literally dictate what agency looks like. In a qualification about what constitutes the polis, Arendt quotes an ancient Greek saying: “Wherever you go, you will be a polis.” She suggests that this “watchword of Greek colonization” reflects the Greek belief that the relationship between citizens in the polis could be created anywhere. This Ancient Greek truism is an assertion of the perceived universality of the human condition of plurality. However, as a colonial ideology imposes itself onto a people, so does the search for a polis – in my case, the search for resistance – structure knowledge about marginalized populations. It is not that a more astute perception, looking more closely, will allow one to see more real and more radical “resistance.” What I want to argue that as long as one looks for resistance, one recreates this imposition of the polis.

This is because the theoretical gesture I am discussing – wherein the polis functions as a “space of appearance” confines an analysis of politics to the appearance of political subjects. The appearance of resistance restricts the discussion to the recognizable activities of individuals. It consists of, as Arendt suggests, attributing glory to heroic actors. In subcultural literature, the attribution of “resistance” to subcultural actors is an assertion about the presence of agency within a given community. As I will explore shortly, a similar gesture is at play in so-called subaltern studies. At best, this gesture has the power to expand the polis. This could mean extending the possibility of enacting political activity to greater numbers of people. This is significant. Ultimately however, I find the political reach of this gesture limited. The ways in which this agency is located means that it must always be found as distinct from individuals without it. To
explore this further we need to return to Arendt and to the relationship between political activity and the agents who can carry it out.

Political life

“Action without a name, a ‘who’ attached to it, is meaningless.”¹³¹

In order to further understand how political activity resonates, Arendt’s definition of politics requires interrogating the relationship between political activity and the subjects capable of executing it. For Arendt, it is not political activity alone that has political meaning. “Action without a name, a ‘who’ attached to it,” she suggests, “is meaningless.”¹³² This is a crucial point in her definition of politics. When an individual performs a recognizable action, she proves that she has agency – the ability to act. Arendt suggests that enacting political activity performs a “second birth,” that of the political subject.¹³³ Speech and action that is seen and heard by others have an “agent-revealing capacity.”¹³⁴ When we speak of agency, in other words, we have attached the dimension of a subject to (political) activity. This relationship is presupposed by the human condition of plurality. The collectivity of the polis is significant because it is required for the recognition and narration of subjects who perform political actions.

Here we must consider the critical assessments of Arendt that I pointed to in the beginning of this discussion of her work and to which I promised I would return. The un-


¹³² Ibid., 180-181.

¹³³ Ibid., 176.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 182.
ignorable critique of Arendt is that her formulation of politics perpetuates a sort of elitist view of political subjectivity. Because she separates work from labor and action from both of these, she is accused of denying agency to those whose lives are consumed with laboring or with work. This recognition of the cleavage Arendt proposes between activities, and with it subjects – some of which (and whom) are political, and some of which (whom) are not – informs the critique I am working to provide of how the discourse of resistance problematically projects passivity and assumes silence on the part of the subjects for which it attempts to speak.

Writing in the early 2000s, almost fifty years after the publication of The Human Condition, Jacques Rancière questions the separation Arendt proposed between public, political space, and private, unpoliticized space. Rancière was writing in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of humanitarian intervention in the name of human rights. The discussion of “human rights” and how they are being used in international politics leads him to a discussion of the rights of the “citizen” versus the rights of “man.” I am interested in Rancière’s attempt to “reset the question of the subject of the Rights of Man,” and with it resetting the subject of politics.

Rancière suggests that Arendt’s political theory is useful in understanding the problematic dynamics in a period expected to be “a peaceful posthistorical world” that has nevertheless seen an unprecedented proliferation of violence on a global stage. The problem for Rancière is that violations of “human rights” have become the excuse by

135 Rancière, “Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?”
136 Ibid., 302.
137 Ibid., 297.
which colonial and imperial intervention have continued. Rancière suggests it is through a conceptualization of human rights as “the rights of the victims,” rights which must be defended by others.\(^{138}\) Human rights are the ones invoked by the plight of those who have no state or other body to whom they can appeal. Rancière follows Arendt’s argument that the “rights of man” are not the “rights of the citizen”; a citizen can appeal to her state for redress of grievances. In contrast to the citizen, the refugee and the exile have no body from which to claim or to which to petition her rights. Hers are the rights of “man.” Rancière suggests that these rights are held up and defended by others, through which maudlin exercise “humanitarian interference” is invoked as essentially the right to invade.\(^{139}\) Rancière accuses Arendt of providing the theoretical basis through which this cleavage – this separation of “man” from “citizen” is possible. He suggests that Arendt envisioned “the public sphere [ie the polis] as a separate sphere, removed from the realm of necessity.”\(^{140}\) In the latter, life is trapped in “idiocy” or brute necessity and is incapable of public action.\(^{141}\) Outside the polis, neither actions nor life are political.

I am not sure the perpetuation of a “realm of pure politics” was Arendt’s intent – her emphasis on collectivity in action and the plurality of the human condition speaks to a wider conceptualization of shared humanity than that which Rancière gives her credit for. It is nonetheless unavoidable that the construction of a sphere called a polis, where actions can be recognized, implies that there is necessarily a space separated from the polis, perhaps surrounding it in a kind of vast abyss, where actions are apolitical, where

\(^{138}\) Ibid., 298.

\(^{139}\) Ibid.

\(^{140}\) Ibid..

activity if it happens at all, is not recognized, and where actual people live an unpoliticized existence. This must be the case because otherwise the polis would not be recognized as a distinct sphere of human interaction. Its defining feature would not be a “space of appearance”; and its central content would not consist of the spectacular recognition and distinction of individuals. If all individuals were political agents, the “second birth” marking the arrival of political subjectivity would not be necessary. Indeed, if the polis represented all human activity – it would not exist at all. Its very definition is built on selection and distinction: the emergence of individual political subjects from an apolitical, indecipherable mass.

The polis and political activity within it requires the continued existence of a space that is not the polis, where human beings are not political subjects. In this light, sociological or anthropological studies that circle around the question of agency are curious indeed, especially when they essentially consist of claiming agency for marginalized or oppressed populations. What I mean is, the theoretical gesture that raises “marginalization” or “oppression” as a foil, which is then countered by narratives of resistance that attest to the presence of agency among marginalized communities, is curious in that it intrinsically relies on the idea that spectacular actors emerge from a great mass of subjects without agency.

I just considered how subcultural studies reclaimed delinquent behavior as symbolic resistance. Subcultural theorists like Dick Hebdige, Tony Jefferson, and Paul Corrigan recast marginalized youth populations presumed to be a drain on society’s resources as active bricoleurs, making meaning and building symbolic resistance. In so doing, these researchers attributed political subjectivity to their interlocutors. I now want
to turn to explore another trend in how agency is located and constructed among another kind of marginalized community. I turn to studies concerned with “resistance,” but this time in the field of so-called “subaltern” studies. As I will show, this literature is also concerned with populations considered to be marginalized or, as is more frequently invoked in this literature, *oppressed*. These are post-colonial populations, at the “periphery” of global power; often peasant or working class; occasionally women, or other social categories removed from the center of power. I mentioned in the previous discussion that subcultural researchers frequently invoke the perception of delinquency and unproductivity as a foil that they then counter with claims about the meaningfulness of intense activity among their interlocutors.

In subaltern literature, the claim is first that oppressed subaltern populations “resist” in robust ways: that is, that they have agency. Secondly, the claim is that this agency is wholly different from “Western” agency, and thus requires new tools to discern it. Subaltern “resistance,” these authors claim, is different. Without conflating the plight of Bengali jute workers with the leisure activities of English mods and tods, I intend to use Arendt’s model of political activity as a tool in order to argue that the search for resistance which these literatures share poses problems for actually different conceptualizations of politics and political subjects.

*Example: Subaltern agency*

One of the most influential schools of thought in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been subaltern studies, or alternatively “post-colonial” theory.
Heavily influenced by Edward Said’s provocations about imperialism in *Orientalism*, and headed by the so-called “Subaltern Group,” Subaltern Studies has succeeded in bringing unprecedented study of the non-European/US world into the European and US academe. At the forefront of efforts to “decolonize” theory and academic practice, this theory and research has consistently insisted first that “Western” historiography has repeatedly sidelined the “subaltern” subject. They critique the fact that the subaltern subject has only ever been a sidekick to the march of European history. Second, these efforts to decolonize theory and academic practice insist that the subaltern subject has been ignored because “Western” models are inadequate for the study of African, Asian, and aboriginal or indigenous cultures. Using different approaches, subaltern theorists have argued that understanding the “subaltern agency” unique to Indian peasants, Bengali jute workers, and other marginalized communities requires attention to the different forms of belonging, community, and spirituality in the non-European world, and the effects of these particularities upon the history of capitalistic development in these places. To pay attention to these aspects, subalternists argue, a process of writing history that is different from those used for Western subjects is required. Indeed, so they make the case, subaltern history is incomprehensible if analyzed through the perspective of Western experience. Historically, much literature concerning Arab politics has also occasionally embraced this model of championing local difference at the expense of global comparison and contextualization. Especially with regards to the study of “Arabs,”

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142 The “Subaltern Studies Group” refers to a cluster of authors whose work largely focused on Indian and South East Asian history and anthropology and who prioritized “decolonizing” history and theory as a central focus. Initial works were gathered and edited by Ranajit Guha in five volumes. Influential members include Ranajit Guha, Pratha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gayatri Spivak, among others.

143 My own analysis in this section owes much to Vivek Chibber’s analysis of agency in *Postcolonial Theory*, 152-177.
music, and emotion, this championing of essential cultural difference is widespread.\(^{144}\) (I return to these considerations in the next chapter.) Here, I recognize how this theoretical gesture of inverting Western bias, despite the intentions of its authors, can have depoliticizing effects.

Ranajit Guha’s *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, a foundational text in the subaltern canon, provides an example of how the reliance on spectacular activity as indicative of agency in this literature is problematic.\(^{145}\) Guha uses an archive of instances of insurgency and rebellion, which he interprets to reveal a different kind of political agency, unique to the peasant in colonial India. Guha’s methodology for doing so initially allows him to argue that a certain kind of political subject has been ignored by both colonial and nationalist historiography.\(^{146}\) *Elementary Aspects* asserts that the Indian peasant is worthy of having her own history written, and not as a subset of some other history – like that “of the Raj, or of Indian nationalism, or of socialism.”\(^{147}\)

The second intention of Guha’s text is to confirm the value of this first venture by suggesting it is impossible to understand the history of the Indian peasant using the tools

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\(^{146}\) In the introduction, Guha claims that responsibility of “exclude[ing] the insurgent as the subject of his [sic] own history” should be “shared equally by all schools and parties.” He then proceeds to with the following declaration, “To acknowledge the peasant as the maker of his own rebellion is to attribute, as we have done in this work, a consciousness to him.” (Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, 4.)

\(^{147}\) Ibid., 4.
of Western historiography. Guha is thus concerned to trace a different kind of political subjectivity. In *Elementary Aspects*, he does not trace individuals, political affiliations, or particular locales. Rather, he traces something he calls “peasant consciousness.” This is Guha’s attempt to recast the political subjectivity of the subaltern subjects he studies.

Guha argues that the Indian peasant cannot and should not be understood vis-à-vis “Western” identity groupings like political party, class, gender, et al. Rather, peasant history should be understood through social and cultural specificities unique to the Indian context: things like, “negation, ambiguity, modality, solidarity, transmission, and territoriality.”

Importantly, for Guha, these elements of peasant consciousness can be seen to appear in moments of insurgency and agitation. Indeed, Guha repeatedly insists that moments of insurgency *reveal* the political or rebellious consciousness of the Indian peasant, and it is therein that this consciousness *appears*. His emphasis on the appearance of political consciousness and its revelation through spectacular acts is an excellent example for the argument I’ve been developing here about how an understanding of spectacular acts that reveal political subjects is problematic. It is so because it is never

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148 Others, like Vivek Chibber, have taken issue with Guha’s assertion that “class” is a Western category that cannot be projected onto the Indian subcontinent. Chibber suggests that Guha’s replacement of class struggle with an identity of negation against landlords and moneylenders is a sloppy use of Gramsci. (“Sloppy” in the sense that it borrows Gramsci’s terminology without considering the political critique – that of class – which Gramsci was making when he used that terminology.) Other elements of Guha’s “peasant consciousness,” argues Chibber, like ambiguity, territoriality, and solidarity are similarly found in other parts of the world and other moments in history, including in Europe. This critique suggests that as he asserts the uniqueness of the Indian peasant, Guha is exoticizing, if not orientalizing, aspects of this society.

149 Each of these is a chapter heading in Guha’s text.

150 Fellow subalternist Partha Chatterjee wrote that in *Elementary Aspects*, Guha had created “a methodological procedure by which one obtained an access into peasant consciousness.” (Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1993], 161, emphasis added.)
quite clear to whom these subjects are “appearing” or to whom they are revealing themselves.

Indeed, what’s fascinating about Guha’s study in relation to the discussion of the recognizability of political activity and the putting into discourse of “resistance” that I have been elaborating is precisely the archive to which Guha turns. Guha writes that, unlike crime, “rebellions are necessarily and invariably public and communal events.”

Further, he states that peasant consciousness is “expressed through its resistance at the point of insurgency,” when it appears as “an antagonistic force” in the historical records of the dominant classes. In other words, not only did rebellion or resistance only appear to exist when others noticed it, but specifically when it appeared in the historical register of the colonizer! In actual fact, Guha builds his whole notion of subaltern consciousness (their unique political subjectivity) on records he himself identifies as “elitist in origin” – on “police reports, army dispatches, administrative accounts, minutes and resolutions of governmental departments, and so on.”

If Guha is interested in recasting subaltern agency (which he claims he is), then this is methodology is problematic at best. More specifically, I find it limited: limited in the sense of how it is ultimately unable to break out of the framework of oppression it reportedly attempts to deconstruct, one where elites oppress, narrate, and control the means of representation of the subaltern.

One might call Elementary Aspects, a re-narration of Indian history. I call this a re narration because the author relies on the identification of the same spectacular acts considered to be criminal or unprincipled by previous visitors to the archive. Guha’s

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151 Guha, Elementary Aspects, 79.

152 Ibid., 14.
work in *Elementary Aspects* is an example of how subaltern literature, like Corrigan’s subcultural study above, functions as a reformation of the polis in order to extract different meaning from human activity. Where the British colonizer found these spectacular events evidence of treason, and the nationalist historian found them proof of the “pre-political” (that is, not ideologically informed) nature of peasant frustration, Guha finds these events indicative of a unique peasant consciousness. In all cases, political subjectivity is located via the recognition by the colonial police (among others) of speech and action.

I would suggest that we do not have in this methodology a radical formulation of “politics.” In these formulations we are still very clearly narrating the birth of political subjects vis-à-vis the recognition by a chosen elite of some spectacular activity. The appearance of the robust consciousness to which Guha attests lies in its distinction from a mass of apolitical, unconscious, behavior that presumably, nobody bothered to write about. Some agents demonstrate consciousness. Which ones? The ones the police and the colonial governor saw fit to enumerate in the ledger. As some critics of Guha have pointed out, this is indeed a peculiar way to reclaim the agency of the subaltern, especially perhaps, the one arguably sidelined by “Western” historiography.¹⁵³

A discussion of formulations of subaltern agency and their limitations here would not be complete without considering the major damage the tendency to reverse-

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¹⁵³ Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory*, 155. Critics of Guha’s work have furthered this critique by connecting it to one of the central aspects of peasant consciousness that Guha identifies, “negation.” Negation in Guha’s text, heavily influenced by Antonio Gramsci’s work, refers to a set of negative relationships with people in power, like land owners and money lenders. For instance, Walter Hauser worries that framing Indian peasant consciousness exclusively or primarily through negation risks oversimplifying the peasant as an object of oppression. That is, in making a case for the unique agency of the Indian peasant (defined through negation), Hauser argues that Guha is reinscribing the power dynamics that cast her as subaltern in the first place. (Walter Hauser, “Review: *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* by Ranajit Guha,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 45 [1985]: 174-177.)
orientalism has done to the search for alternative kinds of agency. This also draws out the question of to whom politics and agency appear when spectacular acts take place. I suggested above that the first major concern of subaltern studies has been to claim that the subaltern has agency, and that the second has been to assert that this agency looks different than “Western” agency. According to this literature, subaltern agency is unique; and it requires its own tools of analysis.

For example, in The Nation and Its Fragments, Partha Chatterjee argues that community plays a much more prominent role in rural Bengal society than in the individualistic, European societies from which capitalism comes and in which the struggles against it initially took place. Chatterjee urges us to “grant that peasant consciousness has its own paradigmatic form, which is not only different from [European] bourgeois consciousness but in fact its very other.”

It is undoubtedly one of the greatest paradoxes of the legacies of Said’s Orientalism that in establishing a considerable history of racism that the “West” projected on the “East,” and encouraging its further recognition and analysis, the compelling framework of orientalism was nevertheless not able to discourage many authors from composing explicitly reverse-orientalist analyses while invoking the very terms of anti-orientalist critiques and analysis. That is, the claims to unique subaltern community,

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154 While Chatterjee’s work is perhaps the most prominent example, Chibber explains that, “Postcolonial theorists [in general] commonly take the stance that political psychology is culturally constructed, all the way down. Even more to the point, they take one form of consciousness to be peculiar to the West – the capacity to separate one’s own identity and interest from those of the social group to which one belongs” (Chibber, Postcolonial Theory, 176).

155 Chatterjee, The Nation and Its Fragments, 164, emphasis added.

156 Ahmad traces this to weaknesses in Said’s text (Ahmad, In Theory, 159-220); Chibber traces this to weakness in the subaltern/postcolonial project writ large (Chibber, Postcolonial Theory 152-176). I am less concerned with where it comes from than with not perpetuating this trend in my own work.
consciousness, and resistance more often than not end up spinning “Western” stereotypes about “Eastern” subjects as positive cultural aspects. Negative tropes about the religious, tribal, or irrational nature of the subaltern are flipped into essentialized claims about unique subaltern “community,” “spirituality,” and “consciousness.” Critics of this tendency in subaltern theory have explicitly taken issue with this: that in theorizing a uniquely “subaltern” consciousness, the school has first ended up reinforcing Orientalist perceptions of southeast Asia (in particular) and second, this reverse Orientalism ultimately and necessarily circles back to bourgeois humanism and the birth of the rational political subject, vis-a-vis recognizable political activity.

Which is to say, the “unique” resistance and indigenous political consciousness found among subaltern subjects has frequently either mirrored the political subjectivity of Western subjects, or reiterated the prejudices of nineteenth-century Orientalism. The point for me here is not that subaltern theorists potentially fail at their own project (as Rosalind O’Hanlon argues\(^\text{157}\)) but that this dependence on the emergence of behavior of activity to indicate politics is quite clearly tied to normative understandings of subjectivity. That is, my interest is not in insisting that a different political consciousness

\(^{157}\) Rosalind O’Hanlon takes pains to establish the continued exclusivity of “the virile figure of the subject-agent” in this literature and questions why subaltern studies, in their very critique of the same, have nevertheless not been able to shake the indomitable influence of the Enlightenment project in re-producing this rational human subject. She writes:

> At the very moment of this assault upon western historicism, the classic figure of western humanism – the self-originating, self-determining individual, who is at once a subject in his possession of a sovereign consciousness whose defining quality is reason, and an agent in his power of freedom – is readmitted through the back door in the figure of the subaltern himself, as he is restored to history in the reconstructions of the Subaltern project. The consequence of this is to limit and distort the conceptualization of the contributors’ own chosen themes of domination and resistance.

actually exists among subaltern populations but has been misunderstood by postcolonial theorists. Rather my argument is that even this literature, with its pretentions to radical critique and its widespread influence in the academe as such, also relies on the same basic understanding of political subjects being born through spectacular acts of resistance. This understanding, as I’ve been arguing, requires the perpetuation of life, behavior, and individuals whose existence is ignorable, and apolitical. Most importantly, it is an understanding quite at odds with the (radical) notion, articulated throughout this literature, that oppressed and marginalized populations have the capacity to “resist,” “have agency,” or live politicized existences, despite not appearing in normative histories, archives, or ledgers.

The parallels that I see between what signals indigenous “resistance” and subaltern agency within postcolonial critique and what in cultural studies marks “symbolic resistance” and subcultural agency lie in how individuals are understood as performing political activity, or enacting agency. I do not intend to conflate the political impact of a jute workers’ strike with that of the sartorial choices of suburban punks. But I have wanted to look at the theoretical mechanism that allows both to be seen as markers of an “Other” agency. “Alternative” agency that ultimately mirrors normative political engagement and subjectivity illustrates the limitations of the theoretical feedback loop upon which subject-based political analysis depends.
Conclusion

I have spent a great deal of time in the second half of this chapter critiquing two very important fields of cultural study. I hope to have established that they share certain expectations of political activity. We might say the framework they share begins from a zero-state of no agency. Marginalized populations start as non-descript groups of people, understood as devoid of the potential for political activity, which are then scripted by the theorist as entering and performing on a political stage. The researcher interprets the recognizable activity that renders the demographic in question active, that is, political. Despite the widespread championing in these literatures of the power and capacity of marginalized societies, they begin, much like the hegemonic framework they bemoan, with the supposition that youth agents and the colonized/post-colonized are disempowered by their very subject positions. This is overcome by the performance of specific and recognizable actions that render them political subjects. The problem as I see it is that these conceptualizations of agency, contingent upon certain kinds of action, promise to continue producing ignorable subjects.

If I have traced political activity and a discourse of resistance in two otherwise unrelated traditions of academic practice, my attention to these two specific literatures in particular is directly informed by my subject matter in this study. Rap and hip hop concerts in the Arab world and the political resonances therein beg to be addressed most immediately by the frameworks developed either in subcultural or in subaltern literature (or both). My sustained attention in this chapter to dominant frameworks in these fields has been to lay the groundwork for how my own understanding of politics in the genre of
rap music in these three Arab cities will diverge from these.

In sum, I have tried to draw attention to how an emphasis on recognizable activity has created a *representative schema of* “resistance” – which frames and limits the ways in the North American (and British) academe are able to recognize political energy. My understanding of what politics may be generated in Arabic rap concerts thus started with a critical understanding of how recognizing agency as incumbent on spectacular activity necessitates the perpetuation of agents without agency and apolitical behavior. Having established the limits of this model, I will now be concerned to propose an alternative.
Chapter Two: Feeling Politics

Overview

In the previous chapter, I suggested that an emphasis on locating “resistance” has limited the study of politics in subcultural and subaltern studies to the location of spectacular activity. I argued that the theoretical gesture which frequently attributes significance to this activity comes in the construction by the researcher of a polis around certain actors: a political space within which the significance of a given activity is affirmed. I suggested that this framework necessitates the perpetuation of apolitical or non-spectacular behavior – against whose background only some subjects can emerge as having agency. I argued that this is a troubling way to conceive of radical politics among a certain group of actors or within a specific genre of cultural production.

In this chapter, and in order to get out of the theoretical cul-de-sac, which I suggested limits our understanding of the political possibility of cultural production, I propose applying elements from both the spatial and affective turns in critical theory. I propose a broadening and deepening of a potential polis in Arabic rap and hip hop by considering a spatial analysis of concert culture. Then, I propose a critical consideration of feeling to produce a similar complication of subjectivity. This serves, I hope, to open up a conceptualization of subjects and agency within this rap and hip hop culture in these cities.

In the first part of this chapter, I propose an ethnographic methodology rooted in the spatial dynamics of concert culture. This consists of a consideration of the urban
geography through which performers and audiences travel, as well as an awareness of the construction of intimacy between performers and audiences. It is my intention that this material reading of the spaces within which concerts take place can reset a sociological imagination of the “polis.” That is, this spatial methodology may help dissuade from focusing on a group of agents in isolation. Following this, the second part of this chapter makes a case for the construction of what Dorreen Massey has called a “spatialized subjectivity” by inserting an analysis of feeling in rap concerts. That is, I add a consideration of subjectivity (via felt processes) to my conceptualization of political “space.” Specifically, I propose discerning feeling through a re-invigoration of the ethnomusicological concept of *tarab*, traditionally applied to classical forms of Arabic music. In doing so, I propose tracing the building of tarab in rap concerts as a technique to recognize ways of being with others that are politically potent.

Bringing together the theoretical arguments allows me to propose a model for a political ethnography of subcultural production: what I call *feeling politics*. This procedure – considering both space and feeling, or feeling through space – is my alternative to the discourse of resistance and the theoretically limiting tendencies of recognizing spectacular political activity that I identified in Chapter One. I conclude this chapter with reflections on my role as researcher and my personal navigations of both space and subjectivity over the course of this research.
Part One: Deepening Space

Heterogeneous audiences

In Harlem, the MC took the mic between opening acts. She called out to the audience, scattered throughout the concert space, in a mix of Arabic and English, ‘Who here is falasteeni [Palestinian]? Who here is from falasteen [Palestine]?’ A few enthusiastic shouts of solidarity and hands shot up from the crowd. I spotted Palestinian flags, noticed some familiar faces from the Arab American community. She repeated the question to a slightly more enthusiastic response. Then she continued, ‘Who here is from masr [Egypt]?’ You could tell she was preparing to run through a short list of countries, and the performance space and the bar quieted slightly waiting to hear who would be called on next.

In the pause, from the bar, a middle-aged African-American man, seated with a friend hollered back in response, “Harlem! From Harlem!” When she ignored the outburst, his friend continued “Yea, from Harlem! Speak English!” The interaction effectively ended that tactic of community building which the rapper Shadia Mansour, when she took the stage, seconds later, quickly countered with an Arabic language reference pulling her audience to her and encouraging them to ignore/forget the outburst.¹

The incident above happened at the Shrine, a world music venue in Harlem, New York, at 113th Street and Amsterdam. Over the past decade, it has built a reputation as a world music venue and bar in the heart of a neighborhood that has, in the past thirty years, gone from perhaps the most notorious ghetto on the East coast to an increasingly hip haven of valuable real estate.² In November 2011, the UK/Palestinian MC Shadia

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² Property values in Harlem were on a steady climb before the 2008 financial crash. Developers and investors are enthused to see the market returning (showing gigantic jumps in asking prices – asking prices
Mansour performed there with DAM, a group of Palestinian rappers based in Lyd, Israel. The concert was part of a promotional tour in several US cities for the documentary film *Hip Hop Is Bigger than the Occupation*, filmed and produced by the non-profit group Existence is Resistance. The MC warming the crowd, who goes by the name Harrabic Tubman, did so after a young rapper had already taken the mic as an opening act, but before Shadia Mansour and DAM took the stage. How to understand this exchange? To me, it is irrelevant whether or not the older men seated at the bar identified, understood, or sympathized with the political struggle around Palestine and its occupation by Israel that the artists and the event were endeavoring to make visible. Furthermore, it is similarly perhaps tangential if they identified the rap music being performed as a legacy of African American musicians that were first formulated by rappers a few miles away and decades before.

Considering the hostility with which it was laced, the inclination to clump the African American men at the bar in with the things the rapping Palestinians “resist” is politically dangerous: pitting minorities against each other in the midst of gentrifying Harlem plays into both racism and essentialism. Neither does it advance the Palestinian struggle. But it no way did the men’s vocal rejection of the concert’s content actually

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4 “Harrabic Tubman” is the stage name of Nancy Mansour. Note the obvious play on words invoking an Arab “Harriet Tubman.”
empower Arab or diasporic listeners, nor did it further the Palestinian cause writ large, or the musicians’ performances in particular. More pertinent to a material understanding of what is political about this subcultural event – and what in my opinion is more likely – is that the men from the neighborhood were responding to an influx of much younger, white and Arab incomers with different cultural capital in a quickly gentrifying neighborhood. That this audience’s arrival in the neighborhood was couched in a presentation of “hip hop culture,” but rendered alien via the language in which it was spoken, was likely also significant.

The framework of the event at the Shrine – fundraising for an NGO called “Existence is Resistance” – should easily recall the problematic politics of the discourse of resistance elaborated in the previous chapter. One can imagine an analysis of this concert that applauds Palestinian resistance against the Occupation; that celebrates the power of music to transcend borders (after all the film being promoted is entitled *Hip Hop Is Bigger than the Occupation*); and that, considering the concert’s location, similarly celebrates the intersectionality of African American and Arab/Palestinian struggles. “Harrabic Tubman”’s stage name also invokes this intersectionality.\(^5\)

Strangely, perhaps, all of these narratives necessitate that we ignore the exchange between the MC and the bar, relying instead on the positive responses from audience members that huddled close to the stage.

Towards an alternative, I want to suggest this exchange at the Shrine can productively illustrate the limitations of the dynamics of the “polis” I described in the

\(^5\) Her naming choice has been critiqued online for what has been interpreted as an unbecoming appropriation of African American culture and history. See M’bwebe Aja Ishangi, “The Power in a Name When Called upon by Someone Else,” accessed October 1, 2015, [http://daghettotymz.com/current/powername/powername.html](http://daghettotymz.com/current/powername/powername.html).
previous chapter. There, I argued that Hannah Arendt’s conceptualization of the polis as the “space of appearance,” or the sphere where political activity happens, was a useful framework for understanding how a persistent discourse of resistance functions in academic literature. I identified that a discourse of resistance operates vis-à-vis a methodological gesture of recasting a group of people around certain actors. Within this constructed polis, given activities can be understood as significant – as empowering, as “resistant”, etc. I argued that what was troubling about this construction of the polis was the necessary continuation of apolitical behavior outside of it, against which only some activity can be interpreted as political.

An important part of the construction or location of a polis lies in the presumption of some kind of homogeneity within this political sphere. I mentioned that Arendt writes that the polis is “the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together.”6 In subcultural literature concerned with style, for example, “resistance” is attributed to those haircuts and sartorial choices that peers (who approve) or teachers and parents (who don’t) recognize. Similarly, I noted that the actions of subalterns are registered as threatening by the colonizer (recorded in colonial police legers). In these accounts of “resistance,” the polis is made up of supporters – those who recognize empowerment in selected actions; and foes – those who recognize a threat or other negative implications in the same actions. But what to make of the others who witness activity but accord it neither of these valences? At the Shrine, what to make of the men at the bar? How to document politics in motion while acknowledging the heterogeneity of audiences even as they gather in the same concert venue?

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So the significance of the incident at the Shrine lies in its ability to underscore the dynamic heterogeneity of urban concert audiences. It illustrates the feebleness of only considering the fans huddled close up to the stage – the inadequacy of constructing a specific audience, through which political significance can be attributed. Secondly, the incident clearly highlights the tensions in urban venues when the marketing of the live music is effected by or playing into the discourses of resistance I identified in the previous chapter. Concert frameworks investing in a kind of “urban chique” all too frequently position events at the frontlines of gentrification in whatever city they are found. The response to the MC’s efforts to warm the crowd from the bar’s local clientele rejects this momentum in a memorable way, while at the same time putting into relief the vibrant intersection of trajectories alive in the concert space and ignited by the concert itself. How can a political ethnography of subcultural production account for these urban dynamics and these political exchanges? How can an analysis of the political texture in concerts like this one level the boundaries of the polis so that other actors – who don’t fit the binary of resistor/resistee – can also be recognized and their political activity (their existence) accounted for?

In other words, can we build a model for understanding politics in subcultural production that accounts for the multiple trajectories present at once? Can there be a model for understanding politics in performance that accounts for what Doreen Massey calls the “simultaneity of stories-so-far” – that is, the heterogeneity in a given venue at a given time?\(^7\) How can politics be extracted or attributed to the processes of encounter, collaboration, and co-consumption in city spaces that are themselves actively contested?

\(^7\) Doreen Massey, *For Space* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2005), 54.
The first part of this chapter attempts to deepen the polis, and in doing so moves towards a more spatial understanding of the heterogeneity of audiences and venues.

I am hardly the first to recognize that intrinsic to the idea of the polis are practices of exclusion. In the previous chapter, I pointed to Jacques Rancière’s critiques of Arendt. For centuries, the liberal idea of the cosmopolis has emerged in political theory as the open, welcoming counterpoint to the closed, exclusive polis. Against the idea of a finite and bound city-state, increasingly manifest in modernist claims to the political community and identity of the state, theorists have theorized the cosmopolis. As R. B. J. Walker explains, after Hobbes, many philosophers have come to the conclusion that “the modern polis can no longer be our political home, at least our only political home.”8

Moreover, over the past two decades, there has been a resurgence of theorizations of the cosmopolitan, deepening and complicating the term, searching for a “cosmopolitics.”9 As David Harvey has quipped, “cosmopolitanism is back.”10

This more recent resurgence in theorizing the cosmopolitan comes in part as a response against critiques of utopian cosmopolitanism that emerged in the wake of the Cold War, perhaps most easily perceptible in the work of Martha Nussbaum.11 Her critics found much at fault with the celebration of the open and global reach of capital, and with


9 See, as perhaps two bookends with plenty of variation in between: Bruce Robbins and Pheng Cheah, Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998) and David Harvey, Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom (New York: Columbia UP, 2009).


the positive aspects of globalization in her work.\textsuperscript{12} The complete range of formulations developed to recover the cosmopolitan project in response to these criticism – what Harvey calls “counter-cosmopolitanisms” – are outside the scope of my discussion here.\textsuperscript{13}

These debates have in various ways tried to root or locate cosmopolitanism in a specific geographic place or among a specific set of identities. Thereby, they address the darker sides of the transnational expanse of capital, paying attention to the irregularity of privilege and movement across the globe, looking for “actually existing cosmopolitanism.”\textsuperscript{14} Can the idea of a rooted cosmopolis – a diverse, tolerant, and open political community, that is nonetheless effected by shifts in global capital, transform the political expectations I suggested were attached to the more traditional polis? Can thinking of urban audiences consuming avant-garde music as cosmopolitan shift the processes of recognition of political activity away from locating “resistance”? Is the cosmopolis a satisfying alternative to the polis?

A certain degree of cosmopolitanism in Arabic rap and its consumption is easily recognizable. Some rap lyrics articulate anti-sectarian and anti-nationalist sentiment. More significantly, the structure of live rap consumption in Ramallah, Amman, and Beirut is markedly cosmopolitan. Most live rap concerts are primarily geared towards a mobile, and upwardly mobile cosmopolitan audience – whether that means foreigners, locals who travel or have lived abroad, or simply locals with mobility in each city. That Arabic rap \textit{concerts} almost exclusively rely on this framework while Arabic rap \textit{lyrics}...


\textsuperscript{13} Harvey, “Cosmopolitanism and Banality.”

\textsuperscript{14} Bruce Robbins, “Introduction Part One: Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism,” in Robbins and Cheah, \textit{Cosmopolitics}, 1-19.}
frequently bemoan structures of power and speak in local idiom to the street, need not be terribly surprising. It would indeed be remarkable if an iteration of what is at least occasionally a “global” culture – hip hop – did not have at least some cosmopolitan qualities. What is worth underscoring, however, are the class considerations that mark its live (cosmopolitan) consumption. It is here that what Doreen Massey terms “the local production of the neocapitalist global” may be interesting in terms of Arabic rap and concert culture.\textsuperscript{15} This is something I return to in each case study.

Indeed Massey’s “local production of the neocapitalist global” may point to the different ways in which gentrification is manifest in Ramallah, Amman, and Beirut. It is here that the limits of understanding the political implications of rap production as cosmopolitan can be found. The cosmopolitan economy I just described, while trading in anti-sectarian, anti-religious, and “universal” values and aesthetics simultaneously engages in processes of exclusion based on class, ethnicity, and religion (especially as publicly displayed). The cosmopolis – globalized (sections of each) city, open and connected to (sections of) other cities – necessitates for its existence vast stretches of rural or urban backwardness from whose restrictive confines and familial doldrums young people are understood to flock. As I detail in my all three of my case studies however, audiences frequently refuse this narrative, in some cases violently. The most “cosmopolitan” centers of Ramallah, Amman, and Beirut are also, for some audiences, the least tolerant, the most exclusive, the most difficult to access. On Hamra Street in Beirut, a young veiled woman from Hermel (in the Bekaa\textsuperscript{c} Valley) asks to stand next to me as she awaits her ride after a rap concert at the theatre Metro al-Madina. She is afraid,

\textsuperscript{15} Massey, \textit{For Space}, 101.
standing alone on this hipster-ized thoroughfare, that people will make fun of her for wearing the veil. In Ramallah, youths from the neighboring refugee camp throw bottles over the wall into the lush garden of La Vie café, where rappers and electronic musicians have performed, and which prides itself on trading in local, organic products and implements the boycott of Israeli goods. Café ownership considers erecting mesh netting over the garden to protect from the projectiles. In Amman, young boys flock to stare at the stream of well-dressed men and women queuing to enter the Roman amphitheatre for the Al Balad Music Festival. They throw stones from the concrete plaza outside, into the theatre, to which they (and anyone without a ticket) are barred entry during concerts. The festival’s director understands this expression of frustration as stemming from the fact that during the festival, this public space is (in his words) “stolen from them.” Like the incident I described during the concert at the Shrine, these examples of audience interactions, expectations, and resentment point to very real difference and heterogeneity within and around cultural spaces. I want to suggest these spaces are not adequately understood either as cosmopolitan, or as a cohesive political community constructing a polis within the bounds of which the significance of political activity can be located.

These examples, and the others which I detail in the chapters that follow, have led me to question the limits of the open tolerance of the cosmopolis. Even when (especially when) this cosmopolitanism is couched in globalized modernity, when it actively counters restrictive religious social mores, and when it supposedly encourages free and alternative creative expression, it consistently implements a class project which allows for the middle and upper-middle class consumption of forms of globalized culture while

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16 Interview with Raed Asfour, Artistic Director of Al Balad Theatre; August 16, 2015, Amman.
it actively excludes working class audiences (frequently in the name of security concerns, or in the name of profit). I review in more detail, and, I hope, complicate these dynamics in each case study chapter.

For now, I want to note that these testimonies have led me to interrogate the structure of the cosmopolis in relation to the polis. In other words, considering the practices of exclusion upon which both depend, are the polis and the cosmopolis actually opposed? Walker suggests:

It is a great mistake to assume that our futures lie either with the polis or with the cosmopolis. We confront, rather, ongoing struggles to resituate and politicize sites of political authority. We already know that the old distinctions between local and global or urban and rural or north, south, east and west are being renegotiated very rapidly. These negotiations imply the need to renegotiate our understandings of both the polis and the cosmopolis.

In fact, the polis and the cosmopolis are co-constituted, each based on a similar understanding of a modern subject, its limits, and construction. While the polis sees the necessity of a community of individuals, constituted as subjects, through which to distribute democracy; the cosmopolis affirms the status of the individual subject while recognizing the need to tolerate difference (embodied in different, individual, subjects). In other words, my search for a different sort of political space in which to read the political significance of rap concerts does not find much traction in the cosmopolis as

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17 Mehdi Amel wrote about the class nature of the Arab quest for “modernity” in *Azmeh el-hadara el-‘arabiyyeh ama azmeh el-bourgeiosiyat el-‘arabiyyeh? [Crisis of Arab Modernity or Crisis of the Arab Bourgeoisie?]* (Beirut: Dar Al-Farabi, 1974).

18 Robbins writes, “There is a growing consensus that cosmopolitanism sometimes works together with nationalism rather than opposed to it.” (Robbins, “Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism,” 2.)

alternative to the polis. This is so even though the aesthetics of many Arabic rap concerts frequently trade in global, cosmopolitan, trends.

The phenomenon of “that metropolitan-academic preoccupation: cities” (of which this study is in some ways a part) provides another avenue of inquiry. The metropolis is, of course, a conceptualization of space within which much politics (and “resistance” incidentally) has been located in recent scholarship. From “everyday” resistance to the “right to the city,” the urban metropolis has emerged as the terrain upon which political significance is readily discernable.

Since Lefebvre located the unspoken assumption in Marx and Engels (namely that the struggle over the means of production is essentially an urban struggle), the political potency of activity in the city has taken on new meaning. US cultural studies in this vein are especially prone to these discourses of resistance, which, as Kristin Ross explains,

...take capitalism for granted as a kind of force field or switchboard that processes meanings; the Salvadoran or Guatemalan selling oranges on the freeways of Los Angeles becomes a figure of ‘resistance’ - someone who has appropriated urban space and used it to his own devices, someone thumbing his nose at the ‘master planners.’

But, Ross asks productively, “resistance to what?” Here, similar to the hesitation I articulated in the previous chapter, Ross critiques the washing out of “resistance” within

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20 Massey, For Space, 154.
23 Kristin Ross qtd. in Doreen Massey, For Space, 46.
24 Ibid.
the specific confines of urban studies, where the “metropolitan” becomes place holder for struggle. For her part, Doreen Massey explains that: “What Ross is really worrying about here is the lack of coherence in this resistance, and the lack of a singular focus (tactics ‘are not made to refer back to capital nor to offer any means of understanding the system as a whole.’)”25 And she continues:

Against ‘the city as system’, the implacable presence of stabilized legibility, is romanticized a mobile ‘resistance’ of tactics, the everyday, the little people… This central power is understood as removed from ‘the everyday’ … It is an imagination which has taken a strong hold in urban literature, with its own elaborations… of this street as ‘the margins.’26

I have articulated so far in this chapter that I seek a deeper conceptualization of political space than the one available in either the polis or the cosmopolis. It should be clear however, that to consider the whole physical city – or metropolis – with its ghettos, refugee camps, and gentrifying neighborhoods together, as the political space par excellence, is also limiting and problematic. If the polis – as a political community built on the recognition of specific activity – is built on the continuity of apolitical behavior outside it, and the cosmopolitan neighborhoods of each city actively exclude in order to build an ethos of tolerance; than the metropolis flattens all urban conflict or confrontation into a single amorphous struggle, the political goals of which are not clear. How then to imagine the terrain through which politics in this genre of subcultural production are built?

25 Massey, For Space, 47.

26 Ibid.
A Different methodological gesture

In her book *For Space*, the late Doreen Massey makes a compelling case for philosophical and political attention to the concept of “space.” She argues for an understanding of space as something more than a simple “expanse we travel across” and proposes instead to understand it as “the product of interrelations, as constituted through interactions.”\(^27\) That is, she proposes an understanding of physical space that is not just “there,” bounded and unbounded by different political and ecological boundaries, but that is constantly constructed through the material interactions it hosts. In this way, her conceptualization of space is voluminous: it is three-dimensional. Hers is not an understanding of space as area, as flat expanse. This sense of depth in her formulations about space adds a living dimension to physical location; Massey’s argumentation “for space” is about understanding how we interact in it and through it: as the “sphere of possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality.”\(^28\) This “contemporaneous plurality” responds to trends in post-colonial and subaltern literature, and to the anthropologization of the “Other” that consistently figures “the field” as frozen in time and research subjects and their locales as existing in a romanticized “tradition” that is always in the past.

In Massey’s theorizations, I find a sharp theoretical model for reformulating the political space within which rap and hip hop concerts are found. Massey urges us to rethink space. And she does so from political convictions about contemporary

\(^{27}\) Ibid., 9.

\(^{28}\) Ibid.
globalization – our understanding of which she sees as philosophically confined by the traditional binary between space and time – that are similar to the political concerns I have attempted to unravel over the course of this dissertation’s introduction and the previous chapter. Massey’s work allows me to discard notions of a polis, momentarily set aside considerations of the cosmopolis (and cosmopolitan aesthetics or consumption), and to really interrogate the shape of the metropolis – the city itself – by thinking instead about the constantly-being-constructed, three-dimensional space through which performers and their audiences move to arrive at the concert venue and which they construct together through their interactions over the course of the performance event.

Massey’s provocations provide fertile ground to begin to understand the intersecting trajectories manifest in the concert at the Shrine in Harlem, at Metro al-Madina in Beirut, La Vie in Ramallah, and during the Al Balad Festival in Amman. In other words, “space” is a way of understanding the venue and cultural event that is pregnant with possibility, without eroticizing the alternative or transgressive nature of cultural production or the seemingly alternative venues – themselves often at the heart of contestation over the right to the city.

Considering rap concerts spatially means recognizing that ongoing urban change is part of the politics of these events. In some cases these urban changes look like gentrification, in others dispossession, and in others systemic privatization. Audiences and performers live and understand these urban processes in different ways, and they move through the physical manifestations of these changes in order to meet in specific venues. For me this is not only a question contextualizing a rap concert within the history of the gentrification of Harlem, to take the example I pointed to earlier. Rather, analyzing
patterns of listening and audience behavior spatially will deepen understanding audience/performer interactions by pointing to politics in process. Massey writes that recognizing space is a “recognition of the fact of spacing.” It is precisely the dimension of space as distance and proximity felt in the performance venue that I argue is political, that points to political processes.

A subcultural ethnography built on this recognition is less prone to romanticizing the political or populist reach of a certain musical genre. Understood spatially, concerts are moments when relations are enacted, brought into relief. Moreover, these relations, because they are situated in space, are always in motion. Massey tells us that relations are “are necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out.” The political impact in such an understanding lies in acknowledging that collective feeling, community building, shared experiences, or political expression in rap concerts may not be already formed, as in some hypothetical, succinct subculture. Rather, the processes of interacting in space may be the political developments to pay attention to. As Sara Ahmed has offered: “Collectivities are formed through the very work that has to be done in order to get closer to other others.” In other words, rather than the already formed and outwardly performed identities, styles, politics often taken as evidence of “resistance,” politics may equally be productively discerned in processes of interacting. This has deep implications for the capacity of live cultural production – like rap concerts – to shape politics and determine political constitutions. Moreover, if the concept of

\[\text{29 Ibid., 53.}\]
\[\text{30 Ibid., 9, emphasis added.}\]
\[\text{31 Sara Ahmed, Strange Encounters (London: Routledge, 2000), 17, original emphasis.}\]
space is able to dissolve the boundaries the polis, allowing us to dissect and consider patterns of inclusion and exclusion, the conceptualization of *feeling* I elaborate in the next section multiplies subjectivity and moves the discussion away from both identity and agency. This is to pick up where Massey stops, to offer a theorization of what Massey calls a “spatialized subjectivity.”

**Part Two: Spatializing Subjectivity**

*Feeling*

I feel you. That’s the most important thing: I feel you. The first line of rap I ever wrote is maybe the most important one I will ever write. It says *“ana hases feek katheb”* [I feel you, liar]. The line does two things. First, it shows the listener that the politician “on high” doesn’t feel him at all. And in the track, I’m describing the pain [that comes from this]. And second thing, at the same time, I’m telling the listener that I’m with you: I’m in the same place. I am in pain in the same way.

~Bu Kolthoum

Massey’s proposition to spatialize subjectivity comes from her recognition of the “inseparability of individuality and sociability.” In her efforts to dislodge the primacy

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33 Syrian rapper Bu Kolthoum. Interview with the author, March 31, 2015, Amman. All subsequent quotations from Bu Kolthoum are taken from this interview. Translations from the Arabic are my own. The quoted line of rap is from the track, “*Oum Wsela*” [“Get up, we’re there”]. See: “Bu Kolthoum ‘Oum Wsela’ official video – *qoum weselna* – *bu kolthoum*,” YouTube video, 2:52, posted by “Bu Kolthoum,” August 11, 2014, accessed May 22, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y28fiq6wjPA&ab_channel=BuKolthoum](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y28fiq6wjPA&ab_channel=BuKolthoum).

34 Massey, *For Space*, 56.
of temporality as framework for narrating the subject, she writes, “Experience is not an internalized succession of sensations (pure temporality) but a multiplicity of things and relations.” Subjectivity in other words, she suggests, is not built chronologically, but is constantly constituted in the multiple relations held simultaneously. Similarly, Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd have argued that the emotions and passions that build an individual are not constituted separately and succinctly, but can be held simultaneously, effecting both memory and imagination. Leaning on Spinoza, they write: “To understand the operation of the passions in individual life is at the same time to understand the relations of collaboration and antagonism which bind human beings together in society.”

This way of understanding the individual complicates subject readings that are based on a variety of identities (class, gender, nationality, et al.). It does so by pushing past the immediate alternative, discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, to assert, in post-modern times, the presence of hybrid identities. Instead, the line of inquiry Massey, Gatens, and Lloyd pursue places the body at the center of the interrogation of the individual. Importantly, this body is always recognized in relation to other bodies in lived space. So, Gatens and Lloyd write, “It is only as a finite individual among other finite individuals – made vulnerable but also sustained by their collective power – that the individual exists.” This individual in relation to others is significant not because of the different identities it can carry, but because of the capacity of the body to affect and be

35 Ibid., 58.


37 Ibid., 47.
affected by other bodies. “To be an individual at all is to be exposed to the external force of other bodies – to the powers, whether congenial or antagonistic – of other individuals.” 38 This focus on the body as a force that acts upon and is acted upon opens up interesting ways to consider the politics in live cultural production, and in particular to evaluate audience interactions in contested city spaces, like rap concerts.

In particular, this line of inquiry allows for a way of interpreting interactions without drawing a tight circle (a polis) around chosen performers and their audiences, excluding subjects around them. That is, by acknowledging that audiences “are not just passively moved by external forces, [t]hey have their own momentum,” we are able to to consider audience movement – not just in the concert space, but towards it and away from it. This spatializes the individual listener – putting the focus on her in relation to others, but not necessarily as opposed to or removed from others. In other words, that audiences bring affect into concert venues and simultaneously are affected by fellow audiences and the performer is central to the processual politics in rap concerts. Listeners, in Gatens and Lloyd’s terms, “act and [are] acted upon in a multiplicity of ways.” 39

Like Massey and Gatens and Lloyd, I also lean on Spinoza’s conceptualization of sensation and subjectivity. It is in particular his formulations that our sense of self is our sense of our body in relation to other bodies that is most productive here. That is, subjectivity is built vis-à-vis what is felt in the body and sensed in relation to other bodies. His idea of subjectivity is something simultaneously felt internally and in relation to others. New avenues to imagine politics in process open when the feeling body is

38 Ibid., 54.
39 Ibid., 27.
repositioned as central in how to conceive of subjectivity and collectivity. It is not the shape or color of bodies (ie identity) that is my primary interest, but their ability to hold energy, absorb energy, sense other bodies. This emphasis on sensation is central to my proposal of “feeling” as central to the politics in rap concerts.

I use “feeling” in the meaning of sensation. That is, I mean feeling as the process of sensation, not as specific emotions. What is important to hold on to here is the spatial relationships sensed between self and others. Consider the expressions, “You feel far”; “I feel close to you”; “I feel you”; “I don’t feel it.” The point is to notice the difference between these statements and phrases like “I feel sad/happy/angry.” Importantly, while the latter are internally focused (even if the cause or catalyst of the feeling is external), the former communicates sensation of the body in relation to others. It is easy to imagine a range of emotions attached to each phrase: “You annoy me. I wish you would leave. You do. You feel far. I am happy.” Alternatively, when used in this context: “I miss you. You feel far,” the same phrase can carry different affect. The sensation of distance or proximity can arise from different emotional registers, or even multiple emotions at once. Consider this example: “Come back. I am angry at you because you feel far.” Here, one can imagine both longing and anger together as the affective registers. It is not the emotional qualities in and of themselves that concern me in my elaboration of feeling in rap concerts in the following – except perhaps in so far as registering that emotions (plural) may be held simultaneously. (I will return to the emotional blending in the discussion of tarab, below.) What I am concerned to trace, rather, is the feeling of others – whether as proximity, distance, or co-presence.

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40 I acknowledge that bodies do not do this equally, of course.
Feeling featured as a central part of my conversations with interlocutors over the course of this research. Considering the internet-based media through which Arabic rap is primarily disseminated and the real obstacles to hosting live events (especially in Ramallah and Amman), the reasons artists give for bothering to attempt and continuing to host live events were always an important part of our discussions. Tangentially, the focus I brought on the live concert often came as a something of a surprise to my interlocutors, who are used to a slate of questions from journalists and researchers about politics, resistance, protest (vis-à-vis the Arab Spring, intifada, or whatever other street protests are underway), or their relationship with US hip hop culture. It was nonetheless exploring the live aspect of their work that led me to the line of inquiry that I elaborate here. Their answers as to why they consider concerts important are almost categorically wrapped up in the opportunity “to feel” their audience or, as listeners, to feel the music. DJ Sotusura locates an inciting moment in his personal history about the relevance of the live rap concert in an experience listening to American rap:

There was a festival in LA. I went because Wu Tang were the headliners. Right before Wu Tang, Mos Def took the stage. It was 1999. Mos Def’s first album had been out for like six months, and I hadn’t really listened to it. I had heard one or two tracks but I hadn’t really listened to the whole album. Mos Def took the stage and did his set. I was totally stunned. I’m telling you, he gave me goose bumps. Any song he did, the whole crowd was with him. This was the first concert where I felt the power of an MC. I

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41 During my last two months of fieldwork, protests against the corruption and inefficiency of the Lebanese government erupted in a new wave of anti-sectarian protests catalyzed by a crisis over the nation-wide disposal of garbage. The #YouStink protests (#tl3at_r7tkom) were accompanied by renewed interest in the political rap of Beirut, especially the work of Naserdany al Touffar and El Rass, as I explore in the Beirut case study. The discourses of protest and resistance attached to Arabic rap are thus neither confined to the context of the “Arab Spring” (elaborated in previous chapters), nor the Palestinian intifadas (as I discuss in the Ramallah chapter). Rather, the alacrity to associate Arabic rap with protest, the street, and “resistance” is susceptible to the presence of spectacular activity (like street protests), regardless of the specific political issues addressed and interests at play.
can listen to Mos Def at home, and like the album, but the effect he has on stage is much greater than anything else.

When I came back [to Amman] in 2004 we did concerts with Ramallah Underground. And when they went to London I went on stage with them. And [there] I felt like the crowd was being touched the same way I felt when I saw Mos Def. The guys [of Ramallah Underground] just had to hold the mic right and you could feel their energy: rage. Like, they were just going to explode. This feeling, I know the audiences felt it. Arab or British, it didn’t matter — there were people who came up to them after and were like, ‘Man I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I can feel it.’

Sotusura’s testimony points to the involuntary, felt sensations (goose bumps) that transpired when listening to a powerful performance and to the centrality of the experience of feeling or being moved by the music in the consumption of live rap that I want to focus on in the remaining part of this chapter. Audiences and listeners alike affirm the importance of the opportunity to discern these feelings. The Ramallah-based rapper, producer, and DJ Boikutt (himself one third of the now disbanded Ramallah Underground) elaborates from his perspective:

I can put music online, and people can hear it, like it or not like it, whatever. But live, there’s a connection in the moment. You can know right in the instant what the response is of anyone listening, how they receive what’s coming out of me, what I’ve been working on for years. I can see in the instant how people react. In people’s faces. In their eyes. I can feel the energy, I can feel the vibe, khalas [that’s it]. And at the same time, it’s a connection. At the end, music for me isn’t one sided. There is call and response.

Building a theoretical model based on these testimonies and those of their peers, the alternative I propose to reading resistance in rap concerts lies in paying attention to

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42 Hicham Ibrahim, the DJ who goes by the stage name Sotusura. Interview with the author, September 12, 2015, Amman. All subsequent quotations from Mr. Ibrahim are taken from this interview. Translations from the Arabic are my own.

43 Boikutt, interview with the author, March 30, 2015, Amman. All subsequent quotations from Boikutt are taken from this interview, unless otherwise noted. Translations from the Arabic are my own.
these powerful sensations – of feeling the performer – or feeling the audience. Simply, these experiences on stage can act as validation for performers. They also, I think, point to politics in motion: as performers experiment with expression, audiences are exposed to articulations to which they may not be otherwise. When this happens in semi-public spaces, both the articulation and the reactions of listeners are felt multiply, from different directions. This call and response of receiving and giving affect are the political exchanges in these live musical events at the same time that they are absolutely central to the aesthetics of the genre and different performers within it. Having established a spatial understanding of concerts, and the centrality of feeling in order to discern the self in relation to others, I now want to propose tracing the building of tarab in rap concerts as a way to analyze and codify how these feelings circulate.

*Tarab*

Music is the way to the soul. You get people into trances, basically. If you have an audible algorithm, you can make them feel certain stuff. Basically, that’s lovely, it’s beautiful.

~Al Nather

In this dissertation’s introduction, I referred to seemingly uncontrollable emotional reactions (tears, shouts, etc.) in response to powerful performances of Arabic rap. I suggested these felt reactions of mine have in part driven a curiosity to explore other less tangible forms of political engagement in this genre of subcultural production.

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44 Mohammed Masroujy, the Palestinian DJ and rapper who goes by Al-Nather. Interview with the author, March 30, 2015, Amman. All subsequent quotations from Al-Nather are taken from this interview. Translations from the Arabic are my own. (Al-Nather heavily interspersed his discussion with me with English.)
Similar to but distinct from the Spanish *duende* and the Persian *hal*, Albanian wedding singing, the Tunisian *stambeli*, and the Moroccan *gnawa*, explored by other scholars of music, poetry, and performance, *tarab* is a term that describes both a traditional genre of Arabic music production and the audience-performer interactions and the affective condition evoked by the exceptional performance of live music, often associated with the genre.  

Ethnomusicologist Ali Jihad Racy’s foundational study on tarab culture provides the basic understanding for the term that I assume and then depart from here.

Pointing to the centuries-old use of the term in Arabic philosophy on art, Racy tells us that reference to tarab appears frequently in medieval Arabic literature. Of these, especially Majd al-Din al-Ghazzali’s work on proper modes of listening in music and in prayer was long the most developed work on the subject. Racy builds on these and other ethnomusicological literature in order to develop his own understandings of tarab as a state of rapture, an emotional blending that is transformative for subjects,

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47 While pointing to these sources, Racy also takes care to critique Glibert Rouget’s dependence, in the latter’s seminal study on trance, on these medieval sources in trying to establish understanding of contemporary music. While acknowledging the history of the term dating back to the medieval period, Racy is keen to define and analyze a contemporary musical practice corresponding to some characteristics associated with the term for centuries (Racy, *Making Music*, 197). See also Gilbert Rouget, *Music and Trance: A Theory of the Relations between Music and Possession*, trans. Brunhilde Biebuyck (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985).

and/or an overtly expressed longing invoked by a particularly powerful piece of music or poetry, and a desired state of spectatorship. Racy focuses his study in the twentieth century, in the urban centers of Cairo, Damascus, Beirut, and to some extent Aleppo, where tarab dominated a type of specialized, urban musical production, associated with particular patterns of listening. Most readily located in the careers and popularity of Umm Kulthoum, Mohammed Abd el-Wahab, and others of their generation, tarab music reached its peek during their lifetimes, and has since steadily declined in popularity.\(^{49}\) This tarab music is associated with songs written in specific modes, where the subject is almost always love, and is nearly completely dominated by an affective mode of longing. Tarab music is called such because of the tarab condition it has been associated with producing. Distinct from trance though it shares some of its characteristics, the tarab condition is an affective state induced by the processes of careful listening and exchange with engaged performers.\(^{50}\) In Arabic, it is often invoked in relation to \textit{saltanah}, or ecstasy, and \textit{wajd}, religious ecstasy or trance (especially in the Sufi tradition), but is

\(^{49}\) See also Virginia Danielson, \textit{The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century} (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997); and Jonathan Shannon, \textit{Among the Jasmine Trees: Music and Modernity in Contemporary Syria} (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2006).

\(^{50}\) Charles Hirschkind calls tarab “enchantment” that is “produced by the affective synthesis of listener and performer.” He also refers to it as “harmony” and “an intersubjective form enabling an exchange of feeling or an affective melding.” (Charles Hirschkind, \textit{The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics} [New York: Columbia UP, 2006], Kindle edition, locations 823 and 1153.)
nonetheless distinct from both. Tarab need not have a spiritual connotation; nor is it solitary, nor inwardly focused (like the experiences of saltanah and ecstasy).

Considering my focus in this study is not the music of Umm Kulthoum or others, but with Arabic rap, I am here less concerned with the twentieth-century classic music genre usually associated with the word tarab than with the affective condition frequently associated with it. My interlocutors are nonetheless intimately familiar with the style of popular music, often referred to as tarab elʿarabi [tarab music]. They consistently testify to its presence in their narratives of musical exposure as children and teenagers. Further, this music has been consistently sampled across the wide range of Arabic rap developed over the past thirty years (I return to this below). The style and form of tarab music is

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51 Saltanah is frequently related as an element of tarab. Saltanah is the ecstasy an individual can go into as a result of (mostly) playing music. Tarab more readily invokes the dynamic of elation or ecstasy invoked by exchange between performer and listener, what Racy calls the “transformative experience.” One can yusaltan (go into ecstasy) listening or playing alone. The same is not typically true for tarab. (See Racy, Making Music, 120-146.)

52 Rouget tries to make a firm distinction between ecstasy and trance. The former he confines to the religious experiences (the likes of those documented by the nun Teresa de Avila), which are solitary, quiet, and which the subject remembers clearly afterwards. By contrast, trance is the stuff of shamanistic rituals, and may be manifest in trembling, shaking, foaming at the mouth, swooning, etc., and is induced by music, drumming, or other noise, the experience of which few subjects are able to recall after the fact. His definitions are not always compatible with the translated terms he refers to, for example, other translators use the same words (which in Rouget’s study have completely opposite meanings) to describe different aspects of different terms. Neither am I convinced that there cannot be elements of what Rouget describes as ecstasy in trance. I return to Racy’s problematizing of Rouget’s work on tarab specifically with reference to its Arab subject matter later in this section. (See Rouget, Music and Trance, 3-11.)

53 On Oum Kulthoum and tarab see Virginia Danielson, “The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997), 139, among others. For distinction between singers in this genre and their ability (or not) to produce tarab, especially for the interesting contrast he draws between between tarab and sentimentality, see Martin Stokes, “Abd al-Halim’s Microphone,” in Music and the Play of Power in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia, edited by Laudan Nooshin (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 55-74. Furthermore, the relationship of tarab to spiritual practices, especially certain Sufi rituals, points to its presence of tarab outside this musical genre. See for example, Michael Frishkopf, “Tarab in the Mystic Sufi Chant of Egypt,” in Colors of Enchantment: Visual and Performing Arts of the Middle East, edited by Sherifa Zuhur (Cairo: American U in Cairo P, 2001), 233-269.
also sung (not sampled) in the work of the Hermel-based rapper Gaafar al Touffar, who is known for singing *mawwal* between verses or as the hook in his tracks.\(^{54}\)

What I am primarily interested in here is not *tarab el arabi* but *tarab el jumhur* [tarab of the audience]. That is, not the genre of music, but the reactions of the *jumhur* [audience]. Rather than dissecting the style of music in use, whether sampled or recorded, I want to propose tarab as a way of approaching audience dynamics in rap concerts and as a way to re-center the processes of listening to rap as significant.\(^{55}\) Racy’s observations continue to be useful here. A performer of tarab music himself, Racy tells us that that tarab concerts [*haflat*] rely on a specialized listening audience, on which the singer depends for responses that may include clapping, exclamations [*aiwah*! (right on!), *Allaah*! (Heavens!), *et al.*] rocking, swaying, etc. These reactions facilitate the performer’s own ecstasy and encourage him/her to *yitrabou* [go into tarab]. Moreover, Racy tells us the emergence of tarab depends in significant part on specialized listeners or *samiʿah*, who were trained, either through formal or informal instruction, how to appreciate the series of improvisations performed by vocalists and instrumentalists, themselves possessed by the trance-like condition of tarab.

On the heels of a small concert under spring rain in Amman, I asked Boikutt about what he discerned from the gathered audience’s reactions. His description is

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54 In classical tarab, *mawwal* is a sung piece of music before the formal song begins. Sung in dialect as opposed to standardized *fusha*, the mawwal allows the singer to demonstrate his/her ability to improvise a non-metrical melody.

55 Al-Ghazzali emphasized the significance of listening as meaning making. He writes, “There is no way of extracting… hidden things save by the flint and steels of listening to music and singing, and there is no entry into the heart save by the antechamber of the ears.” (Al-Ghazzali, translated and printed in Duncan B. MacDonald, “Emotional Religion in Islam as Affected by Music and Singing being a Translation of a book of the *Ihya Ulum ad-Din* of Al-Ghazzali with analysis, annotation and Appendices,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1901): 195-252, qtd. in Rouget, *Music and Trance*, 258.)
illuminating in unpacking tarab exchanges in rap concerts – in order to understand those interactions between audience and performer that establish whether or not the music is felt:

I found two people who were interested. I could tell from their faces. There was a guy up front, and there was a very open connection between us, he was exchanging with me a lot. I don’t mean to imply some deep analysis of his personality, but he was very clear and open with me. And there was another woman, she was standing in the back and she was giving me a lot of feedback on the flow. I’m not even sure if she spoke Arabic, but she was giving me feedback on the music. So there, I had two points in the audience. One guy is giving me feedback on the lyrics, and one is giving me feedback on the technicality, on the musicality. This was the perfect balance for me. At a complicated lyrical place I’d check in with this guy, for the flow I’d check in with the woman in the back; both cases I could see if it was good or not. Of course I was also checking in with other people who were there, but I would always return to these two points. I need this energy.

In this case, the “dialectical …intercommunication with others who ‘felt’ the music” seems predominantly to takes the shape of eye contact and slight movements of the head. Other performers at different events describe it in more obvious displays like shouts, clapping, raising both hands to the temples or forehead in an expression of shock or relief. The intensity of the exchanges can build and release over the course of a concert. In rap concerts, as in the traditional contexts Racy describes, the tarab state can suggest “loss of control” – jumping, shouting, or other releases of energy that may otherwise not be typical and at the same time be “physically empowering.” Regardless of the form it takes however, of central importance is that it is an exchange. Like the

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57 Ibid., 201.
rapper and DJ Dakn explains, “It’s question and answer, it keeps going. We’re in a circle and we all go into a trance together.”58

Performers thus refer to exchanges that rely on some of the traditional performer-audience interactions in hip hop concerts – like, for example, call and response. H. Samy Alim has suggested that call and response in contemporary US hip hop and rap music developed from similar interactions in funk music performances, like this basic one:

“[Rapper] Say ‘Hoooo!’ [Audience] ‘Hooooooo!’ [Rapper] Say ‘Ho! Ho!’ [Audience] ‘Ho!’ ‘Ho!’”; etc.59 Literature on call and response, sometimes called antiphonal exchange or communication, in hip hop studies, anthropological accounts of African musical forms, studies of preaching styles in African American churches, as well as assessments of protest strategies in Occupy Wall Street, all suggest that these responsive utterances are additionally significant in that they are able to create community during the performance event.60 Robert Farris Thompson describes call and response as “perfected social interaction” for its ability to bring individuals together to act as one body.61 Daniel and Smitherman concur adding, “call and response seeks to synthesize ‘speakers’ and

58 Interview with the author, March 30, 2015, Amman, Jordan. All subsequent quotations from Dakn are taken from this interview. Translations from the Arabic are my own.


61 Thompson, African Art in Motion, 28.
‘listeners’ in a unified movement.” Arab rappers and MCs, like their counterparts that perform rap in other languages around the world, also use antiphonal strategies to connect with and activate their audiences.

However, MCs and listeners I spoke with readily discern between what they call “hype” and what they call a listening experience that “biʿabi el rass” [fills the head]. The difference as manifest between two prominent Palestinian crews with pronouncedly different aesthetics will be some of the focus of a subsequent chapter. At the moment, I want to note that what my interlocutors call “hype,” or the excitement that comes from traditional call-and-response, where a performer is able to charge the crowd and excite them, is not always the kind of tarab I want to pay attention to here. The ability of the music to fill the head, is, however. This tarab can be much harder to notice visually, because it is not predicated on spectacular behavior (jumping, yelling, etc.); the feeling, however, can be much more powerful. Recall Sotusura’s recollections of the Ramallah Underground show in London. The performers were not very active or hyped up. There was little call and response. Sotusura says “all they had to do was hold the mic properly” and the communication of feeling was powerful enough that even non-Arab speakers were moved enough to tell the musicians afterwards they could “feel it.” The Lebanese rapper El Rass’s distinctions between a concert that hypes and one that does something else make this distinction very clear. He started by explaining to me how he notices the presence of tarab in his concerts:

For example, when they shout, when they cry. There are a lot of nuances, when you see a hall of three hundred people and you’re spitting your shit and no one is moving a thing. They’re staring and you can see that they

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really want to get every word you’re saying, you can feel that, compared to a public for example that only reacts when you say something provocative or very catchy. You can see the difference between the different kinds of reactions. And it’s not only a question of different kinds of publics, sometimes it’s your responsibility too to take the public to this kind of place. As opposed to keeping them in the “shout out” place, in the “hype” thing. A lot of people would see a successful show as a super hype thing. For me this is not an ideal show.

Super hype — when they’re dancing?

Or like you know when it gets shouting and people going crazy and put your hands up and whatever. For me this is not the ideal show. For me the ideal show is when people individually and internally are most affected by what I am proposing to them. And not on a simplistic, basic, bond of punchline-reaction, insult-reaction.

Filling the head, what El Rass calls “when people are most affected” – as opposed to hype – requires a more focused, active listening. Racy’s emphasis on the importance of what he calls “creative listening” points to the centrality of the audience in this form of performance analysis. Racy suggests this “creative listening” can be led by a specialized section of the audience, what Racy calls the sami‘ah, or “listeners.” These are the dedicated fans who fuel the performer with attuned reactions to delivery, rhythm, tone of expression. In other words, tarab is not manifest in just any response, but in a specific kind of delivery within the framework of the performer-listener call and response. Racy tells us “proper listening requires the display of reactions that are both genuine and idiomatically correct.” In other words, the communication of “feeling” the

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63 Racy, Making Music, 131.

64 Elsewhere, I have elaborated how sami‘ah may facilitate multilingual call and response in performances of “Long Live Palestine: Part Two” performed by DARG Team in Geneva. (See El Zein, “Call and Response and Arabic Hip Hop in ‘the West.’”)

65 Racy, Making Music, 39.
music in the reactions of samiʿah is nuanced. This active listening communicates to the performer what is working – what “is felt” and to what extent, as in Boikutt’s recollections about the concert at Jadal, above.

Sprinkled throughout the jumhur, or general audience, the specialized listener helps in part to shape the appropriate reactions and who deliver the most useful feedback to performers. The samiʿah may include musicians (other rappers and DJs for example in my context), but usually they are just dedicated fans. Racy says that the “samiʿah can be viewed as an in-group.” These audience dynamics also appeared in the rap concerts I am concerned with here. Asked if he noticed characteristics particular to rap audiences, the owner of a music venue in Ramallah responded thusly:

A rap audience is different, specific. [They are] more of a community. People come in a group, like maybe ten of them and they know each other well. Audiences of other bands are more spread out. [In a rap concert], there will always be the first two rows, full of loyal listeners. They’ll always be there, and you’ll see them in all the rap concerts. And then the rest of the audience… they’re varied.

In these recollections, the owner recognizes the presence of a specialized listening crowd within the general public at rap concerts. Importantly, he offers that the presence of the samiʿah is unique to rap concerts among the other genres of music (rock, jazz, DJ parties) that he hosts in his venue.

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66 Racy adds: “the ability of the samiʿah to listen and feel is manifested in a culturally established vocabulary of gestures, facial expressions, body language, and verbal exclamations, that all express their genuinely felt tarab sensations…[their behavior]…forms basis for meaningful performer-listener interactions.” (Ibid., 41.)

67 Racy writes that the samiʿah “may either cluster together as a substantial constituency in a small musical gathering or may be ‘sprinkled’ as individuals or small ‘pockets’ of individuals within large audiences as public performances.” (Ibid., 40.)

68 Ibid.

69 Sami Said, co-owner of Beit Aneeseh, now Radio. Interview with the author, December 7, 2014, Ramallah. Translation from the Arabic is my own; emphasis is original.
Racy argues that tarab induced by this listening is impermanent; tarab lasts a few moments or, at most, a portion of an evening: it is transient, fleeting. The effects of tarab may include disruption of the perception of time: seemingly speeding up or slowing down its passing. Predominant among the sensations aroused by tarab is the sense of empowerment it induces—physically, musically, emotionally, causing reactions, performances, or expressions that may not otherwise be typical. Significantly these felt sensations connect audiences to each other. As Racy, leaning on the qanun player Amin Fahmi expands, “listeners experience an elative sense of surrender, a feeling of *communitas* that… binds them together as citizens of the tarab nation.”

Indeed, this phenomenon—where an individual, subjective sensation encourages the “imaginative awareness of others” evokes the spatialized subjectivity proposed by Massey and Gatens and Lloyd, with which I opened this chapter. What are we to make of the proposition of a “tarab nation”?

Perhaps most compelling to me in the characteristics Racy ascribes to tarab is its conceptual elusiveness— that is, tarab is not partial to a particular ideological expression or belief. It is surely tied to the lyrical expression involved, but it need not depend on the articulation of a particular political project. Racy suggests that tarab is “an ethos that is felt rather than something that is merely conceived or visualized.”

Further, neither is the emergence of tarab tied to a specific emotion or affect. Racy takes great care to emphasize the distinction of tarab from emotion-specific descriptions of sentiments or

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70 “Tarab nation” is Racy’s phrase, extrapolated from the following quotation from Amin Fahmi: “When I used to listen to the Shaykh [Zakariyya Ahmad] as he sang and acquired saltanah in his singing, I always imagined that he was an uncrowned king…he took control of his listeners and captured their senses…They would look up to him with exaltation and reverence, as if they were the subjects of a nation whose name is tarab” (qtd. in Racy, *Making Music*, 124).

71 Ibid., 174.
feelings. Instead, echoing statements from his own interlocutors, he asserts “al famn ihsas” or, “art [music in this case] is feeling.” Differentiating it from both sentiment and emotion, Racy explains that this feeling “is best interpreted as something resembling… the concept of ihsas… [which] stands for “feeling” (rather than ‘feelings’ in the plural) and is not committed to any particular emotional or sentimental profile.” Ihsas as he identifies it, and as it means in Arabic, means something closer to a physical sensation, a feeling. And it is this meaning that I also want to invoke when I propose the phrase “feeling politics” as a methodology for the political ethnography of subcultural production. But before moving on to address this proposal, I want to return to the subjective yet interrelational aspects underscored in the presence of tarab as active listening, to the ideas of communitas that may be engendered by the emergence of tarab. I will do this via a detour, however, to address the some cultural assumptions invoked by this framework.

Racy notes that Arab audiences’ emotional responses to live musical performances captivated the interest of eighteenth and nineteenth century Western observers of the Arab world. He points to the orientalism that allowed observers like Guillaume Andre Villoteau to comment on Egyptians’ “bizarre display of passion.” Racy argues that it is orientalism that allowed these authors to postulate about the emotional, hysterical, or childish essence of Arabs based on behavior that, in comparison to British, French, and German norms in concert etiquette, seemed quite alien. In

72 Ibid., 198-202.
73 Ibid., 203.
74 Qtd. in ibid., 1.
deepening an understanding of tarab from the perspective of both scholar and performer of the genre and the affective condition associated with it, Racy takes great pains to distance himself from even twentieth century ethnomusicological studies. He deplores claims like Rouget’s, for instance, that the Arab listener

is encouraged by his upbringing to cultivate this emotion, sharpen it, exacerbate it as it were, and not only give it free expression but make it explode, and express this explosion in the most spectacular way.75

Racy is right to point out that this type of analysis, despite being frequently fronted by explanations that seem to deny cultural essentialism, nonetheless perpetuates it. Rouget’s efforts preceding this passage only shake a bias about an “innate Arab temperament” to place it instead on an Arab “sociocultural phenomenon”:

It is indeed hyperesthesia that is involved, it seems, at least relative to what we late-twentieth-century Europeans see as the norm. But to what should be attribute it? I trust everyone will agree we cannot see it as some natural and innate quality of the Arab temperament. We are clearly dealing with a sociocultural phenomenon (even though one could just as easily interpret our relative indifference to music as resulting from a veritable form of anesthesia of our musical sensibility; in which case this would then be our culturally specific characteristic).76

Whether the “sociocultural phenomenon” is “ours” or “theirs” makes no difference, the essentializing function remains.77

It would be a great shame if my proposal to apply an interpretation of tarab to audience dynamics in Arabic rap were interpreted as an invitation to understand these audiences or these performers, the politics that seem to be in process, their lyrical expression, or their behavior otherwise as particularly “emotional.” My proposals in this

75 Ibid., 299.
76 Ibid., 298.
77 See discussion elaborated in the Introduction to this dissertation.
chapter of “feeling politics” and recognizing tarab in order to do so are not an attempt to orientalize my interlocutors or to understand their politics as either hysterical or innately emotional. I should think that the concept of tarab in music and in audience behavior – as a way of understanding feeling aroused by performance and as analyzing how music is felt – could be a productive tool of analysis in a number of cultures and performance styles. I see no reason why it cannot be applied to some forms of hip hop elsewhere, especially hip hop resembling the early political roots of US hip hop (see for example, Sotusura’s recollections, above). As should be clear in my differentiation of “hype” and music that “fills the head” neither is this proposal of tarab as performance analysis an invitation to haphazardly apply it to every instance in which one discerns audience/performer call and response. Rather, if I am successful, my attempts here to unseat the phenomenon of tarab from the genre with which it has recently been associated in ethnomusicological literature should be a productive theoretical and methodological move for the study of other types of performance. The framework of tarab seems to me more attached to the nature of some live performance than any cultural essence. My intention in using the term is to attempt to adapt – and to introduce into English discourse no less – a concept of Arabic musical theory and listening analysis to the discussion of contemporary live performance. Tarab is just as valid a framework of performance analysis for these live events as any number of other models of spectatorship touted in recent years.

The analysis of political space I elaborated in the first section of this chapter culminated in the proposal to “spatialize subjectivity.” By this I meant recognizing the self in relation to others, specifically by rooting an understanding of community in the
felt sensation of the body and its proximity or distance to other bodies. I pointed to theory building on Spinoza’s work that suggests that it is only through the felt body that we imagine others. Rap concerts are rife with these processes of feeling. As performances of live music, they are ideal events within which to elaborate further this conceptualization of self and other through the analysis of performance. On the philosophical importance of recognizing the felt experiences of listening to music, Judith Becker writes:

[W]e experience music with our skins, with our pulse rates, and with our body temperature. To subscribe to a theory of musical cognition which cannot deal with the embodiment of music, of the involvement of the senses, the visceral system, and the emotions is to maintain a Cartesian approach of mind/body dualism.  

Building from this, I suggest that offering an analysis of Arabic rap that does not consider the felt experience of listening to it, is to relegate its analysis to the traditional study of music as text (whether lyrics or beats), and to confine a study of the politics therein to the rational workings of logic (the mind), as opposed to the materially felt experience of interacting with others in space (the body). It is indeed to continue to perpetuate this dualism.

How the music is felt is important. All the more so because, as I have been working to elaborate, the processes of an individual feeling the music herself are intimately intertwined with her processes of perception of the communities within which she can imagine herself. Earlier, I referred to Fahmi’s invocation of a “tarab nation” – or an imagined, ephemeral community in the presence of tarab during live concerts. This concept points to something that is felt internally, communicated or shared with others, fleeting, and empowering. I also referred to literature on call and response which

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similarly can bring into being a feeling of community with its enactment. Central to the political significance that may be attributed to rap concerts as a result of the presence of tarab during them may lie in the sense of self in relation to other that it evokes.

Importantly this fleeting, empowering felt self in relation to felt others is unique from the models of audience rapport and communitas largely based on visual (as opposed to aural) stimulation offered of late by scholars of theatre and performance. Erika Fischer-Lichte’s *autopoeitic feedback loop* for example, describes exchanges between performers and spectators in avant-garde performance practices since the 1970s.\(^79\) This concept applies to various performatic arrangements wherein the roles between spectators and performers are reversed (spectators act, performers watch or listen), community is generated, and intimacy and distance in the performance space is actively negotiated. Performances Fischer-Lichte considers do not represent community generation or intimacy, rather, “…they actually create instances of these processes. The spectators become actors and in so doing having an important effect on the course of the performance itself.”\(^80\)

Significantly for my study, and especially for the analysis I offered in the previous chapter, all of Fischer-Lichte’s examples require quite spectacular behavior on behalf of the spectators in order to confirm their “transformation” into actors. Audiences of Marina Abramovic’s *Lips of Thomas* moved to stop the performance itself, covering the artist with their coats as she lay crucified upon blocks of ice. Similarly, some of those who attended Joseph Beuys’ action in 1964 at the University of Technology in Aachen,

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\(^80\) Ibid., 40.
stormed the stage and punched the artist until he bled from the nose. Taking an example from music, attendees to David Tudor’s 4’33” audibly and vociferously voiced their disapproval, shouting and throwing things onto the stage when the pianist sat in silence, refusing to play a single note. The feedback loop Fischer-Lichte indicates as transformative is, in the examples she presents, categorically manifest in quite spectacular behavior on behalf of those audiences supposed to be passive. The passive spectator becomes active through the manifestation of spectacular behavior. This is precisely the problematic theoretical cul-de-sac I identified in the previous chapter. When we locate political activity in the behavior of individuals who act out, we are perpetuating the need for apolitical, passive activity, from which only a few gestures can emerge as politically significant. While this celebrates some individual choices, it actually necessitates the continuation of “apolitical” behavior, against whose background some gestures appear transformative.

The interactions I am talking about when tarab emerges in rap concerts also point to the reality that live performance is co-conceived, or at least dependent on a live audience. However, the reactions that rappers are going for are not the spectacular transformations from passive actors into active spectators, which Fischer-Lichte talks about. As the DJ Dakn told me, “It’s energy going back and forth, you play with it, it’s like soccer.” Or as the Syrian rapper Bu Kolthoum put it,

At the base it’s about energy. I grab a stone of energy and throw it at them [the audience], and I’m waiting for a response. I throw a spark, like they say. The response they give me allows me to respond again with something stronger. It gets me higher, higher, higher, and this lets them come with me on this trip. If I get to a very high spirit, I know 100% that they are with me. But if I sing and there’s no response, I can’t.
Contrary to some theatrical presumptions about the passivity of the spectator, rappers assume their listeners are already active, it is about bringing them “on the trip,” in order to feel the music. Audience reactions are about communication, presence, and feeling, not the transfer or transformation of subject positions. Dakn again:

Sometimes when I’m spitting verses, I close my eyes. But within the first four lines you can notice what’s happening in front of you. And from there it becomes clear if the listeners are political, or if they’re not into arts, or into whatever… from their feedback I can tell if they know what’s going on. I can also tell if they understood me but it wasn’t satisfying enough for them [in that case] that means I need to work on myself. You also have to build from one concert to the next.

The importance on feeling (as opposed to vision) is made so clear in these remarks, where Dakn admits in four lines he can tell what’s happening with his eyes closed. The goal is feeling this proximity or distance, and the satisfaction or dissatisfaction from it, not the agitation or provocation into a certain type of action, or any spectacular behavior.

In fact, the emphasis on correct forms of listening, implied in all these interlocutors’ reflections, suggests that the radical transformations of the position of listener/performer would not be welcome. As evidenced in these recollections, audience reactions not only let him know his weaknesses, but if the audience even “knows what’s going on.” Dakn is referring here to a definitely understood framework of behavior, within which comprehension and communication can also not be faked. Within this understanding of audience-performer interactions, the goal is in fact not to be spectacular or to produce spectacular behavior outside the understood framework, but to recognize and feel the presence of those present. This points to an understanding of the act of listening as

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81 Judith Becker elaborates at length about negotiations of “believability” in trance (Becker, Deep Listeners, 30-32); and Racy discusses the sincerity of audience reactions in depth in the context of tarab listening (Racy, Making Music, 37-39).
always already active; one needn’t catalyze a spectacular gesture in order to overcome an inherent passivity.

When asked if tarab exists in rap concerts, most performers confirm its presence. The great majority of the MCs I interviewed positively related the presence of tarab – or particularly charged exchanges with their audiences – in concerts as a central part of the value of the live concert itself. In cases where musicians and audiences affirm powerful exchanges of feeling but hesitate about whether or not to call it tarab, the value placed on tarab-like exchanges is still high, pointing to the primary machine of pleasure in rap concerts, for both performers and listeners. The hesitation about whether or not to call these sensations tarab in rap concerts may come from the discomfort with what seems like an anachronism, applying a classical term to contemporary performance. Other times, it may come from the reality that many listeners of Arabic rap also listen to and enjoy the classical tarab. The patterns of listening to the latter (and frequently the company within which one finds oneself when doing so) are markedly different from the patterns of listening to the former. Most notably because classical tarab concerts are now somewhat rare in these cities, listening to this music will likely be confined to the home or the home of a friend, playing or replaying familiar recordings, the extent and depth of whose satisfaction is largely familiar. In most ways these jalsat [gatherings] will be quite different from the rap concerts I describe below: in terms of audience, in terms of affect, and in terms of energy. For some, I think that makes also describing the interactions in rap concerts as tarab difficult to accept.

My goal is to make a convincing case for why tarab can be applicable to rap concerts, primarily by focusing on the shape of the interactions and sensations shared
between listeners and performers. For a moment, however, I want to indulge a brief
digression into content, in order to explore the political potency of these feelings and
sensations. While I have been using standard translations of tarab as ecstasy, trance-like,
and so on, at a very basic level, tarab means “agitation” or “movement.” To be affected
by tarab in a musical context like the ones I discuss here, means to be moved by the
music. Al-Ghazzali tells us that the subject of the medieval songs that moved listeners in
his time was the love of God. It is for that reason that al-Ghazzali’s treatises are on the
proper forms of listening: how to be moved (and how not to be moved) by the love of
God. In twentieth-century tarab, Racy suggests the subject of most tarab music was
heterosexual love: sweet hearts, forbidden love, slighted love, betrayal, alienation. He
offers that the development of some lyrics about camaraderie, friendship, and drinking
can be traced back and occasionally conflated with love of God. Regardless, we can
imagine al-Ghazzali’s shock (can we not?) at the secular, profane, and perhaps much
more explicitly erotic nature of the lyrical longing in twentieth century tarab in
comparison to that of the twelfth century, in which he wrote.

A great number of contemporary rap lyrics also deal with longing – not for a
sweetheart, for God, nor (explicitly) for camaraderie and drink – but rather for any
number of things taken, lost, missing, or otherwise non existent. While not taking a lover
as the subject, many, many Arabic rap lyrics articulate sentiments of betrayal, of
spurning, or deceit. Most powerful pieces articulate some form of alienation – from self,
from immediate community, from international understanding — that may be the result
of local corruption, colonialism, occupation, stereotyping, and so on. While these lyrics
are not articulated in an affective register we associate with love-lust or despair, much of it, I think clearly fits a mode of longing.

It is perhaps for this reason that twentieth-century tarab sampling works so well in contemporary Arabic rap. Consider a track I will discuss at length in the Ramallah chapter: Ramallah Underground’s “Khaleeni ʿAyeesh” [“Let Me Live”]. The track opens with a sample of Oum Kulthoum singing a line from her piece “Amal Hayati” [“Hope of my Life”]. Oum Kulthoum’s piece is about a love affair that is ending – khaleeni ʿayeesh is a plea to be allowed one more day in the company of her beloved. Her refrain takes on a very different meaning sampled under Boikutt’s verses. The phrase “khaleeni ʿayeesh” sung between verses about the impossibility of resistance (and the hypocrisy of the diaspora) still literally means ‘let me live’ but here it is directed at the forces of the Occupation as well as political discourse about what one should and shouldn’t do under Occupation. The lyrics I excerpted in this dissertation’s introduction “I try to forget but politics pulls at me/ I tell her let go, I’m not interested/She tells me I’m a part of your life you won’t be able to resist me,” also by the Ramallah Underground, similarly position political struggle as a tiff between lovers (not least of which is evident in the anthropomorphism of “politics” as a woman). There are dozens and dozens of examples of this politicized longing and frustration in the work of the musicians I deal with here.

This affective articulation of desire, betrayal, or slighting in an overtly political context (Occupation, corruption, diaspora, etc.) should not be confused with pieces in which rappers directly address the subject of love or romantic partnership, a growing subgenre. This subject, which is a favorite suggestion among journalists, enthusiasts, or musicians themselves who declare politics “gets boring,” has seen different periods of
interest and growth. But this is not what I am referring to.\textsuperscript{82} I do not want to associate the powerful tarab I think can exist in rap performance with individual songs that discuss love. I am rather talking about an affective mode of longing when the topic is not overtly romance.

It seems to me that the jump from longing for a lover to the longing for some political alternative, the end of Occupation or colonialism, or another becoming, not yet arrived, is not that dissimilar from the jump in subject matter from the love of God in the twelfth century to the love of a lover that dominated tarab listening in the twentieth. If tarab can be equally found in lyrics addressing both of these subjects, it may surely structure the longing for neither a specific, omnipotent power, nor a specific, unattainable lover. Tarab can also be manifest in the longing for something politically evasive and as of yet unattained. Similarly, someone else expressing that longing can relieve the pressure felt on the individual listener.

For example, Rouget takes from al-Ghazzali the example of a woman taken by her husband far from her homeland. One day when she is off to gather water, she hears someone singing about their own homesickness. The woman is so moved by the music she faints and dies. This is an (rather extreme) example of being moved by the music, or feeling tarab. This anecdote highlights how the feeling of homesickness was already present in the woman, but the surprise of hearing someone else articulate it, and set to music, brought that feeling out and moved her to (in this case a rather dire) ecstatic

\textsuperscript{82} A most welcome reflection from a fan came during the artists talks of the Word is Yours Festival in Amman in October, 2015. Discussion on the panel had turned to the subjects addressed in Arabic rap, and the need to diversify subject matter. The young half-Jordanian/half-German woman sitting next to me turned and whispered, “What I like about Arabic rap is that it’s not misogynistic. They insist on writing songs about their love lives, why? To make it misogynistic??”
climax. Nonetheless, this tarab still relieved her (one might say) of the painful feeling of being far from home.

Listeners of Arabic rap similarly point to a release when they listen to specific pieces. If we were to follow the framework of resistance we are so eagerly told should exist in this genre, it seems at the very least the anger articulated by performers in their lyrics (rage, I was told more than once) should translate to the audience, inspiring them to pick up rocks, and make revolution – or whatever artistic “resistance” is meant to catalyze. On the contrary, however, most listeners affirm they feel relieved or relaxed after having attended a rap concert. DJ Sotusura offers his reflections having watched audiences for over a decade:

This guy on stage relieved them. He said everything that was on their minds so they relax. They don’t come out of the concert, “let’s break shit!” I think rather they come out of it feeling like, “wow this was good for my soul to hear someone say what I can’t say.”

This points to the pleasure in tarab listening during rap just like during classical tarab or the medieval example. Similarly, audiences of Oum Kulthoum did not exit her concerts heartbroken and weeping. Rather, even if there is heartbreak at play within the individual drama – indeed especially if this is the case – the musician pulls out and relieves the longing via the emergence of tarab. My suggestion is that the same can be true whether the subject of longing is the singular God, a specific lover, or an abstract politics. This is why I think it valid, for political analysis no less, to engage with an analysis of tarab in rap concerts. This relief felt together in the presence of the MC’s articulated expression is the beginning of the felt self in relation to others that tarab is able to generate.
At the same time, this is not the same effect Augusto Boal writes of when laying out the politics of Aristotelian catharsis.\textsuperscript{83} When Boal writes about how Aristotle’s “coercive system of tragedy” functions, he argues that disruptive politics are purged from the body politic via their representation on the stage in this kind of play-making. The audience leaves the theatre less likely to confront the fates because Oedipus has done so. The protagonist’s indulging his own hubris leads the spectator not to want to do the same. This is not the same kind of catharsis I identify.\textsuperscript{84} The feeling of tarab I am talking about can be empowering, and thus politically potent, \textit{while} it provides relief. As I mentioned, this feeling stems from the felt sense of self in relation to others. This relief is not catharsis in a lesson received from the performer or his or her message. It is a felt confirmation of not being alone, of feeling self in relation to others, of feeling longing \textit{with} others. To understand this relief, its \textit{tarab-ness} as it were, is to acknowledge longing and relief simultaneously – this is the impact of the “emotional blending” I will address shortly.

There is a final note about emotion as reflected in longing and with regards to the Arab context to be mentioned here before moving on to see how this model differs from other discussions of politics in Arabic music and rap. I affirmed above that Arabs are not more emotional than other groups of people, neither is “their” political articulation more hysterical, hot-headed or otherwise prone to feeling than that found elsewhere. In specific ways, however, the political history of the Arab world today is marked by loss, and this loss is outwardly recognized as such in ways that the political defeat of progressive forces


\textsuperscript{84} Not least because of the spectator’s passive state in this form of theatre that Boal presumes.
elsewhere on the planet is not. The continued presence of the Israeli Occupation, the still felt defeats of the wars with Israel of the previous century, the failure of pan-Arabism, and in the past ten years the devastating counterrevolutions in Libya and Egypt, the rise of fundamentalism and ISIS, and the recent occupations and divisions of Syria and Iraq mark Arab political reality today with an inescapable sense of loss. This loss is much different, both affectively and to the extent to which it is felt and accepted, than the felt decline of “the Left” in Western Europe and North America, or the millennial “malaise” we are constantly being told is disturbing the youth in the US. It is not that Arab politics are inherently emotional or that Arabs are inherently political, it is that political history at this moment in this region is – I think it is safe to say – and perhaps especially among this generation of 18-35 year olds, felt to be full of failure and defeat. The anger and longing that emerges in some tracks of Arabic rap is tied to this material, political reality.

*Revolutionary song in the Arab world*

The conceptualization of feeling in rap concerts I am elaborating here allows for an analysis that other studies of the political valences of Arabic music have not be able to access. Political study of Arabic music – whether or not they revolve theoretically around a notion of resistance – has most typically been conducted in an analysis of song as political vehicle. While genres and particular singers are recognized for their proximity to politics or their manipulation to political ends and genres are recognized as part of

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85 Virginia Danielson considers for example the political effect of Oum Kulthoum’s oeuvre and her relationships with poets and politicians alike (Danielson, *Voice of Egypt*, 126-146); Christopher Stone considers the political impacts of the Rahbani family before and during the Lebanese Civil War.
political and cultural life, musicological readings, in depth lyrical analyses, and
discussion of politics in music have regularly been analyzed through individual, iconic
songs.86 This attention has produced a veritable repertoire of Arab political song in the
twentieth century, where the influence of cultural forms like the *dabkeh*, political
movements like Nasser’s state-led socialism, and general changes like the advance of the
video-clip influenced the development of music within which individual songs became
prominent classics.87 Recent work on politics in Arabic rap music has continued in this
vein, highlighting particularly popular tracks as new anthems for the rising generation.88
It is worth noting that this critical attention on political song has perhaps
disproportionately focused on Palestinian artists or Palestinian subject matter, considering
the centrality of the Palestinian question in regional Arab politics. (Or, at least, the
centrality of the Palestinian question in Arab politics as perceived by an international
audience. Local political questions have always outweighed the regional ones, in the
Arab world as elsewhere – to the great expense of the Palestinians, no less.) My emphasis

(Carolyn Stone, *Popular Culture and Nationalism in Lebanon: The Fairouz and Rahbani Nation* [New
York: Routledge, 2008].)

86 Joseph Massad and Elliott Colla produced the first two iconic studies of this sort. David McDonald
continued in this tradition while deepening his analyses with musicological readings. (Joseph Massad,
Rhetoric of Egyptian Pop Culture Intifada Solidarity,” both in *Palestine, Israel, and the Politics of Popular
Culture*, ed. Rebecca Stein and Ted Swedenburg, 175-201 and 338-364, respectively (Durham: Duke UP,
2005); David McDonald, *My Voice is My Weapon: Music, Nationalism, and the Poetics of Palestinian

87 See Rayya El Zein, “Review of: *My Voice is My Weapon: Music, Nationalism, and the Poetics of

88 DAM’s track “Meen Irhabi” [Who’s the Terrorist?] has proven especially susceptible to this approach.
See Sunaina Maira, “‘We Ain’t Missing’**: Palestinian Hip Hop – A Transnational Youth Movement,” *The
Centennial Review* 8 (2008): 177-178; Randa Safieh, “Identity, Diaspora and Resistance in Palestinian Hip-
Hop,” in *Palestinian Music and Song: Expression and Resistance since 1900*, ed. Moslih Kanaan, et al.,
69-81 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2013)
on tarab in performance rather shifts the focus away from the song as political vehicle and into deliberations of the political experiences of interacting during concerts.

This approach I am proposing, based in the recognition of the slow building of tarab, is also considerably different from most studies of the politics in “global hip hop.” Unlike much contemporary discourse about hip hop and rap in the US, rap outside of the US is much more readily associated with the early political roots of US hip hop and is almost always digested with an understanding of its political, if not “resistant”, potential. These political valences are often located within the social structure of rap production and consumption, in “empowering youth communities,” often associated with if not directly dependent on local economies of aid, NGO markets and cultural production, and international recognition thereof. Alternatively, politics may be located in the formation or expression of local, hybrid, or conflicting identity. These are different strains within the trend of postulations about rap as “resistance,” from which I hope my proposals here will allow my study to diverge.


Like a piece of theatre, a religious ritual, a sporting event, or a government ceremony, haflet rap [a rap concert] is marked by social expectations that change for the different phases of the event, each understood by the participants.\(^\text{91}\) The features of this performance event and the behavior of its participants are similar enough in the three case study cities of this dissertation to be recognized, and yet unique enough to be set apart from the concerts of other genres of music and other performance events. In many ways the features of the rap concert are similar to those in rap concerts in venues with comparable numbers elsewhere in the world. Similar to Racy’s assessment of the tarab music event, which leans heavily on Victor Turner’s classification of the phases of a performance/ritual, I characterize the haflet rap here as having four phases.\(^\text{92}\) Breaking down the performance event as such is a way to systematically pay attention to the formation of tarab, and thereby to notice the motion and interaction between audiences and between performers and audiences in the concert space. In my case studies, my excerpts from field notes provide thick description that typically hone in on one particular phase within the concert itself. The observations that opened this chapter, during the concert at the Shrine, for example, focused on the “warming up” period, as explicated below. Breaking down the rap concert in this way allows for a more systematic tracing of the emergence of tarab. Alongside my descriptions, which are formed from participant


observation and informal conversations with anonymous audience members, are specific, recorded recollections from musicians.

*Build up.* The concert announcement happens online between two and ten days before the event takes place. It consists of circulation of a poster designed specially for the event online (usually on Facebook, either by the venue itself or by the individual performers). The poster displays a title for the event – usually not simply the musicians’ names, but a title for the event – an album name, or another conceptualization of the reason for this concert, ticket price if applicable, start time, venue, and the performers. This announcement is part and parcel of word-of-mouth communication. Not all attendees hear of the event through Facebook or social media. Audience and performer interactions begin in this phase, with audience’s enthusiastic assertions that they will attend, regrets that they cannot make it, questions about whether there is new material, and performer responses, including encouragements “not to miss it” and assertions about the one of a kind nature of the event.

*Opening of the house.* The time listed on the announcement is anywhere between one and two hours before the moment when the musicians first take the stage. Between the time listed on the event announcement and the emergence of the musician on stage, there is little or no music in the venue; house lights may be on, or lighting may still be in process; and the house is empty save the bartenders and other arriving guests (technicians may also be present). If the sound check has not happened, it may be in progress. The

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93 One of the many hats musicians are now wearing is that of graphic designers in order to produce poster and album covers. Producer Shermine Salwalha notes how this pressure on Arab musicians to perform all these different roles (designer, promoter, producer, mixer, booking agent, etc.) leaves less time for their development as musicians and performers. (Interview with the author, June 7, 2015; Amman.) Rappers also complain about how the lack of event organizers to facilitate live concerts means they perform less. Promotion, sound engineering, marketing, and performing is all too much, they feel, and effects their ability to produce content.
musician may occasionally be visible passing through the venue (he or she may also be acting as technician). However, MCs are typically not there just “hanging out.” Boikutt explains:

I like to be by myself before the show. That’s why I don’t like shows where there isn’t a backstage. I get uncomfortable. I end up outside in front of the crowd, and if I find myself talking to somebody I know for a while, then I get nervous. Because I end up not in my own energy, you know? My inner peace is distracted because that someone else will be talking to me about something else that doesn’t have anything to do with the show. I’ll be thinking about the first track and the second track. I need to sit and be thinking like this. So I like to be by myself. It doesn’t always work out. So I go to the bathroom a lot to be by myself. Sometimes I’ll do a little exercise in there if I can. If the bathroom is big enough I’ll do pushups, if it’s smaller I’ll do some stretches, so that my muscles can relax.

While musicians prepare, audiences socialize. They may smoke, drink, or order food. They may even leave the venue to do so. Many are coming en route from somewhere else; almost all attendees come accompanied by or meet friends and acquaintances in the venue. Audiences do not know everyone present, but even if they do not come in a group, they are sure to meet people they know once there. Audiences greet each other from across the venue, move through the venue to meet each other, introduce each other to others, etc. The significance of this phase of the performance lies in its establishment of the social milieu in which the musical performance will take place. Significantly, happenings outside the venue frequently flow into the space during this time. This may include recent political events, or neighborhood drama, from the large to the minute. This phase allows the space in the venue to calibrate – expanding or retracting as necessary, in order to absorb the different navigations through the city which audiences completed in order to arrive at the venue. Audiences get comfortable with each
other before getting introduced to the performers. Performers also speak of it as a significant time in their own preparation to perform.

*Warming the crowd.* The first performer, MC, or set of musicians to take the stage are usually younger (in experience, and usually age) than the MC of primary billing. Their stage presence is less developed, appearing nervous, jittery, or overly confident. Usually an MC who is not performing (or who may perform a single number later in the evening) will introduce them, encourage them, and direct the audience’s attention to the stage. This attention may not be very focused at first. Audiences will largely still be socializing and arriving, paying attention sporadically, or at the culmination of a particularly compelling track or refrain. Even during this period, however, committed fans or listeners in the audience – they may be friends, family, or just followers – of the less experienced MC will be listening astutely and will facilitate directing audience attention to the stage. This may take the shape of cheering “*aiwa!*” [right on!] and clapping after significant passages or at the end of tracks. Hearing these cheers, especially in the middle of a piece, encourages audience members who may be unfamiliar with the young MC, or engaged in socializing to direct their attention to the stage. Not everything is encouraged uncritically. Passages that are poorly delivered or poorly written will be politely ignored, as audiences turn back to conversation and refreshment, applauding more or less when cued by the hosting MC. This phase, while its energy doesn’t compare to the following phase, is important for several reasons. First, it gives younger performers the valuable stage experience they need while introducing them to a largely still unfamiliar fan base. Second, it facilitates a transition from the energy of the socialization of the previous phase to the more focused energy of the following phase.
This is the most experimental of the phases of the performance event, where less experienced performers try out themselves and their work, and where audiences feel out the kind of evening coming up. There is generally a progression of performers, leading to the most prominent name(s), again introduced by a well-known MC. This MC also works to focus audience attention, starting a sort of question-response. Joking is usually at a pleasant minimum, though the MC may show his or her charm, often exhibited in a kind of big-sibling mode, in anecdotes about the performers, for example. Venues may also play with the lights during this phase, gradually darkening the house further and lighting the stage more. Digital projections may begin intermittently; foot lights or spotlights may be introduced.

*The heat.* The boundary between this phase and the previous one can vary but one can be sure it has arrived when the overwhelming focus of energy in the venue is between the stage and the first two or three rows of people, standing, crowded up against the stage. It is frequently initiated by the request of an MC known to the audience to “come closer.” Where requests like “I need your energy,” “Where are you?” “What are you sitting for?” “You want me to sing and dance for you?” are not uncommon. These sarcastic jibes at the audience by the performing MC point to an understanding that the work of the performance is shared, and that without the focus and presence of the audience, the MC will not be able to perform. Boikutt explains:

> For me to be on stage, holding the mic, and people are seated, far from me, where I can’t get the body language from them: that’s very difficult. I don’t have fun in the show and I don’t feel like I’m connecting with the audience.

This phase also builds gradually, usually from this request to come closer to a coordinated call and response, or series of them, which leads to the most lyrically
complex, as well as most succinct and powerful political expressions, that also happen to be the best known by the audience. This is not to suggest that these are refrains familiar to all the audience, but that they are better known than others. Talented MCs are able to play with surprise in this phase because there is something to contrast with – that is, a new verse, refrain, or other introduction or substitution may appear new in contrast to what the audience already is familiar with: something that is difficult with newer material. Syrian rapper Bu Kolthoum notices the presence of this phase in a particular set of gestures:

The reactions I see are always [from listeners in] the first and second row, after that I’m kind of blind to the rest because of the light. I see their lips moving with the track. And I feel it when I deliver [islekh] a punch line and everybody’s like oohhnh! [he puts his hands on his temples].94 This body language by itself has a big effect. This is satisfying to me. It means they understand what I’m saying. It means they understand the work musically because they love the music, and at the same time they understand the issue, they understand what I mean by this punch line (because we don’t speak in a very direct way [shekl mubashar] in Arabic hip hop).95 I know they understand because the sound from the audience feels like the place is going to explode.

It is in this phase and interactions like these that the tarab present in the performance is most obvious. Performers speak of temporarily losing consciousness, of a feeling of being high (that is not drug-induced), riding the energy in the performance space, becoming something else, and arriving at a more complete realization of the work.96

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94 *Islekh* means “slaughter” or “butcher.” Bu Kolthoum is using slang to descriptively relate how he is “killing it” or how he powerfully delivers a punch line. “Deliver” here as a translation is woefully inadequate, but “slaughter” or “butchering” a punch line in English would convey messing it up, not “killing it.” Hence, I settle for this rather tame translation with the Arabic in parentheses.

95 He means he is content when his listeners understand the metaphors in his lyrics. When he says expression in Arabic hip hop is “not direct” he is underscoring its poetic value, the importance of playing with words, imagery, and symbolism, and relating ideas in a nuanced way.

96 Few of the performers I spoke with admitted to using drugs while or before performing. As for alcohol, the same tension that Racy refers to in balancing anxiety and concentration when imbibing alcohol and
Audiences may exhibit elements of trance behavior: the ceaseless flowing of the body or of the head in rhythm with the music, seemingly involuntary exclamations, or other exhibits of elation. During this phase of the performance the venue almost without exception becomes unbearably warm, regardless of the season outside. If smoking is permitted inside (and often even if it isn’t), the smoke in the room becomes thick. If there is a dominant mood conjured by the music or the musician, or by the effect of both on the audience, be it enthusiasm, aggression, distaste, confrontation, or otherwise, it becomes pronounced in this period. When I speak of a political feeling in rap performances, I am talking about the energy sustained in some events during this phase. During this phase, the multivariated elements of the performance, performer and audience, are flowing into a more cohesive energy. It is this that I refer to as tarab in these performance events.

Cooling. Concerts frequently culminate with a finale or series of them. Return for a formal “encore,” popular in other genres of musical performance in these cities, is usually skipped in rap concerts, or else it is nodded to by a symbolic gesture. When the performers have finished, the concert is definitively over and the performance space usually empties quickly. This is often mandated by the heat in the room; “cooling” frequently takes place outside the performance venue, or at least away from the stage,

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playing music also appears in the testimonies of my interlocutors. Most artists I spoke with talk of needing heightened concentration in order to perform well, despite having experimented with alcohol or marijuana in performance contexts. Even if artists do imbibe alcohol while performing, none credit it for the feeling of elation during performance. On the other hand, some musicians prefer performing in venues that sell alcohol. They consider that the presence of alcohol among the audience sometimes allows for more of a release of audience energy and reactions the performers seek. As Al-Nather puts it “it’s way more difficult to get people into our music if they’re not sincere. If there is peer pressure. Any kind of social pressure. It’s difficult because we’re not socially accepted. I think we can easily get people ‘tarab-ed’ if they’re completely honest with themselves. Alcohol helps with this.” Boikutt concurs: “It’s not that I prefer [there to be alcohol], it’s that I prefer that people be relaxed and comfortable and giving real responses. If they can do that without alcohol, great, but up to this point I don’t really see that happening without alcohol. So I prefer there to be alcohol.”
where audiences and performers can smoke, wait for rides, and otherwise dissipate into the evening. This phase, which may differ in length for individual participants releases the energy accumulated between the stage and house in the previous phase. It returns participants to the secular social mode with which the event began, coming down from the transformative tarab or elation which marked the previous phase. Rapper Bu Kolthoum describes his feelings after a concert:

When I come off the stage afterwards, I’ll be trembling. I don’t know why. I come out of the event the feeling *mhaddar*, zero, energy at zero, I mean no anxiety, no energy to try anything else. Zero thoughts. In my brain there will be nothing. I’ll be exhausted, but super relaxed. I come off the stage like a guy who’s let everything out [*fashsh khilqho w khalas*]. I come out of the stage like... like someone who’s been imprisoning something and just let it out. I come out like someone who was thirsty and has drank [*ʿatshan w shereb*]. I’m very “relaxed,” calm [*rayeq*], “calm.”

Likewise the Palestinian rapper Haykal recounts coming down from tarab after a free-styling session, or open jam:

I am not really always focused on what I’m saying [when free-styling], sometimes it will be the beginning of an idea, and sometimes it’s like when [the prophet] Muhammad said *biyji el wahī* [inspiration comes to him] or like when Tupac says “I feel his hands on my brain, when I write rhymes I go blind and let the Lord do his thing.” You understand what I mean? Not literally. And it depends. But it happens especially when I’m free-styling. I lose it, I start talking, talking, talking. Most of the time I stop by just leaving. I go somewhere else, or I go for a walk, or I smoke a cigarette. Sometimes I laugh, sometimes I cry, I don’t care. It’s only about doing the energy.

These testimonies point to a particular emotional release for the performer. Racy proposes the emotional “blending” to understand the affective exchanges in tarab dynamics. His attention to emotional blending in his construction of this feeling,

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97 Words in quotation marks originally spoken in English.

something felt between joy and sorrow, between longing and satisfaction, between empowerment and submission, between anger and relief, pushes concepts of affect and feeling in a productive direction. Racy argues tarab consists of “transformative blending, or “the creation of new blends that are no longer identifiable in terms of their inner, mostly emotional, ingredients, or no longer emotional in the familiar sense.” In other words, tarab consists of emotional blending that is both individual and shared. It is subjective, but it requires certain conditions. Furthermore, considering its affective nature – the emotional blending Racy suggests is intrinsic to it – the presence of tarab points to the kind of simultaneous heterogeneity that I suggest is also a necessary characteristic of audiences themselves – a collection of “bodies with [different] momentums.”

*Feeling through space*

In this chapter, I have proposed paying attention to how tarab is built is a productive way to trace the development of feeling in rap concerts. I suggested attention to feeling and sensation as a way to consider the “multiplicity of things and relations” in a concert space. Specifically, I find this productive because it allows me to discern emotions not in succession to one another but simultaneously (anger and relief; elation and discomfort; etc.). The intrinsic “blending” in tarab points to the powerful political experience of complicated attachments to self and community, while its outward

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99 Ibid., 203.

100 Racy offers: “The emotional impact of tarab renditions is subject to the listeners’ own interpretations, which in turn reflect their temporary moods, as well as their levels of musical initiation.” (Ibid., 216.)
manifestations allow for a way to consider and analyze audience behavior and performer-audience dynamics.

This is the feeling part. The discussion of “through space” that follows combines this analysis inside the concert venue with an appreciation of the physical, urban space which audiences traverse in order to arrive at concert venues. I alluded to this conceptualization of political space in the first section of this chapter. I am now putting these two sections together: feeling through space is a two-part process, both are spatialized. First, I want to consider a spatial understanding of the live concert event: the venue, the neighborhood, from where audiences arrive and how they leave. Then, I want to consider the spatialized dynamics felt within the concert space – how the music is felt, how performers and musicians communicate, and the feelings that emerge in the space when they do. This is what I call feeling through space, and what I elaborate as feeling politics.

In the case studies that follow, I document examples of feeling suspended between audiences and performer and/or other individuals in and around the performance space. I use performer and audience interviews to build an understanding of how tarab is built in different venues, at different moments, and with different audiences. Thus, I trace the development of tarab and its affective texture in different concerts and in the experiences of different musicians and fans. Importantly, my study and my use of tarab differs from traditional studies of tarab – I propose a qualitative documentation of its affective texture. This means I do not assume the same quality of tarab in all concerts, even while it is based on similar structure of expression (seemingly involuntary call and response, a powerful affective experience, audience composition, mix of committed and
casual fans, and rapport with the performer). I am introducing a qualified study of tarab as audience-performer relation; suggesting that the affective blending sustained within the framework of tarab interactions points to processes of politics in motion.

The ability to arouse tarab does not point to established political positions voiced with force, but to a combination of manner of expression, awareness, and feeling that is able to access the listener’s own politics in process. Its political potency lies in this combination of lyrical and affective delivery, which is primarily accessible in live performance, and the success of which performers gauge in their audiences’ responses to them. This potency is indecipherable, however, without an equally attentive appreciation of the materiality of concerts within urban space. So, my documentation of tarab feeling in rap concerts comes alongside a documentation of the changing urban space within which participants live and across which they traverse.

Feeling politics means combining sensation of the individual body in relation to other bodies with an analysis of the material volume of space. This points to the heterogeneity of stories-so-far and a recognition, like Susan Leigh-Foster emphasizes, that bodies do not go through space the same way.\(^\text{101}\) I suggest this to be a framework for a political ethnography of subcultural production. With regards to the particular case studies examined here, I have proposed that this may be achieved by following the emergence of tarab in concert venues situated within changing city neighborhoods. Critically, the experiences during rap concerts need not necessarily lead to more egalitarian, less misogynistic societies, neither must they portend greater capacity for

communities to respond to or retaliate against oppressive power structures. They may occasionally be a part of larger, progressive social transformations. But they need not be in order to find significance in this study. This allows me to offer research that dissects city spaces and relations within them as they are lived: without projecting resistance on them before hand, or attributing radical significance to them afterwards. I see little reason to attribute to rap concerts a single, radical affect, or a single political experience. But, I do see plenty of reason to see these events as rich societal cross-sections, rife with politics in motion, the eventual state of whose outcome is far from clear.

*Imagining the researcher: Or, my body and I (also) move through space*

“Mind is the idea of body.”

In bringing this chapter to a close and as an opening towards the case studies that follow, the perhaps obvious fact that as a researcher I also had feelings and also moved through space deserves some attention here. In a way, the academic articulation of my location as a researcher is perhaps as much a formalized response to the constant probing of identity and trajectory that were asked of me by strangers, acquaintances, and interlocutors over the course of this research, as it is now an ethical requirement in the writing up of my findings. In my own mind, this probing of identity and place is only the latest chapter in a lifetime of negotiating space (and my “place”) between the US and the Arab world.

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I am an Arab-American woman who speaks Arabic with an accent that is not quite place-able: outside of Lebanon, the accent is presumed Lebanese; inside Lebanon it is decidedly not. It is Palestinian, Lebanese, and American. Above all it is broken, based on a phonetic understanding of the spoken language (‘ammiyeh). The Arabic I speak is prone to mistakes and mispronunciations not typical among literate adults, based as it is on aural exposure to the language since I was a child and very little formal instruction. At the same time, my relative ease with language offers me access I would not have otherwise. My familial identity (my name), my familiarity with local dialect, with patterns of joking and understanding, with social expectation, and with political expression initially open the doors to intimacy and trust with my interlocutors that I would have had difficulty opening under different circumstances given my own personality (increasingly introverted) and the emotional journey that accompanied this research. That said, I look more like my northern-European grandmother than the imagination of “Arab” by either Western or Arab interlocutors. And perhaps more pronounced than my physical features or the structure of my speaking, I grew up in the US. Living “abroad” has forced the recognition that I carry myself in a culturally specific way: the way I walk, the way I dress (in terms of style, not exposure of skin), how I hold my body, the eye contact I maintain or dislike, all mark me as “foreigner” whenever I travel in the Arab world.103

The combination of these factors – the fact that I am quite obviously not “Arab” and quite obviously “Arab” at the same time – creates, I have been forced to notice, a kind of weird effect. Neighbors, police, salespeople, receptionists, waiters, busboys,

103 I offer this reflection as an exercise in self-awareness, not essentialism.
bouncers, bartenders, baristas, and strangers consistently remark with surprise “that I do not look Arab” in the middle of conversation. Meanwhile, friends of friends are often eager to discern my “identity package” with tests of language or attempted readings of the way I pronounce certain words. These kinds of tests are not unique to my person (I witnessed them tried out on others constantly) and most frequently come in attempts to (quickly) understand where one is coming from, and (quickly) decide whether to establish or dispense with trust.

I bother to mention all of this in an attempt to acknowledge perhaps some underlying exoticism that I carry with me unintentionally as a researcher, which is the product of hybrid upbringing. Asked to reflect on my position “in the field” (which is at the same time my only permanent home [in the case of Beirut], and where I “come from” [in the case of Palestine]), I have come to recognize that I frequently perform familiarity and difference at the same time. This can generate enthusiasm and curiosity that brings its own set of challenges and advantages as a researcher.

In Palestine for example, in the middle of the 2014 Gaza war and its aftermath, I was overwhelmed by the amount of sharing – of intimate details, of personal histories – to which I was warmly (urgently?) made privy in Ramallah, within weeks (sometimes within minutes) of meeting people. I came to recognize that politics were often projected upon me: as a “Westerner,” I was frequently assumed to be tolerant, open-minded, not religious, but also that I probably did not yet understand the difficulties, complicities, and betrayals of NGOs nor the specificities of local politics. At the same time, without making too much out of it, my company may have seemed to feel comfortable and familiar because we converse in Arabic.
The significance of language in my own mind was highlighted by my frequent recognition in social interactions with friends in Ramallah, Amman, and Beirut, of shifts of trust and limitations on sharing when the conversation was entirely in Arabic versus when, in the presence of non-native speakers, it turned to English or French. (This is the case even though my interviews were conducted in all three languages.) That this research was conducted for the most part during a particularly violent period of the “War on Terror” should not be sidelined. Without exaggerating its significance (and quite understandably, no less, considering the disastrous fall-out of the huge influx of NGO workers and other expats), I frequently perceived a tangible distrust of foreign observers in the different Arab communities which I wove in and out of. The difficulty of the Arabic language – and the fact that still relatively few non-Arabs communicate effectively in local dialect – makes of the language both a security blanket within which speakers can feel at ease, and an easy barrier to stave off strangers, or at the very least with which to invert the conceived power dynamic between “the West” and the Arab world.

The projection of familiarity upon my person through language or otherwise nevertheless in some cases profoundly unsettled me, in many cases because I had much less reason to feel either comfortable or familiar. One set of revelations about physical abuse in a romantic partnership in particular pushed me to the point of doubting the contours of what I was actually doing and forced me to reevaluate what it was I was hoping to theorize, or where I hoped my impact would be. Of course many researchers confront challenges of intimacy “in the field.” This is to recognize my own.
That I am a young woman who appears “unattached,” entering into what has been in my experience a predominantly male “scene,” has also been a significant part of my positioning within this research. My experience of it as such comes from several factors. Concert culture in the Arab world, as elsewhere, is first and foremost a social exercise. However, unlike New York for example, where a culture of music consumption and amateur listening is particularly cosmopolitan (indeed, where dilettante consumption of music is almost professionalized!), going to concerts alone in either Beirut, Ramallah, or Amman – as was absolutely necessary in my case upon arrival in each city – is a rather alien act, upon which, it should be noted, not terribly interesting or pleasant expectations attend. (This is not only a question of gender. A most welcome conversation near the end of my research with a rapper revealed his own experiences of hostility and confusion when he attends concerts alone, as work – whether it is to scope out a venue, or observe a colleague, etc.) My experience nonetheless of the scene as predominantly male, or as particularly charged with testosterone, comes from interfacing almost exclusively with men at concerts, most of the time not of my own volition, more often than not fraught with expectation and feigned confusion (“why so sad,” “why don’t you dance,” or if slighted, for example, “what, are you CIA?”), and all too frequently accompanied by intrusions into personal space brought on by the need to hear despite the sound system, and so on. There are of course women who consume this subculture, and as my stay in each city progressed, I met and, in all three cases, built or became part of friend groups of mixed gender where we exchanged and shared reflections, in the process of which attending concerts became less fraught and less open to misinterpretation. Part of a group,
my presence at a concert was obviously no longer solitary, and as such my being there as an observer or researcher was less noticeable – indeed it was probably invisible.

The majority of musicians I interviewed were also male. Of course there are exceptions and of course I made an effort to include them in this study. That this music production is generally dominated by men should not be surprising, however. (I find attempts to declare otherwise problematic: the search for token female performers is often informed by the discourses of resistance I discussed in the previous chapter). Moreover, in this gendered context, this researcher’s desire for an “in” occasionally presented some confusing choices. It is perhaps not at all evident what “a PhD about rap concerts” could possibly mean outside of an academic context (see last remarks in this section), and I think it is fair to assume that in many cases I was initially presumed to be a naïve, eager fan, with the attending expectations about sexuality that this social grouping is frequently presumed to embody. I felt this in the way the girlfriends of musicians occasionally reacted to me, in the complete (or deliberate) lack of attention to social norms some invitations to meet up conveyed, and in the near constant appreciation for the professionalism and seriousness with which I was treating the work in question – often articulated with respect or surprise in the middle of or upon conclusion of an interview.

While many anthropological or ethnographic researchers struggle with access to their interlocutors, in my case I was for a long time preoccupied – perhaps more than was necessary, though it did not feel so at the time – with structuring that access in order that I did not find myself in a position that would damage the reputation of the study. That said, I can assert (without surprise), that all of my in-person interactions with interviewees were full of mutual respect, especially as I both was given the opportunity to
explain my study and as I built a reputation for myself over the years. The impact of words of respect from one musician to his colleagues cannot be underestimated (vouching for me, as it were), and as my study progressed I found it less and less necessary to find ways to iterate my seriousness (it was assumed) or (interestingly) to assert or articulate my identity, which I believe somehow became less relevant.

My access to funds also clearly influenced my position in this research, in the most obvious way by getting me out of New York. At different times, I carried university funding, departmental support, NGO affiliation, or was part of a US government-affiliated program. I eagerly sought all these types of funding for years and uncritically accepted all kinds of support when my applications were finally successful. Without them, the breadth (and certainly length) of this research would not have been possible. Funders variously did put stipulations on research projects and potential interlocutors. In my case, however, at no point did a funder’s delimitations effect whom I spoke with or where I saw music performed.

However, to stop the consideration of how funding effects research positionality there would be to disregard how affiliation nevertheless marks a researcher. As I explore in the following chapters, the affiliation with NGOs or with the US government in my sites almost always carried with it a set of associations that were far from neutral. The words and names that conjure respect and prestige in some places can inspire very different associations in others. Knowing this, I nevertheless made it a point to try not to obscure the sources of my funding in conversation with my interlocutors (the publication online of my research affiliations I exercised more discretion over, for different reasons). I did this not only out of respect for the opportunities I was offered, despite the troubling
politics that I came to understand were in some cases attached with them. In the best cases, being forthright about affiliation (unexpectedly, and pleasantly) became a way to further conversation about opportunity, strategy, and access, deliberations many of these musicians also share. I adapted my presentation of where and how I was coming to a given interview depending on with whom I was speaking.

What most affected the locality of my research, however, and most relevant perhaps to the theoretical explorations in this chapter, was my material mobility as researcher through, around, and outside of each city. With the exception of the studios of Katibeh 5 in the camps of Bourj el Barajneh outside of Beirut, I confined my research (and myself as researcher) to the cosmopolitan centers of each city. That is, I have restrained my research to the districts where gentrification is most obvious, where the great majority of concerts are held. The most significant way in which the study is limited is thus in terms of class as it is reflected in the geography in each city. I spoke with musicians and audiences from across the economic spectrum. However, the physical space in question in this study is decidedly not the refugee camps around any of the three cities, nor the working-class neighborhoods of Dahiyeh (Beirut) or East Amman; it is rather the suburban sprawl of Masyoun (Ramallah), the bars and festivals of West Amman, and the pubs, clubs, and cafes of Hamra Street, Mar Mkhayel, Gemmayzeh, and Monot (Beirut).

I am of course aware that rap concerts have taken place in refugee camps around all three cities. Unfortunately, none of these took place during periods while I happened to be in any of these cities. These concerts appear in the reflections of musicians and fans, but as I did not have the opportunity to witness a single such event in person, I have
hesitated to the point of abstention to postulate about the audience-performer dynamics in such events. Moreover, and this is as much a question of methodology as the study’s limits, I deliberately did not insist, as far as my capacity as a researcher was involved, on access outside the cosmopolitan centers of each city. Where I was invited, I humbly tried to follow, and learned much (as is the case with Katibeh 5). My interviewees come from and live in a variety of neighborhoods and represent the spectrum of economic class. Whenever possible, I tried to leave interview location categorically at the interviewee’s discretion. But where I was not invited or did not have established pretext via which I could enter spaces outside the center of the city (an introduction, an interview, or a concert), I did not – in my capacity as data-gatherer or recording observer – try to enter.

This was a conscious decision based on my interpretation of what was appropriate considering the features of the performance of gender and identity just elaborated (how I am most frequently read by strangers), and what I set for myself to be the ethical limits of a project such as this one. I considered that attending concerts alone in West Amman, Masyoun, or Gemmayzeh to observe, to meet and talk with strangers, and to make connections to be a necessary part of my research. Trolling refugee camps to meet people or make connections I considered something else entirely. I considered it so despite knowing, thanks to the recollections of my interlocutors, that I may find other consumers and different frameworks for the consumption of rap in other neighborhoods. This decision for me was as much about ethics as it was about focusing research energy. The intrusion by “Western” researchers into the most downtrodden sections of each city, and the penetration of the most vulnerable populations by well-meaning cultural observers is a real problem, the disdain for which was articulated to me by more than one of my
interlocutors – and to which I had no wish to contribute. To put it another way, this choice of mine is marked by a refusal of trends in urban literature, what Massey calls “another form of eroticized colonization of the city… getting laddish thrills (one presumes) from rushing about dark passages.”104 Entering a refugee camp a handful of times would neither have given me the impetus to speak about the place or value of rap across the whole society (as so frequently happens in English language assessment of the genre!) or to pontificate about these neighborhoods in particular. I could have focused my project entirely on rap in a particular camp in each city, but doing so would mean I ignore most all live rap and hip hop, period, most of which depends on the cosmopolitan frameworks of the gentrifying city-centers.

Thus, part of my research choices in this regard is an emphatic refusal to fetishize the most vulnerable populations as the most authentic. Part of this is to acknowledge the very limited populism in concert culture, so often assumed in the discourses of resistance discussed earlier, in this genre of cultural production. And part of this is to appreciate both the foreignness (to me) and density of each of these three cities, despite the months I spent in each, and the need to limit and focus my scope. If it is not already evident, however, narrowing the geographical scope of my research, even if it is in some ways marked by class as reflected in the topography of the city, does not mean that class drops out of the considerations I pursue in each chapter. Over the course of the remaining chapters, the class dynamics attached to a certain kind of cosmopolitan consumption should become obvious.

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104 Massey, For Space, 47.
A final consideration about my positioning as researcher may be a consideration of my belonging inside/outside hip hop culture itself. I do not consider myself a “hip hop head.” Style-wise I do not think I can be read this way, and I do not pretend to boast this cultural expertise, as much as I have tried to catch myself up in my research since beginning this project. My interest in el rap el ‘arabi was at first concerned with the performance of what was to me fascinating and extremely personal political expression in the wake of the most exciting political developments since 1968. My own history of exposure to hip hop (in any significant degree) is very recent, and almost entirely attached to trying to understand the development of the genre in Arabic. My practice of participant observation was/is never styled, consciously or otherwise, as a part of b-boy culture, or the other attending stylistic or expressive elements of global hip hop. Out of respect for the musicians whose work I appreciate, I never attempted my own raps or beats. I expect there will be readers who will find fault with the lack of “inside-ness” I could thus hope to boast as a researcher and consumer of the genre. But I have decidedly tried to “keep it (more) real” by not making pretensions about own “hip”-ness, or “hip hop”-ness, as it were – with my interlocutors and readers, both.

The media fascination with performers of this genre has, for the most part, not been conducive to musicians taking writing about them seriously, or as serious work, or as stemming from serious interest or thorough study. It is my hope that I am able in the case studies that follow to respond to these musicians’ creativity and seriousness with the same – a testament to the fastidiousness with which they attend their own work.
Chapter Three: Ramallah

The Second Wave of Palestinian Rap

Overview

My first aim in this chapter is to draw attention to patterns that have distinguished rap production in Ramallah over the past ten years from rap production in occupied Palestine in the decade that preceded it. This encourages me to recognize the emergence of a different mode of production and consumption of rap music since roughly 2006-2007, what I propose to call a “second wave” of Palestinian rap. My second aim in this chapter is to explain how the production and consumption of the second wave functions politically. Following the theoretical elaborations I offered in the first and second chapters of this dissertation, I do this by tracing the emergence of tarab during second wave concerts. Having located the particular political feelings produced by this tarab, I then situate these dynamics in concert venues within the larger context of the city of Ramallah. This allows me to include a consideration of who is included and who is excluded in the production of this particular political feeling.

With few exceptions, most existing academic literature on Palestinian rap and hip hop understands Palestinian rap as an embodiment of the changing forms of youthful “initifada” and as an enactment of resistance against the Occupation. My research findings largely do not corroborate this narrative. I found that Palestinian rap today

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1 Research for this chapter was made possible by a June Bennett Larsen Alumni Research Grant, the Wenner Gren Foundation, and the Palestinian American Research Center (PARC). Thanks in particular to Penny Mitchel and Mark Ropelewski for facilitating this research.
largely does not engage or (re)produce an ethos of intifada, uprising, revolution, or resistance. In the pages that follow, I explore how the material negotiations of concert makers and concert-goers continue to be political despite not being intifada or “resistance.”

Exploring the political feeling in second wave rap concerts in Ramallah in my research quickly became less about finding a subcultural answer to the Occupation in rap concerts and more about comprehending one of the myriad ways in which life continues under it.\(^1\) The second wave of Palestinian rap can best be understood as an avant-garde musical subgenre whose consumers and producers are largely part of an “alternative” middle class in Ramallah. Initially, the politics of the second wave can be found in the ways in which they interrogate Palestinian politics by refusing the romanticism of traditional political narratives. Second wave rappers push on the contours of Palestinian struggle by refusing the politics of \textit{sumud} [steadfastness], questioning the intentions and existence of international solidarity and the cohesiveness of the diaspora, and interrogating, sometimes irreverently, notions of authenticity or heritage [\textit{turath}] and resistance [\textit{mouqawameh}].

In Chapter One, I pointed to the “putting into discourse” of resistance. There, I considered what calling cultural production “resistant” or “resistance” does. I asserted my interest in the production of power and knowledge that accompanies how artists are discussed. And I argued that the putting into discourse of cultural production as resistance

\(^2\) I spent approximately five and a half months between July and December 2014 based in Ramallah. The period, marked as it was by the kidnapping and burning alive of Palestinian teenager Mohammed Abu Khdeir and the Israeli Defense Force’s bombardment of the Gaza Strip in “Operation Protective Edge,” was undeniably a very tense one across the West Bank and throughout Israel. These political events had important effects on my research in ways I could not anticipate. For example, there was much less live music in Ramallah in the summer and early fall of 2014 than in previous or following years.
builds on specific racial imaginations. In this chapter, in addition to exploring briefly some of this racial imagination in existing literature on Palestinian rap in particular, I will explore how traditional narratives of Palestinian struggle build on specifically classed imaginations. I am concerned to pay attention to how second wave rappers represent the political and economic contradictions they observe and to how they refuse dominant political representations of Palestinian identity and struggle.

As mentioned, much existing literature on Palestinian rap is keen to underscore the capacity of this cultural production for resistance. To do so, authors have framed these artists and their fans as part of an international youth “movement.” This latter is frequently understood as being virtually able to pull artists out of the Occupation.3 Others have framed Palestinian rappers as part and parcel of ongoing local activism,4 whose lyrics are envisioned as tools of physical struggle.5

My hesitancy in this chapter to call these artists or the cultural content they produce “resistance” is encouraged by Ted Swedenburg’s ambivalence about the ubiquity of “the struggle paradigm” in Palestinian rap.6 More specifically, my concern is not only

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that the location of “resistance” in second wave rap may be inaccurate – it directly contradicts the testimonies of my interlocutors – but also that this narrative of locating resistance makes it impossible to discern and evaluate the political deliberations and interactions that do exist and that are taking place. Asserting that Palestinian rappers enact resistance against the Occupation may obscure an analysis of the politics of rap production and consumption under it. In addition, I argue that the reach of this essentially avant-garde musical experimentation in live performance is very limited. The limits of populism in this concert culture needn’t be reason for its dismissal. After all, hundreds of studies have focused on contemporary and historical avant-garde art movements. In this chapter I want to testify to the aesthetic innovation and political experimentation in this genre while also acknowledging the exclusivity of its concert culture. This should only prove contradictory if we assume certain romance about political struggle or creative expression in the Palestinian context.

My analysis of the deliberations and contradictions in my interlocutors’ testimonies has been markedly animated by Sherene Seikal’s very recent book, *Men of Capital: Scarcity and Economy in Mandate Palestine*. While dealing with a different time period than mine here, Seikal compellingly lays out how the historiography of Palestinian choices since 1948 has almost exclusively been narrated in the academe against the backdrop of Zionist victories (I expand on my use of Zionism in this chapter, below). She argues this has led to characterizations of the middle class as consisting of

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either loyal nationalists or colluding capitalists. Moreover, the historical failure of Palestinian capital to defend its national interests (I explore neoliberalism in the context of the Occupied Palestinian territories, below) – today combined, I would argue, with the acceptance among the middle classes of more globalized forms of culture – has “embarrassed scholars” and pushed researchers away from studies with Palestinian middle class protagonists. This has not only led to what Keith Watenpaugh calls a “paucity of work” on the Arab middle classes, generally; in the case of Palestine specifically, Seikaly argues convincingly that this has closed off avenues to understand politics and strategies in formation. Viewing Palestinian capital – like that middle-class cultural and economic capital invested in alternative leisure like rap concerts – as necessarily either of the revolutionary vanguard that can lead the struggle against the Zionist Occupation, or part of a “comprador” class that colludes with it leaves very little room for understanding the complexity of Palestinian social fabric.

I attempt in this chapter to illustrate some of the complexity of that social fabric. Moreover, to do so I lean on the theoretical discussion elaborated in Chapter Two.

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8 When narrating the middle class, Seikaly suggests that “Historians have used the divides between the comprador and authentic economic nationalist to explain late capitalism and the failure of the national bourgeoisie to uproot older forms of economic power.” (Seikaly, Men of Capital, 12.)

9 Ibid.

10 Keith David Watenpaugh, Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2006), 18; qtd. in Seikaly, Men of Capital, 12. Christa Salamandra’s work has also countered this tendency to ignore upwardly mobile and “elite” Arab protagonists as worthwhile subjects of ethnographic research. In the conclusion of her work on new consumptive practices of upper classes in Damascus, she writes, “Elite social statuses are being redefined through new consumptive practices, as ways of life are transformed into lifestyles of the modern sort. Such processes are rarely discussed in literature on the Middle East, where it is assumed, despite evidence of rapid and profound social transformation, that the old urban notables still know who they are—and are known by everyone else—and have nothing to prove.” My research leans on her attention to classes with economic and political power in a different Arab, urban context. (Christa Salamandra, A New Old Damascus: Authenticity and Distinction in Urban Syria [Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2004], 155).
Spatializing an analysis of subjectivity under Occupation allows for a material and affective analysis of what these “avant-garde,” “middle class” political negotiations feel like. This is not to argue for their efficacy. It is to testify to their sensation. In my discussion of what I consider analysis-worthy politics in Palestinian rap today, I do not propose that my interlocutors invent and then embrace a radical, new politics. My proposed conceptualization of politics in Palestinian rap alludes to politics in process by considering the material, discursive, and affective navigations these artists and their fans undertake.

Part One: The Ramallah Bubble

A bourgeoisie doesn’t make a state

Am I going to come and tell you that there are [neo]liberals in Ramallah? I can’t say that. There is a monopoly, and there is monopolizing. There is a bourgeoisie, and there is a bourgeois class. These bourgeois are open to global culture, and they live like the world is a playground built just for them. And if and when anything happens, they pack themselves up and leave. There is a bourgeoisie; and a bourgeoisie doesn’t make a state.

~She‘rab

These comments by She‘rab (which means poetry-rap) came during the first interview I conducted in Ramallah. I didn’t realize at the time how aptly the poet-rapper crystallized a complex phenomenon that I would spend many months afterwards trying to parse. His words came in my response to my question to him of what, if anything, neoliberalism meant to him. His answer, which in half a dozen lines points to the

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11 She‘rab, interview with the author, August 26, 2014, Ramallah, all subsequent quotations from She‘rab are taken from this interview. Translations from the Arabic are my own.
relationship between capital, Palestinian sovereignty, and the Israeli Occupation needs to be understood within the context of economic and political changes in Ramallah and the occupied Palestinian territories since the 1991 Oslo Accords, and within the context of the sixty-odd years of Israeli Occupation of historical Palestine. I begin this discussion of the emergence of a second wave of Palestinian rap with an elaboration of the context in which it is found. I open with Sheʿrab’s comments, to which I will return.

As the military, economic, social, and political history of the creation of the state of Israel has been thoroughly documented elsewhere, I have relieved myself of reproducing it here.\(^{12}\) However, given the scope of this literature it is worth being clear about a few definitions I will use throughout this chapter in reference to the Occupation of the Palestinian Territories by Israeli forces. I refer to the presence of Israeli forces in the West Bank and the Gaza strip as an “occupation.”\(^{13}\) In doing so, I position the politics of this study and myself as researcher within an extensive and expanding literature—academic and otherwise— that assumes the illegality of Israeli presence in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip since 1967, recognizes the complicated system of settler-colonialism which structures its jurisdiction there, bemoans the brutality of its military, and critiques the system of separation, or “apartheid,” that have made of Palestinians and “Arab-Israelis” second-class citizens in their own homeland. When I refer to the “Occupation,” I mean Israel’s integrated apparatus of embodied military force, disembodied surveillance,


\(^{13}\) In his study examining the historical discourses of Palestinian-Israeli relations, Sean McMahon acknowledges that the “Occupation” and the “Occupied Palestinian territories” [oPt] are terms that “represent the overwhelming international consensus on the status of the[se] spaces.” (Sean McMahon, *The Discourse of Palestinian-Israeli Relations: Persistent Analytics and Practices* [New York: Routledge, 2010], 8.)
an extensive permit system, and a legal code that is applied to Palestinian and Israeli subjects differently, and which is intended both to separate Israelis from Palestinians and to appropriate resources for the State of Israel and its (Jewish) citizens.

To differentiate my positioning now within literature that is critical of Israel and its policies, it is important to me to underscore that I understand this Occupation to be driven by the specific political project of Zionism. Zionism is one of the most significant political ideologies of the modern period, developed in Europe in the nineteenth century. This political project for an exclusively Jewish state is the basis of Israeli institutions and foundations and drives the Occupation of the Palestinian Territories. Zionism is separate from Judaism, a religion, and from Jews, an international community of individuals who adhere to this faith. Moreover, I identify Zionism as the driving ideology of Occupation and Israeli state policy while recognizing that one Zionist strategy is settler colonialism. This is to assert that I consider that racism and colonial practices are mobilized in the name of a specific ideological political project. In a similar way, the politicized religious zeal that drives contemporary Zionism enables Israel to enforce a system of apartheid. In the Occupied Territories and Israel today, both settler colonialism and a system of apartheid are tools of Zionism. This should serve to position my use of terminology vis-à-vis current literature on Israeli settler colonialism and apartheid.\(^1\)

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\(^1\) The contemporary trend in critical literature on Israel/Palestine is to use models of either settler colonialism or apartheid to understand the Occupation. These gestures have garnered the Palestinian cause considerable attention through international lines of solidarity and comparison – with other indigenous struggles, and with the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. I insist on expressly identifying Zionism as the driving political and ideological force that mobilizes both settler colonial and apartheid strategies as tools. I consider this to be the best way to deflect the most powerful Zionist defense in use today: that critics of Israel are anti-Semitic. Recognizing Zionism as a political project quite distinct from Judaism is a less frequently articulated piece of pro-Palestinian critical discourse today, the attention much more frequently going to settler-colonialism and apartheid. (On settler colonialism and apartheid see: Maya Mikdash, “What is Settler-Colonialism?” *Jadaliyya*, July 17, 2012, accessed November 3, 2015, [http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/6453/what-is-settler-colonialism](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/6453/what-is-settler-colonialism); Ilan Pappe, “Zionism as
The Zionist Israeli Occupation effects mobility, economic growth, and access to resources like water within the West Bank as it affects Palestinian access to places and resources outside these territories. As the manager of La Wain club told me:

The Occupation affects everything, generally. Specifically it affects the cost of alcohol and the ability of those coming from Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Jenin, and wherever to get here. When there are four checkpoints to cross at night, [your potential audience] will tell you, “Why do I want to go out? No, man. I’ll stay home.”

Alongside the images of young men and women throwing stones at tanks, the idea of young poets spitting words like weapons in an expression of non-violent, empowering creativity in face of this occupation has proven especially sellable. My point is that understanding how these concerts work politically requires understanding them not as images or ideas cast against the Occupation, but as sites of production and consumption within a material economy structured by it. As my interviews with interlocutors illustrate, it is impossible to talk about the challenges facing the production and consumption of a second wave of Palestinian rap in Ramallah today without – in addition to the Occupation – also considering the shortcomings of the bureaucracy of the Palestinian Authority (PA; in Arabic simply as-sulta [the Authority]) as well as the economic realities of living in the West Bank. As the following interaction between co-

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15 Bakar, manager of La Wain club. Interview with the author, December 2, 2014, Ramallah. Subsequent quotations from La Wain management (with Ramzi Hazboun) are taken from this interview. Translations from the Arabic are my own.

managers of La Wain pub, which followed the earlier statement quoted above about the Occupation, illustrate:

**Bakar**: We want to install a new sound system and expand. That’s the plan. *Inshallah* [God willing], you never know, tomorrow they can come and occupy us.

**Ramzi Hazboun**: Who can?

**Bakar**: The Authority. 17

Testimonies like this one need to be understood within the context of the PA as sustained by the Oslo Accords (1991). 18

Oslo I, Oslo II, and the Paris Accords directly tied a promised Palestinian state to the development of a specific Palestinian economy. This economy was not an abstract horizon but a particular program of “good governance,” aid packages, and investment opportunities structured by the IMF, the World Bank, and the so-called Washington consensus, over which Israel ultimately held the veto. Importantly for the political effect it produced, this particular economic program was called a “free” economy. 19 However, this “free” economy was never actually free, nor nominally even “open” to free trade.

17 See note 15.

18 Oslo I (1993), the Protocol on Economic Relations (also called the Paris Protocol, 1994), and Oslo II (1995) are the signed agreements referred to generally as the “Oslo Accords.” Signed between 1993 and 1995, their term was not meant to extend a period of five years, approximately 1999.

19 The Oslo Accords were able to essentially dictate the shape and pace of the development of the Palestinian economy by establishing a preliminary structure for a Palestinian government and by setting the boundaries within which this government could operate. Article 21 of the Basic Laws, drafted by the Legislative Council for the Palestinian Authority (PA), addresses the structure of the Palestinian economy. It begins, “The economic system in Palestine shall be based on the principle of free market economy.” (Palestinian Basic Law, Article 21, March 18, 2003, accessed March 5, 2015, [http://www.palestinianbasiclaw.org/basic-law/2003-amended-basic-law/](http://www.palestinianbasiclaw.org/basic-law/2003-amended-basic-law/)) Tariq Dana notes, “paradoxically, even the United States, the global driver of free market capitalism, has a constitution that is flexible enough to allow for different responses to specific economic circumstances.” (Tariq Dana, “The Palestinian Capitalists That Have Gone Too Far,” *Al-Shabaka*, January 14, 2014, accessed March 5, 2015, [http://al-shabaka.org/briefs/palestinian-capitalists-have-gone-too-far/](http://al-shabaka.org/briefs/palestinian-capitalists-have-gone-too-far/))
Sara Roy has underscored not only the crippling reliance of Palestinian trade on Israeli markets, but also the deliberate and systemic Israeli attempts to thwart any substantial, independent Palestinian economic growth or development, because of the preludes to a state that such growth would provide. She calls this “de-development.” Amal Ahmad calls it Israel’s policy of “containment.” Jeremy Wildeman and Alaa Tartir point out that the Paris Protocol structured an Israeli “customs envelope” around Palestine, wherein even foreign aid donated to Palestinians was required to pass through, and be taxed by, Israeli customs. It is common, frustrating knowledge to most of my interlocutors, all Palestinians under 35, that Oslo I and II and the Paris Accords amount to an economic and security prison imposed on Palestinians and enforced by Palestinian security forces and the PA: a prison where, for example, the construction of tanks to collect rainwater, the manufacturing of school uniforms – and literally hundreds of other basic activities – are prohibited by Peace Accords that promised a Palestinian state.

This is all to point to an important relationship between Zionism and neoliberalism. The development of an independent Palestinian state and an independent

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Palestinian economy is overseen and limited by Occupation forces. This is to point not only to the failure of the Accords in helping to establish Palestinian sovereignty, something all my interlocutors readily acknowledge, but to the very complicated role of investment of capital in Palestine today, considering the necessary collusion that investment requires with the existing forces of Zionist Occupation. Moreover, it is within this context that the disdain for recent Palestinian economic growth that She‘rab expressed in the quote that opened this section can be understood. When he says that the bourgeoisie “doesn’t make a state” he is referring to the hollowness of economic development in this context.

This foray into the politics of Palestinian development under Occupation is relevant to my study here because the recent growth in the rap scene in Ramallah is part of economic and cultural development attached to the specific growth of the city. In my research, this neoliberal economic growth emerged as a central factor in the city’s ability to host a “second wave” of Palestinian rap. The political status of the city as Palestine’s “de facto” capital in the “post-Oslo” period reflects an influx of Palestinian and other

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24 This is within a larger regional context driven by the material interests of the US, as world power. See Tawfiq Haddad, “Political Economy of Neoliberal Approaches to Conflict Resolution and State Building in the OPT, 1993-2013” (PhD diss., The School of Oriental and Asian Studies, University of London, 2015).

25 For a critique of this relationship as a critique of “capitalist peace,” see Tariq Dana, “The Symbiosis between Palestinian ‘Fayyadism’ and Israeli ‘Economic Peace’: the Political Economy of Capitalist Peace in the Context of Colonization,” Conflict, Security, and Development 15(2015): 455-477. It has been important for me over the course of this research to discover, assert, and re-assert how Zionism and neoliberalism work together, at the same time, and when and how they diverge from each other. I understand that the Occupation is underpinned by Zionism at the same time that it structures neoliberalism in Palestine. Conversations with Lisa Bunghalia, Falastine Dwikat, Yasmine Hemmayel, and Tawfiq Haddad were instrumental in this process.
Arab capital that operates in close coordination with the Zionist Occupation. In this context, and as I’ve begun to allude to here, the lines of anti-capitalist struggle, anti-Zionist struggle, and Palestinian liberation (which ultimately needs both) become very hard to follow. The need for Palestinian growth and the development of its economy are not addressed by anti-capitalist critiques of recent Palestinian neoliberalism. In the context of the Accords that require this development for Palestinian liberation, it is not at all clear how an anti-capitalist sovereignty could be achieved. At the same time, considering Zionist control over this capital and its use, it is equally unclear how the development of the Palestinian “state” or “its” economy could ever be achieved via this kind of capitalist investment.

Tawfiq Haddad calls the recent growth of Ramallah a “second phase” of neoliberalism in the occupied Palestinian Territories (oPt). This was heralded by then Prime Minister Salam Fayyad in the promotion of policies since dubbed “Fayyadism” – significant accelerations of the neoliberal program imposed by Oslo, coming on the heels of the Second Intifada (2000-2005/6). A US-educated, former minister of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to Palestine, Fayyad’s “institution-building” program received consistently positive reviews from supporters like Tony Blair and George W. Bush. Robert Danin has called it “a third and highly pragmatic form of Palestinian

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27 Haddad, “Political Economy of Neoliberal Approaches.”

nationalism.” But the accelerated neoliberal approach increasingly gathered criticism, despite touted figures of an increased GDP.

Fayyad’s critics have offered more cautious analyses of this program’s potential. Raja Khalidi and Sobhi Samour suggest that “[Fayyad’s] statehood program encourages the idea that citizens may have to acquiesce [to the] Occupation but will not be denied the benefits of smoother running traffic, a liberal education curriculum, investor-friendly institutions, efficient public service delivery, and, for the middle class, access to luxury hotel chains and touring theatre performances.” Kareem Rabie argues that the investor-friendly environment proposed and worked towards by Fayyad created the much-remarked upon “Ramallah bubble.” This bubble refers to both a credit cycle that looked unstable and to a new culture of consumption, “luxury,” and entertainment that catered to a lively expat community and the Palestinian middle class. Within the “bubble” one could almost forget the continued presence of the Occupation, encouraged by an atmosphere of consumption. Moreover, the extension of consumer credit helped in part to provide an

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audience, which had time, interest, and spendable capital for a spectrum of leisure and entertainment, including “alternative” musical production like rap concerts.\(^{34}\)

The emergence of this bubble was marked in my interviews with interlocutors with a mix of surprise, excitement, and disdain, as is clear in these recollections of Sami Said, the owner of a prominent restaurant-bar cum music venue:

I remember this period of like one month when maybe ten or fifteen broadcasts came out, and they all did the same report on the same theme, and that was: “Nightlife in Ramallah.” The first and the second one, we were pleased, whatever. But then we started to feel like something wrong was happening. [It’s like people were surprised that], even though there’s an Occupation, people are still living. What does this mean, people are still living? Like, what are we supposed to do, die? And then all of a sudden we stopped hearing from these journalists. [And we were like,] what was that, you finished? Everything is fine because people go out at night? Look: it’s our right to go out. And, we want to go out. And we still have problems. It doesn’t mean that everything is ok, that people are living normally.\(^{35}\)

Indeed, the existence and development of the “Ramallah bubble” is one of the primary concerns the second wave of Palestinian rappers in Ramallah are eager to discuss.\(^{36}\) The growth that has made of Ramallah a hub for an international audience consuming


\(^{35}\) Sami Said, interview with the author, December 7, 2014, Ramallah. All subsequent quotations from Said are taken from this interview. Translations from the Arabic are my own. Taraki notes that an orientalist “wonderment that Palestinians are capable of intelligent lives pervades these journalistic writings [on the Ramallah Bubble, by ‘Western and Israeli journalists’].” (Taraki, “Enclave Micropolis,” 11-12.)

\(^{36}\) To be sure, these concerns are not limited to the genre of hip hop and rap, and are addressed in musical lyrics across a number of genres. (See, for example the indie rock band Bil3ax’s piece, “Ramallah”: “Ramallah-Bil3ax,” YouTube video, 3:32, posted by “Faressho,” November 12, 2013, accessed April 23, 2015 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=61nTMkSCEm0&ab_channel=Faressho](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=61nTMkSCEm0&ab_channel=Faressho).) Neither are these concerns about Ramallah’s changes and the culture of detachment and aloofness “under” the bubble limited to the genre of musical production. In July of 2014, Ashtar Theatre produced Yasmin Shlalda’s play entitled, *Ramallah Bubble Lounge and Coffee House*. The play, which premiered during the 2014 Israeli assault on Gaza, is a series of vignettes, each of which characterizes different, well-recognizable parts of Palestinian society as they pass through one café. It is a critique of precisely this culture of detachment within the Ramallah “bubble.”
alternative cultural production is the basis of its (very recent, and relatively limited) claims to cosmopolitanism, acting as a precarious node in circuits of exchange between Haifa, Tel Aviv, and Amman, and to a lesser extent, Beirut and Dubai. Understanding the limits of this cosmopolitanism requires a closer look at how audience makeup and youth demographics reflect persistent class stratification in the oPt (I return to this in the third section of this chapter). Finally, the fact that the oPt receive of the highest levels of per capita foreign aid in the world must effect how we understand its “free” economy.\textsuperscript{37} Understanding how the “Ramallah Bubble” is built requires considering not just the neoliberal imperatives for a “free” economy and the push for private investment. It also requires a consideration of how the economy has been “developed” by a booming NGO sector in the absence of a state.

\textit{Locating the “Second Wave”}

The concerts that I document and focus on in this chapter all took place within the “Ramallah Bubble,” the cosmopolitan phenomenon acerbically critiqued by academics and Leftist commentators as neoliberal while they are simultaneously celebrated by the Western press as proof of a growing Palestinian economy. Importantly, despite the increasing critiques Ramallah’s growth in cultural production and consumption is receiving, audiences, musicians, and bar owners are all enthused by the progressive implications of the presence of alternative leisure in Ramallah. None of my interlocutors – musicians, fans, curators, journalists, or venue owners – see the increase in privately

owned leisure spaces, more opportunities for concerts as provided by them, or the alternative sociality built in these venues as part of the negative effects of neoliberal development in Ramallah. They certainly do not consider that these events or this cultural production encourage or facilitate the Occupation. While most of my interlocutors readily recognize effects of gentrification in increasing real estate prices, the changing demographic of Ramallah, the presence of expats and aid workers, increased securitization (by both the IDF and the PA), all in a culture of encouraged consumer debt – they categorically do not connect their concerts to this trend. On the contrary, musicians, audiences, venue owners, are all enthused by the prospect of its growth. Consuming this culture is, more often than otherwise, seen as exciting, if not liberating.38

Understanding this seeming paradox requires stepping back to assess the kind of opportunities available for artists and fans to interact. What distinguishes the second wave rap concert is both how it differs from previous concert trends and how it refuses opportunities from the NGO sector.

Rap concerts during the Second Intifada and immediately after were often held in basically public venues (like the Qasaba theatre) or as part of festivals hosted outside. Private venues could accommodate small audiences only (like Pianos, a bar/lounge). The owners of Beit Aneesh (now called Radio) explain that before they opened in 2008, concert culture was limited:

38 Lisa Taraki suggests that Ramallah’s middle class actively “recasts” narratives of Palestinian resistance to accommodate these new patterns of consumption. She suggests that, “a new conception of resilience has been taking root, one that is not based on an ascetic denial of frivolity, joy, or entertainment, but rather renders the very pursuit of happiness a manifestation of resilience and of resistance at the same time.” (Taraki, “Enclave Micropolis,” 17.) This is not my argument. That is, I am not interested, as has been the trend in subcultural studies for some time (see Chapter One) to invest the “everyday” with an ethos of resistance. I return to how second wave rap and their concerts engage with narratives of Palestinian struggle in Part Two of this chapter.
[There used to be concerts], but, excuse the expression, [they] used to happen in a dull [ghabi] way. Like for example, Qasaba would bring a band, and you’d go, and sit in your chair, and listen to Arabic soft rock, or hip hop or whatever, from your chair. There were no drinks, you couldn’t smoke, there was no interaction. [Concerts] used to be like this: in a proper, official, cultural venue; or in the street, during a festival, for example. But still there were no drinks. In between these two options [the formal concert venue and the street festival] – a bar where 200 people could drink and see the musician and talk to them before or after the show – this didn’t exist [before we opened]. Beit Aneeseh was the first place like this.

Since the second phase of neoliberalism in the oPt we can see a consolidation of a general trend in the performance and consumption of a certain kind of rap in private venues. Hip hop concert culture, advertised via social media, taking place after dark, in private venues that post cover charges and employ bouncers, is a development since the end of the second intifada and coincides with the growth of the Ramallah Bubble. It does not mean that there were not rap concerts in bars during the period of the Second Intifada or that one cannot find rap in more public spaces or as part of festivals today. 39 I want to recognize a general trend towards a specific kind of consumption tied to the aesthetic and political development of this music.

This trend is partly driven by a refusal of the influence of non-governmental organizations in cultural production. Musicians and other artists I spoke with are hesitant to engage with, if not fiercely critical of, the not-for-profit and/or non-governmental institutions (NGOs) which sponsored, encouraged, and showcased the first forays into the genre of Palestinian hip hop in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and which continue to host

39 For example, Boikutt recounts having been invited to perform in Qalandiya refugee camp, alongside MCs from the camp. They performed on the bed of a truck in a main street. Boikutt recalls it as one of the best gigs he has played, where the interactions with felt the least inhibited and the most engaged.
projects, events, workshops around hip hop and rap across the West Bank. As filmmaker and then co-manager of La Wain pub Ramzi Hazboun told me:

NGOs … have Western politics. Whatever work you do with them contributes to those politics – it doesn’t matter what the work is specifically. Like in our field for example, are the NGOs in music and culture or [are they] in politics? In the end, it’s always politics. They might bring you a brilliant band from wherever, but to work with them they always put it in your face [in a contract where you have to state] that you’re against “terrorism” – without anybody clarifying what “terrorist” means, and how it’s meaning is changing, actually. [Their structure] is colonized, regardless if they bring a band whose beats we appreciate. We try to avoid working with anyone that’s imposing a politics on us. Not just in the bar, but in all aspects of daily life.

Musicians’ desire not to participate in this NGO economy is frequently propelling them into the arms of private businesses, in the form of privately owned bars and clubs. To be sure, they also have complaints about the general managing structure that shapes these opportunities, including financial negotiations with owners, or the hassles of putting up capital to rent a space on their own. By and large, however, they prefer these arrangements because they feel they have more control over the transmitted meaning of their work.

None of my interlocutors admitted to collaborating with an international NGO for the purposes of showcasing their own, original work. Anecdotally, many revealed having attended or agreeing to a gig and then resigning or stepping out at a later time. Some artists and producers of the second wave may have worked with NGOs in the past, thereby deterring them from future collaborations; others have come of age in a period

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40 Maira discusses several examples of these (Maira, Jil Oslo, 42-43).

41 Almost all my interlocutors, venue owners and musicians, hold down other jobs in addition to making music/running the venue. Some of this work is in the NGO sector, with both local and international NGOs represented.
when they could consume a range of cultural production, within which they were able to discern important political differences. In this way, “second wave” points not only to the emergence of new voices on the Palestinian rap scene, but also to evolution among artists as they learn from experiences and establish political positions.42

For example, when I arrived in Ramallah in July 2014, Stormtrap/Asifeh (rapper and producer, formerly one third of the crew Ramallah Underground) and Asma Ghanem (an experimental musician going by the name Shams Asma43), then a couple in addition to occasional musical team, were debating participation in a musical festival and workshop sponsored by the US State Department called “One Beat.” They had received an invitation to participate in the weeklong series of concerts and workshops in the Southwest US from the US embassy and had preliminarily agreed. Some time later, they discovered it was sponsored by the US State Department and when I met them, they were in the process of deciding what to do.

In our discussions, Asifeh was sure their participation (or his at least) had to be terminated. He had no interest in being affiliated with the State Department (How can I decry others’ complicity with the Occupation if I take this gig?, he asked). Ghanem was less sure. There were no other Palestinians on the billing, and no Israeli musicians either.

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42 My observation of this political position vis-à-vis NGOs during interviews with musicians, venue owners, and audiences is in marked contrast to some recent literature that has asked Palestinian cultural producers and consumers what they think about (mostly Western) NGOs. Sunaina Maira writes that, “in the focus group interviews [she] did with youth in the West Bank, none of them spoke about foreign NGOs as a factor in the “Westernization” of Palestinian culture or the entry of globalized cultural forms.” She writes about an “absence of [a] direct critique of… the process of NGOization of the cultural sphere.” (Maira, Jil Oslo, 42-43.) Needless to say, these findings are in direct contradiction to my own, as evidenced in Hazboun’s quote above. It may be that the five to ten year difference between her fieldwork and mine has allowed for the growth of this critique, as it is surely true that frustration with NGOs is growing. Of course other literature on cultural production and cultural producers in this period also found antipathy towards NGOs. (See for example Maurya Wickstrom, Performance in the Blockades of Neoliberalism: Thinking the Political Anew [New York: Palgrave, 2012].)

Ghanem argued that cultural exchange was necessary and that furthermore, the opportunity to make a statement always existed. As an artist, she suggested, one should always be able to make an intervention. She argued that by refusing the invitation they were giving up the opportunity to expose people to different politics. By way of example of how they may be able to subvert the political meaning via their participation, she recounted her experience participating in a workshop in Graz, Austria, run by an Occupy Wall Street activist and sponsored by a public Austrian university.44

During a workshop, the artist-participants were tasked with making protest signs which they could later choose to hold in the day’s performance: a staged protest in a public square. The participants were furnished with markers and poster board and told to use images only to construct either a statement (concluded with an exclamation point) or a question (concluded with a question mark). Ghanem recounts that much of the talk at the time was about gay marriage and homosexuality and many of the participants chose this subject as the subject of their posters. An organizer assured Ghanem that her poster could be about anything she desired, however. Assured, Ghanem took a marker and a poster board and drew the Israeli flag, then the equals sign, then a swastika, and concluded with a question mark.

Before she finished, seven or eight people crowded around her and took the poster and the marker from her. They asked her what she thought she was doing and demanded that she removed, covered, or blotted out the swastika. When Ghanem refused in the name of artistic license, the organizer blotted it out with a marker for her. Word of the incident spread quickly. For Ghanem, this was a successful intervention — in that it exposed the limits of Austrian “freedom” and generosity towards artistic expression that the workshop was clearly invested in showcasing. In that it forced a tiny but very literal enactment of the censorship [on the subject of Zionist policy] in the society lived daily.45

44 Asifeh spent many childhood years in Vienna with his family. He speaks German and holds Austrian citizenship. He cites collaborations with his neighbors and friendships in Vienna as an important part of his artistic development. (Interviews with the author July 19, August 27, and September 5, 2014, Ramallah.)

45 Field notes excerpt, July 2014; discussions, and recorded interview with the author July 19, August 27, and September 5, 2014, Ramallah.
I include this anecdote as an example of the experiences which artists return to in debating their participation in internationally funded opportunities. Interestingly, Ghanem was using this experience as reason to participate in the US State Department venture. The discussions Ghanem and Asifeh had with me and the arguments they rehashed in my presence also illustrate how social relationships are guiding the political development of the second wave. Asifeh, a performing musician across two decades, was much more sure of his position than was Ghanem, who has been performing her own work since roughly 2009. Asifeh’s experience undoubtedly helped to shape Ghanem’s position – and this needn’t reflect on the nature of their personal relationship, only. Aesthetic as well as political influence is easily perceptible in the friendships between second wave rappers in Ramallah, and navigating opportunities is a primary forum in which these experiences are rehashed and reviewed. Ultimately, the pair declined the invitation, pulling out of the workshop.46

In addition to suspicion of European and US NGOs and sponsored festivals, some musicians and venue owners also relate an antipathy between them and local non-profit cultural organizations. They accuse the latter of being secretive or selective about opportunities, and of generally unambitious programming – either with regards to more

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46 During my conversations with both Ghanem and Asifeh in July, we talked at length about the frameworks of “resistance” which are available to, and indeed asked of, them as musicians when they represent Palestine in international festivals. My own research is part of this industry of cultural production and exchange. When Ghanem and Asifeh were debating their participation in One Beat, both asked for my opinion. I was forced then (and continue to) reflect on the stipulations placed on the researcher by the different funding opportunities which I accepted and which facilitated this research, and the underlying ideological systems of which they are a part. In accepting PARC funding, I uncritically signed a contract which included a clause stating I would not collaborate with “terrorists,” the same kind of clause Ramzi Hazboun acerbically critiqued in our interview (quoted above). The complications of affiliation while on an IIE Fulbright research fellowship, affiliated as it is with the US State Department, and which facilitated my research in Amman, would become clear at a later time. It has been impossible for me to engage sincerely with the questions these musicians navigate without simultaneously reflecting critically on my own role as researcher and the structure of opportunities that facilitate this work.
mainstream aesthetics or the relative paucity of events organized. Several musicians also related resentment about an attitude of dependency, which they felt was expected of them by local cultural institutions, and which they simultaneously perceive in the relationship between these institutions and international organizations or artists. These musicians feel that on the one hand, local cultural institutions want to be the ones setting the pace and determining the horizon of cultural expression; at the same time, they feel these institutions depend too much on international support and validation. As with the international NGOs, it frequently seems to musicians that the priorities are not in the right place. Indeed, I often felt from my interlocutors a more pronounced astringency and a more ready disgust towards NGOs – foreign and domestic – than that even towards the Occupation. While the abuses of the latter are well-documented, the problematic politics of “development” via NGOs and donor aid are still less current in analysis and discussion of cultural production and politics within it. Similarly, while the negative effects of the Occupation were often assumed in our conversations, my interlocutors frequently expressed what seemed to me a desire to correct a positive image of NGO work, with testimony to the political contradictions they impose on them.

It is against this political and economic backdrop that I argue that we can notice the emergence of a “second wave of Palestinian rap.” The second wave is set apart by patterns of social collaboration, by the kinds of concerts they pursue and perform in, and the musical, lyrical, and performatic experimentation therein. Sunaina Maira has proposed jil Oslo, or the “Oslo Generation” as a category useful for understanding the

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47 I use performatic as Diana Taylor does, as a term to describe something relating to live performance. Taylor suggests the term as an alternative to distinguish from J. L. Austin’s discursive notion of the “performative.” (Diana Taylor, The Archive and the Repertoire [Durham: Duke UP, 2003], 6.)
politics of Palestinian hip hop. She describes this youth demographic as coming of age in the years after the Oslo Accords. This category effectively encompasses, I think it’s safe to say, most all Palestinian rap, and definitely all Palestinian rap in Arabic. While there is at maximum a ten or so year gap between some musicians I mention here, my proposition that there is a “second wave” of Palestinian rap speaks less to a generational distinction between the musicians in question than it does to aesthetic currents, patterns of collaboration, histories of exposure, concert culture, as well as the political feeling generated within them. My discussions with musicians and fans, my experience at concerts, perusing online footage, and listening to the music encourages me to mark the development of different aesthetic and political energies within a single generation.

Haykal, Dakn, al-Nather, Shua, Julmud, Faragh, Riyadiyat, and Boikutt/Muqata’a form a loose collective they call saleb wahed or, “minus one”: “-1.” This is the most tangible, physical manifestation of the energies I identify as belonging to the second wave. To this named collective, I add She‘rab and Stormtrap/Asifeh to the category of

48 Maira, Jil Oslo, 34-73.

49 Many Palestinian rappers began writing poetry or rap in English before writing in Arabic. For example, Boikutt recalls rapping in a crew called Two Man Army with friend John Na‘meh in English before Ramallah Underground formed. Tamer Nafar of DAM began his career rapping in English and Hebrew before switching to Arabic (see Ted Swedenburg, “Against the Struggle Paradigm,” in Popular Culture in the Middle East and North Africa: A Postcolonial Outlook, Mounira Solimon and Wael El Hamamsy, eds. [New York: Routledge, 2013],17-32.)

the second wave. Together, this near dozen musicians and producers participate in a robust network of exchange and collaboration with Lebanese, Syrian, and Jordanian rappers, producers, and other musicians. They collaborate extensively among themselves and with Edd Abbass (of Fareeq al-Atrash, based in Beirut), DJ Sotosura (Amman), Osloob (of Katibeh 5, Paris), Bu Kolthoum (Syrian, residing in Amman), El Rass (Beirut), Sayyed Darwish (Beirut), Psychaleppo (Beirut), El Far3i (London). These collaborations form a dynamic, inter-urban exchange not present in the rap scene in Palestine or in the region before 2007/2008. In addition, all of the “-1” artists DJ recorded sets in addition to performing and recording their own raps. The production work of Al-Nather (who raps less than the others) is helping to connect a dozen or more MCs across the Arab Eastern Mediterranean. Finally, the influence of Boikutt – as a producer as well as a musician – among this group of musicians and their fans is palpable and undeniable. The second wave of Palestinian rap is thus distinguished by a certain cohesion among a group of artists and their social patterns of collaboration.

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51 Another important player is al-Had, who shares a history socially and musically with the “-1” group (especially Haykal and Dakn) but who is now based in Chicago. She’ rab’s Sound Cloud page, accessed April 19, 2015, [https://Sound Cloud.com/she3rap](https://Sound Cloud.com/she3rap). Stormtrap made up one third of the Ramallah Underground. Stormtrap/Asifeh’s Sound Cloud page, accessed April 19, 2015, [https://Sound Cloud.com/stormtrap.](https://Sound Cloud.com/stormtrap.)


53 Others have explored how collaboration online or for the infrequent concert organized by an international festival or NGO fosters a liberating sociality by creating a virtual mobility not available to Palestinian musicians under Occupation otherwise. In my research, I recognize that the collaborative patterns of a wide range of musicians across the Levant is a powerful social as well as aesthetic network. However, I do not make arguments here testifying to the political potential of this networking. For one, the bigger the scene gets, the more fractious it actually becomes. In Beirut, for example, the city where the most collaboration could and does take place, the rift between different groups of rappers and hip hop heads has become so deep as to prevent collaborations and interactions between musicians. In Amman, the politics of international concert organizing created resentment where “foreign” artists were paid while “local” artists weren’t (they were all Arab rappers). Secondly and more importantly perhaps, suggesting that a specific politics emerges just from collaboration patterns in the context of this region – where geographical mobility...
Unsurprisingly since they share such strong social connections, similarities in musical exposure form another defining characteristic of these musicians. Asked about the first rap they really took to or to which they remember being exposed, many of the “-1” point to different artists than those referred to by Arab rappers performing in the early 2000s. This makes sense considering teenage years lived in the latter half of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

A particularly memorable scene in Jackie Salloum’s *Slingshot Hip Hop* (2008) features Tamer Nafar of DAM holding Public Enemy’s album *Fear of a Black Planet*. (I identify DAM as part of the “first wave.”) Nafar points to the CD and says, “There, they have a fear of a Black Planet… Here, we have fear of an Arabic nation.” The sound bite opens the trailer to the film, so well does it frame an easily-digestible understanding of Arabic rap in relation to its African-American predecessors: Palestinian Arabs under Occupation identify with the struggles of African Americans in US East Coast ghettos, and so are attracted to imitate their modes of expression.54 Indeed, many of my own interviews with first wave rappers trace their exposure to rap to a certain generation of African American musicians. Mos Def, Gangstar, Public Enemy, Wu Tang, Nass, the

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It has been popular among leftist circles for some time to connect African American struggles against racism, poverty, and ghettoization in the US to the Palestinian struggle against Occupation. Some of this work highlights the productive exchanges between black and Arab organizers and experimenters with political strategy in attempts to connect important struggles.\footnote{See for example, Alex Lubin, Geographies of Liberation: The Making of an Afro-Arab Political Imaginary (Chapel Hill, NC: U of North Carolina P, 2014).} Other examples do important work connecting the strategies of empire.\footnote{See for example, Keith P. Feldman, A Shadow over Palestine: The Imperial Life of Race in America (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2015).} Sometimes, however, and especially in the case of Palestinian hip hop today, understanding the Occupation as an iteration of urban suffocation and intracommunal strife in the Bronx can perhaps offer only a facile understanding of either experiences of oppression. In analyzing the political processes of listening and making meaning in second wave rap, I want to caution against this kind of connection-making and political theorizing.\footnote{In Chapter One of this dissertation, I pointed to blackwashing as part of the phenomenon of neoliberal orientalism that drives the discourses of resistance I deemed problematic in representations of Arab rappers. There, I suggested that simplified understandings of Arab politics are created using (equally simplified) references to expression and struggles by African Americans. In Chapter Two, I pointed to examples of how framing of Palestinian hip hop concerts in Harlem appropriates terms of African American struggle while participating in the gentrifying energies of traditionally African American neighborhoods. Of course blackwashing is very different from the very real work of intersecting African American struggles and Palestinian ones (like some promising strides made in 2014 during #BlackLivesMatter organizing following violence in Ferguson, Missouri, and protests against the Israeli bombardment of Gaza). This latter in my opinion needs more than the hopeful projection of one struggle upon the other. Indeed, much real black-Arab antipathy suggests that these lines of solidarity desperately need to be rediscovered and redrawn. Contestation over the terms of solidarity was really obvious, for example on social media surrounding the emergence of the hashtag #MuslimLivesMatter following the murders of three Muslim}
I suggest this caution is necessary because, in our interviews, second wave rappers readily offer that the experience of the US ghetto that grounded much early US hip hop was altogether too strange to have proved directly influential in their own music making, lyricism, or political awareness. Some of these musicians pointed to the incomprehensibility of the slang used in this hip hop, not used in other forms of popular culture available to them at the time, rendering lyrical expression hard to follow. Others pointed to the availability, during their own teenage years, of other kinds of rap on outlets like MTV and others in Palestine. And others still pointed to their own relationship to the streets and clubs of their own neighborhoods in Ramallah. For example, Haykal offers that a conservative upbringing kept him from socializing with kids in his neighborhood from a young age. In his case, and in his analysis, this prevented a strong sense of identification with the kinds of urban sociality referenced in early US hip hop.

Rather than identifying with African American life in the US ghetto as expressed in early hip hop lyrics, most all the second wave rappers I spoke with remember that Eminem was their first significant exposure to rap music. The political assumption of shared black and Arab experience in the attraction to rap as a medium requires serious reconsideration when the Palestinian rapper offers that his initial attempts at lyric writing were driven by the desire to reproduce the multi-syllables in Eminem’s work, or that looking back, he finds in his early lyrics teenage angst against his mother (a frequent

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59 By contrast, Boikutt and Sotusura, for example, who also reference the importance of Public Enemy, Mos Def, and others, spent childhood and teenage years in the States.
theme of Eminem’s), as opposed to rage or frustration against racism and systemic oppression. This of course is not to deny the relevance of first wave rappers’ testimony. It is rather to point to important shifts and changes among rappers and their audiences.

To be sure, the second wave’s aesthetic and lyrical choices – more in line with trends in electronic music than with traditionally understood hip hop sounds – have also garnered criticism from some of the veterans on the scene, who express frustration with the more brazenly experimental forays of these artists. In our interviews, older musicians frequently shook their heads in reference to some of this younger work. Commentary like “it’s not hip hop,” “something’s been lost in translation,” or “I don’t even understand what this guy is saying here” frequently appeared in these testimonies.

Regardless of how much one appreciates the new sounds or not, the recognition of different influences by musicians is an important shift that very much deserves attention. Moreover, all of these musicians expanded their range of musical exposure in the process of becoming musicians, and now relate to and digest much more than their teenage idols. If a distinguishing feature of the second wave is the kind of rap they remember being initially exposed to and compelled by, a second defining characteristic, also rooted in performer histories, comes from the shared recognition of different approaches to rap in Arabic. Second wave rappers, unlike the first wave, were not the first to rap in Arabic. This means they had the opportunity to discern aesthetically between musical and lyrical approaches to rap in Arabic, something musicians several years their senior would not have had the opportunity to do. Moreover, the second wave shares ideas about the kind of rap after which they are interested to model their own work. Referencing the kind of music they look for, the kind of music they found in early mentors, the kind of music
they like, and/or the kind of rap they aim to produce, Haykal, Dakn, al-Nather, Sotusura, Boikutt and others used the phrase “biʿabi el rass,” Arabic for “fills the head.”

In his work on tarab, ethnomusicologist A.J. Racy writes that the “the ineffability of the tarab state is illustrated by the prevalent use of metaphors that explain how the music is ‘felt,’ as in such expressions as ‘filling the head.”**60 Interlocutors’ testimonies lead me to suggest that second wave rap is premised on feeling the music in a certain way. Asked to explain what this feeling consists of, my interlocutors contrasted the thing they seek (music that fills the head) with music that “hypes.” In Chapter Two of this dissertation, I referred to the uniqueness of tarab as a performatic phenomenon: that while it may employ call and response, it cannot be reduced to it. The specificity of second wave rappers’ articulations of the kind of music they seek to create and that which they seek to avoid precisely plays on this distinction.

Asked to elaborate, the distinction between “hype” and “filling the head” was frequently illustrated by my interlocutors by distinguishing between two bands. The Ramallah Underground and DAM made up a big part of the rap scene that existed in Palestine during the Second Intifada (so they make up a majority of rap that makes up the “first wave”).**61 While DAM is still together and producing rap music, Ramallah Underground has since broken up. Interestingly considering the relative lack of critical attention they have received, my interlocutors credit the Ramallah Underground with a continuing influence. Haykal told me:

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61 DAM’s Sound Cloud page, accessed October 23, 2015, [https://Sound Cloud.com/damrap](https://Sound Cloud.com/damrap); Ramallah Underground’s YouTube channel, accessed December 9, 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/user/Ramallahunderground?&ab_channel=Ramallahunderground](https://www.youtube.com/user/Ramallahunderground?&ab_channel=Ramallahunderground).
[The name] “-1” isn’t really different from the phrase “Ramallah Underground.” It’s almost the continuation of RU. We are -1 from Ramallah. It’s the Underground of Ramallah. We became a kind of a continuation of what the Ramallah Underground was.

Observers agree. The DJ Sotusura, who never raps himself, explained to me that, “Ramallah Underground is a school when it comes to Arabic hip hop. DAM is a school and Ramallah Underground is a different school.” This observation points to a significant aesthetic and political spectrum in Palestinian hip hop.

Most second wave rappers and producers were barely teens when Ramallah Underground and DAM performed in Ramallah what were, for many of them, the first live concerts of the kind. Al-Nather was twelve when he first saw Ramallah Underground perform, a concert he and childhood friend Dakn, remember vividly.

**Al-Nather:** Of course I remember [the first rap concert I heard]. It was [Ramallah Underground] at Pianos. It was revolutionary for everyone who was there. We didn’t have anybody doing this kind of thing in Ramallah. It was the first time ever - It was like who are these guys? What are they doing? Are they really one of us? From here?

**Dakn:** Yes. Yes, that’s exactly how it was. […] They saw things differently, and this perspective filled my head [biʿabi rasi]. You know what I mean? In these remarks, the two second wave rappers identify a political process of listening in which they aligned themselves with one aesthetic over another. Continuing, Dakn recounts the following about a concert of both DAM and the Ramallah Underground at the Qasaba theatre in the middle of the Second Intifada:

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62 Interview with the author September 11, 2015, Amman. Subsequent quotations from Sotusura are taken from this interview. Translations from the Arabic are my own.

63 For thick description and analysis of DAM’s concerts and their performance styles see McDonald, *My Voice is My Weapon*.

64 Interview with the author, March 30, 2015. Subsequent quotations from Dakn and Al-Nather are taken from this interview. Translations from the Arabic are my own.
I came with the local neighborhood club [nadi] where we had been playing basketball. The majority of people there were from the club, kids. I was very young and most of the crowd was my age. I’d heard of DAM, I knew some of their tracks. But I hadn’t heard Ramallah Underground before. DAM took the stage and everybody got on their feet and started dancing, and I did too. Their track “Meen Irhabi?” [Who’s the Terrorist?] in the middle of the intifada really captured people’s imaginations [ktir bita’qed kanat], every line was like what we wanted to hear. But then I heard the track “Khaleeni ‘Ayeesh” [“Let me live,” by Ramallah Underground]. And that was like, wow [wa kanat ya’ni aha]. It was from the street. It was different: a different approach to the people.

It is important to note here how the two pieces performed live are juxtaposed in Dakn’s memory. While Dakn and Al-Nather both admit they were excited by DAM’s piece in performance, it was Ramallah Underground’s track that really touched them. This points to the song’s effect as one of both lyrics (something I’ll return to in the next section) as well as delivery. The distinctions between the two help to parse the difference between “hype” and “filling the head” as reflected in audience dynamics in Arabic rap.

Haykal remembers DAM’s stage presence as “more like comic,” and nationalist.65 Al-Nather called it “acting.” Elaborating on this difference between the two bands’ performance styles, Sotusura explains,

DAM are good performers, they’re good on stage, capturing the crowd, and communicating with the crowd. I think in this part of it they’re stronger than the others. They’re the first crew that did live shows and had a proper interaction with the crowd and had a proper live show.

Haykal describes it like this:

DAM have, like, signatures. Like “Rrrrrramallah!” all the time. They want to keep people hyped, in a fun way. “Yalla! [let’s go!] Let’s have fun!” “Yalla heyyyyy! [he claps].”

65 He offered “more like comic” in English. I return to the question of performing Palestinian national identity below. (Interview with the author, August 16, 2015, Amman. All subsequent quotations from Haykal are taken from this interview. Translations from the Arabic are my own.)
This, Haykal, Dakn, and Al-Nather confirm, is in marked distinction to the performance style of the Ramallah Underground. Haykal told me:

The way [that Boikutt] delivers, it’s not his concern if people like him or not. He’s informing. There is informative behavior in both of them [Asifeh and Boikutt]. They like for the effect on people to come from… the words themselves, how they control the sound, and how they use hip hop for what it is, as music. DAM do it up more like a show.

The differences Haykal and Sotusura point to are similar to the differentiation I described in Chapter Two between the emergence of tarab in audience-performer interaction based on specialized listening and the excitement or hype produced by more generic call-and-response. There, I argued that tarab is a kind of call-and-response, but should not be reduced to it. Second wave rappers offer that the ability of a piece of Arabic rap to “fill the head” depends in part on an articulation of politics that lets the listener think or feel beyond the immediate excitement of the live performance, the latter always more or less always charged with some kind of energy. Explaining how this works lyrically requires another contextualization, this time in terms of political discourse.

* * *

In this section, I have sought to contextualize the emergence of what I call a second wave of Palestinian rap within the context of recent neoliberal economic growth in the Occupied West Bank. I have identified a concentration of rap and hip hop production that finds its home within the cosmopolitan growth of Palestine’s “de facto capital” following the Oslo Accords. In recognizing the emergence of the second wave, I have pointed to new patterns of collaboration among musicians and differences in their
influences and exposure to rap in English and Arabic. In so doing, I underscore the influence of the Ramallah Underground, a “first wave” band (made up of Asifeh, Boikutt, and Aswat) that has since broken up. Importantly for understanding the musical and lyrical influences and of the second wave, I include Asifeh and Boikutt’s recent work in the category “second wave.” Unlike DAM, a first wave hip hop crew that are still together and which figure in every study of Palestinian rap and hip hop, the influence aesthetically and politically of the Ramallah Underground has been critically understudied. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I maintain a focus on the influence of the Ramallah Underground and especially the work and mentorship of Boikutt in understanding the aesthetic and political experimentation in the second wave as well as the social collaboration patterns evident in this network.

Finally, I have suggested that the driving thread of the second wave is the search for and the making of music that “fills the head.” I suggested this is different from rap music that “hypes” and pointed to some initial differences in performatic styles to which my interlocutors testify. These testimonies about the differences between the Ramallah Underground and DAM are integral to my argument about the emergence and particularity of a second wave of Palestinian rap. To understand further how second wave lyrics discursively “fill the head,” I now turn to a contextualization of these lyrics within political discourse about Palestinian struggle.
Part Two: Political Discourse

Second wave rappers offer that the ability of a piece of Arabic rap to “fill the head” depends in part on an articulation of politics that lets the listener think or feel beyond the immediate excitement of the live performance. In our interviews, second wave musicians and fans relate the effects of listening as a political process, where the lyrics, delivered in a certain way, have the capacity to produce a powerful political feeling. As the observations that concluded the preceding section alluded, this capacity for rap music to “fill the head” depends on particular qualities of the live delivery as well as the form and content of the lyrics themselves. I return to the musical components of sound and the ability of these sonic elements to produce affect in the concert space in the third and final section of this chapter. Here, I want to explore how the intellectual engagement in second wave lyrics lies in diversion from and inversion of representations in existing narratives of Palestinian struggle.

My argument is that historical discourses of Palestinian political struggle are classed in specific ways. Ways of framing Palestinian-ness and the struggle for national liberation since before 1948 are built on a classed imagination of Palestinian fighters and their society. The material political and economic developments in the oPt means that these political imaginations conjure figures that no longer reflect the material reality of Ramallah. In this context, second wave lyrics paint a different class picture of Palestinian society. Their commentary on Ramallah’s growth, their cynicism about the uses of sabr [patience], sumud [resilience], their refusal of performances of turath [heritage], and their disavowal of mouqawameh [resistance] point to politics in formation. Far from the
theorization of certain kinds of political action, these reflections are closer to observations and analysis than calls to arms or rallying for struggle. At the same time, they have real affective power. I argue this kind of lyrical work, most noticeable when it actively inverts mainstream, historical, and romanticized narratives of Palestinian struggle, is central to the ability of second wave rap to “fill the head.” That is, this lyrical expression helps to produce the tarab that distinguishes the political feeling in these concerts.

_Sabr and sumud_

Discourses of struggle against the Occupation – as well as the political, legal, and military discourses that sustain it – have frequently assumed its temporary nature. During the Second Arab-Israeli war in 1967, when Israel seized the Gaza Strip from Egypt, all of the West Bank up to the Jordan River (including East Jerusalem) from Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria, its territory tripled in a matter of days. However, the “new” territories were never annexed; they remained contested territories.\(^{66}\) This, Neve Gordon, Eyal Weizman, and others have argued, allowed Israel to sidestep the Geneva Conventions concerning the responsibilities of an occupying power.\(^{67}\) Less tangibly, it also helped produce a certain fluidity regarding the hard reality of the Occupation and

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\(^{66}\) Also called the “Six-Day” or “Yom Kippur” war. For a history of the buildup to the 1967 war, see Cleveland and Burton, _A History of the Modern Middle East, Fourth Edition_ (Philadelphia: Westview Press, 2009), 322-344.

how to contest it. Gordon suggests that following Israel’s defeat of the Arab armies,

“Temporariness was… used to prevent opposition and to thwart Palestinian resistance.”

A similar application of “temporariness” was achieved during the Oslo Accords. The first of the Oslo agreements, the “Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements,” illustrates the central feature of all of the following agreements: namely, they were built on the premise of an interim agreement until the establishment, after the interim period, of a sovereign Palestinian state. The status of Jerusalem, the question of refugees, the geography of international borders, and relations with neighboring countries were all left unelaborated and unsettled, to be returned to at the end of the interim period. Moreover, the veritable maze of barriers, checkpoints, roadblocks, gates, dikes, trenches, and ‘flying’ checkpoints – what Eyal Weizman calls

68 Gordon, Israel’s Occupation, 25.

69 The Declaration of Principles reads: “The aim of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations within the current Middle East peace process is, among other things, to establish a Palestinian Interim Self-Government Authority, the elected Council (the “Council”) for the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, for a transitional period not exceeding five years, leading to a permanent settlement based on Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338. It is understood that the interim arrangements are an integral part of the whole peace process and that the negotiations on the permanent status will lead to the implementation of Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338.” (“Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements,” September 13, 1993, accessed March 22, 2015, http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/guide/pages/declaration%20of%20principles.aspx.)

70 Sean McMahon identifies this dependence on temporariness in the Accords as evidence of the non-radical nature of the Oslo Peace Process, and the continuation of business-as-usual in Palestine. He argues that it is indicative of the continuity, despite fanfare to the contrary, of Israel’s Zionist political intentions not to relinquish territory to Palestinians nor to recognize any Palestinian state – and of the complicity of the Palestinian leadership with Israel (McMahon, The Discourse of Palestinian-Israeli Relations, 5). The Oslo Accords have in effect encouraged the further entrenchment of the Occupation, as they enshrined in agreement the presence of Israeli bureaucracy and its military on the Palestinian territories. Despite the positive press, Israeli military control and surveillance after Oslo expanded via further division of Palestinian territory. Oslo II split the oPt into three “kinds” of areas: Areas A, B, and C. Critically the Accords also stipulated emphatically that the Palestinian National Authority must “establish a strong police force” responsible for “maintaining internal security and public order” even as it authorized the redeployment of Israeli military along the terms of the divisions between areas (“The Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip” (Oslo II), Article XIV, and Annex I Article IV, September 28, 1995, accessed March 22, 2015, http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/guide/pages/the%20israelipalestinian%20interim%20agreement.aspx).
“structured chaos” – was made possible by the Oslo Accords. Effectively designed to maintain the difference between these territories, it thereby deepened and extended the Occupation Israel administered since 1967.\footnote{Weizman, Hollow Land, 5. Weizman’s observations expanding on this notion are worth quoting at length: “...[T]he very military, political, and economic logic of the Oslo process [was] one that sought to replace direct occupation and management of the occupied Palestinians, and thus direct responsibility for them, with the creation of a Palestinian Authority – a prosthetic political system propped up by the international community – and the delegation of local functions to it. According to this logic of governance, Israel remained in control of the Palestinians by regulating their movement through space, without resorting to managing their lives within the separate enclaves it sealed around their towns and villages. In assuming the duties of the day-to-day governance within the enclaves under its control, the Palestinian Authority has freed Israel of its obligations as an occupying power by international law.” (Ibid., 141.)} If indeed the Oslo Accords succeeded in a further entrenchment of the Israeli Occupation of Palestinian Territories, they have done so in part by reaffirming the manner in which the Occupation was talked about and conceived. Central here has been a sense of impermanence – that the Occupation will not last.

Historically and into the present day, this sense of impermanence has thus had profound effects on the ways in which Palestinians articulate and develop tools of struggle against Zionist dispossession. The state of limbo – the sense of the Occupation’s imminent dissipation, despite much historical and material evidence to the contrary – persists in Palestine today. While the terms used to describe or invoke struggle against the Occupation have changed over the decades, two widespread discourses in particular speak to the idea of the need to hold out for a limited time. The discourses of sabr [patience] and sumud [steadfastness, resilience] date back to before Israel’s defeat of the Arab armies of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria in 1967, preceding the formal military occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In the period between the nakba – the violence and expulsion that accompanied the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, and the 1967 war, strategies for dealing with what was then understood to be a temporary...
condition were first developed as the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) organized abroad. Discourses around both sabr and sumud developed during this period and imagined the condition of estrangement from Palestine, via exile or occupation, to be temporary. Both were developed in order to strengthen Palestinian communities during a period understood to be interim.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Palestinians and Arabs worldwide reeled from the defeat of Arab armies and the blow to Gamal Abd al-Nasser’s Pan-Arabism that this defeat had dealt. Salim Tamari suggests that an official iteration of sumud [steadfastness, resilience] began during this period “as a form of passive resistance.” According to Tamari, the application of sumud grew out of a “survivalist ideology,” which envisioned the economic dependency on and dispossession by Israel to be finite. In this iteration of Palestinian struggle, Palestinians needed “survival programs that would make life tolerable and leave the fabric of community life intact.”72 Sumud was a way of encouraging patience, resilience, and the setting aside of personal difference or personal gain for the sake of the larger struggle. This iteration of political strategy was based on the notion that “all Palestinians suffer equally under the yoke of occupation.”73 It was intended both to unite a populace that was disjointed – with populations living the misery of exile and occupation in different ways; and to connect a leadership, itself in exile, with its people.74 The discourse around sumud was also specifically connected to the


74 The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was founded in 1964. From 1967 to 1970, the PLO coordinated operations outside Palestine, from Jordan and Syria. Following the events of Black September in 1970-1971, Lebanon became the base for the PLO. After the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the
commemoration of the sacrifices of the Palestinians living directly under occupation. In this way, leaders abroad could invoke solidarity with their countrymen, a-samdeen [the steadfast ones] under occupation. During the first intifada, discourses of sumud were additionally invoked to help sustain an “ascetic culture of resistance.”

Many of my interlocutors – musicians, fans, or bar owners, express skepticism and impatience about the proposition of patience, resilience, or asceticism accompanied with the expectation the Occupation will not last. They are extremely cynical about strategies or invocations of sabr [patience]. For example, consider these lyrics, dripping with sarcasm, in a track released in the immediate aftermath of the 2014 Israeli bombardment of the Gaza Strip:

\[zay\ \text{el}\ \text{jahsh}\ \text{lazem}\ \text{inta}\ \text{enta}\ \text{w}\ \text{ana}/
\]
\[zay\ \text{el}\ \text{hamameh}\ \text{'al}\ \text{beit} \\text{dalak}\ \text{sabr}\ \text{enta}\ \text{w}\ \text{ana} \]

[You and me, like beasts, we keep goring/
You and me, like the pigeons on the roof, got to be patient]

PLO relocated to Tunis where they remained until the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. (See for example, Mark Tessler, A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict [Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994].)

75 Taraki, “Enclave Micropolis,” 17.

76 In specific, political terminology, this probably reflects the fact that the idea of a one-state solution is becoming much more prevalent and accepted in the West Bank since the end of the Second Intifada (Near Eastern Consulting, “Survey: Seventy Percent of Palestinians Support One State Solution,” February 24, 2007, accessed December 9, 2015, https://electronicintifada.net/content/survey-70-percent-palestinians-support-one-state-solution/6773). I want to focus my discussion here on the affect produced by specific political discourses, however, not on explicit political answers, on which my data in any case is insufficient to be conclusive. The point for me continues to be that these politics are in formation. This being the case, I have not pursued definitive answers about the percentage of musicians or fans that support a one or two state solution. Nonetheless I do not find it inaccurate to interpret some general inclinations affected in the ways in which lyricists refuse strategies of sabr and sumud.

A good example of the dark sense of humor in much second wave rap, in this track Shua spins a trope about staying patient with dignity into a caricature of the pathetic position of senseless repetition and stagnation. Pigeons’ inability to imagine anything but sitting on the roof of his house and the beast’s stubborn charge are juxtaposed with the mode of sabr or patience. In the wake of Israel’s 2014 attack on Gaza, the lyrics are a fresh (if extremely cynical) take on discourses of “holding on.” Needless to say, there is also a quite pronounced sting in them – which may be alternatively alienating, refreshing, or incomprehensible depending on the listener.

Less dark but equally frustrated, the lyrics in Stormtrap’s “Zey ma sar mbareh” [“What Happened Yesterday”] also refuse the narrative of patient waiting. In the wake of Israel’s 2014 attack on Gaza, the lyrics are a fresh (if extremely cynical) take on discourses of “holding on.” Needless to say, there is also a quite pronounced sting in them – which may be alternatively alienating, refreshing, or incomprehensible depending on the listener.

Significantly, Stormtrap refuses sabr while connecting it to being bought: pointing to negative uses of sabr in the context of Palestinian politics:

Linno el waqt ʿam yisbaq
Bigillak jay el salam bas asbar
Bidak tistana? Hay el hitat biʿamorha ma bazbot
Biydfaʿlak qad ma biddak ʿashan tiskot

[Because time is racing
He keeps telling you peace is coming just be patient
You want to wait? These plans never succeed
He’ll pay you as much as you want to keep quiet.]  

As Tamari duly notes, the usage of sumud by the PLO and its foreign sponsors eventually lost its revolutionary meaning. In 1978, Arab State leaders gathered in Baghdad decided


to aid the “sumud” of the oPt with cash in the amount of $150 million annually. In doing so, Tamari suggests that the phrase, “daʿm sumud ahluna fi al-dakhil [in support of the steadfastness of our people inside] became the official Arab ‘guilt money’ for abandoning the confrontation with Israel.” Tamari argues that via this appropriation, the discourse of sumud was transformed, from passive resistance to “aggressive nonresistance." In this way, the uses of sumud by the PLO and its foreign partners came to be described with cynicism. That is, the transformation of struggle in discourses of sabr and sumud into something that can be bought showed itself to be completely evacuated from both revolutionary ethos and liberatory praxis. Tamari writes:

The word sumud became a term of cynical self-denigration often used as a mocking reference to the *nouveau-riche* recipients of patronage money. Only to the external observer did it retain any positive content of glorification thus enhancing its irony.

In his lyrics reflecting the post-Oslo reality of the West Bank, above, Stormtrap points to similar connotations of corruption and buying off within the discourses of sabr and patience.

Tamari also points out that, concerned as they have been with Palestinians staying on the land, discourses sabr and sumud have also been tied to a particular agricultural

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81 Ibid.

82 Ibid, 63. To be sure, as the First Intifada in many ways rebelled against the nepotism and elitism that characterized these years of the PLO and its foreign donors, the valences of sumud changed again. It was during this period that the revolutionary socialist arm of the PLO, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) actively reinvented an application of sumud in order to reflect changing political dynamics. They invoked sumud as an official, broad-based strategy for confronting the Israeli Occupation. Specifically combatting the problem of the efficacy of Israeli torture techniques on Palestinian prisoners in Israeli detention, sumud became, under the leadership of the PFLP, a set of strategies through which prisoners refused to confess under torture or threat of torture. Prisoners shared torture techniques and strategies to resist them. Demonstrating sumud by not confessing became a badge of honor whose public recognition the PFLP actively promoted. (See Lena Meari, “Sumud: A Palestinian Philosophy of Confrontation in Colonial Prisons,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 113[2014]: 547-578. I am indebted to Omar Qassis for initially referring me to this historical moment and usage.)
imagination. Sabr, which is also the Arabic word for a species of cactus, conjures the patient determination with which Palestinians remain on their land.\textsuperscript{83} The olive tree – an obvious visual placeholder for Palestine – as well as the cactus, wheat, dates, and citrus have all been mobilized at different times to evoke Palestinian land and Palestinian struggle.\textsuperscript{84} Given this agricultural imagination, the human figure associated with sabr, the Palestinian \textit{fellah} [peasant; \textit{fellaheen}, pl., \textit{fellaha}, feminine] and the traditions associated with rural Palestinian society, like embroidery, handicrafts, cuisine, the dance of the \textit{dabkeh}, among others have similarly come to represent Palestinian struggle.

Contemporary invocations of the figures of sabr, especially as found in the search for “authentic” expression, can be found encouraged in contemporary art scenes in Palestine and internationally where Palestinians artists are featured, especially where female artists are concerned. These may be manifest in the production of traditional embroidery or in wearing traditional clothing. For instance, Palestinian-UK hip hop artist Shadia Mansour’s decision to perform in the traditional Palestinian robe or \textit{thob}, can be seen as an example of this kind of manifestation of sabr and the imagery of the resilience of traditional Palestinian society that it evokes.

\textsuperscript{83} Ted Swedenburg describes the practical use of the \textit{sabr} in identifying Palestinian homesteads well: “When Palestinians sight cactus plants (sabr) on the Israeli landscape, they know immediately that an Arab village formerly stood on that spot. Arab farmers planted the cacti to fence off their property… Palestinians claim that the Israeli authorities, despite unceasing efforts, cannot eradicate sabr. Even when burned to the ground, the plant always springs back to life. Cactus has thus become a folk metaphor for the indelible Arab character of the land. Since sabr means “patience,” it equally connotes persistent Arab steadfastness on Palestinian territory.” (Ted Swedenburg, \textit{Memories of Revolt: The 1936-1939 Rebellion and the Palestinian National Past} [Fayetteville: U of Arkansas P, 2003], 62.)

\textsuperscript{84} The olive tree famously thrives in rocky soil with little water.
Figure 3.1: “Shadia Mansour in *thob*.” Shadia Mansour often performs in a *thob* or traditional Palestinian gown. Photo by Ridzdesign.
Tamari rightly points out that the uses of both sabr and sumud, relying as they do on a romantic notion of the land and on traditional Palestinian society, have often been quite socially conservative in their application.\(^{85}\) Tamari writes:

> In the West Bank, sumud also evolved as a form of asserting the traditional virtues of rural society (attachment to the land, the fecundity of Palestinian women, and self-sufficiency). In effect, there was something very retrogressive in this attitude. Attachment to the land took the form of an idealistic glorification of peasant society that never existed in reality.\(^{86}\)

For her part, Sherene Seikaly has fascinatingly documented how in the 1930s, Palestinian middle classes and elites actively excised laborers and peasants from national narratives of what constituted an upstanding Palestinian and who contributed to Palestinian society. She shows how it is only in the 1940s,

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\(^{85}\) The fact that public opinion in Ramallah is increasingly conservative came up frequently in my conversations with interlocutors, especially venue owners. The dominant political discourses, which I suggest second wave rappers refuse and invert, have real material implications – especially on the privately managed venues in which second wave concerts are increasingly held. For example, in April 2014, the municipality closed, to considerable media fanfare, a popular restaurant-bar called “Beit Aneeseh” (it reopened as “Radio” in January 2015). When I arrived in July it had been closed for nearly three months and was still a regular subject of conversation. The managers of Beit Aneeseh referenced social conservatism and political infighting as responsible for the (unexplained) closure. They explain that when public opinion pressures as-sulta, the Authority responds by occasionally closing bars and restaurants. When this plays out in the environment of the political divide between Fatah and Hamas, the two main Palestinian political parties, that political rivalry can and has been literally played out on the backs of Ramallah’s leisure scene. As Sami Said of Beit Aneeseh explained,

> Aneeseh became like a hanger. Everybody could hang his own problems on it. Say Hamas has a problem with Fatah or the PA. So Hamas starts writing on its websites that the PA is responsible for the opening of places like Beit Aneeseh, and that therefore the PA encourages licentiousness, things that are haram [forbidden] and so on.

In other words, the existence of the bar became the terrain through which local political parties vociferously articulated their politics. When the municipality closes a drinking establishment to prove it does not succumb to vice, it is engaging ideas about the proper forms of politics informed by traditional ideas of “Arab Palestinian culture” (which is here implicitly Muslim, it should be noted). The prevalence of this conservatism, or at least this conservative reiteration of identity and culture is not that different from the conservative turns in other Arab and Muslim countries/politics (see Tarik Sabry, *Cultural Encounters in the Arab World: On Media, the Modern, and Everyday Life* [London: IB Tauris, 2010], 48).

[i]n the face of both wartime constraints and the rapid erosion of political possibilities [that] men of capital expanded their understanding of the middle class to include what they called the authentic Bedouin and fellah [peasant], who they feverishly and belatedly sought to represent.87

These considerations of the discourse of sumud and the incorporation of what are today the idyllic images of Palestinian struggle lead me to the observation that the discourses of Palestinian struggle are socialized in specific ways. Specifically, I suggest that they are “classed” in specific ways. When I say “classed,” I mean a specific socio-economic idea of Palestine and its caretakers are mobilized to serve a specific political imagination.

In Chapter One, I suggested that the neoliberal orientalism of the mainstream press and US state department cultural programming racializes representations of Arab rappers on world stages. That is, by blackwashing, neoliberal orientalism mobilizes ideas of “black”ness in order to understand and incorporate Arab politics. Here, I suggest a political imagination that imagines and idealizes the Palestinian peasant class is at work in much discourse about Palestinian struggle. Discourses of sabr and sumud, especially through representations of turath [heritage] illustrate this classed imagination vis-à-vis the fellaheen [peasantry]. The problem with this political imagination, especially the declarations and performance of specific ideas of “Palestinian-ness” – in addition to the conservative overtures that Tamari identifies, is that the romance of these ideas persist despite the changing shape of Palestinian politics, continued land dispossession, and economic realities.

This is especially significant when we recognize that the once widespread experience of the fellah tending his plot of land within an extended family/kin network is

87 Seikaly, Men of Capital, 11-12.
no longer the reality for a majority of Palestinians, an increasing number of whom are urban, laboring poor. The reality of Palestinian dispossession means that most Palestinians today are not farmers but laborers, who sell their labor to Zionist (or predatory Palestinian, Arab, and other transnational) capital to survive. It is in this context that the refusal of second wave rappers to reproduce the discourse of sabr and sumud as attached to images of turath has the capacity to be politically powerful.88

By observing that second wave rappers also largely avoid performances or associations of turath, I mean that they avoid performing widely-recognizable Palestinian identity. Almost always dressed in t-shirts, hoodie sweatshirts, and jeans (rarely sporting even a kaffiyeh) second wave rappers are largely not interested in being identified first as Palestinian. On the contrary, they speak of a constant negotiation with international curators, with the press, and with fans in which they insist on being recognized as musicians first, not Palestinians. Similarly, their recollections of the kind of music they like reflect this political choice. This explains for example, the refusal of the “comic

88 This is not to suggest that these aesthetic choices disavow the insistence for the land, the oldest and most fundamental of Palestinian political demands. I am suggesting that there are ways in which romantic posturing about the land and its caretakers has distanced political discussion and strategy from the reality of the existing relationship between the historical class of the Palestinian fellaheen and the land. That is, there are ways of celebrating the farmer that mask the contemporary challenges she faces. Some second wave lyrical work rejects this distance between the romance in political discourse and the material reality.

I have been asked here to expand on how this critique of romanticism applies to the demand of “return” for Palestinian refugees. I maintain that similarly, any consideration of Palestinian return needs to acknowledge the material and economic changes over the last sixty years. Without a serious restructuring of capitalism in Palestine (and elsewhere), the influx of both capital and unskilled labor when return is achieved will be very trying on the existing population, one that has already suffered considerably under occupation. This material analysis should also apply to the contexts from which refugees will return. Of course, the political discourses of resilience and return have also been used, in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and the Gulf States as excuses not to integrate Palestinians into the local economy and society. This doesn’t mean that “return” should cease to be a central demand. But, alongside the narratives I’m outlining here, the goal of return is frequently romanticized, a romance which is achieved by not considering the material realities of the Palestinian economy and its political geography. The hard-hitting lyrics in Ramallah Underground’s “Khaleeni ‘Ayeesh” (discussed in Chapter Two) excoriate the political posturing of the diaspora who demand resistance by Palestinians under Occupation, while they live comfortable lives abroad.
nationalism” some listeners located in DAM’s work. Haykal explains his reluctance to embrace bands of the “first wave” of Palestinian rap, MCs like Rami GB and DAM as follows:

[This music had] a very strong Palestinian character [taba‘a] that was very close to the general taste, or the taste of weddings, etc. As part of the middle class, my taste was closer to pop and Western music. I wasn’t accepting wedding music, to me that was trash, even though I grew up in Al-Bireh [outside of Ramallah]. Rami GB and DAM were close to this Palestinian character that I didn’t use to like.

Here, Haykal admits he felt more at home in more globalized cultural contexts “closer to pop and Western music” – and was less interested in the outward, recognizable representations of “Palestinian” identity in some popular culture and music. His statement “to me that was trash” could be understood as an anti-populist bias (one not that dissimilar from the refusal of “pop” culture elsewhere). But it could also be interpreted as a refusal of the stereotyped image of “Palestine” and “Palestinian-ness” which have long framed both Palestinian cultural production and politics, and which Haykal distinctly felt did not represent him.

The distancing from traditional celebratory discourses of sabr, turath and the fellah, need not necessarily trigger an aloof, “comprador” middle class image for Haykal and his peers. Nor should it necessarily attribute to them an anti-peasant political position. On the contrary, their refusal of the traditional political narratives attached to the land and the agricultural imagination may more compassionately reflect the continued


90 Helga Tawil-Souri has made this argument. I discuss her work in the Introduction to the dissertation.

91 Seikaly, Men of Capital, 11-12.
dispossession and re-entrenched distance between young Palestinians today and the land itself. So when Shua raps cynically in the middle of the 2014 bombardment of Gaza in the lyrics reproduced above, he is specifically lambasting a political imagination that exalts agricultural imagery and staying steadfast on the land as the stalwart Palestinian ideal. He turns it inside out, stripping the humanity from sabr, rendering it dumb, repetitive, self-destructive.

To be very clear here, I do not consider that the musicians of the second wave of Palestinian rap deny their Palestinian identity. These rappers and their fans identify as Palestinian. They just don’t feel the need to perform this identity outwardly. Musicians feel that when they do, it closes off the possibility of being understood as a musician first and foremost. Additionally, it pressures them to articulate politics and identity in specific ways: this they eschew – not their actual identity or the real struggle against the continued dispossession of their land by the Occupation or Zionist settlers. My point is the dominant political discourses around reclaiming the land in Palestine are increasingly out of touch with the material reality under neoliberal occupation. They continue to rely on historical tropes that do not today represent the majority of Palestinians.92 Otherwise well-researched, left-leaning Palestinian policy papers regularly advocate a return to “sustenance farming” with very little acknowledgement of the fact that this is literally

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92 Moreover, the exoticization of Palestinian land and its caretaker the fellah, in discourses and deliberations of Palestinian struggle have often come at the expense of the experience of both the refugee and the exile. Besides their sometimes radical potential, these discourses often envisioned a framework for ideal Palestinian being that is completely untenable to most Palestinians, be they internally displaced, or refugees in other countries. The continuing prevalence of the idea of the fellah as the Palestinian mode of resistance par excellence creates an idea of Palestinian struggle inaccessible for both the refugee and the exile. That is, if the Palestinian struggle is imagined as being fought by the peasant on the land, what room does this leave for political engagement for people not on the land? The answer historically has been sumud: just hold out until you get on land and can resist like the fellah. My argument is that today, all the failure of Oslo made obvious, this is not empowering politics. Sensing this, the second wave rejects them.
impossible for the vast majority of Palestinians in the economic and material landscape of the West Bank post-Oslo, and perhaps only partially possible for some parts of an urban upper-middle class. 93 When these rappers treat representations of turath and Palestinian identity with some disdain, I think they are reflecting the urban reality of Palestinian dispossession today, not disrespecting the historical peasantry.

Furthermore, considering the history of discursively incorporating, holding up, and excluding the peasantry that Seikaly has laid out, we can see how the second wave’s refusal of these discourses is part of a longer history of the Palestinian middle classes incorporating or leaving out the peasantry. In other words in both cases (the period Seikaly addresses in the 1930s and 1940s and mine 2004-2014), this incorporation or exclusion is not actually about the peasantry, but about what works as a political symbol for Palestinian struggle. The rappers are saying that the romanticized construction of the fellah and his [sic] society – what frequently, even today, constitutes “Palestinianness” – does not represent them. This doesn’t have to be disingenuous or politically deplorable. In fact considering the extent to which this romancitized fellah continues to be held up in Palestinian political discourse, refusing that figure and the imagined trappings of this society could actually be politically productive: demanding alternatives in its stead that actually reflect the increasing urban poverty of the occupied territories today.

Mouqawameh

In addition to discourses of sabr, sumud, and turath, discourses of mouqawameh [resistance] in Palestine are also classed, though differently. If sabr and sumud invoke an imagined peasantry, mouqawameh similarly relies on a classed imagination, but here more closely attached to the urban, working class, than to the peasantry. This classed imagination of more valiant resistance existing in poverty allows West Bank residents generally to readily identify (and romanticize, actually) citizens of Gaza as the real agents of resistance. It is the same imagination that encourages the Ramallah middle classes to locate more authentic resistance in the stone-throwing youth of the refugee camps. Both citizens of Gaza and denizens of refugee camps, in contradistinction to the middle classes of Ramallah, regularly bear the brunt of Israel’s security operations, are less upwardly mobile financially, and at the same time occasionally defend themselves physically.

All my interlocutors refused the notion that their work may be resistance or should be referred to as such. Haykal referenced the distance between Arabic rap and the Palestinian “street” when he told me,

I never wrote about myself “I am resisting” or “I am resistant” [mougawem]. The looks you will get from the street here will be like: Who are you kidding, man? [inta esh tithabal?] It’s impossible for someone to come down [and rap] “I am resisting” if the street rejects you [tafef ‘aleyk].

94 Testimonies like this one are the primary reason I do not find more recent assessments of pleasure or consumption “as resistance” under Occupation in the context of the growing middle class in Ramallah to be a compelling alternative to the asceticism of sumud. That is, my interlocutors were much more ready to disavow the existence of resistance at all in their work than they were to claim the presence of resistance in cultural activity not typically seen as such. (Taraki, “Enclave Micropolis.”)
His testimony reflected sentiments articulated by most of my interlocutors. This disavowal, I perceive, is part a deferral of respect, part an assertion of cynicism. In the summer and fall of 2014, “mouqawamah” most immediately evoked throwing stones and firing rockets, i.e., physical resistance. I heard many iterations of, my music “isn’t resistance like throwing stones is”; or hosting or attending a concert is “hardly launching a rocket.”

The second wave refusal of discourses of mouqawamah may also reflect their recognition of the romanticization of urban poverty as resistance. Consider Boikutt’s lyrics off his most recent album in the closing track “Akher Kilmeh” [Last Word]:

\[Biysawrou abyar w aswad dakhl ras “Old School”
\[‘arfeen ino el kuffiyeh ‘arabiyyeh bas wallah el mukhayam mish “cool”

[They film in black and white, pretending to be “old school” we know that the kuffiyeh is Arab, but I swear the camp is not “cool”].

In these lines, Boikutt directly juxtaposes trappings of resistance (the kuffiyeh) with its current romanticized location (the refugee camp) while critiquing those who seek to appropriate political struggle or political reality for their own benefit. The camp is “not cool” means they are not there to be appropriated as cultural capital – political or aesthetic.

The lyrics and performatic elements in second wave rap disavow discourses of resistance and refuse to embody traditional representations of “Palestinian-ness” that are classed in certain ways. If this is the case, what are the implicit or built class positions assembled through these refusals and disavowals? As I will explore in the next and last

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section, second wave concert culture is middle class, urban, globalized, and relatively elite cultural production. That said, I see no reason to assume that the appeal of its lyrical content should be confined to this demographic. Especially since, as I hinted to in the beginning of this section, evidence of politics in formation is most obvious in second wave lyrical work when it describes the political and economic contradictions of life in Ramallah.

Consider Boikutt’s description in “Risaleh min Muqata’a” [Letter from Boikutt].

I’m reading in the paper
About roads newly paved
Speed bumps removed, a lot of other useful stuff!
Certain individuals benefit
Funding from here and there
Organizations are plentiful, but freedom is far-fetched
... Let them wait for foreign aid until they die
Spinning in circles within the apartheid wall
Into unlimited mazes, taking up unlimited space
That are renewed to fit settlement expansion
Violation, occupation
But not for everyone
There are people here in Palestine living “the good life”
I don’t know what they’re think
Seems like they don’t know one day we’ll be gone
And all these shops will close.

In this piece that he regularly performs, Boikutt paints a quotidian picture of Ramallah (“I sit reading the paper…”) wherein the inequality and corruption in the city’s political reality are almost banal, so regular are they in his perception of the current landscape.


97 Arabic lyrics provided by the artist. Translation by the artist with Loubna Bilali in “Exploring Popular Literature,” 72-73.
Disdain and criticism of money, shopping, and the commercialization of Ramallah frequently appear in second wave lyrics, as do characterizations of the city as fertile ground for corruption, coldness, and anonymity. The hypocrisy of the former is frequently put into relief by juxtaposing these neoliberal elements with the role of Ramallah as “de facto” capital – as supposed seat of resistance since it houses the administrative offices of the Palestinian National Authority. For example, Hakyal offers in his track “Haqqan” [Truthfully]:

\[ \begin{align*}
    \text{Sigara bara: lefet hawa} \\
    \text{‘Imara qarabat tetsawa} \\
    \text{Guevara wallah ma biddho yatsawq} \\
    \text{Ramallah sharnaqah ili batbawa’ el saytara el wishka} \\
    \text{Khush nsban fawran el saytara btskha} \\
\end{align*} \]

A cigarette outside: a change of air
Another building about to be leveled
I swear [Che] Guevara doesn’t want to be taken to market
Ramallah is a cocoon that cradles corrupt control.
Hide behind a monument, and control stains immediately.  

Here, Haykal takes us with him as he goes out for a cigarette break. In front of him, another building is about to be leveled to make way for a shopping complex. Revolution does not want to go shopping, though, he offers. And then the “Ramallah Bubble” emerges in his recollections as a cocoon holding corruption in. How does listening to lyrics like these function? The words themselves point to politics in formation: not quite calls to action, articulating shared observations about changes and developments in the city can nonetheless have powerful political effect.

\[ \begin{align*}
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In Chapter Two I proposed tracing the emergence of tarab as a way to re-center the processes of listening to rap as significant. In our interview, second wave rapper Haykal specifically noted that listening is a political process that can yield different results. For example, Haykal offered that listening to DAM’s lyrics was a political process with limited potential. He explained:

DAM have this lyric, “Why are children free everywhere else, but I don’t have freedom?” I used to repeat this line for like six months after I heard it. But then I thought about it some more and it occurred to me that the children of the world aren’t free and actually this phrase is really dangerous. Your capacity [ist’abak] for resistance itself really disappears here. You erased the idea that there are children that are much more oppressed than the Palestinians, and you’ve made it so that the Palestinian deserves more respect than the rest. Now you’ve become like everybody else. You didn’t take me anywhere. You’re repeating the same thing, like Najwah Karam. You didn’t do anything with brain. You just repeated what everyone says, and got me to repeat it.

His description of listening to this first wave band hinges on the lyrics not opening new ways to consider his place within the larger horizon of political struggle. On the other hand, Haykal’s description of the political process of listening to the Ramallah Underground (the first wave band that much of the second wave looks up to) is very different. Boikutt’s lyrics were for him much more stimulating, intellectually, and as a result, stronger politically.

When Boikutt says this line, “akter moustahlekeen lil bida’a/ fa tarakoulna el hayat” [we’re the biggest consumers, that’s why they keep us alive], he solves a lot of personal problems for me. I couldn’t understand before […] But when he gives me the idea of economics: [he tells me] basically ‘don’t think that you’ve performed some great resilience [ino samadet]. Don’t think that you are strong.’

99 Najwah Karam is a Lebanese pop star.
Haykal’s reflections on the political processes of listening locate the appeal of the Ramallah Underground in their ability to articulate lyrics (and Palestinian politics) in a way that opened avenues for further exploration, not repetition. This band offered a kind of expression that encouraged questions not mantras. Importantly, this feature is central to the band’s ability to “fill the head” – or to produce a certain kind of political feeling.

* * *

In this section I have endeavored to draw out some of the innovation in second wave rap lyrics in order to locate how this music produces specific tarab. I have suggested that refusals or inversions of dominant discourses of Palestinian struggle can readily be found in second wave lyrics, which likely has wider demographic reach than live concert culture in Ramallah. Moreover the political potency of this lyrical innovation may be able to produce that feeling of “filling the head” because the dominant narratives of Palestinian struggle, classed as they are in specific ways, cannot or do not reflect the changing, material Palestinian reality. So, this lyrical work may be significant in the ways in which it contributes to political discourse. For now however, this lyrical innovation is indicative of politics in process: not yet the formation of actual political positions. Importantly, the appeal of these lyrics and the rejection of romance in Palestinian political discourse cannot be attached to a specific class identity. This is so despite the often exclusionary nature of second wave concerts themselves. In the next section, I consider these concerts, with a discussion of how these lyrics contribute to the formation
of tarab and the political feeling unique to the second wave. As I will explore, the ability of these lyrics to fill the head depends on a negotiation of self and community.

Part Three: Al-misfah, Tarab, and Alienation

*Al misfah* [the filter]

In Chapter Two, leaning on Judith Becker’s work on listening, I suggested that a lyrical analysis of music in the absence of a consideration of how this music is felt in performance promises to maintain a Cartesian split between mind and body. Having explored how second wave rappers innovate lyrically, my concern is now to round out that analysis with an examination of how this music is felt. Here I will build on the model built in Chapter Two, which offered that tracing the building of *tarab* in live concerts is an ethnographic technique to recognize ways of being with others that are politically potent. In developing this model, I expanded on Gatens and Lloyd’s explication of Spinoza: especially the idea of the inseparability of individuality and sociability. That is, central to my proposition to trace the emergence of tarab as a way to track politically potent sociality is the idea that one’s sense of self is conceptualized through one’s body, which is always felt in relation to other bodies.

Thursday. I arrived at La Wain around 10 with an Italian woman I had met at a capoeira class and a [male, Palestinian] friend of friends I’d been out with before. The cover was 30 NIS [around 7 USD]. Our male companion left almost immediately upon entering the bar, but after paying the cover.
The Italian and I sat at a bar and ordered a beer. It was easy to hear each other above the [recorded] music playing.

By the time Boikutt took the mic I lost track of the Italian, having moved up within the first two rows of people; energy was concentrated up by the stage, maybe a dozen people, very close together, standing, dancing and responding to the MC. All were focused forward, listening. It was very warm; cigarette smoke was thick.

Despite the warmth, the energy throughout the bar had holes and gaps in it. Even close to the stage responses were not uniform. A few people danced, a few people smoked, some smiled and tried to make eye contact with the MCs, obviously positively engaged. With others body language was more reserved. Obvious interest. Boikutt clearly had their attention. But it was like each of us was in her own space. Arms folded. Straight faces. [See Figure 2]

The crowd was less concentrated immediately behind me. Thin, even. People chatting, laughing, sitting, standing, disinterested, allowing other things to pull them away from the stage. By 11:30 the musicians had stopped. There was no encore. Police crowded the door on my way out, confirming suspicions they were responsible for the evening’s abrupt finish.  

The concert at La Wain was Boikutt’s release of his album Haiwan Nateq (see Figure 3). It happened the same evening the Qalandia International Festival concluded. Earlier in the evening, the Ramallah Cultural Palace was mostly full for the indie rock concert of Bil3ax, hosting a couple hundred listeners. After the concert, groups of friends connected and expanded to greet the weekend. Several hours later at La Wain, there were maybe fifty people by the time the concert started, around twenty-five acting as a group of engaged sami’ah [listeners]. Even this group dwindled as the concert continued, some allowing themselves to be distracted by socializing, going for fresh air, etc. The group

100 Author’s field notes, November 2014.
that remained gathered tightly to the stage, but conducted a heterogeneous exchange with the performers, where their reactions were anything but uniform.

The tarab that was present at La Wain that night was not built on a revolutionary ethos that appeals to Palestinian identity or anti-Occupation politics in order to engage, attract, or gather the largest audience. Rather the rhythmic union built in this concert, like in other “second wave” rap concerts, was rather premised on the slightest bit of irritation, which was actually designed to alienate a portion of a given audience. This rhythm of

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filtering is developed through various techniques, some of them sonic, built into the music, and some of them performatic, enacted gesturally by the singers/MCs. Sonic filtering elements may include sound that’s just a little bit too loud for the space, unclear vocals, generated noise. Gesturally, MCs may incorporate a degree of disdain for the audience or the fact that they are performing into their act. In our discussions, Al-Nather confided that an influential part of Boikutt’s performances, that he’s been paying attention to since he was a young teen, is that “when [Boikutt] performs, it’s completely his own personality. He doesn’t give a fuck. [It’s not like with other bands] you can see how they’re fucking acting.” Similarly, as I explore in Beirut in concerts of Touffar, an enactment of disgust is central in the filtering process which produces tarab.

Based on my experience at the Haiwan Nateq release concert described above and others, I want to suggest that the exchanges in second wave rap concerts can be understood as a negative call and response. In Chapter Two, I pointed to the centrality of call and response in the building tarab in rap concerts. Negative call and response is a variation on that tradition of the rapper calling out and inviting a response of engagement. When an MC starts off too loud, or the sound is not clear and audience members leave, this too is a call and response, but of disengagement, from which musicians learn and feel with their audience. While a balance is required so as not to alienate all listeners, successful negative call and response succeeds in making more engaged intimacy, but with a smaller percentage of the audience that has gathered. That is, the exchange, despite being built on initial invitations to disengage, is nonetheless an active communication between performer and audience. My own experience affirmed this as evidenced in the
field notes quoted above. None of the people I came into the concert with were with me during the musical climax of the event.

This concert is a productive jumping point to explore this musical philosophy in more detail. The concept of filtering is Boikutt’s; and the word *al-misfah* [the filter] titles the opening track on his latest album. Boikutt describes how a kind of filtering in his work may function by quoting a phrase from his own lyrics: *bastafīzzek ‘a beat kharra zay wijjek*. Hard to render in English, the phrase literally translates “I dare to impose on you a shitty beat, like your face,” or more lyrically perhaps: “The shitty beat’s in your shitty face.” Boikutt explains,

[T]his phrase expresses, if you like, a little about all of my work. [...] On my recent album] the name of the [first] track is “Al Misfah” which means “the filter.” This is the concept. It’s part of my message [khitabi], part of my “discourse.” I like filtering [al-filtera] in music. I believe in this. It’s not necessary for everybody to like what I’m doing. There needs to be a conscious reaction. Some people hate it, some people like it, some people, whatever no reaction. [These reactions allow me to process, they give me a kind of tracking [iqtifa”] of my own work. It relieves me that there is a real response from people; that they aren’t just waiting for me to finish and then clapping politely. No, there are people who like it, and people who don’t. There’s “filtering” that happens. It brings out the reality of what’s happening.

*You don’t aim to reach as many people as possible?*

No, it’s not that. It’s just that it won’t work. And I’m not going to change myself and how I do things [rasi] in order to be able to reach everyone. That’s the point. It’s important to me to do the work that I like, how I like it, and that’s why I make music anyway. To connect what’s here [in his head] to the outside world... I would love it if everybody liked my work, obviously. That wouldn’t upset me. But I believe it’s not possible.

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103 Words in quotations were originally articulated in English.

104 Ticket price for the concert is noted above. Some of this revenue will go to the artist. None of the musicians I spoke with in Ramallah make a living exclusively off of their music. They all hold down day jobs (in marketing, film/media, journalism, among others) and most DJ for money (see note 40). Music is
Here, Boikutt explains how *istafaza* (or disrupting, disturbing, imposing) and *filtra* (filtering), structure the building of rapport with an audience. Importantly, he articulates this as a process between him and a listener [*bastafazak*], not something that happens in a vacuum or in isolation [*bastafaz* is the verb without a direct object]. At the same time, he recognizes and respects, in fact, that this rapport built through the music is not an open invitation to just any listener.

The rhythm of filtering is built on a negative call and response and actively negociates solitude and togetherness. Second wave rappers and fans consistently recount how the iteration of a specific line or a particular flow sequence stops them in their tracks, reaches something inside, and shakes out a conceptualization of consciousness (*wahi*, is frequently the term invoked) the listeners knew they possessed but were not aware of. The realization that someone else not only feels similarly but articulates it powerfully can be overwhelming, the effect of which is frequently not increased community but solitude. This explains in part why the filtering philosophy behind this music is so appropriate. The tarab I am recognizing is a sort of reverberating return to the self that is always connected to the presence of others, even as it actively keeps them at bay.

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primarily disseminated on social media and thus is, for the most part, free of charge. In my research, musicians making money off of their music did not come up a lot in Ramallah or Beirut, but it did all the time in Amman. The musician’s career and the monetization of hip hop and other forms of alternative music in the Arab world is a central focus of the Amman chapter.
Figure 3.3: “Event Flyer, for the Haiwan Nateq release concert.” The text reads: “A speaking animal at La Wain? Boikutt performs with Julmud, Shua, Dakn, and Al-Nather, Thursday 13 November.”
Moreover, it is this tension of feelings – disgust, disdain, cynicism, impatience irreverence, anger mixed with the delight, surprise, and relief of hearing another articulate it, – that constitute the “emotional blending” in this tarab. That is, a feeling articulated by an MC of disgust or cynicism about the neoliberal incursions in Ramallah, for example, changes when it is heard and received by active listeners. When heard, that disgust or cynicism, can relieve, give pleasure, excite or encourage the listener, who having heard out loud and delivered powerfully something she thought was hers alone, is forced to recognize others were similarly moved by the music. This surprise or relief points to how clearly second wave lyrics diverge from mainstream conceptualizations of Palestinian politics and just how thirsty audiences are for alternatives that more closely reflect their own observations in their city. It is important to reiterate however that, as tarab, this feeling is more of an ethos that is felt rather than a specific something conceived or visualized. This means for example that the emotional blending I identify as political feeling in second wave tarab could happen as a result of listening to any of the lyrics I have translated in this chapter, and is not tied to specific subject matter. I consider this lyrical work to represent politics in process: I do not consider them articulations of specific political positions.

*Feeling through space*

In order to avoid romanticizing the presence of this tarab, it is now necessary to spatialize its emergence. I conclude this chapter by rounding out an analysis of the presence of some powerful affective interactions in second wave concerts by considering
the accessibility of these concerts in Ramallah. While Al-Nather and Dakn remember attending DAM and Ramallah Underground concerts as kids as part of the local *nadi*, the growing and changing nightlife in Ramallah (of which second wave rap is a part) attracts a different crowd with different cultures of consumption. Haykal, whose more conservative upbringing prohibited him from limited concert culture (at Pianos, for example) as a teenager, still resents the bar atmosphere, which he calls “completely bourgeois.” Which is to say that even while rappers readily acknowledge that the live concert is of the most important opportunities for the building of rapport with their audiences, they regularly recognize the limits on the reach of the live concert in Ramallah. For example, when I asked Sheʿrab if rap in Ramallah was *shaʿabi* [popular] he laughed. Then he continued:

No, it’s not *shaʿabi*. It could be, in 20-25 years. People embrace it when they hear it, sure. But they don’t hear it everywhere. [Shaʿabi is where] people can find it, like at a wedding, or in a car…. [Can you imagine] in the middle of a *hafleh shaʿabiyyeh* [a popular party/concert], like at a wedding, someone taking the mic and singing a rap song? That’d be hilarious.

There are at least two things to underscore in these remarks. First, Sheʿrab assumes a particular definition of the term “*shaʿabi*” – describing musical events like a large weddings and the popular music that typically features within them. His laughter at the idea of taking the mic and singing rap at such a gathering and his refusal to apply the adjective “*shaʿabi*” to his own work is first and foremost a question of genre and material accessibility, not political relevance. This points to my observation above that concert culture and lyrical content point to different demographics, not exclusive to each other. That is, Sheʿrab specifically is not talking about who his music might speak to, but how
one has access to it (“people embrace it when they hear it, but they don’t hear it everywhere”). His recognition of the limited, material reach of his music despite what he considers its potentially much more widespread appeal, is critical.105 Sheʿrab and others’ recognition that their work is only slowly reaching poorer audiences (almost categorically not reaching them live) is an important articulation of self-awareness.

For their part, venue owners and programmers also recognize that they cater to specific a specific demographic. What’s particular about their reflections, however, is their refusal to apply a class qualification to their clientele. Sami Said reflects, “Most of the places that open in Masyoun are upper class restaurants. For our part, we were aiming for [something else]. I wouldn’t call it ‘middle class’ and I wouldn’t call it ‘shaʿabi’ [popular, of the people]; I’d call it shabab [youth].” The owners and managers of both Beit Aneeseh and La Wain used the word shabab to describe their clientele. Shabab is a masculine plural noun, literally meaning young men; is not connected grammatically to the adjective shaʿabi. In the context of the general clientele of music venues, it refers to a mixed gender grouping, roughly 21-40 years old, to which a class make-up is hardly ever ascribed. In an example of this evasion of class, Sami Said offers “youth” as an alternative to upper class, middle class, and popular (“I wouldn’t call it ‘middle class’ and I wouldn’t call it ‘shaʿabi’”). It is to this evasive demographic that the growing “Ramallah bubble” caters. As I have been arguing, second wave rap concert culture largely depends on the same demographic.

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105 His admission is in quite obvious contradistinction to the ethos adopted by more commercial artists, DAM prominent among them, who allow themselves to “speak for Palestinians” and seem to be interested in representing “Palestinian” issues to local as well as international audiences.
I surmise that concert culture is predominantly middle class based on the reality of where and when concerts are held (private bars after dark), what kind of venues host them (establishments that serve alcohol and employ bouncers that deny entry to groups of young men unaccompanied by women), and the neighborhoods in which these are found (predominantly the neighborhood of Masyoun, the heart of suburban sprawl in Ramallah). I offer these reflections as a contextualization of what I argue is powerful political feeling conducted in these concerts, built by sonic, performatic, and lyrical elements. That is, in this chapter I have testified to the presence of political feeling in second wave concerts, as attested to by audience interactions, musicians’ recollections, and my own participant observation. At the same time, I have found it necessary to recognize the limited physical access to these sites and the middle class demographic to which they are geared. This should serve to limit any new romanticism attached to the politics in process I identify here. Considering the political innovation in second wave aesthetics as well as the obstacles Ramallah’s new urbanization present in terms of class accessibility point to the contradictions of growth – cultural and economic – under an Occupation facilitated by the PA.

Conclusion

“There was this huge revolution at some point here in Palestine. All the shabab [young people] became rappers. And then it all died out.” Muhammad Mesroujy, the 22-year old producer and rapper who goes by Al-Nather tells me. He’s referring to the growth in Palestinian rap production in the late 1990s and early 2000s, leading up to and during the Al-Aqsa (Second) Intifada. This first wave was prominently marked by the
emergence and popularity of DAM from Lyd, MWR from Akka, Rami GB from Jenin, and the Ramallah Underground from Ramallah. This rap production “died out” as the Second Intifada ended (c. 2006), as a host of economic policies focused popular attention on growth and development, as political division between Palestinian political parties polarized political discourse, and as groups like Ramallah Underground broke up. In the wake of the Arab Uprisings (2011-2013), it has been popular to claim that Palestinian rap has returned, influenced and encouraged by the nearby revolutions and the explosion of cultural production, including rap and graffiti, that accompanied the political stirrings in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya.106

In this chapter, I have proposed a different narrative of Palestinian rap production. Like Al-Nather, I recognize that there was a concentration of rap production leading up to and during the Second Intifada (2000-2006; what I call the “first wave”). Following this however, I have argued here that the period Al-Nather describes as “dying out” (roughly 2005) to the present (2015) may be productively characterized as a second wave of Palestinian rap. Considering that its early coalescence can be noticed as early as 2007, the formation of a second wave of Palestinian rap has less to do with the spectacular Arab Uprisings as it does with local musical mentorship, patterns of exposure to different forms of pop and rap music, and the economy of alternative leisure and live music in Ramallah, the latter shaped by the twin forces of neoliberalism and Zionist occupation.

In the first section of this chapter, I described the shared characteristics among a group of collaborating rap musicians that emerge against the backdrop of neoliberal incursions in Palestine, structured as they are by Zionism and the Occupation.

106 See for example Maira, Jil Oslo.
Establishing that the second wave is heavily influenced by and aligns itself with the aesthetic experimentation and lyrical modes of the Ramallah Underground, especially the quest for music that "fills the head," I turned to a contextualization of second wave lyrics within Palestinian discourses of political struggle. I argued that the second wave largely refutes narratives of sabr [patience], sumud [steadfastness], or mouqawameh [resistance] while rejecting outward trappings of turath [heritage]. I argued that these narratives are classed in specific ways and that rappers’ refusal of them point to significant politics in process.

In the third section, I moved on to describe the specific political feeling in second wave concerts, built through a tarab premised on alienation and what I termed negative call and response. I suggested that this alienation works as political feeling by performing the inseparability of individuality and sociability: after aurally initially isolating the individual, lyrical expression ultimately connects her with other listeners. Finally, I spatialized this analysis of political feeling by considering the relatively exclusive venues in which these concerts are held. Ultimately, considering what Massey calls “the fact of spacing” in the Ramallah Bubble forces the recognition that tarab built on the filter, as exciting as it may be to an avant-garde consuming audience, may be exclusivist in practice. I argue that this needn’t discredit the genre of cultural production or its producers and consumers. But it should recalibrate widely-held assumptions of politics and resistance in Palestinian rap.
Chapter Four: Amman

Resignation and longing in the emerging “cultural hotspot”

Overview

My research in Amman documents the recent emergence of the city as a regional cultural hub together with an overwhelming, articulated desire of young people to leave Amman behind. The material growth of the city, the growth of a cosmopolitan middle class, and the increased number of and attendance at musical festivals has promised to make Amman something of a concert hub. This density of cultural production is encouraging hints of Amman coming to beginning to catch up to the regional superiority

Figure 4.1: “Bu Kolthoum’s New Year Resolution.” Syrian rapper Bu Kolthoum fled violence in his home city of Damascus and has resided in Amman since 2012. The sentiment he expresses in this New Year’s Resolution posted on Facebook is a good example of the celebration of musical productivity in Amman coupled with a desire to leave that I explore in this chapter. Bu Kolthoum’s latest album, “Inderal,” named for the anxiety medication on which he depends, was released in October 2015.

1 Research for this chapter was made possible by an IIE Fulbright Student Research grant. I spent approximately nine months in Amman from January 3 through October 10, 2015 supported by the International Institute for Education and facilitated by the Jordanian-American Commission for Educational Exchange (the Bi-national Fulbright Commission in Jordan). I would like to thank Alain McNamara for accommodating an unorthodox start date for my tenure (in order to accommodate research in Palestine) and Iman Abdul-Wahid, Hiba Shtayeh, Aya Al-Abdallat, and Abu Firas for their help and support over the course of these months in Amman. Thanks also to Jermaine Taylor at IIE in Washington DC for his attentive logistical support.
of Beirut, Cairo, and Dubai and the historical importance of Baghdad and Damascus as centers for Arab cultural production. Nevertheless, more than in Ramallah or Beirut, my conversations with interlocutors were laced with a recognizable desire to move from and beyond the city. Many cultural producers were both proud of the new role Amman plays, especially in alternative music production in the region, at the same time that they were quick to bemoan the felt impossibility of producing culture, especially live music, in Amman. Rappers and producers pointed to the increased opportunities to showcase their work live and their growing fan base at the same time that they decried audiences’ ability to respect or give back to musicians and their work.

This chapter is laid out in three parts. The first explores the growth of Amman that has made it an increasingly cosmopolitan capital city. I trace the flows of demographic and financial capital in the context of regional upheaval that shape the growing opportunities for musical production in Amman. In Part Two, I build from assumptions of Jordanian “stability,” central to its attraction as accessible regional host for cultural production, to explore in more detail the heavy hand of the Hashemite regime in discouraging political dissent. In this section, my interlocutors’ conflicting testimonies about the presence and degree of state censorship drive my recognition of a political feeling of resignation produced in some Jordanian rap lyrics. In Part Three, I explore in more detail what “performed resignation” looks like when it is reflected in audience behavior. In particular, I am concerned how audiences’ divided attention, especially in concerts in public spaces in Amman, impedes the regular emergence of tarab. This drives the recognition and analysis of the political feelings particular to rap in Amman.
Part One: “Cultural Hotspot”

[Red Bull] labels every country in a tier. There’s a “tier three,” “tier two,” “tier one,” and “cultural hotspot.” A country like Egypt, because of their theatre and music and film scene, they are a “cultural hotspot.” Lebanon is a “cultural hotspot” because of [its] nightlife. Since 2013, Jordan has been a “culture tier two.” Before that it was dead: it was a “tier three.” In the beginning of 2015, we moved into “culture tier one.” Because of all the concerts and festivals, it’s coming alive with music. So now the goal is becoming a “cultural hotspot.”

~ Raed Serhan, Culture Manager for Red Bull, Jordan

If these guys don’t live off their music, it’s a waste of talent. It’s a shame [haram] for someone like El Far3i to work a 9-5. He’s a crazy drummer, he plays guitar, he has a nice voice, he writes crazy raps: he should live off of this. But of course he can’t do it alone. He can’t write, and record, and make melodies, and do promotion and marketing, and book his own gigs. We need an industry. Little by little this will become an industry. Why don’t any of our rappers have websites? Why are none of our guys able to sell their music online? Why is it all free downloads? Each one of those artists should be treated like products. If [these artists] are going to live off their music, it has to go like this.

~ DJ Sotusura

Amman’s status as an emerging cultural hub is most readily identified with the emergence of a series of successful independent musicians/bands over the past ten years

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2 Interview with the author, August 23, 2015; all subsequent quotations from Mr. Serhan taken from this interview, which was largely conducted in English.

3 In the case of the stage name of Tareq Abu Kweik and the band Morabba3, addressed in this chapter, I have used the transliteration the musicians use, which substitutes the number “3” for the Arabic letter ‘ain (see Transliteration Note). From the musician’s Sound Cloud page: “El Far3i means coming from a branch which is a symbol of growth and reaching outwards to the world by feeding from the roots.” (El Far3i SoundCloud page, accessed January 19, 2016, https://soundcloud.com/El Far3i.)

4 Interview with the author, September 12, 2015. All subsequent quotations from Sotusura are taken from this interview. Translations from the Arabic are my own. “Sot u sura” means “sound and picture.”
and with increasing numbers of, and attendance at, music festivals.\(^5\) Bands like Morabba3, Jadal, Autostrad, and Zaed Naes are redefining not only the sounds of Arabic indie rock, but non-commercial paths to musical success.\(^6\) While Arabic indie rock, indie pop, alt-rock, and of course hip hop, have been growing in the region over the past decade, much of it has focused in Lebanon and out of Beirut: with bands and trajectories like Mashrou3 Leila and singer-songwriters like Yasmine Hamdan and Zeid Hamdan.\(^7\) Since the emergence of Autostrad and Jadal in particular, and Morabba3 most recently, Amman is emerging as another important hub of musical production.

In addition, while small-scale bars have doubled as concert venues or “discotheques” in Amman for decades (like Caesar’s for example), influx of capital into the city has encouraged the opening of more such venues.\(^8\) More than a dozen café/bar/lounge venues now host musical acts and DJs in Amman.\(^9\) My interlocutors

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\(^8\) Interviews with Shermine Sawalha and Raed Serhan.

\(^9\) To name a few: Canvas, Bargos, the Flip, Corners Pub, Fann w Shai, Bonitas, Blue Fig, Jadal, Books@, JetLag, Laconda, and Maestro. Consider in Ramallah during my research there were basically two
suggest this is an increase since around 2011. Over the same period, musical festivals showcasing regional talent have established themselves and attract increasing audiences every year. The most obvious example of this is the Al-Balad Music festival (held bi-annually, inaugural season 2011). But the recent Word is Yours Festival (2015), efforts to host the local bands listed above, and specific corporate-sponsored initiatives, like Red Bull’s “Soundclash” concerts are also a part of this growth. This is the energy Raed Serhan refers to when he speaks of Amman moving from “tier three” towards “cultural hotspot.”

The curious rating system used by the Austrian energy drink manufacturer is not a scientific gauge upon which to base a critical appraisal of Amman as environment for live concert culture. But this transparent codification is a succinct articulation of hopes and expectations I heard voiced repeatedly by other cultural producers and consumers in Amman. The stability Jordan boasts relative to the region and an influx of transnational as well as regional capital alongside the emergence of more independent musicians points to a hopeful future for Amman’s independent cultural production: the building of an infrastructure that would allow Jordan’s musical talent to sustain themselves off of their music.

The emphasis on quantity of production in laying claims to the development of independent music production over the particular parsing out of qualitative texture stuck out to me in my conversations with interlocutors. Asked about the challenges they faced,

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functioning venues and in Beirut at time of writing there are also two or three venues available to rappers for the live performance of their work.

10 “Soundclash” is a Red Bull “concept” that has been used as concert structure around the world. In 2014, Red Bull staged a “Soundclash” between Morabba3 and Autostrad. Both bands played a sequence of variations on their own and each other’s work in a concert structure that has been used between different bands in other countries. Serhan estimates 3,000 people attended. Tickets were 10 JDs.
most musicians, producers, and events coordinators bemoaned the small number of venues (despite these being three and four times what is available in other cities in the region) and the paucity of people willing to coordinate events. In other words, just more was needed. Serhan’s answer when asked him how a country moves from “tier one” to “cultural hotspot” are indicative of this trend:

You just have to do more. You have to become a point of interest. It has to be a place that people actually depend on. Let’s say if there’s a festival that happens every year that everybody pays attention to in the region, that creates a lot of buzz: that’s the right direction, that’s towards becoming a cultural hotspot.

The “doing more” that is making of Amman a “point of interest” is happening amid neoliberal incursions specific to the urban shape and political history of Amman. In establishing the neoliberal context that audiences traverse to attend hip hop concerts in Amman, I am concerned on the one hand with the “industrialization,” to interpret Sotusura’s words, of musical talent in Jordan and the hopes and expectations attendant upon the establishment of a profitable, independent music industry. On the other, I want to pay attention to the patterns of exclusion that are accompanying these changes, and the curious negative perceptions that also shadow the hope and excitement of this growth. I use my own experiences navigating Amman’s expansion as an initial map to chart this neoliberal growth. This offers one reading of the context to Serhan’s comments about Red Bull’s grading system.

I moved eight times in the ten months I spent in Amman in 2015. Seven of the eight moves were driven by structural deficiencies in the living space (no heat, no hot water, bed bugs), and all eight apartments were located in what is commonly referred to as “West Amman”: the sprawl westwards from the city-center, roughly along Zahran
Boulevard, marked by the eight numbered traffic circles.\(^\text{11}\) This part of the city is what urban literature on Amman consistently describes as “Westernized (read: Americanized)” and where, as one US master’s student told me, life was “as comfortable as it was ‘back home.’”\(^\text{12}\)

The first flat I lived in off of the Seventh Circle near Dheir Ghbar, one of the city’s new gated communities, put me in walking distance of both the upscale Cozmo and Safeway markets and a Porsche dealership; close to the airport road and near a half hour by car from the bars and festivals that would become the focus of my research. The malls and markets within walking distance fit into the model of what Christopher Parker has described as the “well-lit and privately policed site[s] of global consumption.”\(^\text{13}\) The covered parking lots and wide streets illustrated the assumed reliance of the area’s residents on a private vehicle. That is, along with the “tech city” and the newer Carrefour hyper-market and City Mall past the Eight Circle, the first area in which I was living in Amman was, its rather bleak landscape not withstanding, obviously catering to globally-oriented (or at least globalizing) tastes.\(^\text{14}\)

\(^\text{11}\) The traffic circles increase in number the farther west from the city center. So First Circle is closest to the downtown area separating “East” from “West” Amman, while the Eighth Circle is the farthest.

\(^\text{12}\) Géraldine Chatelard puts it this way: “Amman is typically described along two axis, which are presumed immovable: the first, economic and geographic, cuts the city into two parts: the prosperous and Westernized (read: Americanized) West and the miserable and traditional (almost Islamist) East; the other, ethnic/nationalist, separates Palestinians from the ‘native’ Jordanians.” Géraldine Chatelard, “Amman, et pourtant c’est une ville” in Jordanie, le Royaume Frontière, ed. Riccardo Bocco (Paris: Autrement, 2001), 4. Translation from the French is my own.

\(^\text{13}\) Christopher Parker, “Tunnel-bypasses and Minarets of Capitalism: Amman as Neoliberal Assemblage,” Political Geography 28 (2009), 117.

Another flat in Shmeisani, off the Fourth Circle, put me in the center of relatively older flows of transnational capital, in the nest of the affluent banking community established by the influx of immigration from the Gulf in the wake of the first Gulf War. It was here that I first saw skateboarders and b-boy dancers in Amman, occasionally gathering under the watchful eyes of police, on the wide central plazas of Thaqafa Street. Continuing east, the flats in which I resided in Jabal Amman were in one of the oldest (West) Amman neighborhoods. Here, the flows of transnational capital were visibly manifest in a mixed neighborhood demographic largely unseen in other areas of West Amman. African and South Asian migrant labor crossed paths with European and North American NGO and US workers, and fruit and gas sellers paraded their wares from open bed trucks that blared recorded sale offers. During Ramadan, community drummers still woke the neighborhood for sahour [the meal to precede the fast], a tradition no longer present in the city’s newer neighborhoods.

15 Many Palestinians who immigrated to the Gulf following the 1967 war with Israel were forced to relocate again in the leading up to and aftermath of the First Gulf War. This is especially true of the sizable Palestinian community in Kuwait (approximately 400,000), who were expelled by Saddam Hussein. (Toufic Haddad, “Palestinian Forced Displacement from Kuwait: The Overdue Accounting,” BADIL 44[2010], accessed January 15, 2016, http://www.badil.org/en/component/k2/item/1514-art07.html.) The influx of people and capital to the neighborhood of Shmeisani in the early 1990s reflects this geo-political context. See also Laurie A. Brand, "Liberalization and Changing Political Coalitions: The Bases of Jordan’s 1990-1991 Gulf Crisis Policy," The Jerusalem Journal of International Relations 13(1991): 1-46. I am indebted to Susan MacDougall for the referral to Dr. Brand’s work.
Nearby, Rainbow Street was the site of perhaps the only successful re-vitalization of public space by private organizations to date in Amman. Renovated starting in 2005-2006 by Rami Daher and the NGO he runs, TURATH, Rainbow is a one-way street leading from the First Circle and dead ending in tight streets which lead to the downtown (al-balad). It is a one-kilometer, cobblestone street which was developed over the past decade to host a dozen nargileh [waterpipe] and coffee shops, several “Western” style coffee houses, the British Cultural Council, the Rainbow cinema, a showroom of the
Jordan River Foundation, and several restaurants offering Armenian, Jordanian, and Western cuisine. Now for the most part snubbed as “commercial” by the increasingly hip alternative scene in nearby Al-Weibdeh, mostly young men and families stroll Rainbow Street and the park at its entrance, eating pumpkin and sunflower seeds or corn, and smoking nargileh. More than any other place in West Amman, it is shaʿabi (popular), public space.

Another, very different, privately designed project for remaking public space is the much criticized “new Abdali downtown.” While incomplete, Abdali is modeled off of the Solidere revitalization of downtown Beirut in the 1990s and has garnered similar criticism. On land owned by the Jordanian military, the project is slated to host five-star hotels, retail and office space, and an open-air “public” boulevard touted as the “new

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16 The Jordan River Foundation is a royal NGO. The showroom on Rainbow Street displays products from the Jordan River Design Project, the Bani Hamida Weaving Project and the Wadi Al Rayan Project – they are handicrafts that highlight a range of heritage and environmental concerns. On NGOs and Royal NGOs in Jordan see Laurie Brand, “Development in Wadi Rum? State Bureaucracy, External Funders, and Civil Society,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 33 (2001): 571-590.

17 I return to discuss Al-Weibdeh in more detail, below.

18 Furthermore, the range of establishments hosted on the street mean that it is also a place where social classes mix. High-end bars hold prime real estate floors above falafel and burger joints. The renowned Sufra restaurant, popular with ministers and foreign guests, is steps away from the open-air plaza hosting corn and salted lupine bean vendors.

19 The Solidere projects in Beirut – largely responsible for the post-civil war reconstruction of the downtown and Beirut’s Central Business District – have been critiqued for stealing the public downtown and transforming it into a playground for Gulf and other foreign capital, barring access to the city’s original consumers, producers, sellers. The Abdali project shares designers and investors that backed the Solidere project, prominent among them the Saudi Arabian company Oger. The problematic incursions of Solidere into Beirut urban space make up a central consideration in the development of political critique in the Beirut chapter, which follows. (See among others, Gildas Coignet, “Régénération urbaine ou dégénérescence de l’urbanité?: Le Projet de nouveau centre-ville d’Al-Abdali à Amman, Jordanie,” *Annales de Géographie* 4(2008): 42-61; and Aseel Sawalha, “The Dilemmas of Conservation and Reconstruction in Beirut,” in *The Emerging Asian City: Concomitant Urbanities and Urbanisms*, ed. Vinayak Bhide [Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2013], 148-157.)
downtown.”²⁰ Public is in quotation marks here to underscore the project’s problematic vision of replacing the historic and still existing actual downtown of Amman (al-balad)

²⁰ MAWARED (the National Resources Investment and Development Corporation)’s accelerated development of Abdali rerouted the public transportation system coming out of Amman’s historical downtown area, while buying out its original inhabitants. It is financially and administratively independent, but technically Parker notes it is owned by the military and its proceeds go to the military pension fund,
with a decidedly more private and securitized space. Géraldine Coignet explains that a percentage of public opinion holds that the downtown souq is “too popular” [trop populaire – with a meaning in French here similar to the Arabic shaʿabi] – that is, too close to “the people.” In contrast, she suggests, the creation of a “new downtown Amman” is the opportunity for its organizers to “remake the image, discourse about, and representations of the city” and is made possible via “an accessibility filter… to the detriment of social mixing.” She continues, “The people who, according to the ‘legitimate’ population, are undesirable in these public spaces, however accessible to everyone they are in theory, do not have a place in these future high places of urbanity in the Jordanian capital.”

In other words, the Abdali project hopes to remake an image of Amman by screening out behavior and actors deemed not modern or cosmopolitan enough for the emerging Arab metropolis. Or further, it hopes to do this by attracting Ammanis to a completely remade space in which actors are screened and behavior policed to fit into cosmopolitan norms. As in the malls of West Amman and unlike the more open atmosphere of Rainbow Street, young men without the company of women are not permitted entry to the new “public” boulevard by private security services. (I’ll return to this shortly.)

among other military projects (Parker, “Bypasses and Minarets,” 115). Most alarming, perhaps, is the confluence of public and private sectors in the service of non-Jordanian capital in this project. As Parker notes, “Stage agencies become ‘entrepreneurial’ in these arrangements by joining forces with, rather than acting as an external source of regulation upon, the private sector.” (ibid.) See also Jillian Schwedler, “Amman Cosmopolitan: Spaces and Practices of Aspiration and Consumption,” Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East 30 (2010): 547-562.

21 Coignet, “Régénération urbaine ou dégénérescence de l’urbanité?,” 58.
On weekend evenings in warm weather, the Abdali “boulevard” is alive with people. Thursday and Friday nights hosted small bands on the top of an awkward step-situation (half of the audiences had their backs to the band, and both halves of the audience and the musicians faced a large, open fountain). One of these acts that played here regularly were the Nomads, a Libyan-Jordanian outfit headed by Fuad Ramadan Gritli. Gritli’s political commentary in sung-form won him death threats in his native Libya following the 2011 popular uprising against General Qaddafi. In Amman at the Boulevard, but also at Blue Fig restaurant in upscale-Abdoun and Corners pub off the Second Circle (among others), the Nomads band plays Arabic and Western covers in a sing-along, dance-along, family-friendly set.

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22 Amman hosts a considerable Libyan expat community in the wake of the uprising against Qaddafi, boasting a spectrum of political views. On the political resonances of Gritli’s work in the Libyan context, see Leila Tayyeb, “Nduwash bel Malgy: Performing the Civil in Post-Revolution Libya,” talk at the Sijal Institute, Amman, Jordan, August 12, 2015.
Far from the suburban aesthetics, upscale supermarkets, malls, and development projects filling what was empty desert west of the city center, East Amman, starting with the open air *souq* [market] in the downtown is markedly poorer, its social patterns more conservative. In contrast to the wide, newly paved boulevards and multiple level parking lots of Shmeisani and Abdoun, the streets of Jabal al-Natheef, and Ashrafiyeh are tight, steep, and littered with potholes, frequently not wide enough for two-way traffic. Children play in the street and between parked cars, noise marks the soundscape, and the expanding construction proliferates its pattern of sand-colored, rectangular cement boxes with seemingly little regulation or urban planning.\(^{23}\) As Jillian Schwedler has put it:

> Amman today is not so much a different city from what it was a decade ago, as it is two cities: cosmopolitan West Amman, where development is unfolding at breakneck speed and foreign investment has skyrocketed, and East Amman, the bustling, dusty home to a majority of the city’s poor and working-class residents.\(^{24}\)

The population density of East Amman has been markedly affected by the spectacular influx of Syrian refugees since 2012, most of whom have not moved into the camps designated for refugees. The increasing pressure the refugee crisis has put on state resources in terms of public services and utilities like electricity and water has additionally affected the (already significantly lower) quality of life the city’s poorer

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\(^{24}\) Schwedler, “Amman Cosmopolitan,” 547.
To be sure, Amman has for decades acted as host to various refugee populations fleeing violence or expulsion. In the latter half of the twentieth century these refugees were mostly Palestinian, quickly outnumbering the local Jordanian population. In the 1990s, emigration and capital from the Gulf States flooded into Amman, building its financial districts and establishing the first of West Amman’s suburban enclaves, the neighborhood of Shmeisani. The early nineties also saw the first influx of Iraqi refugees.


26 This led to political instability and eventually to a state crackdown, led by then King Hussein, notoriously remembered as “Black September” in 1970. See Joseph Massad, Colonial Effects: The Making of National Identity in Jordan (New York: Columbia UP, 2001), 240-245.
fleeing the Gulf wars. And since roughly 2012, Amman has been host to refugees from both Libya and Syria, fleeing the aftermath of civil uprisings in both countries. Al-Zaatari refugee camp, located north of Amman was in 2015 home to 81,000 people, making it Jordan’s fourth largest city. This is only one of any number of spectacular statistics to illustrate the role of host Jordan’s stability – relative to neighboring Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Palestine, and Egypt – has conferred upon its capital city.

Moreover, the influx of refugees and concurrent humanitarian crises has led to Amman becoming a more important base for humanitarian, NGO, and UN workers, as well as students of Arabic (as a second) language. This demographic influx of largely European and North American students and workers has put a different stress on both the economy and demographic of West Amman: manifest in rising rents, a larger, paying clientele for cultural production, demand for luxury services including five-star hotels and upscale restaurants, and marked increase in other forms of globalized, cosmopolitan leisure. Moreover, if North American and European capital is flowing into Amman in a new way since the Syrian, Libyan, and Iraqi quagmires, Arab capital is also taking advantage of Jordan’s relative stability. The numerous development projects in West


Amman point to the impressive regional capital pouring into the city. Hopes to make of Amman a “new Beirut (before 1975)” or “another Dubai” underpin development projects from the new “tech city,” to the Jordan Gate Towers, to the new Abdali Downtown. The influx of all this capital – human and financial – contributes to the feeling that people and things are constantly and increasingly arriving to Amman – more specifically that they are arriving on the run from somewhere else, and especially that they are perhaps only there in transit. This feeling of limbo persists despite the obvious explosion of construction this influx of human and financial capital is bringing, to host both poor and wealthy clients, consumers, and residents.

Thus, the neoliberal context in which the increase of rap concerts in Amman must be understood is one shaped by both a booming humanitarian economy – in the increased presence of NGOs, UN, and related agencies as Amman becomes the regional hub to address the Syrian crisis – together with the influx of Arab and other international capital, similarly taking advantage of Jordan’s relative stability, and the large and increasing numbers of vulnerable persons without material resources or the right to work. The influx of capital is facilitated by the Jordanian monarchy’s close ties with the West, the US in particular, and with Israel, the latter of which facilitates the free passage of goods,

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30 That is, Beirut before the eruption of its sixteen-year civil war, when its reputation for nightlife and leisure earned it the nickname “Paris of the Middle East.” (See for example, Gildas Coignet, “Régénération urbaine ou dégénérescence de l’urbanité?,” 53.)

31 Syrian refugees in Jordan have largely been barred from receiving working permits in Jordan, the latter reserved for Jordanians. This policy on refugee labor mirrors that of other countries and has dictated policy since the 1948 exodus of Palestinian refugees. For example, Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, some of whom have been there for over half a century, were only in 2010 granted basic work permits. (Jim Muir, “Lebanon Grants Palestinian Refugees Right to Work,” BBC, August 17, 2010, accessed January 15, 2016, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-11004945; Abbas Shibli, “Residency Status and Civil Rights of Palestinian Refugees in Arab Countries,” Journal of Palestine Studies 25 [1996]: 36-45.)
while the former buoys the Jordanian state with aid money. The monarchy’s participation in the US-led Wars on Terror, in coordination with the draconian Jordanian secret police [mukhabarat], have so-far clamped down on civil dissent and disobedience and are working hard to stay on top of growing religious fundamentalism. Outside of Amman, this steadily growing fundamentalism – fueled by decades-old tribal rivalry with the Hashemite ruling family – has over the past few years repeatedly pointed to the possibility of a more volatile political situation in the future. Moreover, the advent of the Islamic State, in particular the gruesome execution of the Jordanian fighter pilot Muath Al-Kasasbeh in January 2015 (he was locked in a cage and burned alive), have increased support for the monarch, whose Schwarzenegger-like gusto in response to Al-Kasasbeh’s killing has endeared his patriarchal protectivism to international as well as Jordanian observers. It is important to remember, in the context of alternative music


production the subject of which is frequently political, that the Hashemite monarchy also maintains a firm grip on the limits of expression. The mukhabarat as well as the police were present at every concert I attended in Amman.

If Ammanic cultural producers hesitate to criticize the State or the monarchy on record, they are, like my interlocutors in Occupied Palestine, critical of local and international NGOs. When I asked what the outside sources of his funding were, Nasser Kalaji of the production house Immortal Entertainment responded casually: “Well, NGO’s are a no-no for me; and the State is broke. So that’s it. All we have is ourselves.” At the same time however, the rush to lambast NGO affiliation, or the simplicity with which these opportunities are dismissed in conversation, is often coupled with contradictory practice. For example, Shermine Sawalha, a prominent concert organizer, told me:

USAID and NGOs - they’re the ones destroying the world: why the fuck would I take their money to create art to make [the world they destroy] look better? They’re the same [people] who destroy everything: then, they put money into NGOs to hide the effects of their wars. These are [not partners] I am interested in. But I would be interested in some projects funded by these people who go directly to kids and victims of abuse and whatnot.


On NGOs and RONGOs (Royal NGOs) in the Kingdom, see Laurie Brand, “Development in Wadi Rum?”

Shermine Sawalha, interview with the author, June 7, 2015. All subsequent quotations from Ms. Sawalha are taken from this interview, which was largely conducted in English. Sawalha grew up in Amman but spent many years studying and working in Toronto, Canada. She returned to Amman in 2011. She runs the production company MALAHI and is the mover and shaker behind TBA Collective, an events platform.
Considering the contradiction in responses like these, it is prudent not to exaggerate the politics at work in the refusal of NGOs in Amman. I recognize that there are few options for cultural producers outside the neoliberal humanitarian framework imposing itself on the region. Theoretically, I agree that neoliberal funds may be used to non-neoliberal ends. The refusal of NGOs, when it is enacted, is in part a declaration of a political position. However in my observation, this refusal in Amman is largely not informed by a larger rejection of neoliberalism or of capitalism. The criticism of NGOs is an articulated refusal of (usually US and European) influence and interference, but it is rarely coupled with a refusal of private, for-profit capital from the same locales. Red Bull (via their Culture Department) and Winston Cigarettes (as “Freedom Music”) in particular have a palpable presence in the alternative music scene in Amman. Producers and musicians readily attest to their collaborations with both. Further, they consistently praise both companies for their support. Sotusura calls Red Bull the “only” company that entered Jordan and had a positive impact on cultural expression, specifically in the mitigation of risk involved in live concerts.38

Moreover, the friendships and collaborations involved between Red Bull and local rappers are developing without disavowal of the for-profit orientation of the company. Raed Serhan explicitly did not hide these motives when he explained to me:

38 Sotusura told me: “Red Bull is the one company that came to the country and put support behind all of those alternative bands: they pushed them and they helped them all do concerts. It was a problem, you know, organizing a concert is not easy: it’s not easy to be able to pay for everything a concert requires and also pay the musicians. When Red Bull came to support these things, that risk dissipated. It became that you can’t lose money doing a concert anymore. It’s ok to do a concert and whoever comes, comes: nobody’s going to lose 2,000 lira from his own pocket anymore. No, now the musician can think: Red Bull is pushing us and they’re paying for the stage and the equipment, now all that’s on us is to bring our people and do a nice show. So, for sure, this is important and it helped a lot.”
Red Bull started out with extreme sports. Ten years ago they decided they should get into culture as well. Basically, [they were] supporting all the athletes and sports and everything, but nothing was happening on the cultural side. And if you think about it, like 90% of people listen to music. But how many people actually play sports?

*So it’s about expanding [Red Bull’s] product market?*

Let’s say, yea, it’s about reach. [...] People are not dumb anymore, people are not stupid. They can tell if something [is forced]. If you see an artist [holding] a can, the first thing you’ll be thinking is, ‘I wonder how much they paid him just to hold that can.’ But when you come to [Red Bull], we never do that. It’s about you [the artist]; it’s up to you, if you want to do it, do it, if you don’t, don’t. It's about being genuine. It’s about building relationships. Having a relationship with that person and growing that person: it always goes back to “giving wings.”

*But what’s the point of “giving wings”?*

Once a person has reached a certain status, they’ll appreciate you. And you’ll be tagging along with them.

*So they will bring your product to other markets?*

Yea, without even forcing it. You won’t even have to ask.

The embrace of this private capital by musicians and producers – in the form of collaboration with the “cultural departments” of gigantic, transnational corporations is significantly different from the embrace of the private sector by rappers and their fans that I pointed to in Ramallah.

In Chapter Three, I identified a trend in musicians’ testimonies in Ramallah. In order to avoid concert opportunities offered by NGOs, I suggested that performers were turning to the stages of privately-owned bars and venues. In Amman, the venues available to artists for concerts were the same with or without corporate sponsorship: sometimes concert venues were private bars, sometimes they were public, open spaces,

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39 Red Bull’s single advertising slogan is “Red Bull gives you wings.”
appropriated for the occasion. Sometimes concerts were part of festivals; sometimes they were one-off events. Moreover, working with Red Bull or Winston or having either company as a sponsor did not necessarily mean that an NGO was not also involved. That is, this corporate sponsorship of concerts in Amman did not change the shape of concert opportunities except to mitigate the risk on the individuals organizing.\textsuperscript{40} In Amman, turning to private capital (in this case corporate sponsorship) was not an overtly political negotiation, as turning to private capital (in privately-owned bars in order to avoid affiliation with an NGO) was in the occupied West Bank.

It seems to me that the much more developed collaboration with Winston and Red Bull in Amman rather reflected first and foremost a different emphasis on musical production for musicians in this city.\textsuperscript{41} As I have hinted, rappers working in Amman eventually recounted concerns about making a living off of their art. The monetization of independent or alternative music production in a city that is becoming increasingly expensive drives the shape of affiliation and collaboration. Frequently, this industrialization of music is recounted in relation to the eventual opportunity this music may provide the musician to leave Amman. This trajectory has become all the more tangible in the imagination of many since Tareq Abu-Kweik, (the rapper who goes under the stage name El Far3i), successfully transplanted a music career from Amman to London (with the experimental collective 47 Soul) in 2014.\textsuperscript{42}

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{40} See footnote 38.
\item \textsuperscript{41} Both Red Bull and Winston (as “Freedom Music”) have a presence in the West Bank and inside Israel.
\item \textsuperscript{42} 47 Soul “is an electro-mijwez, shamstep, choubi band.” It is made up of El Far3i, Walaa Sbeit, Z the People, and El Jehaz. (“47 Soul” Facebook Page, accessed January 7, 2016, https://www.facebook.com/47soul/?fref=ts.)
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My interlocutors articulated a range of these feelings of anxiety around departure. Many of these were in direct relation to discussions about opportunities in Amman. For example, a discussion between Boikutt, Dakn, and Al-Nather (all members of the “-1” collective, see Chapter Three) about the opportunities available to them in Ramallah and Amman put concert venues and opportunities in direct relationship to the willingness of colleagues to stay or leave Amman.

**Dakn:** In Ramallah, it’s always risky.

**Boikutt:** Here too, it’s always risky.

**Al-Nather:** But here there are venues.

**Boikutt:** True, but it’s not only venues, it’s people. Like Shermine Sawalha… She is single-handedly making things happen in Amman. If tomorrow Shermine goes to Canada, there will be nothing here.
Al-Nather: You’re right.

In this exchange, Boikutt gently chides his younger colleagues about the differences they perceive in the opportunities available to them in Ramallah and Amman. Strongly resonating is the point that a colleague’s imminent departure is always possible (“if tomorrow Shermine goes to Canada”), without whom musicians feel the infrastructure that allows for opportunity in Amman will collapse. This anxiety about there not being the infrastructure to receive their work came up with others as well. The rapper Satti told me, for example:

Everybody gets to a point where they feel like they’re not making it. Everybody. Even if they’re super active: making music and having shows and everything. When you do all that and feel that you’re still in the same place you were before, for sure you will want to go and see change.43

In these comments, Satti almost seems to undo Raed Serhan (of Red Bull)’s assertion that “just doing more” will suffice. Satti’s feeling of “even being super active” and still feeling like “you’re still in the same place you were before” illustrates the limits of Amman’s cultural growth.

Moreover, Satti’s relative ease with the city as this kind of stepping stone differs affectively with the feeling of frustration and suffocation that the Syrian rapper Bu Kolthoum expressed, for example, while both related a similar desire to move on. In the Facebook status that opened this chapter, Bu Kolthoum connected his musical production with a relief of the stress he feels living in Amman: this for him was both affective and material. The material connection was made by juxtaposing “a new album” with “getting the fuck out of here” – implying perhaps that one will lead to the other. Affectively, the

43 Interview with the author, August 20, 2015. All subsequent quotations from Satti (Ahmad Yaseen) are taken from this interview. Translations from the Arabic are my own.
music had another function: of releasing emotions attached to the frustration of being in Amman. Bu Kolthoum explains:

> Every track I work on is a product of pressure. Each track is an expression of stress [daghet]. I get home, suffocated, no one to talk to, I write a track, I’ll talk to those couple thousand people that listen to my music.\footnote{Interview with the author, March 31, 2015. All subsequent quotations from Bu Kolthoum are taken from this interview. Translations from the Arabic are my own.}

This confluence of hope and suffocation; growth and stagnation characterizes Amman’s recent and emerging importance as a regional center for cultural production for a specific economic cross-section of the population. It is the double bind of wanting to build and wanting to leave, and the quickly successive expressions of hope and despair that give needed texture to recent declarations and celebrations of the city as de-facto hub for regional exchange, emerging capital for alternative music.

\textit{Al-Weibdeh}

Rappers’ testimonies about frustration, impatience, suffocation, and disgust mirror the everyday reactions and expressions of many of the young Arabs I spoke with in Amman. Many, many of the people I met and spent time with in the city also expressed a kind of split personality about the city: it was both home and stagnating, both comfortable and oppressive, both changing and not changing enough. Many hoped to, and some were just returning from, travel. The marked exception to this general rule was a handful of very adamant cultural producers to whom I was introduced (though none of the musicians I interviewed), who, upon returning to Amman from some time away, have
made something of a shtick of aggressively attesting to both Amman’s high quality of life and the density of its art and cultural scenes. These individuals, almost all of whom were educated or had lived outside of Amman, were then building, investing, or otherwise helping to expand cultural activities in Amman. I almost only ran into these types in the neighborhood of Al-Weibdeh.

Here, a cozy but populous scene of artists, designers, musicians, or simply educated and employed 20–40 year olds drink tea or coffee on the corner sidewalk of Rumi café, or on the balcony of the gallery and coffee shop Fann wa Shai (meaning “art and tea”), gather for openings in the Darat al-Funun gallery, and party at the newly opened Laconda Hotel and Canvas bar. It is here that many cultural producers – enthusiastic about Amman or otherwise – attest to feeling the most comfortable. Many of the rappers and producers I interviewed, who express a range of attitudes about Amman, live in the neighborhood. All attest to a series of drastic changes that have befallen the area over the past five-to-ten years. Some refer to these changes positively. As Satti, who lives and works in the neighborhood explained to me, recent openings of cafes and other places “become a part of you and what you do. It can change how you see your own society.” But some of my interlocutors also inferred that this growth of an alternative cultural scene in Weibdeh was having negative effects. DJ Sotusura admitted:

We can say that Al-Weibdeh was ruined because of this growth. It’s the first time I see [here] something like what happens in other European or American cities: where you have a place where all the artists hang out and then all these other people come in – the hipsters and whatever – and the artists have to leave. Three years ago, this was the artists’ hangout. Now, it’s full of foreigners [Europeans and North Americans]. You come to rent an apartment now in Weibdeh, the prices are very high. It’s unfortunate because I feel like it’s the one Amman’s neighborhood that was nice and it’s being ruined. I don’t know what’s the next location that [artists] will relocate to, but I hope we can find a nice neighborhood.
Sotusura bemoans here both gentrification and Amman (“the one nice neighborhood…and it’s being ruined”).

It is in contrast to preppy Abdoun and moneyed Abdali that the obviously artsy, graffitied streets of Al-Weibdeh provide such an insulation to the city’s educated, tattooed, artistic, or otherwise alternative population. Historically settled as an Armenian neighborhood, its (relatively) lush gardens and stone buildings attracted and were built by the city’s elite. Nasser Kalaji, who grew up in the neighborhood, remembers that, “you used to look down the street and you could see, this is the minister’s place, or this is that business man’s family, and so on.” As new construction entered Amman and with the establishment of upscale neighborhoods like Abdoun, many residents of Al-Weibdeh relocated their families to this new construction. For a time, rents in Weibdeh were of the cheapest in West Amman: in comparison to the new construction, these buildings were older, more run down, and less desirable.

The cheaper rents attracted artsy, freelance, self-employed types. Then with the influx of North American and Europeans, intrigued by the alternative vibe, rents began to climb, as Sotusura noticed, above. All of my interlocutors who celebrate Al-Weibdeh were also concerned with the changes to it.

Some expressed anxiety about the “loss” of Weibdeh’s alternative exclusivity as the neighborhood’s popularity extends beyond Amman’s artistic and intellectual community, as its rents rise, and as its streets fill with more popular modes of socialization. This latter anxiety about the change of the neighborhood’s character is

45 Interview with the author, September 15, 2015. All subsequent quotations from Mr. Kalaji are taken from this interview. Translations from the Arabic are my own.
inseparable from a class anxiety about the mass culturalization of an elite artists enclave, while not entirely reducible to it. When cultural producers worry about the “commercialization” of the neighborhood, they are predominantly referring to patterns of behavior and consumption, not the scale of private capital invested or mobilized. For example, Rumi Café is one project of several owned and operated by the same team (including two other “Rumi” locations). All have similar intellectual, or soft, warm aesthetics. In contrast, the venue usually pointed out to me as proof of the neighborhood’s “commercialization” is Volk’s Burger (also an independent operation, whose prices and menu are geared to the same clientele that frequents Rumi). The burger joint has fluorescent lights, bright colors, and a predictably “American” fast food aesthetic. That this business is connected with the fact that the neighborhood is attracting more foot traffic (from outside the neighborhood), or the increase in its vehicular traffic on weekend evenings, should point to a confluence of taste and class anxiety. That is, worry about losing the alternative “vibe” of the neighborhood in a more “commercial” aesthetic is interchangeable with the perceived popularization of Al-Weibdeh.

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In this section I have tried to navigate the split hopes and disappointments accompanying a growing music industry in Amman in the neoliberal context of the pouring into the city of different kinds of financial and human capital. The discourses with which Amman’s emerging role as urban and cosmopolitan center and Jordan’s relative stability are touted are fundamentally classed. Unsurprisingly, this reflects the
problematic contours of discussions of cosmopolitanism generally (see Chapter Two).

But the ways in which the city and its growth are classed are actively occluded in discussions of growing cultural production in Amman. And this deserves recognition considering the undeniable class segregation in this city. In juxtaposition to Amman’s emergent urban cosmopolitanism, homage is frequently paid to the city’s “poor” by referencing the “refugees” and “the camps.” These latter categories objectify and exoticize while reducing a host of social problems (and a considerable economic swath of the population) to one political demographic and one particular set of specific material concerns. Amman has serious problems with class mixing that are enforced by the city’s infrastructure: and this has little to do with the influx of Syrian refugees. Attempts to address economic diversity in audiences of cultural production usually center around “outreach” in and to the refugee camps, not the integration of denizens from West and East Amman in a single, shared space. It is in this context that musicians, producers, and fans in the know speak of “exposing,” “teaching,” or “educating” “the youth” and exposing new sounds to new audiences. Crucially, cultural producers speak of introducing them and catching them up to not only genres of music or art, but also the socially accepted behavior accompanying the consumption of that art. As Shermine Sawalha explained to me when I asked her about her target audience:

> Foreigners love the platform: they feel right at home. Even people from here feel right at home. Sometimes we get people from refugee camps, Syrians and whatever, that have never been in spaces like this. They feel very awkward. I see them: they come a bunch of boys – usually we try to prioritize mixed [gender] groups – but I give them all a chance to come and learn […] Ninety-nine percent of the time we don’t turn away groups of men. But I lecture them before they come in. I make them wait for a

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46 For reflections on the General Amman Municipality (GAM)’s infrastructure planning, see Parker, “Tunnel-Bypasses and Minarets.”
little bit and then I give them a brief about what they’re going into and if they fuck up what’s going to happen them. Cause I don’t want to turn people away who want to come and learn - an education that’s more important than any school can give them. If they come in and behave themselves and are really into it, they’re hooked, and they’re always accepted. We always try to give people a chance.

In these comments, Sawalha offers a good example of the collapsed distinction between urban poor and refugee (“Syrians and whatever”) — wherein the “other” to Amman’s new urban, globally-exposed, cosmopolitan is imagined as refugee. Significantly, in Sawalha’s remarks about audiences “behaving themselves,” she invokes social patterns of behavior that are learned. Sawalha connects the live presentation of independent, alternative music — performed by Arabs or others — with patterns of public behavior and social interaction with which some communities may not be familiar (“they feel very awkward”). “Learning” becomes both about new music and sounds at the same time that it means adapting to globalized standards of cosmopolitan social interactions at night: in particular in this case, it becomes about learning how to navigate different gendered environments than those available in other public spaces in Amman. Speaking more generally about how her production work addresses both musicians’ and audiences’ needs, Sawalha offered:

People are dying for content. They are dying to go to shows, to go out and dance and learn and go to exhibits and go see things that will open up their minds. Since 9/11 there are so many things that are about closing up their

47 If these comments also seem contradictory: “foreigners” feel at home but Syrians feel awkward – it may be because the word for “foreigners” [ajaneb] invokes non-Arab, not non-Jordanian subjects. This understanding of the term is the same across the Levant (and is often more accurate than the “European and North American” parentheticals I have been substituting for “Western” in this study – non-European/North American nationalities are included in this demographic).

48 Syrian exiles actually make up a significant part of the musical acts Sawalha has hosted with both Malahi and TBA, the rapper Bu Kolthoum and electronic musician Hello Psychaleppo perhaps most prominent among them.
minds in the region. [Where] it’s all about religion. That’s all fucking brainwashing.

The conceptualization of specific kinds of cultural production as a force of liberalized modernity and social progress, capable to counteract perceived regressive forces like intolerance, religious fundamentalism, and sexism is not unique to the Jordanian context. In the third section of this chapter, I will return to flesh out the class dynamics at play in two musical festivals in 2015, both of which centrally featured hip hop acts.

Before moving on however, I want to offer a point of clarification via comparison on the subject of public space. Neither of the other two cities in this study are models of integrated class mixing. But both Beirut and Ramallah boast more public space, more interaction between classes, and more fluidity between class lines in different neighborhoods under the same municipal jurisdiction than Amman. Despite all the elitist construction and dispossession of the past fifteen years, Beirutis from all walks of life still can and do gather on the open-air Corniche. Throughout the city (and throughout the city’s history), neighborhoods of different classes border and flow into each other. In Ramallah, while the suburban enclaves of Masyoun and Al-Tireh are expanding and different modes of shopping and transportation are becoming increasingly exclusive, Ramallahawis are still not completely divided or segregated by geography and habit (and they are all subjected to the Occupation). Manara Square and the hisbeh market are shared public spaces while Rukab street is a common thorough way regardless of economic class. Obviously neither of these cities is a class-less utopia, either. But a

complete dearth of actually public space – to which all citizens regardless of class or
gender have access and in which they can find some degree of ease – is not something
Beirutis nor Ramallahawis confront in their cities. The same does not hold true in
Amman. The almost complete absence of public space, the difficulty of mobility and
transportation, the hilly terrain, and the lack of sidewalks make moving through the city
difficult and mixed gathering in public extremely rare. Most obviously, the East/West
divide coupled with the lack of reliable public transportation makes even seeing how the
other half of Amman lives unlikely for most – East and West Amman residents, alike. 50

Moreover, attempts to construct public spaces have proved to be divisive. For
example, the uniqueness of Rainbow Street’s public accessibility in West Amman is
rendered most visible by the density of young, unaccompanied men. Other, new public
and semi-public spaces used by Ammanis for strolling or promenading in West Amman –
the various malls for example, or the new Abdali project – are barred to young men who
wish to enter without the company of women. One effect of the unregulated public access
on Rainbow Street is that it is not terribly hospitable to women, veiled or unveiled,
walking alone or with other women. 51 As in other Arab contexts, and as Laleh Khalili has
noted, “public” places are often laced with an implicit threat for women, and being in
them need not always be a relaxing, much less liberating, experience. 52 The policy

50 Importantly, this works in both directions. Familiarity with the opposite “side” of Amman is rare among
both sectors.

51 In my experience, most unveiled women walking on this street at night were not Arab, unveiled Arab
women preferring to avoid such encounters. See next note.

52 Laleh Khalili writes, “rules of proper and decent behavior for women demand a certain degree of
‘privacy’ in public which is not easily provided by unsegregated spaces… where men’s exuberant and
sometimes aggressive behavior would threaten the women’s ability to partake of a safe conviviality.”
(Laleh Khalili, “The Politics of Pleasure: Promenading on the Corniche and Beachgoing,” Society and
Space 0 [2015]: 7.)
barring groups of young men access to spaces like private malls and the new Abdali Boulevard is implemented with this reality in mind: in order to police public and semi-public spaces for gender-specific violence and to prevent group harassment of girls and women. At the same time, it nevertheless effectively excludes young men from most new leisure spaces in West Amman.\(^5\) I return to questions of access in the third section of this chapter. Now, I turn to further the political context in which rappers intervene lyrically with a look at the political discourses rappers identify in their work and the music and sociality encouraged and discouraged by the state.

**Part Two: Performing Resignation**

To be honest, people overestimate — rappers especially — the influence of hip hop. Like, if I spit this verse there will be a revolution tomorrow! No, that’s not how it works. And you’re not “waking up” the people, or feeding them consciousness, or whatever.

~ Nasser Kalaji

During Mounir Troudi’s concert halfway through the Al-Balad festival in July 2015, the Tunisian singer unintentionally and charmingly acknowledged a particularity of the Jordanian context in which he was performing.\(^5\) Between songs, during light-hearted banter in which he was attempting to communicate with the Jordanian audience in his very Tunisian Arabic and French, two uniformed police officers entered the stadium and

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\(^5\) In a society where many young men are not permitted to socialize with young women until a formal engagement, social outings with peers of the opposite gender that are not family members is predictably difficult. (One might surmise that this increases the frustration that causes gender-based violence in the first place, but this is unfortunately not the subject of this study.)

\(^5\) Mounir Troudi is a Tunisian jazz musician. He performed with his band Nagouz at the Odeon theatre on August 1, 2015 as part of the Al-Balad music festival.
remained standing, unimpressed, near the entrance, their arms folded. Troudi, still in Tunisian dialect, made a joke at their expense – something about their seriousness – which the Jordanian audience largely didn’t understand. Remembering himself, Troudi quickly turned his jibe into a public gesture of thanks to the Jordanian military, encouraging his audience to offer them a round of applause, which they obliged. Troudi’s save, something like when one unknowingly disparages a host in their presence and turns it into a compliment, points to another consideration of musical concerts in public spaces in Amman.

In the first pages of this chapter, I acknowledged the strong hold the Hashemite monarchy maintains over civil dissent. The presence of the state intelligence [or secret police, as it is often translated, the mukhabarat] and the regular police (in uniform) was visible at every concert I attended in Amman. The producer Nasser Kalaji confirmed to me: “We see them, the guy who comes with a pen and a note pad, they’ll always be there: two guys standing in the back.” But, Kalaji was also keen to dismiss the implications of their presence:

At the end of the day, what’s it going to effect? Five hundred people came and heard these couple lines? [It’s like they’re thinking,] ‘Let’s leave them be and we can claim we have a high standard of freedom of expression.’ You know? It goes both ways. We [the producers and musicians] are able to have the show and they [the State] take the credit that we have the civil liberty standards of Sweden, or whatever.

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55 The Tunisian dialect is both different from the Jordanian local dialect (very similar to the Palestinian dialect) and quite far from the classical Arabic (fusha), which is the language of the Qu’ran and taught in all the Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa. Since the Jordanian dialect is closer to fusha, North African Arabic speakers can often understand this dialect. The reverse is not the case. So that someone speaking Tunisian, Libyan, or Moroccan Arabic is not easily (or at all) understood by a Jordanian, Palestinian, Lebanese, or Syrian audience. Moreover, the colonial history of especially Tunisia and Morocco has dictated that French is an easier second language than (in some cases classical Arabic as well as) English. In Jordan the opposite is true (English being the second language). So Troudi’s addresses to the audience – which were in Tunisian Arabic and French – were difficult for the Jordanian audience to follow.

56 At least they did not acknowledge the joke with laughter.
This kind of tolerated symbiosis was related to me by other event managers, producers, and performers as well. Despite personally seeing her juggle and attempt to negotiate arbitrary, last-minute police decisions (regardless of having secured necessary permits and documentation) at more than one event, Shermine Sawalha also denied antipathy for municipal or state authorities, cheerily recounting their rapport was “great,” and that they “never had any problems.” The presence of state authorities is something most all of my interlocutors were interested in downplaying. Kalaji, who was eager to declare himself a “royalist,” told me:

I find it frustrating sometimes, you know? Especially in interviews with people doing academic work, or for a magazine, or whatever. They want to give it so much more than what it is. [For some researchers] it’s like, you have to be risking your life to do this. Like “there are snipers on the buildings and they’ve tapped my phone!” No, man, it’s not like this […] I always mention my political stance in interviews. But people’s reactions when I tell them this, it doesn’t fit their framework: like, “Fuck, man! This guy is messing up my story!”

In these comments, Kalaji articulates a productive hesitancy around the subject of censorship. Perhaps like Janelle Reinelt’s invitation to complicate our understandings of what she calls a “common-sense catchword,” Kalaji invites the researcher to trouble what an assumedly ominous censorship looks (and feels) like. There is no need to exaggerate the presence or impact of state censors on rappers’ political expression, their willingness

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57 Reinelt’s interests are different from mine here. She is interested in investigating the line between censorship and free speech (which is almost exclusively presented in her essay in the context of different accusations of hate speech). There is very little concern with hate speech in my context here. In my estimation, the Jordanian case is more straightforwardly about limiting expression critical of the regime and its policies. But I have found that Reinelt’s assertions about how naming censorship “proclaims it” resonate with my interlocutors’ testimonies about how political pressure in the Jordanian context operates. (Janelle Reinelt, “The Limits of Censorship,” Theatre Research International 32[2007]: 3-15, quoted here and above, 3.)
to experiment politically, or listeners’ ability to respond. Indeed, it is significant that Amman’s hip hop and rap scene has not faced the kind of physical confrontation with the Jordanian state that other alternative music scenes in Jordan have. In the 1990s, Amman hosted a sizeable heavy metal scene. Local bands sang in English, playing covers from popular US and European metal bands, and large outdoor concerts and festivals drawing hundreds were held outside of Amman. The Jordanian state was quick to respond to this enthusiasm with arrests and accusations of “Satanism.” The threat and use of state violence eventually killed the scene.58 This is not a kind of censorship or suppression that hip hop and rap artists and audiences in Amman today face. At the same time, the felt presence of the state is an undeniable part of the Jordanian context. If this presence doesn’t physically stop rappers from saying what they want, a general atmosphere of caution around political subjects in general pervades social interactions in Amman when in the presence of strangers. Importantly, however this latter sense of caution is not only a product of state control, but the result of the particular confluence of material, social, and affective factors in Amman.

In this section, and somewhat differently from work on censorship and counter-censorial strategies in other Arab contexts, I begin to locate what I call performed resignation in some Jordanian rap.59 This is made up of conscious deliberations and active negotiations of political concerns, culminating in a performed tolerance of or

58 Unlike in Lebanon, Iran, and Morocco, state force in Jordan was successful in suppressing the development of the scene. The Jordanian state police was not dissimilar in kind, just degree, from state policy towards heavy metal elsewhere in the region. (Interviews with Tareq Abu Kweik and Raed Serhan in particular. On heavy metal in the region see Mark LeVine, Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance, and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam [New York: Three Rivers Press, 2008].)

resignation to the status quo. Considering how rappers arrive at these positions is an important political process: one that demonstrates the contours and texture of politics particular to Amman. My concern is to demonstrate how the political feeling of resignation built in some Jordanian rap points not to passivity but to politics in process. *Performing resignation* is an active political negotiation, one that is obviously not “resistance” to the status quo, but neither does it indicate complete control by the state or submission to it, or even that the state is the most prominent censoring force involved. Moreover, the significance of performed resignation for my study of rap in Amman is the relationship of this political feeling to tarab. What is the effect of apparent resignation on the ability of rappers and their fans to connect and communicate in concert spaces? How does the feeling of not wanting to rock the boat, or the refusal to confront or challenge the status quo engender or impede the flows of tarab described in Chapter Two? What is the relationship between resignation and the mode of longing I suggested underpins the emergence of tarab in Arabic rap? Is performed resignation congruent to performed disgust or articulated refusal in its ability to host call and response between musicians and listeners? Is there a difference at all?

I argue that performed resignation in some rap lyrics is imbued with the same kinds of longing I identified in rap in both Beirut and Ramallah – an affective framework that led me to propose considering more carefully the textures of *politics in progress* and to build the model of tracking the emergence of tarab in rap concerts in the region. However, the obstacles and tensions particular to public space in Amman, incidentally some of the same tensions that drive expressions of resignation lyrically, stymie the regular emergence of tarab in concerts in Amman. The effect is that audience attention
appears much more divided in Amman than it does in either Beirut or Ramallah. This reflects back on musicians’ frustrations with and desires to leave the city. Importantly however, this configuration of political feeling and audiences’ divided attention need not suggest that Jordanian rap is less political or less powerful than rap I discuss in either Ramallah or Beirut.

In the Ramallah case study, I suggested that second wave lyrical experimentation, following in the example of the perceived impact of the Ramallah Underground, seeks to “fill the head.” I suggested that successful examples of second wave “filling the head” – second wave tarab – work in part by inverting political narratives. For example, turning inside out romanticism about resilience or steadfastness [sumud and sabr] and rendering it deaf or dumb was able to surprise and engage listeners, despite an adopted aloofness in these avant-garde iterations of the genre. In Beirut, as I explore in the next chapter, performed disgust in the heart of Ras Beirut excited and engaged listeners who travelled from outside the cosmopolitan avenues of capital, following rappers who voiced local and ghettoized concerns on central stages of the capital city. In both Ramallah and Beirut, kinds of refusal – manifest as cynicism, rejection, impatience, disgust, inversion – drive the ability of rap lyrics to surprise and engage listeners, and to “fill the head.” A wholly different kind of refusal operates in the Ammani context.

Rap in Amman approaches decidedly fewer explicitly political subjects than in Ramallah and is performed with an almost opposite affect of that in Beirut. Amman concerts boast a considerably “lighter” tone. They are not as concerned as Ramallah’s second wave with experimental sounds and they are much more concerned with not alienating an audience (much less offending one). As an example of how rap in Amman
evades the overtly political and carries a lighter mood, consider that Satti’s most recent album was entitled “Bars with Benefits.” The tracks on the A side of the album relate frustrations with dating in a digital world and are underscored sonically with recorded laughter. Indeed, the sonic reflection of a retreat from the political is especially pronounced in rap in Amman and can be found in the search for “lighter” sounds. “Politics can be too heavy” Kalaji told me. The use of “lighter” sounds came up repeatedly in my interviews and points to the active negotiation of audience tolerance and attention in how politics are articulated and presented.

The diversification of the sounds as well as subject matter of Jordanian rap is frequently credited at least initially to El Far3i. Sotusura, Kalaji, as well as El Far3i himself attest that the lighter sounds and quotidian subject matter in the latter’s work were easier for Jordanians, especially those not already indoctrinated in hip hop sounds and culture, to accept. They suggest that El Far3i was able to reach wider audiences in his solo rap work not only by using acoustic instead of electronic accompaniment, but by rapping about different subject matter: university life, rapport between young men and women, neighborhood dynamics, and other elements of work and play.

Interestingly, my interlocutors referenced the Jordanian or Ammani quotidian that appealed to expanding audiences as a shift away from the subject of Palestine in Arabic rap. Unprompted by me, rapper after rapper in Amman expressed their refusal to touch the political question of Palestinian liberation, which they variously referred to as

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60 I’m not suggesting the album is free of politics. I am suggesting it is not pointedly inverting political narratives in the ways the work discussed in Ramallah and Beirut do. Satti himself acknowledges the relative “lightness” of these tracks in his song “Bila ʿtmeh” [“In the dark”], addressed in some length below. 61 Many of my interlocutors were keen to point out the increasing number of women, especially veiled women, attending rap and hip hop concerts as part of the changes of the scene in Amman over the past five to ten years, a factor they also credit to El Far3i’s content and performance style.
“mainstream” and “tired,” asserting that “there’s nothing left to talk about.” Further, rappers and producers testified that rap “trying” to be political quickly picked up this subject. Jazz tha Process told me cynically, “any rapper that wants to make it has to rap about Palestine.” He identified this move as disingenuous. The Syrian rapper Bu Kolthoum concurred:

How many times have I mentioned Palestine in my music? Not a single time. Not once. Why? Because it’s enough, Palestine is understood. There’s an occupier, he has to leave. There’s nothing left to talk about. Arm yourself and go fight, or shut up about it. At the same time, I’ve never lived in Palestine, nor have I visited — though I hope to, of course! So, I am not going to sit and write *Palestine* and sigh and write about nostalgia — nostalgia for what? You want to talk politics, be my guest. But you want to come and describe to me, and sing me tracks about Damascus, and Homs, and Aleppo, and whatever, and you are not Syrian, and have no history with the streets of Syria? What are you coming to write poetry about? That means you just want views, man. And that means you can eat shit.

Here, Bu Kolthoum extends cynicism about rappers’ intentions when they choose to rap about Palestine to the Syrian crisis as well. He considers addressing these subjects — especially perhaps lamenting the loss of these places (“I am not going to sit and sigh and write about nostalgia”) to be sanctimonious and insincere (“that means you just want views”). I infer from these kinds of comments that in Amman rappers were especially conscious of political posturing in their lyrics despite sharing much of the same politics as rappers elsewhere in the region (distrust of NGOs, critical of local corruption and nepotism, against the Israeli occupation and for the most part critical of foreign intervention).

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62 Interviews with Mohammed al-Hijazi, DJ Sotusura, and Bu Kolthoum, respectively. The interview with al-Hijazi (Jazz tha Process) was conducted on August 31, 2015. Subsequent quotations from al-Hijazi are from this interview. Translations from the Arabic are my own.
Significantly in my opinion, the subject of the Jordanian monarchy, even in the context of Palestinian liberation, is not the direct concern of a single Jordanian rap track of which I am aware. In other words, to “make it,” some rappers turn to political subjects which they hope will win them listeners: the occupations of Palestine and Iraq, the chaos of Syria, orientalism – subjects on which most listeners, despite different political strategies, will largely agree. Others are critical of especially the pressure (from NGOs and frameworks they perceive as “orientalist” offered by European and North American journalists and researchers) on rappers to produce this discourse. But even these rappers do not seek to address immediate political realities of the Jordanian context. They are not turning from the – now obvious – problem of the Occupation to address the more complicated issue of Jordanian state complicity with it. Rather, Hijazzi told me for example that he is looking for more “subliminal” expression. Bu Kolthoum explained,

> When you want to communicate an idea, and you yourself are this wounded [la hal qadeh majrouha], you also want to wound [inti kaman bidek tirjahi]. Most of my tracks are full of curses. I swear a lot. For me the solution is no longer political. You can’t translate feelings politically.

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64 In our interview, Synaptik talked at length about the initial opportunities that he pursued writing raps in order to make some money for equipment and travel. These included a competition sponsored by the European Voluntary Service, a concert sponsored by the Royal Cultural Ministry and performed in front of King Abdullah II, and a competition on a local radio station sponsored by Stolichnaya. He told me “but when I started taking myself seriously I started hating my work [the work he wrote for these kinds of competitions and audiences].” He told me, it’s just like “being a wedding singer” – except instead of being hired to sing popular hits, you’re hired to spout “popular” politics. (Synaptik himself comes from a family of popular Palestinian wedding singers.) He concluded, “there’s no such thing as real political rap. It’s all lies.” (Interview with Laith al-Husseini [Synaptic], August 31, 2015. All subsequent quotations from Synaptic are from this interview. Translations from the Arabic are my own.)
The shift towards the “subliminal” expression and articulations of feeling without politics might seem to follow trends in postmodern lyricism and performance, which have been criticized as depoliticized and aloof in different contexts. However, when successful, I think the turn to the Jordanian quotidian and the invention of “more subliminal” expression (as I elaborate in two examples below) performs an active negotiation of politics, rather than points to the development of a politically disconnected or apathetic rap culture. Performing resignation is an active refusal with particular political affect. The refusal to confront the immediate, Jordanian status quo directly does not avoid political feeling, but it affects its texture.  

Moreover, the retreat from specific political expression, is marked by feelings of frustration, impatience, anxiety, and malaise. Satti offered:

> Listen, the ceiling on expression here is very open. In a sense, there is freedom of speech, let’s say. But like, I don’t want to be just a column in the newspaper, you know? Everybody’s really into politics now. People read a lot and they are hearing all sorts of different things already… What’s it going to change if I come and rap about the same things? This stopped being really interesting to me. It’s not about getting in trouble or anything. I’m just sick and tired of it.

Satti’s hesitancy in these remarks to assert definitively that there is freedom of speech (“in a sense there is… let’s say”) is indicative of a kind of second-guessing about the existence of censorship that other interlocutors also expressed. In the latter half of his comments, he’s also referring to a shift in an approach to political subject matter in his

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65 As Bassam Haddad has argued in the context of Syria, preference for the “status quo” is a complicated negotiation of hope and fear – but also a strategic, logistical navigation of possible gains and losses. (Bassam Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria: the Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience* [Stanford: Stanford UP, 2012]). Moreover, as Christa Salamandra points out, this is not new. The deliberations over sense of self, allegiance, change, and authenticity in the consumption of popular culture are negotiations that mark the current period as they have for generations (Christa Salamandra, *A New Old Damascus: Authenticity and Distinction in Urban Syria* [Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2004]).
music, especially since the Arab Uprisings. This reflects a change in the sociality of political discourse (“everybody’s really into politics now”), something Satti doesn’t feel like it’s in his music to compete with (“this stopped being interesting to me”). Moreover, his decision not to address politics is marked by exhaustion or frustration (“I’m just sick and tired of it”). Khotta Ba expressed similar feelings when he also articulated a retreat from politics, saying:

I no longer have the heart to run after politics or go down to protest. Khalas [enough]. You feel like you’re not going to have an effect, nor are you going to accomplish anything. Because seriously what you’re up against is huge, so don’t waste your time. If it’s going to work out, it will work out on its own. Not because of me or anyone else.  

Khotta’s resignation here is laden with exhaustion (“what you’re up against is huge, don’t waste your time”). Importantly however, as he continued, he also communicated a pronounced anxiety.

I don’t know where I’ll be in a year or two years. You really don’t know. Maybe you’ll find yourself doing great and maybe you’ll find yourself with nothing in the street. That’s what’s happening everywhere around us. Honestly, I don’t know what’s coming. And I don’t feel like what’s coming is going to be nice in the end. It doesn’t look that way.

To be sure, part of the concerns addressed by Satti and Khotta Ba reflect a general mood of depression, caution, hesitation, or worry that has become more pronounced among Arab youth since the counterrevolutionary forces in Egypt, Libya, and Syria seem to be gaining the upper hand (2013-2015; see relevant discussion in Chapter Two). But despite the caution and confusion about the state of regional affairs many rappers expressed to me in all three cities, the remove Khotta and Satti articulate here is quite pronounced. The

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66 Interview with the author, August 12, 2015. All subsequent quotations from Majd Kamal, whose stage name is Khotta Ba, are taken from this interview. Translations from the Arabic are my own.
damper the spectacular Syrian civil war and accompanying rise of ISIS has put on political hopes across the region is considerable. But the political mood of resignation in Amman as expressed here by these two prominent rappers is particular to the Jordanian context.

The feeling Khotta articulated that the undesirable current status quo is preferable to some unknown and assumedly dire future (“I don’t know what’s coming and I don’t feel like what’s coming is going to be nice in the end”) is widespread. Sarah Tobin has suggested that a comparative framework – wherein Jordanians are encouraged by state power to consider Jordan’s problems in relation to regional strife is a powerful strategy of the Hashemite regime to maintain both a sense of precarious Jordanian unity as well as the status quo.\(^67\) She writes that the Hashemite government supplements “consumerist distractions” with comparison to neighboring countries’ strife to “help distract from internal divisions.”\(^68\) That is, the political narrative of Jordan’s stability in a region wracked by violence and chaos – Jordan as balad al-amm w al-istighrar [land of security and stability] – is built by looking warily at the violence next door. Tobin suggests that compared to situations in Iraq, Syria, and Egypt, “most Ammanis agree” that the reforms desired “are not worth” risking another civil war or a US-led invasion.\(^69\)

\(^{67}\) Sarah Tobin, “Jordan’s Arab Spring: The Middle Class and Anti-Revolution,” Middle East Policy, 19(2012): 100-101. I am indebted to Christine Sargent for referring me to Dr. Tobin’s work. Nationalism and Jordanian identity did not come up in my interviews with rappers, audiences, or concert organizers, but it is a thoroughly researched topic. See, among others: Andrew Shryock, Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination: Oral History and Textual Authority in Tribal Jordan (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997); Betty S. Anderson; Nationalist Voices in Jordan: The Street and the State (Austin: U of Texas P, 2005); and Massad, Colonial Effects.

\(^{68}\) Tobin, “Jordan’s Arab Spring,” 106.

\(^{69}\) Economic comparisons at the regional level also play an important part here. Tobin illustrates that the idea of Amman as a relatively wealthy space contributes to the appeal of an aspiring and possible “middle-classness” as unifying project. In this perception of Jordan vis-à-vis its neighbors, widespread poverty is not here but “out there” – specifically, Tobin suggests, in Egypt. According to Tobin, Ammanis do not
The eye cast on the chaos in Jordan’s neighbors is a widespread and demobilizing political force. It encourages the feeling of not wanting to rock the boat.\(^{70}\) As Khotta Ba said, “If it’s going to work out, it will work out on its own.” This resignation happens while not addressing the anxiety that “what’s coming is not going to be nice in the end.” Paralysis and anxiety feed into each other.\(^{71}\)

consider the economic problems to be so great as to risk the country’s relative stability. (Tobin, “Jordan’s Arab Spring,” 106.)

\(^{70}\) Tobin’s piece was published in 2012. While the influx of Syrian refugees has grown considerably since then with effects on the country’s economy, I do not see reason to suggest that her argument about Jordanian perception of wealth (especially in Amman) vis-à-vis the rest of the region has changed much since. (Neither does Tobin: see more recently Tobin, *Everyday Piety: Islam and Economy in Jordan* [Cornell, NY: Cornell UP, 2016], 184-194.) Writing about Syria, Lisa Wedeen has suggested a very similar kind of ambivalence is a direct result of the shape of neoliberal governance and the aspirations and hopes of citizens navigating these incursions. (Lisa Wedeen, “Ideology and Humor in Dark Times: Notes from Syria,” *Critical Inquiry* 39[2013]: 841-873.)

\(^{71}\) The video for Kazz Alomam’s track “Dahab” [“Gold”] is one of few examples that counters this trend. The lyrics are not so explicit, but the visual images in the video clearly implicate the narratives of security in the suppression and repression of the average Arab citizen, and of the working class specifically. To describe it very simply, the video stages a young car mechanic, strapped for money, in a boxing ring up against Arab capital (as stereotyped man in suit). Before the hero can throw a punch, two men in black masks and hoodies, with the words “amn” [security] and “aman” [safety] painted in white on their backs carry the mechanic off. This staging associates narratives of security and safety with corruption (the hooded thugs are called in by the man in the suit before he enters the ring); with collusion with Arab elites – that is, “safety” and “security” protect the rich, not the poor; with torture or other punishment of dissent (the mechanic is dragged off and not seen from again). Most obviously, the video associates the discourses *amn* and *aman* with violence. At the end, the victor, who invoked safety and security to be at the mechanic, shoots off the pistol he was carrying the whole time. It is noteworthy that this negotiation of symbolism does not happen lyrically but is only reflected visually in the video.

[Figure 4.7 “Screen grab from ‘Kazz Alomam ‘Dahab,’” 6:17.]

Slightly differently from Tobin, I want to suggest that in order to recognize how the wavering towards and away from political positions in rap in Amman functions, it is important to acknowledge that this paralysis and anxiety is not only a product and effect of the strong arm of the state. The Hashemite regime and its operations are considerable, but all my interlocutors identify that its hold on power is only one problem of many facing Amman’s denizens, the region, or Arab youth even more generally. Kalaji hinted at this when he expressed frustration with narratives of state censorship in Jordan (“Researchers want to give it so much more than what it is”), implying that the state is not responsible for everything – but importantly, he did not deny the presence of problems, either.

That is, while Kalaji comfortably stated a political position when he called himself a supporter of the regime, he also recognized the need for political processes of deliberation. He put it this way:

We Arabs for the last God-knows-how-many-years have not been able to express ourselves. And that has created a lot of identity issues, a lot of political issues, a lot of racist issues [among Arabs]. We like to say “the West doesn’t understand us” but in reality we don’t understand ourselves, because we haven’t been talking to each other for the last century. You know what I mean? Ultimately I don’t think [hip hop] is about creating change. I think it’s about creating the atmosphere first and second the inspiration to say whatever the hell you want to say. I think at this stage in the Arab world, this is the main push. Because you need to break a lot of constraints, and not just from the state.

In other words, despite what I interpret as Kalaji’s pragmatist political positioning aligned with the Jordanian monarchy, he also recognized the need (“at this stage, this is the main push”) to break “a lot of constraints.” Kalaji himself considers the regime has a
positive role to play in allowing these processes to take place.\textsuperscript{72} Important to me at this juncture however is his assertion that some hip hop, despite not being able to bring “a revolution tomorrow,” is able create an “atmosphere” to express “whatever the hell you want to say.” To me this points to the role rap may play in staging political processes.

El Far3i, stage name for Tareq Abu-Kweik, expressed the censorship situation in Amman somewhat differently than Kalaji but he shared the latter’s emphasis on encouraging expression. On Skype from London, the Palestinian-Jordanian rapper told me:

The Jordanian government doesn’t need to stop you. We’re born [as Jordanians] with the self-censorship. We get it, that we can say certain things and we can’t say others. It’s all about finding your way to say what you want to say in a way that works with them. But… I… I… I… you know… people will tell you like, no you’re not a threat to them, you’re just like a bunch of hipsters in some West Amman bar. But the other reality is that there are people listening to this all over the place. And you know. Because you know that in some neighborhoods in Syria people were getting arrested for listening to your shit. You know this for a fact. It did get there. […] You yourself know that [in Jordan] you can actually push it further but you’re just not ready to go for the fight.\textsuperscript{73}

The potential threat of censorship in El Far3i’s remarks is, like in Kalaji’s, again drawn by a regional comparison – to the Syrian security apparatus. But while he is keen to recognize that Jordanian security pales to the Syrian one, he stutters to articulate the actual impact of this configuration of listening and state power on his own expression. El Far3i testifies that the reality that censorship today does not frequently manifest itself in the hip hop scene in a spectacular displays of force gives a different, self-policing

\textsuperscript{72} Whether one agrees with him on that issue is a matter of politics.

\textsuperscript{73} Interview with the author, August 20, 2015. All subsequent quotations from El Far3i (Tareq Abu Kweik) are taken from this interview. Translations from the Arabic are my own.
dimension to Jordanian state power (“the Jordanian government doesn’t need to stop you, we self-censor.”)

This diversifies how we might understand state power as one of several forces effecting rappers’ expression in Amman. First, implying “self-censorship” is at work complicates censorship in ways Kalaji was keen to dismiss. More importantly, however, El Far3i’s refusal to call out state censorship as the primary obstacle (“You know you could push it further but you’re not ready”) points to other factors holding him back, besides state power. His “not readiness” is central to the announcement of resignation I identify in rap lyrics: El Far3i’s articulation of a “maybe, but not yet” is indicative of politics in progress. Throughout our conversation, El Far3i stayed vague about what “pushing it further” might mean, or in what direction one might want to “push” things, refusing to suggest that outright criticism of the state is something he wished to articulate, but couldn’t. Our conversation remained with in the realm of encouraging a vague “expression,” or encouraging others to “express themselves.”

The “expression” that both El Far3i and Kalaji refer to as important in much rap in Amman is significant because it relates active political deliberations. That is, I infer that it is more than a simple advocacy of a neoliberal or humanitarian “free speech.” Recall that all the rappers I spoke with acknowledged they are relatively free to say what they want. At the same time, all also expressed fatigue or boredom with “politics,” stating that they were looking for other expressions (more “subliminal”; pure “feeling”; that is able to “wound”) in their lyrical work. When rappers relate their attention to the feelings of being watched, of not having political options, or of the uselessness of political debate, and announce a subsequent decision to do nothing (or, importantly, say “nothing”) as a
result, they draw attention to externally and internally imposed modes of censorship and negotiate between positions that are both exhausted and exhausting. The attention to the malaise, the frustration, and the declarations of doing nothing are perhaps the expression that both El Far3i and Kalaji want to encourage. These are politics in progress. My concern here is how these processes, what I call in the Amman context performed resignation, function politically.

An especially good example of the phenomenon I am addressing is El Far3i’s track “Aqrab al thawani” [“The Second Hand”], released in early 2014.\(^{74}\) With over twenty-nine thousand plays on Sound Cloud, it is one of El Far3i’s most-listened-to solo pieces. The song walks through a solitary deliberation and culminates in resignation.

Sitting cross-legged on the floor, in a room where a friend sleeps
I have a dream and a craft but fate is floating in it.
Like everything in this country, the subject is paralyzed:
He promised but did not show; what should I do?
Of course he called, not once but like ten times:
What’s this music called? And who distributes it?
Down with propaganda and dumbed-down rhetoric
Unfounded suggestions: they found you empty when they peeled you!

Me and my career, we play 1-2 offense
So that they don’t ask on Judgment Day why we didn’t change things
You confused the kid when you put him in school
And then they let him loose in society he got up and got a tattoo
I’m not hating: that’s the point, to each his own.
Everyone speaks his mind in his own way, in the way it serves him,

If I change my mind, I imagine I’ll want handala on my back:
So that when I swim in the Dead Sea, you can see his face on my chest.\(^{75}\)

\(^{74}\) Sound Cloud tracks do not include the date of publication. The time stamp rather reads backwards in a vague articulation of time since it was published. For example, in February 2016 at the time of writing, the time stamp for this track read “2 years ago.” “El Far3i- A’qrab El Thawani,” Sound Cloud audio recording, 3:27, posted by “El Far3i,” 2014, accessed February 28, 2016, https://soundcloud.com/el-far3i/el-far3i-aqrab-el-thawani.

\(^{75}\) “Handala” is the name of a cartoon by Naji al-Ali, popular in illustrations of Palestinian resistance. The drawing is of the back of a child with his hands crossed or tied behind his back. So here, when El Far3i
We’re still being kicked out, “ethnically cleansed,” so the show’s not over
Daddy-o, this is the rap of the lowest point on Earth.
And to the people that see that something’s missing in the write-up:
Who said that we don’t make broken hearts dance?

“Second hand”:
You changed my place,
You switched the meaning
You made me doubt my history

Who said that we don’t make broken hearts dance?
Our playground was sold as scrap metal; I bought a swing instead
We wanted to entertain the people because the television is a horror film
And the street is hard; the simplest bite is tiring.
So who is to blame? It depends.

There are the farmers, but they’re not at market because they got angry;
There are the merchants clowning cockily to earn a penny;
And there are those on the western borders, smuggled in crates of grapes.
More than one request, a log on fire, an angry nerve lives in each of us
It blocks every photon of light that comes towards us.

A small country but the planet is strange:
How things come together and, in a push, become a mess.
So where is the best place in the room to hang the calendar?
Because tomorrow and yesterday are here asking me about the present.
Where the changes have put me, I cannot locate my location:
The clock I have is digital I can’t see the second’s hand!
Products produced with intention, but the choice is mandatory.

I bought a new car but there’s no front seat;
How to turn it on to go return it to the factory?
I am compelled to sit in the back and be subjected to the design!

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describes handala tattooed on his back, he’s envisioning the flip side of the cartoon, or the boy’s face, appearing through his body (“on his chest”). The Dead Sea is dangerously high in salt content. The best way to “swim” in it is to float on one’s back.

76 At some 1,000 feet below sea level, the shores of the Dead Sea have the lowest surface elevation – they are the “lowest point” – on Earth. The phrase here has a metaphorical meaning as well, referring to the status of “Palestinian” among other nationalities – or equally to the resistance at its weakest.

77 The word El Far3i used, which I translated as “playground,” is “Al Jubeiha” – referring to an amusement center in Amman that was closed and sold (personal correspondence with the artist, February 29, 2016).

78 Arabic lyrics printed in Appendix C. Translated by the author with the artist.
In this piece, El Far3i’s expression walks the listener through a deliberation that ends in resignation. Articulating the process of how he arrives at this “back seat” is illustrative of politics in process – his recounted deliberations demonstrate this process and the piece points to the activity involved in arriving at resignation. At the same time, declaring that he is “compelled to sit in the back” encourages the listener to recognize that the artist is consciously not saying more. In this way, El Far3i encourages the acknowledgement in the listener of her own resignation, her own self-confinement to the back seat. While the piece recounts a self-conscious removal from politics deliberated in private, the description of arriving at this position drags politics back into the public sphere.

Sitting on the floor while a friend (which could be another incarnation of the speaker) sleeps (another mode of being frozen), we imagine El Far3i in a kind of meditative pose. He daydreams, finding his future floating on the surface, “frozen” like “everything else in the country.” This light expression of frustration with the status quo prompts a paranoid reaction. His mind drifts to an imagined, unknown caller, wanting to know about his music and how he distributes it (“he called not once but ten times”). The paranoia that someone is asking about his lyrics is countered in the next lines by the doubt El Far3i stuttered through in our interview: “Unfounded suggestions: they found you empty when they peeled you!” That is, he casts the fear of someone listening as self-inflatedness: in the end, there is no there there.

In the next verses, the lack of substance in his own “dumbed down rhetoric” is traced to a confused childhood (“Don’t ask on Judgment Day why we didn’t change things”). Amman’s playground was dismantled and sold as scrap metal. In its place he
bought a swing – a childish plaything that allows him to move while staying still. The images of childhood confusion (“you confused the kid when you put him in school”) and impotent attempts at resistance (“he got up and got a tattoo”) carry through to vague evocations of Palestinian struggle. El Far3i invokes Palestinian resistance in the boyish figure of Naji el Ali’s handala, the boy cartoon, whom he takes “on his back.” This seems to imply he’s taking on the resistance, identifying with it, but his support (swimming with him on his back) either drowns the cartoon since he can only float face up in the Dead Sea (another clear metaphor), or by exposing the cartoon’s face, changing the figure of resistance altogether. Further, with this he admits that he, with the Palestinian resistance beneath him, is “at the lowest point on Earth.”

Who is responsible for this state of affairs? He is unable to articulate a subject responsible for the malaise he’s feeling (“Who’s to blame? It depends”). Even the speaker’s gestures towards possible culprits are so vague that we are unclear whether he means actual farmers and merchants, or growers and traders as abstract metaphors for political figures or ideologies. As a nod to those looking for a more precise articulation of politics (“to those who think there’s something missing in the write-up”), he responds by evoking a dull, abstract pain (“who says we can’t make broken hearts dance?”)

Throughout, the quiet march of time – in the second hand, which he can’t even see (“my watch is digital”) – ticks on. The invisible but felt menace of time helps to communicate the confusion he feels (“tomorrow and yesterday are here asking me about the present”), while a lack of direction is affirmed in the last couplets. He buys a car but doesn’t know which way it faces (“there’s no front seat”). Frustrated with it, he can’t
figure out how to turn it on to return it, compelling him to give up and accept the flawed design (“I am compelled to sit in the back and be subjected to it”).

Musically, the piece is not an example of El Far3i’s acoustic work. On the contrary, electronic keyboard and synthesizer score a fast, descending arpeggiated minor triad that repeats throughout the track, giving a tense suspense to the piece. The beat, alternating clap and snare, enters one verse in (around the 0:30 mark), adding momentum and contributing to the build and release of the synthesizer. The tone of El Far3i’s voice is confident, persuasive, even accusatory. Which is to say, this is not an example of his pieces with “lighter” sounds. It plays like a ballad; making, it seems to me, the political positions to which it arrives particularly poignant. Musically in the synthesizer and beats, sonically in the tone of the rapper’s voice, as well as lyrically, the track is a good example of how performing resignation can be conceived as an active standing-down.

The performance of resignation – the calling into attention of its arrival or enactment – stages a political process. El Far3i’s admission of resignation encourages listeners to recognize how they too retreat from politics. The expression of feelings and recounting active deliberations before arriving at a sort of temporary defeat (accepting the flawed design) is what constitutes performing resignation. The recognition of the listener, of the listener’s political expectations, is an important part of performing resignation. Indeed, not only do El Far3i’s lyrics interpolate the listener, they recognize the listener’s recognition. “To those who think there’s something missing in the write-up,” can be read as an articulation of disdain common in hip hop in any language (à la: “haters gonna hate!”). But I think it’s more likely that the line serves as a sign to listeners: I am not speaking, it breaks my heart, but I am dancing anyway. This is crucial for how performed
resignation operates. The listener, while she identifies with the line, is similarly instructed to play along and “dance.” Broken hearts dance after all, El Far3i reminds us, twice.

The relationship here between resignation and longing is important. I have been arguing in this dissertation that articulation of something missing by rappers is laced with longing. This longing encourages the emergence of tarab: a near out-of-body experience between the performer and the listener, which can provoke strong physical reactions in the latter, marked by seemingly spontaneous interpellations, a feeling of ecstatic “emotional blending.” Longing can be seen and heard in the rap lyrics I’ve addressed here. The couplet I underscored above ("To those who thing there’s something missing/Who said broken hearts can’t dance") is an articulation of longing, if a defensive and guarded one. Longing and resignation is obvious in the recorded tracks of others.

Kazz Alomam’s track “Ghabareh” [“Dust”] describes a similar arrival to resignation; Satti’s track “Bil’atmeh” [“In the Dark”] relates similar meditations on frustration and confusion. In the interest of space I will only address the latter of these two. Satti’s track is produced by the US-based producer and rapper Russ. It starts like the latter’s own track “Goodbye.” Both Russ and Satti’s pieces open with a sample of Esther Phillips singing “I Wish you Love.” Satti’s track mirrors Russ’s use of the sung refrain and then sharp shift into the lyrical rap. But while Russ’s rap involves a not terribly complex, largely misogynistic take down of a former girlfriend, Satti bids farewell to a former version of himself. This piece among other examples of performed

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resignation in rap in Amman is especially germane to my discussion here because the affective mode of longing alongside performed resignation is particularly pronounced.

The used sample in this piece reflects the use of sampled tarab I referred to in my discussion of “Khaleeni ‘Ayeesh” by the Ramallah Underground in Chapter Two. The use of the sample in Satti’s track reflects a widespread strategy among rappers of softening the beats and rounding out the rapper’s expression with specific emotional pull. In other tracks, “tarab” sampling helps to frame an affective longing. The sampling of Esther Phillips functions in this way in Satti’s track “In the Dark.” Furthermore, the longing affected in Satti’s voice in this track in recording – an affect that is distinct from that which he normally produces – is significant. As the song proceeds, he sounds almost on the verge of tears, interrupting himself with emotional interpellations of “ya Satti!” [oh, Satti!], mimicking the tarab-like responses of an audience that does not exist. As he articulates what he’s feeling: a slow recognition of his apathy, he gets progressively more upset, so that when he gets to the third iteration of the refrain there is no hiding the emotion in his voice.

The lyrics after the “I wish you Love” sample (“Good bye, no use leading with our chins…” etc.) go like this:

It’s no good to know what you want; they stop you
There’s always someone to throw something heavy; watermelons thrown in the way
I remember my seat in my room like it’s today; it’s a motivation
I really feel like I’m at attacker of the goal, I wait for greatness
See where I was and where I am at now; I’m no longer in my place
I wrote so many poetic lines you feel like I built buildings
I paid attention to what I listened to, I was patient ‘til I grew up to never screw up
I know what it means to lose; I buried so many close people with these hands,
I stood there in front of a judge, staring at the floor, not guilty
If you want the truth, between myself and I, I was ashamed
My lungs are dying, turned to black from inhaling all this smoke
This is a local product, nobody touches it, there are no bags in the store
I’m kinda worried from all the thoughts in my head, it’s getting darker
The last few songs I dropped stupidly, I dissed myself
You know when you’re feeling musical and you feel like composing?
You need to be in the same state of mind and understanding in order to know:

Refrain:
Who’s the loser? Look in the mirror
You no longer have a place at the door of the mosque, like slippers do
I’ve started to walk in the dark and I always feel like there is someone behind me
As far as I go, I say and respond to myself, I’m coming

(repeat)

They attacked with open mouths, my eyes opened and turned red from anger
I organized my thoughts but it feels like they are sheep, they wander off to graze elsewhere
I walked barefoot, knowing there were embers and broken glass
It seems I got used to being overprotective and betrayed
I don’t know if you’re worth anything if you got no audience
I don’t know what bitterness is because I’m always forced to foolishness
Your brother’s no hero, I got used to the idea of submission
I’ve got to go, I want to piss on the subject, but I can’t the gallstones are so bad
Shooting everywhere, up and down, I feel my life turned into an art lecture
For three years I’ve been sleeping on the sofa, I’ve forgotten the bed
Once I got fed up and told myself let me know my destiny
I tried to read my fortune from a coffee cup and cards; its hipsterism that caught me!
I felt numb because in my head I was lost, I couldn’t write, so I left a fingerprint

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81 This is the reference to vapidity in his recent work I referred to earlier in the chapter.

82 Shoes are forbidden inside the mosque. Worshippers remove them before they enter, leaving their shoes at the door.

83 “Shooting” is pissing, here.

84 Reading coffee grounds is a way of telling fortunes. The cup is overturned once the coffee has been drunk. The pattern of the grains describes the drinker’s future.
I asked the prof; he told me look towards the Vatican, he is wise
I can’t breathe without spitting rhymes, it’s like I’m a fish with gills
I’m so high up in the clouds, I lost gravity. I’m on the top of the pyramids
just like the dots in the letter sheen.  

Refrain.

Like El Far3i’s “Second Hand,” this track also walks the listener through similar
deliberations and realizations of politics. Specifically, Satti is confronting a “foolish”
(majbou ʿal-habal) version of himself, castigating his hesitations (“I was waiting for
greatness”) and his preoccupation with senseless things (“I dissed myself”). He castigates
himself for his hesitation (“I waited ‘til I grew up not to screw up”) and his “familiarity
with submission.” The process of recognizing these failings prompts his suggestion that
the real “loser” is himself, is “in the mirror.” In his iteration, he is more lost than used
slippers, even these have a place in front of the mosque (where users remove them before
prayer). The sheer repetition of “I don’t know” and “I feel” in this track is notable, lyrical
work that underscores the confusion and pain in Satti’s recorded voice. Moreover like El
Far3i’s track that ends in the speaker giving up and “being subjected to the design,”
Satti’s track here also succumbs to the aloofness that causes the pain he’s been
describing: at the end, he’s so high “even gravity” can’t touch him.

Satti’s emotional self-critique in this piece can be read politically, as in the line “I
always feel like there is someone behind me” – evoking notions of being watched – and
in the line “It seems I got used to being overprotective and betrayed,” which seconds the
kind of paranoia El Far3i also rapped about. Alternatively, the lyrics can be related to his
development as a musician and related to his musical career, as in the line “I paid

85 The Arabic letter sheen [ش, sh] is topped by three dots in a triangular shape, like a pyramid.
86 Arabic lyrics printed in Appendix D. Translated by the author with the artist.
attention to what I was listening to, I was patient until I grew up” and “I don’t know what you’re worth if you have no audience.” Indeed, the strength of the lyrical work lies in the fact that it’s not clear whether he’s bemoaning the lack of his political development – the articulation of a strong stance – or the incompleteness of his musical career. “Good people were buried,” “I was ashamed,” “my life is an art lecture” are all expressions that can either point to political failure or to frustrations with the music scene and collaborations therein. Moreover, the longing he expresses in his voice, aided by the sample, is more earnest and less defensive than the affective mode in El Far3i’s track. That is, the combination of longing and resignation is more pronounced here. He longs to overcome his resignation, his apathy, his foolishness. But it is unclear if he is ultimately successful, despite the repeated sample singing “Good bye.” Importantly, Satti locates the feeling he expresses as product of his environment: “this is a local product, nobody buys it.” This piece in particular makes clear that the lyrical, musical elements necessary for the emergence of tarab are present in rap written in Amman. Considering I only rarely observed tarab emerge in live concerts in Amman however, this suggests that the problems of arousing tarab are specific to the Ammani material context of performance, not the music itself. And it is to the material context of the concert that I now turn.

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In this section I have attempted to pin down articulations that illustrate one particular political feeling, that of resignation, in Amman. I have argued that by invoking vague terminology and relying on evasive images, active political deliberation is a part of
arrival to resignation, which I imagine as an active – and importantly as a performative – standing down. In my time in Amman, I initially struggled with the lukewarm posturing of many of my friends and interlocutors. Most sure of itself when it is calling out orientalism and most vague when it attempts to articulate specific positions or desires, this kind of political discourse can seem wishy-washy compared to the political observations, refusals, or inversions in both Ramallah and Beirut. I think it would be a mistake, however, to suggest that individuals in these latter cities – and specifically that Palestinian or Lebanese rap – are “more” political than in Amman. When situated within a history Jordanian political culture, this performed resignation points to an active, if frustratingly non-committal, negotiation of political concerns.

Finally, it is not only in the lyrics where the active negotiations of politics in process can be discerned. The seeming resignation to the status quo, to avoid confrontation, and to avoid politics in public is also arrived at in active negotiations in concert spaces and outside them, between concert-goers and those who recognize concerts take place and decline to participate – what I call concert observers. In the next section, I turn my attention to the pauses, stutters, and stares that emerged repeatedly in my observations and discussions in Amman concert spaces. I suggest that these are all active negotiations – risk assessments, calculations – not the absence of politics. This tension of not really knowing what is holding one back (or holding it all together) is manifest in El Far3i’s stutters about the nature of censorship, in Khotta Ba’s “not knowing what’s coming,” and as I suggest in the next section, in the distance between concert goers and concert observers. This seeming stillness and silence, the performed resignation to the status quo, demonstrates politics in progress.
Part Three: Divided Attentions

Basically, I hate dancing. Not break dancing, I don’t mean that. And of course head banging is “part of the process,” like when you hear a beat, that’s part of it. But it’s impossible for me to offer my work [if people] are dancing, dancing. Like, aren’t you coming to listen?
~Bu Kolthoum

In the previous section, I suggested that performed resignation in rap lyrics stages politics in progress. In this section, I explore to what extent these processes of deliberation are received by audiences and reflected in audience behavior. Specifically, in order to situate the affect rappers produce musically within the wider landscape of political feelings in Amman, I consider affective dynamics before and after concerts (what I called “warm up” and “cooling” in Chapter Two), as well as during them. Through thick description of concerts at two festivals in 2015, I explore tension in public spaces and divided attention of audiences.

My exploration begins by considering that rappers frequently find themselves not the center of their audiences’ attention. I follow musicians’ complaints about audience reception in Amman with concert organizers’ reflections about reaching and “exposing” audiences. The frustrations about audience reception I find surprising considering the musical and lyrical work and astute navigations of politics I suggested in the previous section. I consider how refusals to participate in concerts can be read alongside other frameworks for understanding social interactions and the consumption of leisure in Amman. This leads me to argue that constantly divided attention in public space in Amman is not conducive to following along with the performed resignation in some rap lyrics. Political negotiations during concerts fall on not receptive ears. Rappers read this as
disrespect while audiences struggle, and perhaps even resent, keeping up with the competing demands both on public space and their attention.

As in Ramallah and Beirut, most of my interlocutors in Amman affirmed the presence of tarab during rap concerts. Asked to provide examples of this tarab, however, all described concerts outside of Amman. Kalaji discussed its presence in Cairo; Khotta Ba described it in Copenhagen; Satti elaborated at length about Beirut audiences’ ability to give back to a performer; and Boikutt compared performing in Ramallah favorably with performing a very similar set in Amman just months apart.\(^7\) That musicians locate the best examples of tarab outside Amman does not mean the phenomenon is alien to the Jordanian context. Their comparisons, however, point to their disappointments performing in Amman.

At the end of our interview Satti told me,

The one thing I’d really like to see in this country is for people to really give an opportunity to this music, from their hearts, because they’re loving it. I want to see people giving this music this energy and respect because they really love it. Let’s call it a wish.

Satti’s comments belie real anxiety about reaching listeners and getting the kind of feedback in Amman that he has received elsewhere. His frustrations are shared with his colleagues. Khotta Ba told me that despite the growth in music production in Amman,

[People] aren’t used to coming to concerts. They’re not used to knowing what to do in a concert. They don’t know if they’re supposed to clap at a punch line or what. Some people want the song to be over at a punch line and start clapping. They’re not accustomed to a hip hop show where you come and enjoy and bob your head and go home. Lots of people understand hip hop as poetry, like they want to come listen to a reading. Others come too hyped up.

\(^7\) There was one exception to this trend; Kalaji also located tarab in his description of a concert Immortal Entertainment organized at the Rainbow Cinema on Rainbow Street in Jabal Amman in 2012.
Khotta’s complaints about audience reactions are tangible and reflected in specific behavior (clapping and “bobbing your head”) while Satti’s are more abstract (“from their hearts, because they’re loving it”). But both rappers’ reflections point to misfires with the audience. In other words, a problem performing rap in Amman is not only that “there is no fan base” as the rapper and producer Mohammed al-Hijazi of Obsolete Records told me in an interview. It is also that the desired modes of communicating, of “feeling with” the audience are regularly stymied even when audiences do gather. Specifically, rappers and DJs recognize this as particular to Amman.

In a conversation about opportunities in Amman compared to Ramallah, rappers and DJs Al-Nather and Boikutt elaborated:

**Al-Nather:** It’s better here [in Amman, compared to Ramallah]. Because there is culture here. Not culture like we would like, maybe. But there is a music culture. There are more people who support music. It’s a much bigger city.

**Boikutt:** […] I don’t agree that there’s more culture here. I don’t see that there’s even more people willing to support culture or attend concerts. Even the proportion in Ramallah is higher considering the size of the city. Like in Jadal [a venue run by Fadi Amireh] the other night there were maybe less than half as many people as there were in December at La Wain [discussed in Chapter Three].

Al-Nather’s recognition of the presence in Amman of “culture, but not culture that we would like” deepens the paradox about the opportunities the city offers its artists, with which I opened this chapter. While Al-Nather recognizes that Amman offers different (perhaps even “better”) opportunities to perform, there is nonetheless something missing

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88 Hijazzi explained, “If you have one hundred people listening to you, that’s not a fan base. Last year we did a concert… and put fourteen of the rappers with us on the label on stage. Fourteen people, and of them the biggest names in Amman, so they say of themselves. One hundred and fifty people came to the show. Fourteen people, that’s ten percent of the crowd – on the stage. Don’t tell me there’s a fan base. Where’s the music scene? Where’s the respect for this music? There isn’t any.”
in these opportunities. Boikutt confirms this with his rejection of the notion of “more culture” in Amman, a city home to twenty-three times the population of Ramallah. Moreover, Khotta Ba’s observations about what audiences are “accustomed to” and Boikutt’s declarations about “culture” are not abstract constellations about taste. The assertion that audiences do not know how to “come and enjoy” are specific complaints about the kind of feedback audiences in Amman give and that musicians are able to receive on stage.

It seems to me necessary to ruminate on the frustration musicians expressed about the inability of their audiences to consistently react in ways they feel are appropriate. This is, after all, a driving reason why some of these musicians are not content producing and performing their music in Amman. What is preventing the smooth exchange between musicians and listeners during concerts? Why the repeated complaints about a lack of listening culture or respect for musicians? In the wake of the hype about Amman’s emergent role as host to cultural production, why are audiences not getting it?

Learned familiarity with sites of cosmopolitan leisure and the representation and performance of selfhood within them has been the subject of fascinating ethnographic work in Amman. Jillian Schwedler and Sarah Tobin have addressed how “aspiring cosmopolitans” and enacted “middle-classness” function politically in the Jordanian context. Schwedler has argued that learning cosmopolitan behavior – how to consume global brands and enact pleasure in elite leisure spaces – is central to the identity of both Ammani elites as well as segments of the middle and lower classes employed in the

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service sector in West Amman. She calls “aspiring” cosmopolitanism those “practices of survival, creativity, and reimagina-tion” produced “at the blurry boundary of inclusion/exclusion.” Her study works to reinsert texture – and agency – into neoliberal critiques of exclusion. For Schwedler, the patterns of marking public space that I pointed to in the first section need not be exclusively oppressive, as East Ammanis also actively negotiate and incorporate neoliberal changes into their perception of self and community, progress and opportunity. For her part, Sarah Tobin identifies more critically a political project in the assumption of cosmopolitan consumption patterns. She calls a “middle-class orientation” that which promised to “displace overtly political nationalism and replacing ethnic, religious, and other forms of elitism, factioning and sectarianism.” As I explore here, this kind of orientation towards consumption intersects with the frameworks and presentation of alternative music as cosmopolitan.

I want to consider here how some Ammanis refuse the invitation to participate in cosmopolitanism that is specifically not staged in elite spaces. I do not mean how religious authorities oppose certain concerts or festivals. I mean instead to draw into relief how Ammanis decide to participate, or not, in outdoor festivals in public space.

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91 But Schwedler stops short of claiming aspiring cosmopolitanism is liberating, concluding: “Whether these sites and forms of engagement are ultimately emancipatory or destructive remains an open question, with the answer likely contingent upon one’s own perspective of the liberatory possibilities of capitalism.” (Schwedler, “Amman Cosmopolitan,” 549.)

92 Tobin, “Jordan’s Arab Spring,” 100, emphasis added. Schwedler puts it like this: “[W]hat is being consumed is not limited to material goods and services, but also includes cultural codes and even spaces, a particular cosmopolitan aesthetic.” (Schwedler, “Amman Cosmopolitan,” 553.) This idea of consumption as an “equalizing” force, subsuming ethnic or sectarian difference into the desire to shop, has had salience elsewhere in the region as well as outside of it. On this narrative in Lebanon see Craig Larkin, Memory and Conflict in Lebanon: Remembering and Forgetting the Past (Oxon: Routledge, 2012); Lisa Wedeen and Bassam Haddad address it in the Syrian context, see: Wedeen, Ambiguities of Domination, and Haddad, Business Networks in Syria.
Specifically, I want to consider how refusals to participate are noticed by and effect the participation of others. I am concerned with how attention is divided among audiences and between concert participants and concert observers. Refusals to perform cosmopolitanism or to act “cosmopolitan-ly” need not only suggest the presence of conservative forces. They also stage tense but muted contests over city space.

_**Concert-goers and concert-observers**_

The Word Is Yours Festival was a two-day “urban street art festival” organized by Shermine Sawalha, Tia Thorpe, Nereya Otieno, and Samantha Robinson in October 2015. Day One of the festival hosted live rap, skateboarding competitions, a b-boy battle, beatboxing challenges, and skateboard building and painting workshops in the newly opened 7Hills Skatepark in the Al-Weibdeh neighborhood. Day Two largely focused on film screenings and artist talks at the Laconda Hotel, also in Weibdeh. I focus

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93 Sawalha represented the local Jordanian production company MALAHI and the event platform TBA Collective; Thorpe the Danish NGO Turning Tables; and Robinson the British NGO AptART. Malahi and TBA Collective, through Sawalha’s work, were responsible for securing local services, many of which were donated to the festival free of charge. Red Bull Kuwait and Red Bull UAE sponsored artists travelling from those countries (Malikah and Sons of Yusuf). Turning Tables ended up not contributing directly to the festival. On AptART – which stands for “Awareness and Prevention Through Art” and their sources of funding see [http://www.aptart.org/about/](http://www.aptart.org/about/), accessed January 15, 2016. The festival was supposed to rely predominantly on crowd-funding. However, both IndieGoGo and AfkarMENA campaigns were only successful in raising about half the funds requested (less than 42% of the $10,000 goal had been raised by October 1, 2015 [“The Word is Yours- Hip Hop in the Middle East,” IndieGoGo, accessed January 18, 2016, [https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/the-word-is-yours-hip-hop-in-the-middle-east#/story](https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/the-word-is-yours-hip-hop-in-the-middle-east#/story)]. The rest Sawalha largely paid out of pocket. (Personal correspondence with Sawalha, January 19, 2016.)

94 The 7Hills Skatepark, largely “run” by Mohammed Zakaria, was built in December 2014 with the support of Make Life Skate Life, a Belgian/US NGO that collaborates with “local communities” to build skate parks in developing countries. (Unrecorded conversations with the author. See also Hiba Dlewati, “Amman Skatepark a ‘Melting Pot’ for Locals and Refugees,” _National Geographic_, October 14, 2015, accessed January 21, 2016, [http://voices.nationalgeographic.com/2015/10/14/7hills-skatepark/](http://voices.nationalgeographic.com/2015/10/14/7hills-skatepark/), among others.
my remarks here on Day One, when the live concerts – a total of seven hip hop acts – were held.95

Figure 4.8: “Panoramic of the Word is Yours Festival.” The central stage for rap performances was under the black RedBull umbrella, far left. Shade was limited to where most people are seated, along the near back wall. Photograph by the author (at the 7Hills Skatepark in al-Weibdeh around 5pm, October 2, 2015).

In many ways the first day of the festival was a success: for an entire day, the park was full of a mix of people: local and expat, from different neighborhoods, men and women, with the knowledge of the police and local religious authorities. In many other ways, the festival was a failure. The structure of funding meant that travelling musical acts were paid while the local acts weren’t. There were last minute changes, cuts, substitutions, and contingency plans, leading to mistrust between the performing artists

95 They were Malikah (Lebanon/Dubai); Satti (Jordan); Almukhtar (Jordan); Sons of Yusuf (Kuwait); Synaptic and Jazz Tha Process (Jordan); Kazz (Jordan); Arab MC’s (Jordan); Bu Kolthoum (Syria/Jordan). Showcased artists also included DJs, beatboxers, and bboy dancers. For full line up see “The Word is Yours Festival October 2: Street Art, Skateboarding, Live Rap, Beatboxing, DJ’s, B-Boy Battle and Workshops!,” hosted by “The Word Is Yours Festival,” Facebook Event page, accessed January 21, 2016, https://www.facebook.com/events/400190190170359/. Day Two of the festival featured film screenings and artist and producer talk-backs. For full lineup, see “The Word Is Yours – October 3: Artist Talks, Workshops, DJ Sets, Film Screenings, Street Art, Exhibitions,” hosted by “The Word Is Yours Festival,” accessed January 21, 2016, https://www.facebook.com/events/405036743027305/.
(the time of whose sets and the duration were changed multiple times) and the organizational team. When Sawalha managed to convince the police to allow the event to continue (despite her already having secured the permits to do so), local religious figures protested the continuation of music, dancing, and gender mixing in a public space, leading to a muted confrontation between the police and the religious authorities.\(^96\)

These dynamics of misunderstanding and contest over the power to use the space or to declare what kind of behavior was appropriate in it were between the organizers and local authorities (civil and religious) and the fall out of these negotiations was largely between the organizers and the musicians. But this does not mean the unusual occupation and transformation of the park staged by the festival was otherwise harmonious. It would be a mistake to pit the festival attendees as a heterogeneous group united in love of “urban culture,” facing the censorship and disapproval of state and religious authorities. Rather, in my observation, the festival staged a prominent, charged transgression in Amman public space, awareness of which was shared by dozens of disparate groups of people, who used the opening the festival provided differently. Moreover, participants and observers were aware of others’ decisions to participate and how they chose to do so, marking constant negotiations over proper behavior and use and meaning of public space. I first noticed the divided attention held by different users of the park the day before the concerts, while I, along with other volunteers cleaned up the park.

\(^{96}\) The police eventually convinced the religious authorities to back down by arguing that the event was mostly “for” ajaneb [foreigners]. Needless to say, this insulted the (Arab) musicians and local participants who heard this was the agreement to which they arrived, while they were simultaneously relieved the event could continue.
Carrying a black trash back between us, Rana and I set out along the South end of the park, which runs up on Arar Street. We each wore one of the pink plastic dish gloves I had brought. We were talking as we worked, ignoring the shouts and beckoning of men drinking coffee outside the shop across the street. At one point in my gathering of trash, I picked up something heavy. It felt like a rug perhaps, but I could not tell what it was. I lifted it at arm’s length to see it more clearly. Finally, I understood. It was a dead cat. I dropped it and yelped. Rana screamed. Peels of laughter rang out from across the street, where the men had obviously been watching the whole time.

These moments in the build-up to the concerts the next day illustrate a distance and difference I felt in this festival and others conducted in public spaces between concert-goers and what I call “concert-observers.” Concert-goers (and concert organizers, volunteers, other participants) come to these public spaces infrequently, with firmly held, specific expectations of how to act and what to do in public space. They are noticed by concert-observers (everyday users of the space), who tolerate the incursions but markedly avoid participating. In this example, the men across the street clearly noticed my and the two other volunteers’ presence and recognized what we were doing. To the men, who work across from the park, the sight of the (clearly not local) women cleaning the park with their hands was humorous (instead of, say, embarrassing). Obviously, this wasn’t women’s work, whatever the intentions of these newly-arrived “Good Samaritans” were – a perception that was confirmed when Rana and I both startled at the sight and touch of the dead animal. Similarly, she and I both quietly tolerated the taunts and jeers while

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97 The park is elevated above the street, making us visible to young and middle-aged men, sitting outside a carpentry shop drinking coffee. Rana is not her real name.

98 Author’s field notes, October 5, 2015.

99 Rana is surely not a “foreigner,” having grown up in Amman. I am also Arab. We spoke together in Arabic. Nonetheless, our activity (cleaning up garbage), to some extent our dress, or some other combination of factors clearly indicated to the men across the street that we were not locals. They called out to us in broken English.
remaining fixated on tidying the park, which we both perceived was in the best interest of the neighborhood users, despite not having used the park previously ourselves. Neither of us – Rana and I nor the group of men – directly confronted the other. Though we did not directly acknowledge each other’s presence, awareness of their recognition of our intrusion marked the volunteers’ attitude in and towards the space. Their laughter and jeering made us aware of our foreign-ess in the space, despite perhaps our own perceptions of the value of our presence.

While the physical distance between the two groups in this instance is exceptionally stark (a two-lane road runs between myself and the other volunteer and the men in the shop), the dynamic between us was one I also noticed during the Al Balad festival hosted downtown, where the distance and division was less extreme. For example:

Crossing the street into the park, my companions and I dodge boys and girls with soccer balls, veiled women and young fathers holding babies and young children, toy vendors sending lit plastic tops spinning on the stone ground or flashing boomerangs soaring into the air. On benches or against the walls of the large theatre, young men and teens sit spitting seeds and smoking. As we neared the Odeon (the smaller of two roman theatres), flags advertising the festival marked a sort of fabricated entrance corridor. These flags built a queue for audiences, who stood in between them as they arrived and waited to enter or to buy tickets. Opposite the queues, folks clearly not intending to enter, mostly young men and boys, sat on stone structures and quietly watched the queues of people entering. Exiting the theatre, the scene was similar to when we entered it. […] I wished to use the restroom before and after the concert, something my companions advised me against and outside of which they waited patiently lest I be left to traverse the square alone.

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100 The opening night concert was July 29, 2015. The concert was Tarabband: an Iraqi-Swedish folk band. Tickets were 10 JDs. For festival schedule, see http://al-balad.org/al-balad-music-festival-2015/, accessed March 30, 2016.

101 Author’s field notes, August 28, 2015.
Dressed up for a night out, the parade of concert-goers waiting to purchase tickets for the Al-Balad Festival concerts was something of a spectacle for the regular users of the space, many of whom informally queued themselves to watch this crowd. Here the spatial difference between “concert goer” and “concert observer” was less marked. Nevertheless, the delineations between “concert goer” and “concert observer” were not only obvious, they were actively performed. My female companion’s dress (more conservative than she would wear otherwise) was designed to downplay this difference, whereas the queue of those watching the actual concert queue made no effort to mask the difference they observed. I think it worthwhile to consider the negotiated tolerance between these groups in these moments before the concert began and upon its conclusion.

The refusal to ignore, overtly reject, or embrace the festival and the new arrivals to the downtown space points to fissures in organizers’ discourse about reaching as wide an audience as possible, not to mention obvious class tension (the divisions are much more obviously class-related in the Al-Balad example than they were at the Word is Yours Festival in 7Hills). At the same time, my companions’ tight attention to staying within the lines the festival organizers had drawn for concert-goers (evidenced in their attentiveness and recommendations) recognizes the thin tolerance that concert-observers enact. Both recognitions of “the other” – for concert-goers of concert-observers and vice versa – under the watchful eyes of different kinds of security, are indirect and muted. Importantly, these interactions are not direct confrontations. Again, I am not drawing attention here to the repeated complaints by observant Muslims and local imams about musicians playing during the adhan’s call to prayer. Nor by recognizing the refusal of
concert-observers am I referring to the interventions of religious authorities complaining about men and women mixing in public space.

Rather, the affective configuration of concert access and audience behavior described here helps to recognize a flipside of aspiring cosmopolitanism and “middle class-ness.” Especially in Amman’s expanding music scene, there are staged opportunities for the performance of cosmopolitanism – in venues that are specifically not exclusive (both spaces described here are public parks) – that Ammanis actively refuse. That is, when privately run festivals clearly trading in the “cosmopolitan international” enter and appropriate lower-middle-class and working-class space, they are pointedly not greeted by the frameworks of aspiring cosmopolitanism Schwedler talks about.\(^\text{102}\) This is not to suggest that aspiring cosmopolitanism does not exist in other places and at other times. It is however to note that in particular it does not seem to exist here, at the intersection of bifurcated East and West Amman, among ordinary users of park spaces. This is so despite or perhaps because of the framework mobilized by concert organizers.

\(^{102}\) “Cosmopolitan international” is Schwedler’s phrase. To be sure, Schwedler locates most aspiring cosmopolitanism in the malls, traffic circles, and clubs of West Amman, not in East Amman. She doesn’t address the negotiations of cosmopolitanism in “shared” public space, like the downtown plaza, that I am addressing here. (Schwedler, “Amman Cosmopolitan.”)
Raed Asfour, the artistic director of the Al-Balad theatre and of the bi-annual music festival of the same name, also spoke of introducing audiences to different sounds and to new music. He was keen to emphasize that the festival was for “everyone.” Specifically, Asfour told me that the festival’s ideal audience is “the people” [el nass] … in every shape and form: age, economic class, education level.”¹⁰³ Over the course of our conversation, Asfour continued to deny any outward characteristic that could delineate the make up of el nass (age, economic class, education level). Curiously then, in our

¹⁰³ Interview with Raed Asfour, Artistic Director of Al Balad Theatre; August 16, 2015, Amman. Translation from the Arabic is my own.
conversation about the relationship between the festival organizers and attendees and the ordinary frequenters of the downtown plaza where the Roman theatres are located, Asfour automatically made a distinction. He told me, “No one goes there to build relations with them, to teach them about art… and unfortunately their economic level doesn’t allow them to attend a play regularly.”

Despite asserting that the festival’s target audience had no “economic level,” Asfour here easily identifies real difference between the Ammani citizens who notice the festival is taking place – concert observers – and those who actually attend – concert goers. Asfour related to me how this difference has historically been embodied in animosity, when the concert goers arrive and “steal” the plaza from those forced to observe the dispossession: its everyday users. The concert goers’ arrival, typically accompanied as they are by the police, internal security, and mukhabarat (because the festival is an official event), effects the layout of the public space (corridors are constructed, the theatres roped off) as well as changes who has access to which parts of the plaza (tickets are implemented). All of this happens without “us” [the festival organizers and concert goers] asking “their” [everyday users of the space] permission. Asfour concluded, “of course they don’t have the power for you to ask their permission anyway. These things are tied up with the municipality.”

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104 Added emphasis.

105 In the late 1990s, the municipality planted trees in the downtown plaza that is historically home to the smaller Odeon theatre and the larger Roman amphitheatre (they are both ruins of the Roman city of Philadelphia). At night at that time, the plaza was unlit, dark, and very sketchy, known to be the hang out of za’ran [“troublemakers”]. Asfour recalls during their first efforts to host events in this space, people from outside the neighborhood (the target audience) refused to attend, and young men and boys from the neighborhood regularly threw stones at them. In 2012 the municipality cut down most of the trees and tiled the plaza, adding lights. It is now a popular, sha’abi, space frequented by inhabitants of the neighboring hills of East Amman on every night of the week: families, young children, couples, and groups of young men alike. Asfour claims that the rapport between the artistic community, its audience, and the regular
class consumption as “inclusivity” in full relief. Clearly, organizers are keen to draft an “inclusive” cultural product, staging it against the stunning backdrop of Jordan’s ancient heritage.\textsuperscript{106} This is despite the obvious divisions the festival stages between audiences and potential audiences in the downtown plaza.

Asfour claimed organizers offered free tickets to interested parties once they sold as many as they could. He took pains to describe to me one pre-adolescent girl who attended five concerts for free, accompanied by a female festival volunteer, who would “pick the girl up” from her mother (who was in the park around the theatre but did not wish to enter) and return her to her family once the concert was over. With the exception of Mounir Troudi (Tunisia), Morabba3 (Jordan) and Tarraband (Sweden/Iraq), however, the venue hovered around half empty.\textsuperscript{107} During the hip hop acts performed by Boikutt (Palestine), Khotta Ba (Jordan), and El Rass (Lebanon), the theatre was less than half full.\textsuperscript{108} The point here is not only about exclusion at the point of ticket pricing, however.

\begin{flushright}
users of the space is improving, a status he described thusly: “They have to get used to the fact that there’s [going to be] art there.” Adding, “even if individuals are just hearing from the outside [of the theatre], they are still hearing something different – not to say better or worse [than they would otherwise] – just different.” This, for Asfour, speaks to the social value the festival brings to Amman and to Jordan.

\textsuperscript{106} This, Parker elaborates, is part of the Hashemite narrative as well: using Jordan’s spectacular natural landscapes and ancient heritage as part of its specific appeal (specifically for its tourism industry) against whose backdrop its emergent modernity is all the more precious and spectacular. (Parker, “Tunnel-Bypasses and Minarets,” 111-112.)

\textsuperscript{107} The one concert I did not attend was that of the Jordanian indie rock band Zaed Naes.

\textsuperscript{108} Tickets for Boikutt and Khotta Ba’s concert was 7 JD, the cheapest concert in the festival. This cheaper ticket was a compromise with Boikutt who requested a 5JD donation as a condition for participating in the concert. My own perception, shared by some of the musicians who performed, is that more could be done to lessen the very obvious class barriers operating in a public, Amman space. Khotta Ba told me:

To be honest I’m against doing a show in a place like this and not letting the neighborhood kids in. These kids were running around behind the backstage and throwing stones [at us]. Man, let these kids in, the theatre was empty anyway. But that’s how the organizers think. At the end of the day, they want to break even. They’re not here to solve society’s problems.
The large refusal to enter the concert space, if Asfour’s claims to offer tickets to interested parties for free are truthful (think especially of the mother of the girl Asfour mentioned – even to accompany her daughter she preferred not to enter), do more than highlight the misfires of the inclusive intentions of the festival organizers. In them we can begin to see a pattern of deliberation, calculated negotiation, and certainly palpable affective tension conducted between Ammanis in and around concert venues. Importantly for the effect it has on musicians and their ability to communicate with their gathered audiences, these tensions do not stay outside the theatres but enter concert spaces, as well.

*Divided attention*

When dusk fell on Day One of the Word is Yours Festival, the environmental challenges of the day (the sun, schedule changes, negotiations with local authorities) faded. But audience attention remained divided. The gathered crowd nearly erupted in fistfights more than once. As Satti, Malikah and Bu Kolthoum took the stage for their final sets, groups of boys took to teasing each other. One adolescent in particular nearly found himself knocked out more than once after repeatedly spraying water at strangers in the crowd. Sawalha herself intervened at least twice. Which is to recognize that even at the climax of the event, two experienced rappers still did not hold the audience’s attention.

This seemed obvious enough to the performing rappers. On stage, Malikah frequently appeared removed, not connected to her audience, an irritation she expressed
vis-à-vis problems with sound, rolled eyes at mic problems, sarcasm about the (small) size of the stage (making it difficult for her and Bu Kolthoum to move), as well as frustration with the crowd itself. She seemed to be rapping over them, above their heads, not with and to them. Months earlier, under rain in the garden of the Jadal cultural center, Bu Kolthoum was able to hold an affective exchange that was much more focused and powerful than the much larger, sprawling audience at 7Hills at night. The Word is Yours Festival, despite being truly accessible, held in public space, free, inviting a range of audiences and modes of interaction, was not able to provide the conditions for a widespread, felt connection between rappers and the gathered audience.

Awareness of how others were using the space constantly absorbed audiences’ attention. The teen teasing the audience by spraying listeners with water observed and attempted to take advantage of how some were using the space. At the same time, others noted with apprehension the behavior of this teen and those who responded to him. These contests operate below and beyond the more official deliberations between organizers and musicians and between organizers and different Jordanian authorities. Nonetheless, these attentions compete with that which rappers seek from their listeners.

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109 At Jadal, I suspect the crowd was much more self-selecting, less heterogeneous (predominantly Syrian), and familiar with his work. Here, in a context open to the public, the attention audiences spent on each other prevented an earnest engagement with the rappers and their work.
The nuances in lyrically performed resignation are missed when audiences are not listening, or when other factors compete with their attention.\textsuperscript{110} As I elaborated in the previous section, given that rappers are increasingly invested in more abstract and less explicit navigations of politics, their work suffers when audiences are distracted or when listening is not focused. The configurations that distract audiences from rappers in Amman – the meticulous attention to different attendees and observers, the recognition of

\textsuperscript{110} DJ Sotusura credited the growth in the hip hop scene in Amman to the printing of CDs, which allowed audiences to listen on their own, on their own time. (Interview with the author.)
divided (and contests over) public space – dissuade tarab from emerging. These same factors and the divided audience attention contingent upon them, contribute to musicians’ frustration performing in Amman.

At the same time, when the divisions between concert goers and concert observers are as pronounced as they were in the festivals I discuss in this section, the nuanced, poetic political deliberations that rappers in Amman offer are competing with muted but very real and blatant contests over public space. Audiences’ inability to connect is often a refusal of cosmopolitanism and the class package it often comes in. For the most part, rappers’ strategies to connect with these audiences and overcome this perception are limited to negotiations with concert organizers over ticket prices and recognition amongst themselves that concerts are exclusive. Rappers interpret a lack of respect for their work in listening behavior that is not focused on, and cannot appreciate, their often quite dense lyrical experimentation and contemporary musical innovation. But audiences and potential audiences (and especially those potential audiences who refuse to engage) are constantly – if with restraint – performing their perception that concerts are not designed to respect nor communicate with them.\(^{111}\) This gap of expectations is of course at the heart of the neoliberal constellation of cosmopolitanism, growth, and cultural production that physically divides the city and that nurtures so much of the malaise, anxiety, frustration, and disgust so many of my interlocutors expressed in Amman.

**Conclusion**

\(^{111}\) This is something many interlocutors credited El Far3i with overcoming, ever so slightly, in how he was able to engage different audiences in different venues. (Interviews with Sotusura, Nasser Kalaji, and El Far3i.)
In this chapter, I have attempted to account for some of the affective contradictions accompanying the recent establishment of Amman as something of an independent music concert hub. In Part One “Cultural Hotspot,” I considered the expressed desire to leave Amman expressed by musicians and music producers that persists despite the growth of concert opportunities in Amman. I suggested that this desire underscores the political quagmire that is worsening in the city, despite, or indeed because of recent flows of financial, demographic, and humanitarian capital. In Part Two “Performing resignation” I focused on some of the ways in which some rap in Amman navigates this political reality. I suggested that one prominent political feeling expressed in some powerful rap in Amman is resignation and that performing this resignation points to politics in progress. In that section I underscored the musical, affective, and lyrical elements in this work that are conducive to the emergence of tarab.

In the final section, “Divided attention,” I wondered why, despite these musical and affective elements, tarab seemed particularly evasive in Amman. Here, my own participant observation balanced out rappers’ testimony expressing frustration with audience behavior. This led me to an exploration of concert access and audience behavior, specifically in an assessment of the tension between concert goers and concert observers. Ultimately I argued that divided audience attention in concerts in public spaces distracts listeners from the nuances in rap lyrical work, which especially for audiences unfamiliar with the genre, often culminates in dismissal or ignoring the performer, instead of intense connection with them. At the same time, the cosmopolitanism of rap concerts similarly dismisses swaths of the population in pretends to serve, despite artistic
or political intentions of the rappers themselves. These realities influence the affective
texture rappers are able to conduct.
Chapter Five: Beirut

Poetics of Disgust

Overview

The state of the Arab world is disgusting. So I said to myself, I’ll throw up on a city filled with shit, that’s paved with grime.

~Raed Ghoneim (Sot Gilgamesh), “Istafrigh” [“I throw up”].

Figure 5.1: “Graffiti on Dbayeh road in Beirut.” Graffiti reads, “You disgust us.” Graffiti is almost legal in Beirut, a considerable creative industry has sprung up around this fact. Photograph by the author, September 2012.

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Like the previous two case studies, this chapter proceeds in three parts. In the first section, I establish the neoliberal context of the cosmopolitan growth of the city of Beirut. As in Ramallah and Amman, in Beirut I also locate rap concerts within the gentrifying energies of the cosmopolitan avenues of the capital city. In the opening section of the chapter, I trace the configuration of capital and geography unique to Beirut that has allowed for its specific patterns of gentrification. The sectarian configuration of the oligarchy, the seeming weakness of the state, the presence and pull of the Lebanese diaspora, and growing anti-sectarian protest movements affect how Beirutis conceive of and move through the city while determining where concerts are held and who can attend. Like recent literature critical of Beirut’s urban development, I suggest that paying attention in particular to the rapid growth and death of Monot Street, Gemmayzeh Street, Hamra Street, and Armenia Street (Mar Mkhayel) allows for a critical appraisal of Beirut’s “creative industries.” Situating rap concerts at the confluence of these gentrifying energies helps to understand how audience dynamics in them operated. In this section, I also point to affective configurations that have emerged in response to the particular constellation of uneven cosmopolitanism and neoliberal incursions in Beirut. I suggest widespread articulations of disgust point to particular politics in progress.

In the second section, I explore how rap lyrics diverge from Lebanese political narratives, especially around discourses and reasoning of power-sharing, identity, nationalism, and sectarianism, and romanticism about ideas of the city of Beirut. Starting with rap songs that take as their subject the city of Beirut, I explore how articulations of disgust open ways to express alternative politics and social interrogations that run against
the grain of mainstream political discourse. This allows me to begin formulating how expressing disgust informs the emergence of tarab in some rap in Beirut.

In the third section, I build on this analysis of tarab by circling back to an analysis of audience dynamics and performer-listener communication. As in the previous case studies, in the final section of the chapter I consider how considerations of concert access inform a class reading of audience dynamics. In particular, I address how the refusal enacted in articulations of disgust are mirrored in audience behavior when audiences travel with the performer from outside the cosmopolitan avenues of the capital. Hearing and responding to local, ghettoized concerns on central, cosmopolitan stages allows for an enactment of disgust in audience behavior that is as politically palpable as it is aesthetically integral to rappers' presentation of their work.

Throughout this chapter, I propose understanding the dynamics held in tension in rap in Beirut as a product of affective disgust. Disgust is indicative of politics in progress. It is affectively different from performed resignation I identified in some rap in Amman, but it points to similar grasping for and working through both material and affective realities in Beirut.³

³ Research in Beirut was conducted intermittently between 2011 and 2016. Two travel grants from the Center for American Studies and Research at the American University of Beirut, funds from Professor Judith Milhous’ Chair as well as a GC Doctoral Students’ Research grant helped in part to facilitate this research. I am grateful for the trust all of these put in my research. Some of the content in this chapter will appear in El Zein, “‘Resisting ‘Resistance’: On Political Feeling in Arabic Rap Concerts” in Arab Subcultures: Transformations in Theory and Practice, ed. Tarik Sabry and Layal Ftouni (London: I.B. Tauris, forthcoming 2016).
Part One: “How is there ‘no state’”?

There is a state. And this is what it looks like.
~Jana Traboulsi

People aren’t comfortable but they will still go and party. They think like, look, they just hit a Shi’a neighborhood, and then they hit a Sunni neighborhood, now it’s the turn for a Christian neighborhood. So I won’t go out in Gemmayzeh.
~Camille “Camo” Najm, owner of Yukunkun pub

This is no capital of culture. It’s a wrestling wring.
~El Rass, “Borkan Beirut” [“Beirut’s Volcano”]

In the protests that rocked Beirut in the summer of 2015, a series of memes circulated on social media. Originally created by Jana Traboulsi, they all read “How come there is no state? There is a state, and this is what it looks like.” The text was superimposed over images of police brutality against peaceful protesters. The memes, which were shared as part of the protest energies surrounding the “#Tol3et_Re7etkom” or #YouStink protests following the 2015 garbage crisis, highlighted and inverted the

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4 Interview with the author, August 28, 2013. All subsequent quotations from Mr. Najm are taken from this interview. Translations from the Arabic and French are my own.


popular Lebanese complaint *wein al-dawleh?* [where is the state?]. The meme’s response to the question: “there is a state, and this is what it looks like” overlaid on different images played with disdain, derision, and outrage in response to the popular complaints about the absence of a state that served people’s interest. The meme worked to further protest energy by emphasizing that there was a state: a corrupt, dysfunctional, powerful state mobilized against its own people.

The Lebanese government has been crippled by a political stalemate for years. Largely the result of an impasse between the “March 14” and “March 8” coalitions, the deadlock reflects the “confessional” power-sharing system (*muhasasa ta’ifiyeh*), on which Lebanese domestic politics are based. Posts in the government and seats in the legislature are distributed according to religious sect as stipulated in the Lebanese Constitution (1926) and the Ta’if Agreement, which ended the Civil War (1989). The impasse also reflects the power sharing agreements enshrined in the Lebanese constitution since independence from the French in 1943 and the continued hold on power of a handful of oligarchs and political families (many of which are the same who led warring militias during the country’s fifteen-year civil war [1975-1990]). The impasse finally reflects regional struggles for power: the so-called “March 14 Coalition,” led by the Future Movement, is supported by Saudi Arabia and the West while the “March 8 Alliance,” led by Hizbullah, is supported by Syria’s Bashar al-Assad (support

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9 The Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) was catalyzed by the 1967 defeat of the Arab armies in Israel, the expulsion of Palestinian *feda yeen* and the PLO from Jordan in 1970 and the confessionalism built into the Lebanese constitution. The war was ostensibly fought on sectarian lines (Maronite Christian, Sunni Muslim, Shi’a Muslim, Druze, and so on) and divided the city into largely Muslim West Beirut and predominantly Christian East Beirut, separated by the notorious “Green Line.” On the civil war and competing narratives over myth and fact in Lebanese history, see Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990).
which has been reciprocated by the intervention of Hizbullah fighters on the side of the regime in the Syrian conflict) and Iran.\textsuperscript{10} At time of writing, the country has been without a president for nearly two years (since May 25, 2014).\textsuperscript{11} Reflecting the relationship of private capital to state institutions that has led Laleh Khalili to refer to Lebanon as the “neoliberal state par excellence,” when political deadlock occurs, public services in Lebanon suffer.\textsuperscript{12} The Lebanese have seen increasing crises in education, transportation, electricity, and even basic services like trash collection, as was the case in 2015. At that time, the government contract with Sukleen, a waste management company, expired and

\textsuperscript{10} “March 14” is so named for the start date of the “Cedar Revolution” which began on the one-month anniversary of the assassination of then Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri by a truck bomb on February 14, 2005. Those responsible for the bombing have never been caught, despite the UN’s Special Tribunal for Lebanon (as is the case with those responsible for a slate of assassinations of anti-Syrian politicians and journalists between 2005 and 2007). The March 14 alliance is fronted by the Future Movement (the party of the assassinated Prime Minister – largely Sunni Muslim) and includes the Kataeb party (Maronite Christian) and other groups. The “Cedar Revolution” (named for the Cedar tree, national emblem of Lebanon and featured on its flag) involved weeks of marches by supporters. One of their primary demands was the end of Syrian influence in Lebanese politics and the withdrawal of Syrian soldiers and intelligence officers from Lebanese territory. As a result of the demonstrations, Syrian forces completely withdrew from Lebanon on April 27, 2005. On the Syrian-Lebanese relationship see, for example, Bassel Salloukh, “Syria and Lebanon: A Brotherhood Transformed,” Middle East Report 35(2005), accessed March 12, 2016, \url{http://www.merip.org/mer/mer236/syria-lebanon-brotherhood-transformed}.

\textsuperscript{11} This is not the first time Lebanese parliamentarians have been unable to come to an agreement about the role of the presidency. The 2008 election that put Michel Suleiman in the position of president was preceded by twenty months of deadlock (during which the position was left vacant). For context on the role of the president in the Lebanese constitution, see Elias Muhanna, “The Lebanese Presidency, Twenty-Five Years after Ta’if,” QifaNabki, April 26, 2014, accessed March 12, 2016, \url{http://qifanabki.com/2014/04/26/lebanon-president2014/}.

was not renewed, leaving thousands of people without waste collection for weeks. While not the first time this had transpired, in the summer of 2015 this garbage crisis catalyzed the “You Stink” protests – a spontaneous, non-sectarian outpouring of largely youthful protesters, concentrated predominantly on scheduled week-end protests between Riad al-
Solh Square and the Serail (Parliament building) in August, 2015. Of course the lack of public services are only the most recent reason to recognize the twisted shape of the Lebanese state. For years, the inability of the state to provide basic security for its citizens has been the more pressing concern.

The most recent mobilizations against corruption and the sectarian government are part of ebbs and flows of both capital and confidence in the city’s stability. A detailed history of the city, even of just the past ten years, is outside the range of this chapter. But pointing to a few significant flows of capital and affective energy will serve to root my discussions of specific rappers and their concerts in the pages that follow.

Many studies of post-civil war Beirut have focused on the oligarchy that led the reconstruction of especially the downtown area, re-opening Beirut as a playground for Saudi, Gulf, and diasporic Lebanese capital. In particular, much attention to and criticism of Beirut since the civil war has focused on the private company Solidere and

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13 The Palestinian refugee camps in and around Beirut have long suffered basic lack of services, including the distribution of water and garbage collection. (Rapper, producer and Bourj el Barajneh camp resident Osloob recounted how he used to work distributing water in the camps, before blowing out his shoulder and injuring a foot and focusing his attention solely on musical production.) In addition, the populations of the South of Lebanon as well as the Bekaa’ have notoriously been neglected by the State. This of course has allowed the popularity of groups like Amal and Hizbullah, who besides working to present these ignored interests in the state also work as basically social service networks, providing some of the services the state does not. This was especially pronounced in the reconstruction of Southern Lebanon following Israel’s 2006 bombing. The interruptions in the provision of services in these communities largely have not drawn the attention of the general Lebanese populace. But a similar crisis of trash collection did draw attention in 2012. See for example, Nora Stel and Rola el-Husseini, “Lebanon’s Massive Garbage Crisis isn’t its First. Here’s What that Teaches Us,” The Washington Post, September 18, 2015, accessed March 12, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/09/18/this-isnt-lebanons-first-garbage-crisis-and-what-that-should-teach-us/. For wider implications of this, see Nora Stel and Irna van der Molen, “Environmental Vulnerability as a Legacy of Violent Conflict: A Case Study of the 2012 Waste Crisis in the Palestinian Gathering of Shabriha, South Lebanon,” Conflict, Security and Development 15(2015): 387-414.

14 The downtown area, which featured an open market and was the city’s foremost mixing ground across both class and sectarian lines, was completely decimated more than once during the fifteen-year civil war.
former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri’s influence in that company’s buying and selling off of the city’s most touted real-estate. This literature has highlighted the continued

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tension in post-war Beirut, examined how discourses of consumption have attempted to unify the disjointed, war torn populace, and focused on campaigns of civil resistance to Solidere. These studies have importantly worked to trouble the narratives Solidere and other developers have imposed on the city, while exploring the tenuously-held together reality of the Lebanese state.

On this note, it is common knowledge in literature on Lebanon that the Lebanese state has never exhibited features of a Keynesian apparatus common in Western contexts. For better or worse, an important swath of literature on Lebanon has identified it as a textbook example of a “weak” or “failed” state. This literature has led Nikolas Kosmatopoulos to name Lebanon a “prestige zone [for] theorizing” the concept of the failed state. To be sure, Lebanon’s confessional power-sharing agreement is in quite marked distinction to the authoritarian monarchies and other autocratic regimes in the


18 Marieke Krijnen and Christian De Beukelaer write, “contrary to most Western contexts that have a history of Keynesian state interventionism and welfare provision, the state role in Lebanon has never been that of a social provider.” (Krijnen and De Beukelaer, “Capital, State, and Conflict: the Various Drivers of Diverse Gentrification Processes in Beirut, Lebanon,” in *Global Gentrifications: Uneven Development and Displacement*, ed. Loretta Lees, Hyun Bang Shin, and Ernesto López-Morales [Bristol: Policy Press, 2015], 288.)


region. Moreover, the propensity for suicide bombings to paralyze cities or neighborhoods, for militias to act outside the jurisdiction of the state, not to mention the systemic neglect of the South, North, and East of the country, has made the subject of the state’s whereabouts a constant subject of conversation among Lebanese outside of academic circles, as in the discussion of the popular meme that opened this chapter.

This discourse continues, indeed is amplified by, a volatile security situation drawn out over more than a decade. As the club owner Camille “Camo” Najm told me, “People aren’t comfortable but they will still go and party,” employing as they do so a rationale partly informed by political dynamics, and partly in denial of them. He continued, “They think like, look, they just hit a Shi’a neighborhood, and then they hit a Sunni neighborhood, now it’s the turn for a Christian neighborhood. So I won’t go out in Gemmayzeh,” as if one can predict, better than, or in absence of a state, how to protect oneself. Moreover, the sporadic appearance of a draconian state cracking down on individual, peaceful citizens (as highlighted visually in Traboulsi’s memes) further structures sociality and mobility in Beirut. For example, in January 2014 Lebanese


23 See for example, Anne Marie Baylouny, Privatizing Welfare in the Middle East: Kin Mutual Aid Associations in Jordan and Lebanon (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2010).
security forces arrested the Lebanese rapper Hussein Sharafeddin, known as Abu Ali (Double A) The Preacherman because his beard and baggy pants gave him a “Salafist” appearance. He was arrested in the Southern Beirut suburbs of Dahiyeh the day after a suicide bombing killed four people in the neighborhood and held in the anti-terrorism unit before being released without charge. The arrest ripped through Beirut’s rap and hip hop community, with friends and observers expressing the same kinds of disbelief, shock, and derision that underscore Traboulsi’s memes (as in Nasser Shorbaji [the rapper who goes by the stage name Chyno]’s Facebook post, below). In Beirut as elsewhere, rappers are keenly aware of, and often fiercely critical of, the involvement of the state in “anti-terrorism” operations, initiatives they occasionally related to “Western,” specifically US, interference. 

Thus, the privatization involved in the reconstruction of Beirut and the dynamics contributing to the fracturing of Lebanon’s “failed” state are two, inter-dependent, initial considerations in laying out the political and economic forces shaping Beirut today. A third element is the considerable influence of the Lebanese diaspora. The size and importance of the Lebanese diaspora in local dynamics are relatively unique in the region. Before I moved with my father back to the city of his youth in 2006, my own

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25 For a track that explores the diaspora, playing for it, and receiving their feedback, see especially El Rass and El Far3i, “Fi el-Jaleed” [“In the Ice”], on the album Adam, Darwin, and the Penguin, released May 27, 2014. (“Fi el-Jaleed – ma  el-Far3i” [“In the Ice – with El Far3i”], BandCamp audio recording, 4:48, accessed March 18, 2016 [https://elrass-munma.bandcamp.com/track/6] This track is discussed in further detail in the Conclusion to this dissertation.

26 It is an effect of the Lebanese civil war, but also of patterns of migration for at least a century. Famines on Mount Lebanon at the turn of the twentieth century propelled a sizable Lebanese exodus to South America, for example. A considerable Lebanese population travels to and from Brazil yearly. Brazil hosts an estimated seven million Lebanese (Lebanon itself only hosts around four million citizens). Claudio Munoz, “The Lebanese Diaspora: A Tale of Two Traders,” The Economist, March 16, 2013, accessed
relationship with Beirut and with Lebanon mirrored that of much of the Lebanese diaspora flung across the US, Europe, Central and South America, and Australia. We spent parts of the summer and the occasional New Year with extended family in Beirut, meeting up both with family living elsewhere and family permanently residing in Lebanon. As my cousins and I grew older, we spent more time discovering the city on our own, away from the living rooms of aunts and uncles.

By 2006, diasporic visits like mine helped, among other things, to shape a pattern of socializing on two important avenues in the city: in Monot and Gemmayzeh (on streets

Figure 5.4: “Two examples of rappers in Beirut posting on social media about the concerns of securitization in the city.” Left, Nasser Shorbaji (Chyno) posts on Facebook with derision about Double A the Preacherman's arrest, sarcastically suggesting that a decal of a cartoonish bomb on Double A’s car was evidence for arresting him on suspicion of terrorism. (Facebook post, January 22, 2014). Right, Mazen El Sayed (El Rass) writes, “The rap scene is infatuated with the rapport of black Americans with the police. I swear, brother, I have never in my life done a workshop to learn rap from Americans, but you should ask the [Lebanese] security forces how many workshops they’ve done with the US police.” His comments both refuse accusations that his rap is a “Westernized” product while drawing explicit attention to the neoliberal connection and collaboration between US and Lebanese security. (Facebook post, September 6, 2015)
referred to by the neighborhood in which they are the main artery). Both Monot and Gemmayzeh are one-way streets in otherwise residential neighborhoods that for several years attracted intense investment in bars, clubs, pubs and other nightlife establishments, sky-rocketing the rents. From 2000-2005, Monot hosted a potpourri of clubs and bars. The street showcased the first concentrated investment in nightlife since the reconstruction period and capitalized on the neighborhood’s central location. By the 2006 war with Israel [also called the July War, or harb tammuz] and the occupation of the downtown by March 8 supporters in 2006, the street had “died.” From 2002 to around 2009, Gemmayzeh street emerged and then exploded with popularity. Capitalizing on a “pub” aesthetic and leaning heavily on the Francophone traditions in Ashrafiyeh [East Beirut], Gemmayzeh countered the relatively more posh club scene of Monot and the increasing numbers of high-end roof top bars like “Sky Bar” “Le White” and “Le Gray” boasting DJs and requiring bottle-service reservations. At the peaks of their popularity, both Monot and Gemmayzeh were thronged by people in summer evenings, making it difficult to move, much less move a vehicle. Starting in 2008/2009, Beirut’s famous retail district, Hamra Street, witnessed a similar pattern of frantic nightlife investment in the opening of dozens of small pubs and bars, an enthusiasm which carried through the first years of the Arab Uprisings. Some of this energy capitalized on the historic role Hamra has played as home of Beirut’s intellectuals and the Left. Around the same time

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27 The rapport between Beirut’s Christian community, rooted in East Beirut, and the French has historically been stronger than the latter’s rapport with other communities.

28 At time of writing, this nightlife has petered off significantly. Live music is focused at the underground Metro Al Madina cabaret-theatre and Mizyan bar/restaurant.

29 This intellectual vibe was historically sustained by the nearby presence of several universities, especially the American University of Beirut on parallel Bliss Street. On cosmopolitanism in Hamra, see Steven
(2009/2010), investment picked up past the far end of Gemmayzeh street, on the other side of town. On Armenia Street in Mar Mkhayel an especially intense pattern of gentrification that started with bars hosting alternative music and hip hop has expanded to include galleries and high end apartments that specifically cater to the Lebanese diaspora.30

The development of all four of these districts is related to, indeed in some ways hinged on, the presentation of live music. Since 2000, local Lebanese hip hop and rap has played on stages and in venues that were part of each phase of growth. The popular ‘Eid al Musiqah [Fête de la Musique, annual Music Festival] was staged in the early 2000s in Monot and Downtown. Rap acts Fareeq al-Atrash and Katibeh 5, among others, were part of the presentation of local music. In Gemmayzeh, hip hop acts played at Behind the Green Door, and more recently at Yukunkun (opened September 2012). In Hamra, one of the first venues sporting a “local, authentic, not corporate vibe” while “prioritizing cultural programming and political freedom with prices accessible for young people” was the café, library, and art space Tah Marbouta.31 Katibeh 5, Fareeq al-Atrash, Touffar, and bands like Mashrou3 Leila all played at Tah Marboua between 2006 and 2012. Since the cafe was priced out of its original location and moved, Metro al-Madina in the heart of Hamra has consistently showcased local, alternative music, including hip hop (it opened


30 Krijnen and De Beukelaer, “Capital, State, and Conflict.”

31 Interview with co-owner Bilal El-Amine, August 30, 2013. All subsequent quotations from Mr. El-Amine are taken from this interview, which was primarily conducted in English. Tah Marboua opened in 2006, days after the Israeli bombardment of Beirut. It initially opened (by accident) as a kind of relief hub where different political and non political groups coordinated relief efforts. In 2011 they were bought out of their location on the ground floor of the Pavillon Hotel and relocated to the alley between Starbucks and Laziza (both locations are in Hamra.) They reopened in April 2012.
New Years 2012). Finally, Mar Mkhayel’s gentrification was arguably initiated by two important new music venues: EM Chill (named for the “electro-mechanic” auto-repair shop which it transformed) and Radio Beirut. It is impossible to ignore how the presentation of local musicians, hip hop a constant genre among them, has been involved in the frantic, sporadic growth of different areas of the city and the aesthetic development of its nightlife.

If alternative, local music was part of the aesthetic appeal of these gentrifying energies in different neighborhoods at different times over the past decade and a half, international capital was responsible for its existence at all. It is difficult to overemphasize the role the diaspora has played in sustaining as well as driving the climbing rents in neighborhoods like Mar Mkhayel and Hamra. Marieke Krijnen and Christian de Beukelaer underscore how new apartment complexes in Mar Mkhayel are specifically catering and selling to the diaspora. Bar owners I spoke with corroborated this narrative and emphasized how necessary the diaspora was to their economic survival, as well.

32 Tah Marbouta is still in Hamra but in a different location. The particularities of the space forced the owners to focus on the restaurant side of the operation and pulled them away from cultural programming. Bilal El-Amine told me:

I really felt like when we left the other space that they had killed us. The whole neighborhood was being gentrified and places like us that prioritized cultural programming and political freedom with prices accessible for young people was not going to be possible anymore.

Metro al-Madina is an underground “cabaret” theatre that opened New Year’s Even 2012 in the small theatre of the Masrah al-Madina complex. Since it has opened, it quickly established itself as an important venue for local, non-commerical, musical acts and theatre productions. They also intended to open in 2006 but delayed opening because of the July 2006 war. The theatre’s artistic director, Hisham Jaber, actually relocated to Cairo, Egypt for a time before returning to open the venue in 2012. (Interview with Hisham Jaber, August 23, 2013. Subsequent quotations from Mr. Jaber are taken from this interview. Translations from the Arabic are my own.)

33 Krijnen and de Beukelaer specifically locate the diaspora as one important group of Beirut’s new “gentrifier.” (Krinjen and de Beukelaer, “Capital, State, and Conflict.”)

34 Interviews with Bilal El-Amine and Camille Najm.
When we spoke, the Swiss-Lebanese co-owner of the basement club Yukunkun in Gemmayzeh was concerned about a constricted clientele. When I asked him if the neighborhood in which his venue is located was part of the problem (by that time, Gemmayzeh was “dying” and Mar Mkhayel was “booming”), Camille “Camo” Najm related to me:

This isn’t a problem of Gemmayzeh or Mar Mkhayel. The problem is people are offering big entertainment with which you can no longer compete. The second thing is there aren’t tourists in Lebanon. Even the Lebanese themselves aren’t coming [back]. And when they do, they aren’t spending.

Here, Camo relates the importance of the diaspora in fleshing out both local and foreign audiences. Camo’s comments also reflect the competition he feels this frantic growth puts on his venue (“people are offering big entertainment with which you cannot compete”).

Other bar and café owners also readily related that the unsustainability of this kind of investment when neighborhoods gentrify may be owed to money laundering. This reflects their perception that some of their competition doesn’t seem to be concerned with making or losing money to stay afloat.35

Especially remarkable in comparison to the other cities considered here, the gentrification of at least five neighborhoods featured in my research in Beirut.36 Interestingly, however, this has led not to the proliferation of enduring or reliable venues within which rappers are eager to present their work. At time of writing, there are effectively two main venues for hip hop concerts in Beirut: Metro al-Madina on Hamra Street and Radio Beirut in Mar Mkhayel on Armenia Street. That is, while every few

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35 Interviews with Bilal El-Amine and Camille Najm.

36 These are: the Downtown, Monot, Gemmayzeh, Hamra, and Mar Mkhayel.
years over the past decade and a half the returning diaspora was treated to new sets of bars in a new neighborhood, this has not resulted in tangibly greater opportunities for musicians. The rapper and producer Osloob told me, “There’s no music scene in Beirut. There’s no movement. There’s no place for music. You know what’s the dream of the musician in Beirut? To play with Ziad Rahbani and Fairouz.\(^\text{37}\) Of course, they’re fine musicians, I respect them too. But there’s no creativity in [this ambition].”\(^\text{38}\) Countering the enthusiasm of rappers from other cities who come to Beirut, Osloob suggests that audience exposure and eagerness aside, there still is little infrastructure supporting independent musicians in the city.

Finally, the side effect of the rising rents has meant that less and less of Beirut is accessible to its permanent residents. Gentrification in Beirut depends on the return/investment of the diaspora at the same time that it dispossesses Lebanese and limits resources available to them. The frantic growth of different neighborhoods and the official disavowal of others creates what the rapper and producer Osloob called “schizophrenia” [\textit{infisam}] in Beirut. He told me, “Lebanon is schizophrenic \cite[\textit{fi nouʾ min al-infisam}]{\text{37}}. The places and sociality are so different from each other. I would have invited you to come back to the studio [in Bourj el Farajneh, in Dahiyeh], but it’s all checkpoints and security these days. It looks like a different country.”

I return to explore the implications of the audience dynamics Osloob points to here, when audiences travel into the cosmopolitan heart of the city to hear bands voicing

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\begin{footnotes}
\item[\text{37}] Ziad Rahbani and his mother Fairouz are arguably Lebanon’s most famous living musicians. For analysis of the family’s musical legacy see Christopher Stone, \textit{Popular Culture and Nationalism in Lebanon: The Fairouz and Rahbani Nation} (Oxon: Routledge, 2008).

\item[\text{38}] Interview with the author, September 3, 2013. All subsequent quotes from Osloob are taken from this interview. Translation from the Arabic is my own.
\end{footnotes}
local grievances. Moreover, Osloob suggested that this schizophrenia positions rap concerts as easier in some neighborhoods and more difficult in others. He told me that “it’s easy to do a concert in Hamra, it’s hard to do one in the camps. It’s easy to do a concert at Metro [al-Madina, the underground cabaret in Hamra]; it’s hard to do one in Tripoli.” These reflections point to the uneven cosmopolitanism in Beirut. Gentrification in Beirut seems to happen in strips, radiating in dials pointing away from each other, concentrating intense activity on one street for a few years before moving on to another street in another neighborhood. The concentration of investment on individual streets in West and East Beirut is in marked contrast within a specific neighborhood. At the same time, the investment, sociality, and cosmopolitanism in these neighborhoods is wholly different from that in Beirut’s “periphery” – in Dahiye, Beirut’s southern suburbs or in the refugee camps of Sabra, Shatilla, Bourj el Barajneh, and others “outside of” Beirut. The widely different infrastructure and sociality in different neighborhoods engenders the “schizophrenia” Osloob talked about. As other researchers have documented, traversing, or conversely, being confined to specific parts of the city (either by choice, or by shared ideas about safety within neighborhoods) contributes to the sociality of Beirutis and defines a geographic understanding of the city that is inherently political. It also, as I


will explore below, informs how attending concerts can function politically for ostracized residents of the city. Rap has emerged in Beirut that navigates this materially-induced social condition lyrically (as in El Rass’s track). Moreover, audiences confronting this schizophrenia is part of what structures the emergence of tarab in some concerts.

Thus, privatization, sectarian oligarchy and a weak state, sporadic gentrification, and the diaspora shape the material “uneven”-ness of neoliberal incursions in Beirut. A final consideration that influences flows of affect among certain demographics in the city is the condition of non-sectarian politics. Since 2006 the voices of anti-sectarian dissenters flare up sporadically – and I think, following the 2015 protests – it is safe to say with increasing vitality. But the inherently fractious nature of this organizing is also a part of the political feelings of exhaustion and disgust discussed and articulated by many of my more politically active interlocutors. Bilal El-Amine of the café-pub Tah Marbouta explained:

You’ll sit at the table with ten people and they’ll all have wildly different opinions about what to do. And there are no traditions that have been built up, not even cores of people to navigate these differences. Once relief work [in 2006 following the July war] was gone, there was nothing to hold people together. Even the Arab Spring, which was the best opportunity for people to build something, what was attempted was a disaster. During the attempt here [“a-sha’b yureed isqat a-nizam a-ta’ifee,” or, “the people want the fall of the sectarian regime”] literally in every protest, in every meeting, there were physical fights between people, between activists. Really nasty, horrible meetings. [First], it was something to open up that big: it brought in a whole array of political problems specific to Lebanon. And [secondly] the core activists took this kind of ultra-revolutionary approach, like they didn’t want to discuss any kind of strategy, they just

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I thought it was a revolutionary time and people should just go with revolution. I think this kind of atmosphere developing in Lebanon is now kind of dead and buried.

El-Amine expresses here not only acknowledgement of the fractious Lebanese history and politics (“an array of political problems specific to Lebanon”), he also expressed frustration with the attitudes, (what he calls a lack of “strategy”) in new, emerging political mobilizations. As it turns out, these independent, anti-sectarian politics and some of the accompanying attitudes he identifies did re-emerge in the August 2015 protests, despite El-Amine’s assessment in 2013 that anti-sectarian protest was “dead and buried.” The “ultra-revolutionary” attitude he bemoaned also returned and similarly alienated large swaths of the Lebanese populous, even those supportive of the protests. This attitude was also importantly reflected in the rap scene, as I explore in the next section.

All of these factors – the attitude and fractiousness of anti-sectarian protests, along with the factors influencing Beirut’s uneven cosmopolitanism and neoliberal growth identified above – converge to influence the structure of political options and political feeling in Beirut.

In her work on Beirut during reconstruction, anthropologist Aseel Sawalha has productively located a lingering affective malaise in the post-war city. She identified among her interlocutors a state of “limbo” that operated as an “ongoing ’state of emergency.’” Sawalha suggested that the “postwar case of uncertainty” permeated through “all aspects of daily life for most residents of the city” and echoed in various claims by Beirutis to “wait and see.”

My own research documented similar patterns of anxiety and confusion. My interlocutors’ testimonies mirrored in some ways the limbo

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Sawalha located. Many of the individuals I spoke with expressed hesitancy about investments or next steps, iterating that they would also “wait to see what happens.” At the same time, however, I also noticed something else in the tones of voice, expressions, and analyses my interlocutors offered. As the Arab Uprisings and the short lived “a-sha‘ab yureed isqat a-nizam a-ta’ifee” [“the people want the downfall of the sectarian regime”] occupation of the downtown fizzled out, more and more people spoke of leaving Beirut, and a pronounced tin-like tone marked even these more hopeful pronouncements of the future. Disgust permeated many, many of my conversations:

Figure 5.5: “Map of Beirut showing the four boulevards of gentrification discussed here.” From West to East these are: Hamra, Monot, Gemmayzeh, and Mar Mkhayel. Other areas discussed, like the Downtown and Dahiye, also situated for reference. (Map is drawn by the author and not to scale.)
about local racism and local classism, about especially the lack of opportunity for young people in Beirut, about the corruption and oligarchy of the government, about the lack of electricity and internet, about the lack of support for culture, about the stranglehold of NGO funding structures on art production (and other things), about the complicity of the diaspora or the dismal social prospects accompanying a move outside of Lebanon, about sexism and patriarchy, about religious hypocrisy, and so on. In my fieldwork, I perceived that the limbo that Sawalha wrote about in the early 2000s was hardening; it was becoming darker, more cynical, more introverted, less hopeful. As Amine Younes, the owner of a chain coffee houses, who opened the first local café (not an international chain) in Hamra in the 2000s (Younes café), told me, explaining a shift he noticed in his café between 2006 and 2013:

People used to come, students or young professionals, spend half an hour order something, and go to their work or back to their studies. Now with social media and the Internet, people come and spend three or four hours on an espresso or a sandwich. Of course this effected us financially, but I’m not talking about this. Socially, the talk is different. There is pessimism. It’s not always so serious, of course. But there used to be more positive vibes, people would be laughing. Now there’s something negative in things. You can see it in people’s faces. Like three years ago (2010), I started noticing this change. I cannot explain it. You have to see it, then you notice it. It’s in their eyes. Their eyes are empty.\footnote{Interview with the author, August 28, 2013. All subsequent quotations from Mr. Younes are taken from this interview, which was conducted primarily in English. Like Tah Marbouta, Younes café in Hamra also opened right around the Israeli bombing of Beirut in 2006. Younes kept a blog during the heady days of the war: who came into the café, what they talked about. He remembers this period as particularly vibrant, optimistic days, despite the violence. See: \emph{A Lebanese Café During the War}, accessed March 16, 2016, \url{http://www.yawmiyat-yawmiyat.blogspot.com}.}

Palpable in Younes’s comments here was both nostalgia and frustration. Moreover, the statement “their eyes are empty” articulates a distance between himself and those he spoke about, a distance marked by particular affective register. Importantly, Younes did
not really express disgust here. But his comments are indicative of the darker sadness I perceived in the testimonies of many of my interlocutors.

Disgust in Beirut is expressed as the affective result of the tension between the several factors I have pointed to in this section. It is the recognition that the city is being stolen from its inhabitants; the frustration with the status quo; the utter dissatisfaction with the government; resentment towards people who leave; and the identity crises that result upon return. As such, I consider that expressions of disgust are specific, active navigations of politics. By distancing themselves from dysfunction, corruption, neglect, or racism in a particular affective register, the speaker of disgust works around available political affiliation by refusing and circumventing in specific ways the trite, disappointing narratives of politicians, the humanitarian aid industry, and local as well as regional nostalgia. In turn, the listener to expressions of disgust shifts weight, adopts focus, and expresses similar or related affect. These are politics in process.

In the remainder of this chapter, I focus on expressions of disgust in rap lyrics and performances of disgust in rap concerts in Beirut. I suggest something politically productive operates in these performatives: in both the expression of disgust lyrically and its enactment gesturally by MCs in live concerts. My proposal to explore a *poetics of disgust* in rap in Beirut is similar but distinct from Sara Ahmed’s work on what she calls the *performativity of disgust.* 45 Like hers, my concern is what happens when disgust is articulated. Differing from Ahmed’s model, however, I propose to consider the lyrical work of disgust together with its sounding in public. Expressions of disgust

45 Ahmed centers her discussion of politics and disgust around the statement “That’s disgusting!” taking in particular responses to the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001 as an example of these political performatives. (Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* [New York: Routledge, 2004], 82-101.)
separate subjects and ideas from the affects they typically carry, allowing for a parsing out of nostalgia and romanticism.

Secondly, I suggest that effect of the sound of disgust – when it is voiced out loud – is not exactly the formation of community Ahmed writes about. Yes, a community of listeners is required and also formed by expressions of disgust. But these expressions encourage the articulation of disgust in return. *Spitting back* is neither necessarily indicative of community formation and neither does it automatically reinforce the disgust initially articulated. Rather, spitting back as another articulation of disgust furthers the process of deconstruction: it is just as likely to undermine or to deconstruct the first
speaker as it is to further the initial disgust that speaker articulated. This radiation of invention, distancing, and critique in expressions of and listening to disgust is the politics in progress I explore in this chapter.

Like the performance of resignation in some rap lyrics in Amman (see Chapter Four), expressing disgust in Beirut navigates material and affective realities and points to politics in progress. My attention in this chapter does not suggest that all rappers or all Beirutis only voice and articulate disgust, or that they do so in a constant or consistent register. Nonetheless, the political feeling of disgust I work to locate and describe is palpable both in the way rap lyrics in Beirut function and in the way MCs engage concert audiences during live events. In the pages that follow, I work to explain how this disgust works.

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The rapport between gentrification of certain neighborhoods of cities in the Levant and rap that I explore in this dissertation was first encouraged by rap I heard in Beirut, where the city is itself is a frequent enough subject of rap tracks to count for a considerable minority in the genre. More than in Ramallah and in Amman, Beirut is often personified as an important figure in the political and social configuration of the worlds rappers describe. Beirut emerges as both traitor and confidante, hope and despair, culture and barbarity, love and hate, modernity and heritage, cosmopolitan and artless. The growth of and sociality in its streets is something rappers consistently take as a subject. This oscillation is obvious in the track “Borkan Beiruti” [Beirut’s Volcano], a line from which is excerpted as the epigraph to this chapter (“This is no capital of culture, it’s a
wrestling ring.”). El Rass’s lyrics paint a picture of Beirut as ready to explode, in part as a result of the tension of holding together all of its contradictions (similar to Osloob’s “schizophrenia,” above). The last line of the song is “al-diʿareh wa waraqah el tout/ bi-medinet beirut ‘alm” [literally: “prostitution and the fig leaf, in the city of Beirut, is a science.”]⁴⁶ That is, the navigations between impropriety and modesty in Beirut take time and perfecting: they are a science. These navigations may be personal, social, or political.

In this section, I have sought to outline some of the considerations that rappers and the audiences navigate in Beirut. In the next section I consider rapped articulations of disgust – where the subject is Beirut and otherwise – to flesh out further how rap actively negotiates Beirut, pointing to politics in progress.

Part Two: Spitting Disgust

Revolt-ing

In the wake of the Arab Uprisings, Jeddah-based radio host Hass Dennaoui (alias Big Hass) started a hip-hop radio blog (now also print magazine magazine) called Re-volt.⁴⁷ His initial posts were enthusiastic about the “revolting” youth of the MENA region and the connection of urban culture, hip hop, graffiti, break dancing, and other forms of

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creative expression, to the political changes sweeping the region.\textsuperscript{48} Reading these pieces in 2011 and 2012, I found myself frequently jarred by the use of the word “revolting.” While Hass used it to mean “rebellious,” “revolutionary,” and “rebelling,” all I saw was “disgusting.” I begin this section by clarifying how I intend to build an understanding of expressions of disgust and politics in some rap in Beirut.

In her book \textit{Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain}, Imogen Tyler teases apart the symbolic synonym I tripped on reading Big Hass’s blog. Her subject is the productive tension between political discourses of disgust and new mobilizations of protest in the UK.\textsuperscript{49} Tyler lays out two intersecting interpretations of “revolting” from which I want to distance myself here. She suggests that there is productive intersectionality between groups cast out as “disgusting” – fearsome, pitiful, or otherwise abject (“bogus” asylum seekers, gypsies, the Irish Travellers, the homeless, and others) – and new protest movements rising up against the state (including Occupy Wall Street-type occupations, anti-war mobilization, and anti-eviction work). In constructing her argument, Tyler leans on understandings of political disgust similar to Sara Ahmed’s, pointed to above, when disgust is used by conservative politicians and social commentators to cast out the “national abject”: the intruder, infiltrator, threat, and stain on the body politic.\textsuperscript{50}

The first distinction to be made is that the disgust I locate in rap in Beirut is not a part of this kind of political narrative, the “abject politics” Tyler writes about, even

\textsuperscript{48} His enthusiasm for politics has since become more subdued. Personal correspondence with Big Hass, October 2015.


\textsuperscript{50} Tyler, \textit{Revolting Subjects}, 9.
though the affective frameworks of fear, anxiety, and othering that Ahmed and Tyler locate in the UK, Australia, and the US are not alien to Lebanese politics. The Palestinian, the Syrian, the Southerner, and the Bekaa, all embody a narrow space between victim, object of sympathy, and intruder, burden, and threat. The articulated disgust I locate in this chapter for the most part works in the other direction. That is, the disgust I identify as politically productive in rap in Beirut is often directed at the failures of the state, of capital, and of the hypocrisy and failure of “the Left,” “cosmopolitan” society, and the hypocrisy of various groups. Sometimes this disgust is articulated by those who have been conjured as victim-threats. It is not, however, the disgust of social “pollution and contamination” – to use Mary Douglas’s phrase – that conservative commentators invoke. That is, the disgust I am tracing here is not the disgust that Tyler and Ahmed identify as political when they speak of “abject politics.”

Second, neither is the rap I am interested in Beirut the rap of protest or revolt. And here it is actually worth drawing attention to the very recent overlap of protest with rap in Beirut, a connection that has in the past year been made more explicit than it has been in any city in the Levant at any time in the history of rap in the region. During the “You Stink” protests that rocked the city in August 2015, rappers El Rass and Naserdayn al Touffar pushed an explicit relationship between rap and protest. The song “Nihna w a zibl jeeran” [“We have Shit for Neighbors”] was written during the protests, channeled anger directly at the current government, its corruption, and even more specifically Solidere by name (“ma fi reehah bi solidere, ma fi zbaleh bi solidere, hiyeh a-zbaleh solidere” [There’s no smell in Solidere, there’s no garbage in Solidere, Solidere is the

The track reflected both rappers’ participation in the protests. The video for the piece opens with protest footage featuring crowds chanting and ends with protesters clearly deliberating how to protect each other from advancing police. Lyrically, the piece opens with an incitement to protest, with the lines

They strangled you, starved you, estranged you, rise up!
They spit on you, beat you, imprisoned you, rise up!
They trapped you, put a price on you, tied you up, rise up!53

This kind of incitement to protest is related to lyrics in other Naserdayn/El Rass collaborations, as in their refrain, “revolution is in the street, not on the screen” in their track “Anba’ Hammeh” [Important news].54 In August, 2015, pieces by the two rappers were regularly referenced by observers to the political developments.55 Further still, songs by the duo were actually used during street protests. Their 2013 collaboration in


particular, “Beirut Khaybena” [Beirut, Our Disappointment], discussed in more detail below, seemed to prove its resonance with listeners in the street in late August. Footage online captures a crowd of protesters reciting Naserdayn’s verse in its entirety in the company of the rapping duo.56 (I will return to this shortly.) Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan had not yet seen this kind of explicit connection between rap and protest.57

While rappers and audiences testified to DAM and the Ramallah Underground’s lyrical work being important political engagement with the Second Intifada (Dakn told me: “every line was like what we wanted to hear,” see Chapter Three), none had this explicit connection to the act of protest. Even in nearby Egypt, where rap grew considerably with the energy of the January 25th, 2011 uprising against then President Hosni Mubarak, there was not, to my knowledge, a use of rap lyrics during protests (as there was with the lyrics of the singer Ramy Essam, for example).58

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57 In the summer of 2015, footage of rap in protests in Basra in Iraq also surfaced online. There are key differences between the two videos of protest in rap in each city. I explore further the use of rap, its aesthetics, and class make up even in protests in the Lebanese case below. The Iraqi context is largely outside of my scope in this study. I do want to note however, that the rappers in this video in Basra are clearly using the context of the protest to stage their music video. None of the crowd with them – which is a mixed aged group of men – from boys to older gentlemen – is familiar with the track. The two rappers are constantly pointing their neighbors’ attention towards the camera during shooting, none of whom sing along. Musically, the piece plays like a protest anthem and the predominant lyricist is wrapped in a kuffiyeh throughout the track. The piece ends with the rappers and the crowd chanting the popular protest chant, bil roh, bil dam, nafdeek ya Iraq [With our souls and with our blood we will sacrifice for you, oh Iraq]. The Lebanese iteration has none of these qualities in terms of staging, musicality, or integration with protest chants, as I explore below. “Aghniya rab maʿ al mutazahireen (ana ʿaraq min intoum)” [Rap song with the protesters (I am Iraq, Who are you?)], YouTube video, 4:28, posted by “Fahed al-Basra,” August 16, 2015, accessed March 12, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3KcdSlu0vr4&ab_channel=FahedalBasra.

58 As was most obvious in his piece “Irhal,” [Leave] which earned him massive popularity as well as torture at the hands of the Egyptian authorities. For the song “Irhal,” see “Ramy Essam – Irhal [leave],” YouTube video, 1:41, posted by “Ramy Essam,” May 6, 2011, accessed March 12, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QrNIF4gLkvo&ab_channel=RamyEssam; on Essam’s detainment and torture, see: Steve Inskeep, “Ramy Essam: The Singer of the Egyptian Revolution,” NPR Music, March 15,
Rap concerts also became explicitly politicized in late summer 2015 in Beirut. At the end of their concert at Metro al-Madina in Hamra on August 7, 2015, El Rass took the mic and delivered an impassioned diatribe to the gathered audience, urging them to join him in the streets the following day for a scheduled protest. The speech was uncharacteristically romantic, bordering on revolutionary melodrama (particularly surprising for an artist who usually casts himself as intellectual outsider), asking his audience to remember those who have less of a voice (declaring at one point, “If Lebanon isn’t for all of us, it’s for none of us!”) and culminated with audience and rapper repeating “revolution is in the street, not on the screen.”

The rapprochement between rap in Beirut and political protests in late 2015 are an important part of the history of rap in Beirut and in the region. They are important because of the engagement in both explicit politics and specific political strategy. However, much of the affective tension held in the pieces mentioned here, and especially the concert in Metro on August 7, are not representative of the poetics of disgust I am interested in unraveling in this chapter. Rather, the performative disgust I am interested in locating and analyzing emerges at a remove from the adrenaline-laden, no-time-for-strategy, you’re-with-us-or-you’re-against-us attitude the push to the street in August 2015 demonstrated. I am concerned with expressions and gestures of disgust that allow speakers to navigate between options and realities, all of which are unfavorable, when there does not seem to be an alternative. The rap that contributed to (but to be fair, should


neither be reduced to) the #YouStink movement, was part of affective political production that quickly – and despite my continued support, unfortunately in my opinion – closed down options for debating strategy and politics that were not in some way manifest in the spectacular representation of bodies in the street. I have been at pains throughout this dissertation to suggest that “revolution in the streets” is not the only worthwhile political deliberation or engagement at play in the cities I study here (or indeed, anywhere). Yet so much of the discourse of protesters, especially in rap written and sung and played around it, emphasized this representation of politics at the expense of other considerations. In many ways, the affective narrating by dominant voices among the #YouStink protesters closed off politics in progress, insisting on a specific incarnation of political action “in the streets” – similar perhaps to what Bilal el-Amine decried as the “ultra revolutionary” stance of protests in 2011-12.

So I start this conversation about disgust and politics in Beirut with this distance. Others will no doubt take up the affect and enthusiasm of August 2015 – which provides ample evidence of “rap as resistance.” There are interesting politics here – especially of how this rap and these protests ultimately fizzled, morphed, and retreated from the positions and enthusiasm with which they started. But they will not be my concern here. I turn my attention instead to those pieces and concerts where the expression of disgust is not revolting but performs political deliberation. In these cases, expressions of disgust function to release or distance the speaker from the held tension of bad options in the political impasse in Beirut. These articulations of exhaustion by, frustration with, and rejections of omnipresent debility and fatigue express disgust while acknowledging loss
Figure 5.7: “Big up to all the Freedom Seekers.” Ashekman, a "street art crew" and "urban design studio" specializing in urban street wear as well as Arabic "calligraffiti" art projects and logo design posting on Facebook on September 17, 2015. In this post they identify a protester wearing one of their t-shirts, which reads “hurriyyeh” [freedom] in Arabic calligraphy. Ashekman is a two-man crew made up of identical twins Omar and Mohammed Kabbani. See: http://ashekman.com/studio/en/about-the-artists/ (accessed March 12, 2016). Their post reads, “Big up to all freedom seekers, justice strivers, rightful protesters and to that brave dude (whom we don’t know) wearing #ASHKEMAN Freedom Tshirt in the middle of yesterday’s protests! Photo by AP/Bilal Hussein #spotted in #DailyStar #Beirut #thestreetisours.” I include this as another example of the momentary alignment between Beirut’s hip hop and “street art” scene and the August #YouStink protests.

and longing. This is another example of the emotional blending ethnomusicologist A.J. Racy attributed to tarab and which I suggest powerfully “fills the head” in some rap in Beirut. To do so, I propose what the specific performative I am looking at – spitting – looks and sounds like. Spitting is both lyrical and gestural. I explore specific examples of the former here, and of the latter in the last section of the chapter.
In his book *Trials of Arab Modernity: Literary Affects and the New Political*, Tarek El-Ariss analyzes Ahmad Faris al-Shidyak’s *Kashf al-Mukhabba* *‘an Funun Urubba* [*Revealing the Hidden in European Civilization*], published in 1863. The latter work is a travelogue of the Lebanese writer-in-exile’s experiences in England and France over a nine-year period. El-Ariss focuses in part on descriptions of what he calls al-Shidyak’s “aversion to civilization.” El-Ariss suggests that al-Shidyak’s descriptions of revulsion to English food, city living, and rural poverty invert the narratives of modernization and civilization English imperialism was at the time forcing on much of the planet. He suggests that in al-Shidyak’s writings, “the body of the Arab traveler is staged as a site of ingestion and expulsion, incorporation and rejection of European food and ideological models.” In making his argument, El-Ariss rejects a psychoanalytic reading of the retching, fainting, and queasiness al-Shidyak describes in his experiences in England. El-Ariss, referring to Julia Kristeva’s work on abjection, suggests that al-Shidyak’s “visceral reaction to rotten meat and disgusting food could not be reduced to a collapse in the ego.” Instead, he suggests that the “*shameless*” omnipresence of decay in the conditions al-Shidyak describes “is never really repressed.” That is, disgust in al-

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61 Ibid., 53-87.

62 Ibid., 55.

63 Ibid., 75.

64 Ibid., 76, original emphasis.
Shidyaq’s work cannot be read as a Kristevan “collapse” of the self, because the thing with “perverse erotic fascination” is in pure view – indeed, it is everywhere. The object of disgust in al-Shidyaq’s case is instead “rather constitutive of that which is seen and experienced.”

My own context is quite different, but El-Ariss’s contextualization of al-Shidyaq’s aversion within a context of disgust that is “constitutive” of what the author lives is crucial to the way I also understand disgust to operate. El-Ariiss’s teasing out of Kristeva is crucial here in separating how my political account of disgust differs from that of both Imogen Tyler and Sara Ahmed, both of whom rely in significant part on Kristeva. Kristeva proposes that abjection is a tension of both erotic desire and “primal” revulsion. The abject “fascinates desire” while producing revulsion. Kristeva writes that the abject “simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject.” This tension “draws [the subject] towards the place where meaning collapses,” where the border between self and other is no longer perceptible. Tyler and Ahmed use this reading of ambivalence in the abject to theorize how racist political discourses operate. This is valuable in their contexts. It is less applicable in mine.

In my observation, the ambivalent desire that Kristeva talks about – Menninghaus calls it a “subconscious attraction” – is not really present in expressions of disgust in rap in Beirut. In this expression, like in El-Ariiss’s reading of al-Shidyaq, the abject is

\[\text{\footnotesize 65 Ibid.}\]


\[\text{\footnotesize 67 Ibid., 2.}\]

constitutive, not repressed. In Beirut, articulated disgust with the political system or
disgusted elaborations of a number of its very real problems (which, for me here,
constitute the abject) does not imply that these speakers of disgust are somehow drawn
back, despite of themselves, to the scene of corruption, crime, abuse. The specificity of
how I suggest disgust can also work politically – not to describe the marginalized intruder
as Ahmed and Tyler do, but to frame systemic problems of corruption, inefficiency, and
oppression as expressed by those who experience them – hinges on recognizing that the
ambivalence in abjection that Kristeva describes is not at work here. As El-Ariss
recognized, there is no hope of “return” to the scene of the abject – the decaying corpse,
the rotting meat, and so on – because, in fact, there is no exit from this stage of decay and
rot. The “constitutiveness of decay” that El-Ariss located in al-Shidyaq’s “aversion to
civilization” also frames the spitting I suggest rappers and their fans occasionally engage
in when they express their disgust in Beirut.

Conversations with my interlocutors in Beirut make this omnipresence of the
abject clear while connecting this reality to a specific understanding of what constitutes
“the political” in this context. For example, when I asked Mazen El Sayed, the rapper
who goes by the stage name El Rass [The Head], about “politics” in his work, he rattled
off a list of things he has addressed in his lyrics, including: women’s rights, religious
hypocrisy, masculinity, the interference of the Gulf states, and the selling-off of the
Syrian Revolution. Then he asked me,

Is this political? I don’t know. For me it’s not. It’s my everyday vecu
[lived experience], my life. I don’t know if our lives here are too
politicized. But again I don’t know what that means. We have this
exploded reality [here, in the Arab world] where everything is mixed. If I
talk about the policeman taking fifty thousand [LL] in his pocket to let someone get into the front of line, to me this is not political: it’s what I confront everyday. Lucky for the French that don’t have to live that, but for me it’s still the case.  

Here, Sayed notes that the political problems he discusses – and which I note below in more than a few instances are expressed with disgust – are so omnipresent that they are themselves the fabric of his “everyday vecu.” In Sayed’s formulation, the “political” – is inseparable from an “exploded reality” where “everything is mixed.” Disgusting realities then are not fascinating in their morose appeal (“lucky for the French that don’t have to live them”): they are suffocating in their seeming permanence (“for me it’s still the case”). Expressed disgust in this context is as much suffocation as it is revulsion, as much exhaustion as it is disavowal. Raps that channel this exhaustion or frustration as articulated disgust do not so much signal abjection as a “collapse of the ego” as they are political performatives that enact the taking in of breath through, not away from, the contamination of the pollutant. The “stickiness” of this disgust has less to do with a simultaneous desire for the object of disgust as it does an impossible desire to actually be rid of it. Indeed, one’s inability to rid oneself of the disgusting mess is a big part of why it disgusts, thereby driving the lyrical and gestured tfeh! – of spitting. Spitting on the disgusting thing defiles it further. But when one spits –not on a beggar or the racialized Other – but on social filth, systemic corruption, and institutionalized theft, it is not clear

69 Approximately 1,500 Lebanese lira are equivalent to 1 US$.

70 Interview with the author, January 14, 2014. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent quotations from El Rass are taken from this interview, which was largely conducted in English. French and Arabic words only appeared sporadically.

71 “Stickiness” I take from Sara Ahmed. (Ahmed, Cultural Politics of Emotion, 91.)
how much distance one actually gets from it when one does so. Especially since, there is nowhere to go to be rid of it anyway.

In any language, rappers, (like good actors) literally spit to enunciate. My argument here is that spitting in rap also conducts specific symbolic and affective energy. Rappers spit their verses in the cipha, or improvised performance “battle,” and onto recordings. To read “spitting” affectively recognizes that lyrical work deconstructs rappers’ realities: flung into the cipha, these produce certain affects, which once flung, are no longer in the rapper’s control. Spitting starts a political process, or furthers one. In turn, spitting back may happen gesturally in live performance – when rappers spit directly to specific audiences in particular concert spaces. It may also happen individually, in a more introverted manner. This is the capacity of spitting to “fill the head.”

I am interested in the articulation of disgust – what the spitting in rap in Beirut – does. Ahmed suggests, “to say something is disgusting is… to ‘make something.’”72 What does disgust make? Are all declarations of disgust alike? Are there different registers to spitting? How do these affective textures differ? My navigation in this section of “dissing,” “disavowal,” and “spitting back” – all different strategies of articulating disgust – shows how spitting points to politics in progress.

_Dissing and disavowal_

The past few years in particular have seen a fracturing of Beirut’s rap scene into cliques of socialization and collaboration. This has been manifest lyrically as well as

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72 Ahmed, _Cultural Politics_, 94.
socially; rappers have engaged their lyrical energy in so-called “diss tracks” while reflecting their allegiances in patterns of collaboration. As I explore here, “diss tracks” are composed with either one specific person or a general mode of being in mind. The composition of diss tracks is of course not unique to Beirut or to Arabic rap, but the development of the sub-genre over the past few years in Beirut is considerable, contributing to an increasingly ugly series of falling-outs. It exploded recently in a most public split between arguably two of the scene’s heaviest hitters – former collaborators El Rass and El Far3i in February of 2016 (I return to this in the dissertation’s conclusion).73 Diss tracks in Beirut have evolved from more positive renderings of “working on oneself” as in Fareeq al-Atrash’s “Njoom ʿam tiʿrab” [“The Stars are Getting Closer”] (discussed below) to live improvised street battles, like that between Edd Abass and Dizaster in 2014 in Gemmayzeh,74 to virulent expressions of distaste with fellow rappers (like the two tracks referred to above, but also Edd Abbas’s “Shou hal mashkleh” directed at Nasrdayn al-Touffar in early 2015).75 Diss tracks channel sometimes hyperbolic disgust with “the competition,” asserting that one is not bothered while expressing disgust with the interference the competitor poses to the speaker’s “mood.” Consider Abbas’s verse in “The Stars Approach”:


I’ll stay in this mood
Didn’t I tell you? The stars are getting closer
I’ll stay in this mood until I touch these stars
Even if I have to launch an attack on all the stars
I’ll make the Earth rotate around my finger, I told you

[…]

Every time he opens his mouth he spews them out
He lives in terror and all he does is curse
I wouldn’t throw him in my garbage, just so you know
I’ve irritated thousands and never been irritated in my life

Here, the “I’ve irritated thousands and never been irritated” expresses disgust by taking

the high road. The burn is there even while the tone is positive.

A similar mode of distancing oneself from “the competition” can be seen in a

mode of political commentary bemoaning others’ lack of action or apathy. Edd Abbas

again gives us several examples of this kind of work, as in the very popular collaboration

with Ramallah-based rapper and producer Sheʿrab (see Chapter Three), “El Rad el Salb”

[“Negative Response”]. 76 Consider his verse in that track:

    Sitting between two screens
    Witnessing two disasters
    The first is in Brazil from all the goals that hit the net
    The second is in Palestine, so painful that it shows
    How meaningless the World Cup is compared
    To the death of a people in a battle for their land
    Maybe you don’t see my meaning
    This isn’t juxtaposition
    This one’s for those who stand in the ranks of the resistance
    This one’s so you don’t forget when you’re watching football
    That there’s a massacre happening next door Arab rulers are standing idly by,
    crushing up painkillers
    Aren’t concerned with anything besides which mall you’re going to have iftar
    It’s so real It constricts the heart, it’s not a game

76 At time of writing, the track boasted 191 thousand views, far and away more than most of the tracks I
discuss in this study. “El Rad El Salb with She’rap (Prod Edd),” Sound Cloud audio recording, 4:43, posted
As for the lot of you, the only discomfort you feel is heartburn
The only thing you’re good for is grazing like goats
Your fellow Arabs are dying and it’s as if the matter doesn’t concern you
I’d imagine we’d find your conscience in a toilet bowl somewhere
Otherwise, you would have expelled the Israeli ambassador from your country
The least you can do is take a stand You don’t have to be there on the ground
Indeed, you can raise your voice against it
Even if you’re not under the bombardment
You can lend your support with a song
You can lend your support with a photo
You can lend support with the truth when you’re told a false rumor
We’re going through difficult times
So your silence is not welcome
We are in need of awareness and ancillary assistance
They’ve been so cruel to you, Gaza And there’s barely anyone that feels for you
The Lord has reserved the greatest plots of land for you in paradise.

Here, Abbas evolves the one-on-one diss of a fellow rapper to expressions of
disapproval of his fellow citizens (“your silence is not welcome”). He expresses visceral
disgust for their inaction (“As for the lot of you, the only discomfort you feel is
heartburn/ The only thing you’re good for is grazing like goats/ Your fellow Arabs are
dying and it’s as if the matter doesn’t concern you/ I’d imagine we’d find your
conscience in a toilet bowl somewhere”). The affective distance between the speaker and
the object of speech is pronounced and the vituperative spitting is sharp. Importantly, the
“diss” of the listener is a disavowal of their passive political stance. “The least you can do
is take a stand” - “You can lend your support with a song” implies at least the speaker is
doing something. Here, it shares characteristics with the diss track, which emphasize the
speaker’s superiority compared to everyone else.

Admittedly the lyrical work this track offers a political negotiation– of supporting
Gaza from afar – that is palatable to a wide Arab audience. But disgust works as

77 This is Edd Abbas’s verse, the lyrics are translated by the artist and available at “El Rad El Salb with
She’rap (Prod Edd),” Sound Cloud audio recording.
disavowal in other, more complicated ways as well. Of the more compelling expressions of disgust are those that expel romanticism or idealism. In these, nostalgia and romanticism are also spit from the body of the rapper as if illusions contaminate or poison the speaker. In the work of the rap duo Touffar, Katibeh 5, El Rass, and others, we can see the disgust for certain kinds of politicized romanticism as a rejection of what Lauren Berlant calls a “desire for the political.” In this sense, the disgust for and articulated disavowal of certain kinds of nostalgia and romanticism is a conscious rejection of “cruel optimism.”

A younger generation of Beirutis in particular increasingly identify the misfires of narratives of pan-Arabism, Beiruti cosmopolitanism (the oasis of “the good life” in a region plagued by conservative religiosity and authoritarianism), and reject or refuse the optimism these images conjure, identifying them as “cruel” but also as false, disappointing, ineffective, pathetic. Despite all the damning evidence of the death of pan-Arabism, for example, its complete and total prostitution by the league of Arab states, it is still regularly held up and spoken to as an ideal. The Arab Uprisings of 2011-2013 were especially cataclysmic in how they reignited these hopes. Disgust, without trying to be “resistance,” productively disavows affects of hope, nostalgia, and romanticism. This is similar to the refusal of sabr, sumud, and mouqawameh I identified in the context of the second wave of Palestinian rap.

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78 Berlant writes, “It may be a relation of cruel optimism, when, despite an awareness that the normative political sphere appears as a shrunken, broke, or distant place of activity among elites, members of the body politics return periodically to its recommitment ceremonies and scenes.” (Lauren Berlant, Cruel Optimism [Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2011], 227.)

Much rap about the city of Beirut fits into the model of disgust I am building here and refuses the romance with the city. “Beirut Khaybetna” [“Beirut Disappointed Us”] is a good example of the emotional blending of longing and disgust. The piece is a collaboration lyrically between Naserdayn al-Touffar and El Rass, with music and production by Wattar, of the Syrian group Latlatleh. Naserdayn’s verse opens the piece, the beginning of which berates the “left” of Beirut:

This is talk of [the Right of] Return, it goes best with mazzeh,
Jaffa won’t be liberated unless the sushi is fresh
And the free, leftist revolutionary
Won’t bring up “the issue” unless there is Alamaza and young women
You like Najji el-Ali so much?
The cartoon Handala turned his back [to look] at tits
The hammer and sickle became an umbrella and the white dove of secularism
But by the order of the religious authorities and history, the color red, blood, and the DshK80 turned pink from the ground meat of UNESCO
Tell me how did the Left become democratic? Money came from Europe to keep its voice down
Brother, return the Left from those who stole it – that guy sweating from his forehead, about to break his glass of arak.81

Nasserdayn here berates a particular kind of Beirut sociality, likely situated in the pubs and restaurants of Hamra street where self-proclaimed leftists engage in political discussion over traditional plates of Lebanese food (mazzeh). Here, with Lebanese beer (Almaza) and in the company of sabaya (young women – the open sociality with Lebanese women being another romanticized Lebanese stereotype), these “leftist revolutionaries” discuss the Right of Return to and liberation of Palestine. But Naserdayn calls out this posturing and cosmopolitanism as invested in only a sense of Arabness

80 The DshK is a Soviet-era heavy machine gun.
(mazzeh and *arak* – an anise-flavored alcoholic drink), which is invoked to flirt or worse, to womanize (Handala’s back is turned because he is distracted by women’s breasts).

Naserdayn continues to spit on the failures of the Left ("the hammer and the sickle became the white dove"), announcing that revolutionary red (communism), spilt blood, and engaged struggle has been diluted ("turned pink") by the waste ("ground meat") of the UN. His call, “Brother, return the Left from those who stole it!” is both an indictment pronounced with disgust at the failures of the Left and what it has become, and a statement riven with longing, wishing for the mobilized return of something worth believing in.

The situation of this critique of the Left within a song entitled “Beirut Disappointed Us” makes its statement about the selling out of a political idea ("How did the Left become “democratic”") also a criticism of social posturing particular to Beirut. In his verse, Naserdayn clearly expresses disgust with talk and no action but also the posturing of Beiruti liberals (and their consumption) as they masquerade as vestiges of the Left. His verse is an example of recent rap energy in Beirut that is pronouncedly Leftist – that is, that specifically invokes the heroes and strategies of the Arab Left in the twentieth century.82 Musically, the whole track is underscored by a single ‘oud. The trills on the stringed instrument counter the disgust of the lyrical spitting with the pronounced expression of loss and longing. As the three musicians declare their attachments to cities and places outside of Beirut, the “disappointment” in the track’s title, its chorus, and the

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82 It is undeniable this lyrical work is developing, but it is hardly representative of the entire scene. Raed Ghoneim’s work, quoted in the epigraph to this chapter, is another example. Naserdayn explains his reference to the fighter Georges Abdallah (imprisoned in France at time of writing), here: “Naserdayn al-Touffar – w tha qee qaseer li Muhammed al-Jadee,” YouTube video, 8:43, posted by “Naserdayn al touffar,” August 20, 2015, accessed March 22, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Nzx0fcLZys&ab_channel=Naserdaynaltouffar.
disgust in the lyrics stages a disavowal of the romance with Beirut as home of “the good life,” with “revolutionary leftists” as the vanguard of politics, and with romanticism of both of these things together – of Beirut as home to any worthwhile left-leaning socialization.83

This disappointment and disgust with Beirut’s sociality (left-leaning or otherwise) is widespread. The sentiments Naserdayn expresses are echoed by my interlocutors throughout this chapter – as in Osloob’s diagnosis of “schizophrenia,” and El Rass’s lyrics in the track “Beirut’s Volcano.” It appears in the track “Ya bahar khudni maʾk,” [“Oh Sea, Take Me With You”], as well. (I return to this track below.) In “Beirut Khaybetna,” the speakers are keen to emphasize that their perspectives come from outside of Beirut. The three collaborators echo where they are from – Damascus, Tripoli, the Bekaa – in the interpellations between verses and in the chorus. These expressions of disgust with Beirut are most often voiced most forcefully from these “voices from outside.” I now want to examine more carefully how these deliberately “not” cosmopolitan voices are consciously cast “from outside” Beirut, and how this effects the texture of expressions of disgust.

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83 Moreover, it is particularly important that this is the verse cameras captured a coterie of protesters singing in the streets in August 2015, in the company of Naserdayn and El Rass. I want to suggest that tracing this political process – from recorded rap to recorded protest – is vital. A video circulated on social media captured the singing of this verse in the street and shows maybe half a dozen young men and at least one woman reciting the verse by heart. Their denouncement of the death of the Left while protesting stages a particularly excited reclaiming of politics. At the same time, I think it a stretch to suggest the video enacts the realization of a specific project pointed to in the rap and then realized in the street. Instead, what I suggest is happening here is that the denouncement of the death of the Left itself became romanticized and fetishized. The protesters caught up in the adrenaline of protest transformed the political navigation staged in expressions of disgust in the recorded piece into the banner itself. Their excitement to repeat the verse even seemed at odds with one of the rappers himself, El Rass’s facial expressions show how he is both trying to keep up with the crowd and trying to navigate the affective and political paradox in which he found himself. (See: “Fi al-yom a-thaleth” [On the third day], YouTube video, 1:49, posted by “Mak Man,” August 24, 2015, accessed March 12, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gy45jFnNM5o&ab_channel=MakMan.)
Spitting back

As I mentioned above, theorists have explored how disgust is mobilized in conservative political discourse narrating the fear of foreign or poor threats to the body politic. In the US, Australia, and Western Europe, especially the UK, Sara Ahmed and Imgoen Tyler have examined how especially cross-cultural encounters navigate disgust and abjection, in the conjuring of what Tyler calls “social abjection.” Similar casting-out of the body politic has happened in Lebanon. The Palestinian, recently Syrian, and Iraqi refugee and immigrant populations have long been set apart as the national abject—pathetic subjects deserving pity, but also those cordoned off in camps to avoid contamination of the “true” Lebanese body politic. Understanding that these racist and economic discourses have also figured in Lebanese politics helps to unpack how some rap refuses dominant political narratives. Here, I want to recognize the affective spitting that responds to conservative narratives of disgust. The ways in which refusals of racism are articulated spit back at images built for “the Palestinian” and the “camp dweller” in important ways.

In the track “Hadini iza feek” [“Hold me back if you can”] by the Palestinian group Katibeh 5, disgust boils over. The refrain speaks not only to “holding back” but to calming—hadini literally means, “calm me down.” This reference to being calmed, being told to calm down, or to lower one’s voice echoes repeatedly in rap in Beirut. For

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84 Tyler, Revolting Subjects, 19-47.

example, Raed Ghoneim, in the track excerpted in the epigraph to this chapter (the song “Istafrigh”), raps “biqouloli wati sotak, shi hadan minhon yisma‘ak/ bideesh, ishba‘i” [“they tell me lower your voice, or else one of them will hear you/ I don’t want to, I’ve had my fill of that”]. In the opening verse of “Ma‘rktee” [“My struggles”], a track with a very different sound but similar expressions of disgust, El Rass raps,

Strangled, I cried a lot inside so much that my chest became a sea
And the lock to it has been stolen
It’s possible the skyline is burned up
It’s possible for ones’ chest to become a trunk
And its lock in the eyes
Stop telling me to calm down

So Katibeh 5’s track “Hadini iza feek” plays with narratives of explosive discomfort and reactions to expressions of that distate that appear repeatedly in Lebanese rap. But the track also pushes these refusals of politeness further.

Not simply refusing to be calmed, the MCs dare the listener to do the calming if they are able. In this way, the track reinvents the image of the Palestinian in Lebanon: not as pathetic victim, but as powerful aggressor. What we have in this track then is disgust with disgust. By expressing disdain for and distancing themselves from the abject image of the dispossessed Palestinian common in Lebanese society, Katibeh 5 spit back at a Lebanese audience. This allows for recognition of the idea with which the Palestinian is framed in Lebanon. It also rejects this idea. In so doing, it casts the “abject” in a position of knowledge, access and power. Consider when the group raps:


Great!
As long as you are taking my point of view seriously
You’re allowed to be taken aback and to show your irritation
Just like you show your irritation at my presence
Because I am a friend to all the images that are not desirable
This is how we live out these images and no one chooses their life specifically
I’ll tell you
The pressure of bullets and gunpowder does not allow you to move away
Experience will guide you on the road
Hold me back if you can.\textsuperscript{88}

When they say, “As long as you are taking my point of view seriously/ You’re allowed to be taken aback and to show your irritation,” Katibeh 5 acknowledge the (Lebanese) audience listening, anticipating their surprise and irritation. At the same time, they dictate the terms of that reception, both “allowing” their surprise, while framing it with derision (the sarcastic “‘aal!” “great!” that opens the verse). The disgust throughout – first as derision, then as power (“I am the friend to all images that are not desirable” – casting the speaker as accepting hosts [in contradistinction to the Lebanese]), and finally as frustration (“hold me back if you can”) is palpable.

The track reflects of course the perception of the Palestinian in Lebanese society.
As Osloob explained to me when he recounted the experience of performing as part of the Fête de la Musique in Monot in the early 2000s:

I mean we knew these were not our audiences. The Lebanese are used to seeing the sad, poor Palestinian. We didn’t fit that image. The Palestinian that is a little violent: this image bothers lots of people. Not everyone is able to stand this idea. I think like sixty or seventy percent of Lebanese can’t stand to see a Palestinian in this image.

\textit{Even people coming to your concerts?}

Of course. Even Touffar, even Gaafar’s audience and fans. Even this audience is not always willing to see a Palestinian in a strong position. The

\textsuperscript{88} For Arabic lyrics and English translation by Rima Najdi and Faysal Bibi, see “Exploring Popular Literature,” 74-81; the track itself is on the \textit{A-Tareeq Wahad Marsoum [One Way Decree]} album available on ReverbNation, accessed May 29, 2016, \url{https://www.reverbnation.com/katibe5/playlist/-4}. 
Lebanese audience needs to see the Palestinian as a victim. It’s a stereotype, of course.

Katibeh 5’s track “Hadini iza feek” is one particularly strong example of how the group worked to counter these images of Palestinians in Lebanon. Much more recently, Gaafar of the duo Touffar released a track one might call “on behalf of” Palestinians in Lebanon that doubles down on the disgust and frustration Katibeh 5 point to. Especially notable in Gaafar’s track “Ya bahar khudni ma‘k” [“Oh sea, take me with you”], produced by Osloob, is the explicit pronouncement of disgust – explicitly expressed as hatred – that the Palestinian speaker articulates. The first half of the track is Gaafar’s rap. The lyrics of the second half of the piece with its chorus, reads like this:

He has the weakest faith, he who hates something called Lebanon
I have the weakest faith; I hate that thing called Lebanon

Oh Sea, take me with you
Oh wave, take me away
Hope is cut off here
A hellish life

Hello? They told me that Hassan left for Sweden: there, Palestinians meet amongst themselves
Our country is narrow;
The European is expansive, he speaks Hebrew
And he works in an NGO, spends his money, as Leftists do, in Hamra
In the camp, time is less narrow
People are wider, chest-width between the wires
So what held back those who stayed?
Hassan left for Sweden he didn’t take you with him
Because you are not handsome nor European! Hassan met David
And David is beautiful and blond
David saw Hassan the informer

89 Full Arabic lyrics in Appendix E. Note how the rap reproduced there echoes Naserdayn’s lyrics quoted above about left-y cosmopolitanism in Beirut.

90 From here on, the lyrics are articulated in Modern Standard Arabic and spoken by the Palestinian-Iraqi poet Abd al-Rahman Jassem.
And Hassan drew for him a bridge in David’s name: happy Hassan
Hassan boarded his flight with no tears in his eyes
Because in Lebanon, there was nothing to see him off but pain
He left one message on the phones of his friends:
The Palestinian doesn’t love Lebanon, he hates Lebanon, and he hates the
Lebanese
They want us, instead of a bundiqliyyah, to paint over our words of
Palestine, without work⁹¹
without identity
and as an insult to refugees
[…]
My brothers! You are without tomorrow here
Follow me to Sweden! The Palestinian does not love Lebanon
He hates Lebanon and the Lebanese
The Palestinian does not love Lebanon
He hates Lebanon and the Lebanese

At the door to the camp, the guard dog stops me
He craves my meat, my dreams, my knowledge
The cedar is fuel for the fires of hell, I say
And the length and breadth of this country, its people and its land, are
damned

At the door to the camp, the guard dog
and the politician
and the organizations of slavery
stop me from entering Palestine

In some ways, “Ya bahar khudni ma‘k” presents an affective paradox. The lyrics
are so sharp and they are voiced with so much acerbity that, lyrically and affectively it
seems unlike so many of the tracks I have discussed in the study: the meaning in the
lyrics is so pronouncedly straight forward, there is little room to interpret ambivalence or
blending in their meaning. However, precisely like so many of the pieces I have
discussed, the musical arrangement of the piece offers an “emotional blending” that is
almost stunning. Jaafar sings a mawwal as the refrain, which he repeats under Abd al-
Rahman Jassem’s poetry. A single, electric cello underscores the whole piece. The

⁹¹ The bundiqliyyah is a term of endearment for a rifle.
musical elements of “Ya bahar khudni ma’k” round out the cold, sharp lyrics and are remarkably full of longing, of pain, and of loss. It is the juxtaposition of this loss and longing with the pronounced sting in the fast dialogue of the lyrical section that makes the piece a spectacular example of tarab, political feeling, and the affect of disgust I have been discussing in this dissertation and in this chapter. Even though the last line “Prevents me from entering Palestine” is potentially a little predictable, the preceding poetry about the dog at the door of the camp, and especially the virulence with which “the Palestinian hates Lebanon and the Lebanese” is articulated are especially powerful pronouncements of political feeling.

In this piece, there is also a rejection of the optimism in the narrative of leaving Lebanon for somewhere else. The experiences of the Palestinian Hassan, who leaves Lebanon behind for Sweden, are articulated with pronounced disdain (importantly, by rappers who remain in Lebanon). Likewise, the embrace of Sweden is bitterly sarcastic, reflected in the tone of Jassem’s voice as well as the hypocritical interactions Hassan is narrated to have with the “blond” David. The combination obviously resonated with listeners. At time of writing, the track had nearly forty-two thousand views on Sound Cloud, Gaafar’s second-most-listened-to track.

*   *   *

In Chapter Four, based on my fieldwork in Amman, I suggested that one prominent political feeling that is conducted particularly well in rap in that city is resignation. My attention there was to how lyrical expressions that narrated political
deliberations culminating in resignation functioned performatively. I asked what did admitting resignation do? as a way of understanding politics in progress in Amman. Instead of a simple acquiescence to monarchy and state power, I suggested understanding performances of resignation as a navigation of the latter alongside social and cultural considerations in a city that is especially aware of regional demographic and financial flows towards it. My proposal in this chapter has been to consider that different affective textures in expressions of disgust work in a similar way. That is, my attention to what expressions of disgust do is to testify to active negotiations of political, social, cultural, and identitarian concerns. Lyrical expressions of disgust point us to politics in progress. In the next section, I round out these claims by considering how disgust is reflected in audience behavior.

Part Three: Disgust and Ecstasy

As in the previous two chapters on rap in Ramallah and Amman, in this third and final section of this chapter on Beirut, I will consider questions of access and audience behavior to round out the claims I have been making about political feeling. In this section, I consider the particular qualities of tarab related to listening to expressions of disgust. My argument is that listening to disgust is able to amplify the emergence of tarab in Beirut especially when it is accompanied by particular audience formations. I focus in this section on concerts where audiences have followed an MC or series of them from outside the most cosmopolitan avenues of the capital city in order to attend a concert. I suggest that this configuration of audience attendance in concert venues stages
particularly vibrant exchanges and is occasionally able to produce ecstatic responses. The emergence of tarab in these situations reflects both the disgust expressed gesturally as well as lyrically by the performer in live performance. In addition, it also reflects the felt neoliberal incursions shaping the contours of access that impinge on audiences and venues on their way to and during the event. I argue that these gestural embodiments of disgust by MCs and their fans further the spitting back I located in some rap lyrics. Thick description from two concerts in particular illustrates how this operates: one concert of Katibeh 5 at Masrah Beirut in ʿAin el Mreisseh in 2004 and one of Gaafar al-Touffar with Osloob at Metro al-Madina in 2013. I begin, however, with a contextualization of the demographic reach of hip hop in Beirut as expressed by key rappers and producers.

“Leaving the street”

In both Ramallah and Amman, rappers and producers were quick to admit that rap in those cities was not shaʿabi – it had not reached widespread popularity and was not commonly heard in more populist contexts. At the same time, in those cities, my interlocutors testified that the reach of rap had extended more deeply into well-educated, globally-oriented and ajaneb [foreigner]-heavy contexts than the poor neighborhoods or conservative socialities of many of either of those city’s less cosmopolitan neighborhoods. In Beirut, the presence in the scene of the groups Katibeh 5 and Touffar in particular – both of which hail from and initially performed in very different but equally shaʿabi contexts – have succeeded in adding a different dimension to demographic considerations of rap in Beirut.
The rap collective Katibeh 5 was made up of five emcees who were, until 2013, based in Bourj el Barajneh Refugee Camp in the southern suburbs of Beirut. The camp is inhabited mostly by Palestinians who fled Zionist forces in 1948 and 1967, their children and grandchildren, and also by poor Lebanese and refugees from neighboring countries. The situation for second and third generation Palestinians in Lebanon, especially those living in refugee camps, is difficult. The majority of Palestinian refugees do not have the papers to work, to vote, or to travel, despite being born themselves in Lebanon. Neither does the Palestinian Authority (nor Israel, obviously) recognize them and provide them with travel documents. In 2013, Katibeh 5 was invited to perform at the Liverpool Arab Arts Festival. Four of five MCs of Katibeh 5 went to Liverpool and performed. While there, they applied for and received asylum. They have been in the UK ever since. At time of writing, the fifth Katibeh 5 MC, Osloob, lives in France.

The rap duo Touffar was made up of two rappers from Hermel, in the Bekaa. Naserdayn and Gaafar both grew up and worked in Hermel, where the latter still lives (in 2013 he was working as a painter). Naserdayn at time of writing lives in Beirut. The duo split up around 2010. Hermel is a small town in the North Eastern Bekaa Valley that has recently been a flashpoint in the Syrian civil war. As a “stronghold” of Hizbullah, it has been targeted by suicide bombings and other attacks aimed at affecting the Lebanese public’s tolerance of Hizbullah’s involvement in the Syria. At the same time, it is part of a historically neglected region. Education and services are poor. Often the only
opportunities for young men are joining Hizbullah or the Lebanese army. Both are “choices” that can have serious repercussions.92

Both Katibeh 5 and Touffar (as a group and individually) have built and boast very strong connections with the audiences in the neighborhoods where they live and work. They all performed first for their own communities, becoming popular with neighbors, before being invited onto the more cosmopolitan stages of Beirut. Musically, Gaafar’s work most pronouncedly reflects the context he writes from. Most of his tracks feature him singing a mawwal as the loop, opening, or chorus (as in the track “Ya Bahar Khudni Ma’k,” discussed in the previous section). This musical difference in the work has prompted others to note: “They are rapping, but it’s not really hip hop.”93 That is, some of this musical work is quite different sonically – as such, it is easier for listeners not inculcated with hip hop sounds to accept and embrace. Moreover, as Katibeh 5 and Touffar grew as performing musicians, they began performing outside of the camps (in the former’s case) and outside of the Bekaa, in Beirut (in the latter’s). When they did, they took their audiences with them. I will return to this question momentarily.

Over the course of this study, when I asked rappers if and how rap has changed in the region over the past ten years, most agreed that it has changed and most asserted that rap and hip hop audiences have grown: that hip hop culture is less exclusive and that they as rappers encounter less resistance or skepticism. Osloob of Katibeh 5 shared similar

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93 Interview with the author, September 2, 2013. All subsequent quotations from Edd Abbas are taken from this interview, which was largely conducted in English.
reflections about the acceptability of rap in Bourj el Barajneh. But he also offered this
reflection on changes in the scene as a whole:

Rap developed a lot the past ten years. Rappers stopped using simple [taḥfa] rhymes – like makan, zaman, hanan, hunan what everybody can think up. Now there is serious playing with words. This is a development in the brains of the rappers. But something else is happening. Hip hop is leaving the street. It’s becoming more “white color” [maktab] and “cultured” [musaqaf]. These lines like: iḥaab muhajaran ka il-qurunfūl w inta as-seif w al-qamar.94 What? What are you talking about? Someone in the street can’t understand this. Not all rappers are able to get their voices to the street, to shaʿabi society or shaʿabi neighborhoods. So when they can’t do this, they take it elsewhere. A neighborhood like Hamra, the people in it are more ready to accept hip hop than other quarters in the city. And there’s a lot of rappers who are not interested in this experience, in the trial [of getting the street to accept hip hop]. It’s hard, and sometimes it tears you up inside. But it’s worth going through with it. Because this is what hip hop is. It’s a lifestyle. If it’s just words not tied to the ground, it doesn’t mean anything. Neither the words nor the beats have meaning if you are really not present on the ground. If regular people aren’t feeling you [maʿam bihisou feek].

In these comments, Osloob ties an essence of hip hop with being able to “feel with regular people.” Importantly, these comments also reverse more of the more regular commentary I heard about Arabic hip hop’s widening appeal. He does this by specifically underlining the dilemma of “uneven” globalization or cosmopolitanism (“people are more ready to accept hip hop in Hamra than in other quarters of the city”). This is exactly the paradox about the relationship between cosmopolitan opportunity for the presentation of hip hop live in the Arab world and its ability to reach audiences. That is, Osloob’s comments here make vivid the emptiness of narratives of the Arab rapper as representative of the “Arab street” (see Chapter One) when he has to select concert venues that are removed from it. Osloob illustrates the hypocrisy of framing rap sung in

94 Here, Osloob is spouting some nonsense poetry, but in in fusha, the classical Arabic. The idea is that formal, flowery lines, regardless of how beautiful they are, don’t connect with ordinary people or their lived experience.
gentrifying neighborhoods as speaking to “popular” struggle by emphasizing those concerts are specifically staged not in the Arab neighborhoods where they would encounter resistance from inhabitants less open or accepting of hip hop sounds and experimentation.

His comments about language are important also. His mocking of the lyrical experimentation in more recent rap (the work of El Rass, whose lyrics are particularly poetic, comes to mind) – and the distance this implies from the “street.” One might discern there is something anti-intellectual in his remarks, but I think in the context of his comments, Osloob is more interestingly disavowing a romance with Arabic language as necessarily a unifying force among Arab populations – especially perhaps when gaps in access, education, and exposure are not considered. Usually, discourse about Arabic language and comprehensibility favors the more classical Arabic over the local dialect as universally-understood Arabic language (see discussion of the Tunisian musician Mounir Troudi in Amman, Chapter Four). This is an almost taken for granted element of Arabic language: that its most classical form – that enshrined in the Quran – is able to unite Arabs across geography, across tribe, across sectarian difference, and so on. When instead Osloob suggests that the more “classical” Arabic expression is incomprehensible to the Arab street, he is insisting on a class reading of Arab society (that remains divided by economics and, in the case of Palestinians in Lebanon, access to national services including education). Importantly, Osloob’s comments deconstruct romance and enthusiasm about the direction of recent growth of Arabic rap and its access to audiences. His comments help to unpack the significance of audience access to concerts and patterns and behavior of audiences moving through the city to follow specific MCs.
“Visiting Paris”

In a somewhat different register from Oslobb, in our interviews, both Edd Abbas (of the group Fareeq el Atrash) and Mazen El Sayed (El Rass) spoke with pride about the heterogeneity of their audiences and the growth of the scene. El Rass told me:

I think we should take advantage of every line we can have to every kind of people we can access. I don’t believe in this big “other” as in, “I want to sing for ‘the people.’” Who are ‘the people?’ Everyone is the people. I don’t necessarily want to perform for rich kids all the time, but rich kids are people too, they have minds, you know? And I think it’s not necessarily linked. Obviously the hip places want to get acts to perform in their venue. When they see an act being successful, they draw them in. This creates a circle of people that, for example, look like each other and belong to the same thing that is linked to this artist in some way or another. I cannot say that my listeners are from one social group, at all. It’s very obvious in my gigs. Even the shows I do in hip places, there are people there who never come to these venues. Who only come to watch our gigs. People who sometimes come from remote regions in the countryside, who come from Tripoli, normal people, students, people who don’t really go out at night – they come. And that’s what’s really cool. It’s not like they are concerts for rap aficionados and hip hop heads. It’s not. There are people in these concerts that I can assure you don’t listen to rap. And besides the few names of Arabic rap that they’ve discovered and are attached to, they don’t listen to any rap outside of this.

El Rass’s testimony, quite different from Oslobb’s answer to the same question, underscores the positives that a concert in a cosmopolitan venue can provide. The rapper from Tripoli is keen to emphasize that not all his listeners are hipsters, that in fact he has a mixed following from different walks of life. My own participant observation confirms this. More specifically, Abbas credited the increasing heterogeneity in the scene with the work of the rapping duo Touffar and to some extent Katibeh 5. He acknowledged that the different, not typically hip hop sounds these groups have incorporated into their work brought different audiences into the scene. He told me “This is a huge step because nor
me nor Mazen [El Sayed] would have been able to bring these people. This crowd is not going to dig the more experimental stuff.”

The intersection of different audiences in cosmopolitan venues is what I want to focus on in the remaining pages of the chapter. I establish how this mixing diverges from much ordinary use of cosmopolitan space before exploring how disgust works in the context of this relationship between audiences and MCs.

In 2010, Katibeh 5 released their second album, *Al Tareeq Wahad Marsoum [One Way Decree]*. The release party was held at Masrah Beirut [Beirut Theatre] in the ‘Ain el-Mreisseh neighborhood. Katibeh 5 had been together since 2000, and as mentioned above, has a large following in the refugee camps. For many years, they held their *haflat* [concerts] in the camps themselves, playing directly for the audiences to whom their lyrics spoke. This was not without its difficulties, as overcoming local conservatism against a type of cultural production perceived to be “Western” was not always obvious. However, the release party for the second album, like an increasing number of their *haflat*, was held in ras Beirut at the then prominent Masrah Beirut. For these performances, *el shabab* [the guys], as they’re often referred to/refer to themselves, coordinated a carpool of sorts in order to facilitate their audiences getting to the venue.

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95 El Rass’s “more experimental” work is arguably his collaborations with the electronic musician Munma. But in my observation, El Rass has a particularly mixed crowd of listeners. He told me in our interview that “A considerable percentage of the people who listen to me have Islamist tendencies.” He credits this feature of his demographic to his more formal use of language. I noticed especially in his concert as part of the Al Balad Festival in Amman that his audience diverged from the typically cosmopolitan gathering of that festival.

96 For more on dynamics of this neighborhood and political struggles to maintain working class livelihood in the face of privatization of the water front, see Sawalha, “‘Ayn el-Mreisse: The Global Market and the Apartment Unit,” in *Reconstructing Beirut*.

97 The theatre closed in 2012, due to financial difficulties, after much protest and fanfare.
Without this coordination, the venue would be less accessible, if not inaccessible, for their young fans residing in the camps.\footnote{Movement for young residents of the camps, Palestinian or otherwise, is difficult due to the almost total dearth of public transport in Beirut. The vast majority of these teenagers do not own their own vehicles.}

As crowds gathered outside the theatre, waiting for entry and for the concert to begin, tension grew between youths from the camps who had come for the concert and the owner of a nearby store. It was not long before the Lebanese army, which maintains a presence in the neighborhood (as they do throughout different parts of ras Beirut) arrived on the scene. The scuffle, which amounted to some pushing and yelling, and did not come to blows or bloodletting, pitted the Palestinian youths against the local residents, historically affiliated with the political group Amal, who had rallied behind the shop keeper.\footnote{The animosity between these groups dates back to the so-called ‘War of the Camps’ (1985-1987) during the civil war See Julie Peteet, \textit{Landscape of Hope and Despair}, 151-155. On the class dynamics of the ‘Ain el-Mreiseh neighbourhood and the role of Amal within them see Sawalha, \textit{Reconstructing Beirut}.} As the army descended on the theatre, the artists and the crew succeeded in intervening to hurry the majority of the audience into the theatre and to convince the local residents and the army that the concert should carry on. The concert then began and concluded smoothly.

The tension recounted by participants and witnesses points to specific historical and ongoing material conflicts, which generally inform the lyrics of the raps Katibeh 5 deliver, but which they do not specifically address. (Katibeh 5’s lyrics were more concerned with the contemporary conditions of life in the camps, the hypocrisy of NGO work, and with corruption, rather than with historical or ongoing disagreements and collaborations between specific political parties or religious sects.) The historical confrontation between affiliates of the Shi’a group, Amal, and the Palestinian refugees of
Lebanon – especially those in the refugee camps where the massacres of Palestinians by Amal and Phalangist forces took place in the mid 1980s – is not something Katibeh 5’s lyrics specifically address. The concern in their lyrics is for the general status of the second and third-generation refugee in Lebanon and the webs of corruption and repression that make for such dim prospects for so many Palestinian youth in Lebanon. The group’s work is received by many as refreshing, especially those who also reside in the camps, and who recognize themselves in the group’s lyrics. The artists themselves speak of producing music that speaks to, and resonates with, their audiences.

Indeed, an anecdote about audiences seeing themselves in Katibeh 5 helps illustrate the value audiences put in seeing what they perceive to be representatives of their experience on stage. During our interview, Osloob told me about concerts Katibeh 5 did all over Lebanon: in the refugee camps of Tyre, Tripoli, and other cities. He recounts that often in these concerts, audiences assumed Katibeh 5 were residents of their camp. He recalls:

Like when we went and did a concert in Tyre, the audience thought we were from the Rashidiyeh camp. And not a one of us is from Tyre! This happened more than once. When we went to Tripoli, to the Baddaweh camp, they told us, why didn’t you talk about this and that that’s going on. And we were like, really guys, honest, we’re not living here! We don’t know about this and that.

Considering the context of the concerts outside the camps like the one in Ain el Mreisseh I am discussing here, it is easy to extrapolate the symbolism for young fans watching in the heart of Ras Beirut.

The arrival and performance of Katibeh 5 in the established and distinguished venue of Masrah Beirut can be read as a progress narrative, pointing to the group’s success and to the growth of the Beiruti art scene more generally. Indeed, welcoming
Katibeh 5’s perspective from the camps into the more cosmopolitan center of Beirut was and remains a progressive venture. One can read the performance at the established and venerated venue of Masrah Beirut as a validation of Katibe 5’s testimony of the lived experiences in some in Beirut’s marginalized ghettos. But the affective dynamics outside the theatre also illustrate that such a presentation of events is perhaps too simple. Even if the theatre’s curators and programmers sought to celebrate and welcome the work of these artists from the camps, at the same time expanding the “resistance” perceived in their work and a cultural capital of solidarity, the working class neighborhood of ʿAin el Mreisseh, where the theatre was located, and the disenfranchised youth who came to attend it, carried in their bodies the residue of the material realities which they live (see Chapter One).

Aseel Sawalha has discussed how the neoliberal real estate development of the Hariri-backed real estate company Solidere has exercised tremendous pressure on the working-class neighborhood of ʿAin el Mreisseh. The neighborhood, traditionally dependent on fishing, is now increasingly closed off from access to the Mediterranean. Residents of ʿAin el Mreisseh find themselves wedged between the quickly gentrifying neighborhood of Hamra around the American University of Beirut and the ground zero of Solidere’s transformation of post-war Beirut in the downtown area. As such, they are living their own struggle against the cosmopolitan pressures that estrange them from their own neighborhood. At the same time, the stakes for the Palestinian youth, who rarely have the opportunity to travel to, or move around in, this part of the city, are also high. As the Technical Director of Masrah Beirut Ahmed Hafez, who witnessed and helped

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100 Sawalha, *Reconstructing Beirut*. 
coordinate the concert above told me with only a little embellishment, the kids coming from the camps may just as soon have been “visiting Paris.”¹⁰¹ This is a recognition of what Doreen Massey called a recognition of “the fact of spacing” (see Chapter Two).¹⁰² That is, considering the space and distance between audiences gives texture to the politics conducted in encounters on their way to and outside of the venue. Further, it helps frame how to understand dynamics unfolding in the live event, as I now explore in one final concert. Observation at a final concert in Beirut will round out my discussion here.

“People here are rude”

At around 10pm there are maybe forty-five people in the Metro al-Madinah theatre, some seated, some standing. In and outside the theatre, Hamra is very quiet. […] Gaafar bursts from behind the red curtain and straight off the stage. He seems embarrassed or uncomfortable. He moves quickly and sporadically, rapping almost to himself […] Osloob stands on stage with a mixer and a laptop. He suggests multiple times, in different tones, some commanding, some more jocular, that Gaafar slow down or repeat a verse, so that people can understand the words. Gaafar refuses […] Indeed, many audience members already know the new tracks by heart. Despite being treated with ostensible derision by the performer they are eager to sing along with him. Gaafar frequently turns his back on the DJ and the audience. He tosses the microphone away dismissively when the sound accidentally cuts out of it and screams his verses into the void of the half-filled house without a mic. The audience shouts their approval. When he has finished his set he leaves the stage quickly. He seems tired, irritated, fed up. There is no encore.

Outside, after the concert, in front of the theatre, a young woman who attended the performance asks to stand next to me until her ride arrives. It’s not safe at night, she explains. “People here [in Hamra] are rude,” she says and explains matter-of-factly they’ll make fun of her for wearing a

¹⁰¹ Interview with the author, January 23rd, 2014. Translation from the Arabic is my own.

veil. I ask her what she thought of the performance and she bubbles over with enthusiasm. She has raps of her own she has shared with Gaafar.\footnote{Author’s field notes, August 27, 2013.}

During the concert in Hamra, Gaafar’s pieces, like much of Touffar’s work generally, addressed a range of class-based grievances lyrically, incriminating “polite” Lebanese society. On top of these lyrics, Gaafar performed physical gestures of “distaste” that performatively generated temporary community during the performance. This enactment of distaste created temporary ties between audiences and performer – not based on education, class, or literacy, as Bourdieu’s formulation of “taste” prescribes, but affectively.\footnote{Pierre Bourdieu, \textit{Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste}, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 1984).} The performer from Hermel almost seemed to be resisting the audience itself, if not the very fact that he was performing. He turned his back on them, denied requests from them, complained loudly about sound or light onstage, etc. Moreover, this hostility, it seemed to be understood, was not directed at audience members or sound technicians, but was ostensibly part of the politics of the performance itself. When Gaafar performatively relied on enacting a feeling of distaste, he pronounced a specific politics that may be interpreted in his lyrics, but which are not always a part of the aesthetics of the venue, nor the hip part of Hamra where the venue was located. This was part of the performance that his audience came to see and they responded with measured enthusiasm to the disgust he spit (lyrically) and the distaste he embodied (gesturally, physically).

The audience gathered in Metro that night were largely fans of the performer, a considerable number of them his family, extended kin, and others from Hermel who had explicitly come to hear him, despite the tense and unpleasant political malaise that had
settled upon the area of ras Beirut that night. When Gaafar performed disgust, when he appeared irritated, fed up, disappointed, or otherwise unimpressed with his surroundings, he was specifically connecting with this audience, who may also have been skeptical of the hipster-esque dynamics of the (literally) underground theatre in which he was performing. In the transmission and reception of this feeling of objection, audience and performer embodied a raised middle finger that accompanied the lyrical one, which denounced how cosmopolitan and upper middle-class Beirut actively others the Bekaa. The vociferous approval that received Gaafar’s gestures of distaste completed this affective exchange. In this sense, it is important to note that the affective exchange was distinguished from the lyrical one, it did not merely reflect the meaning of the words that Gaafar shouted. Lyric and gesture together magnified the performance of disgust and furthered the impact of either element in isolation.

Distaste and irritation were also evident in the stance of the young fan outside the theatre. As she lingered next to me, a stranger, until her ride arrived, she objected to the notion that its bustling cosmopolitan vibe might be inclusive or festive, trying instead to protect herself against it. Her initial mode of reaching out to me was a gesture of distaste or distrust. This gesture built on and the distaste Gaafar embodied in the theatre. Her expression of distrust helped her navigate the foreign space that was Hamra street.

* * *

In this section, I have traced articulations of disgust in rap lyrics to gestures of distaste in rap concerts via a contextualization of concert access and audience
demographics in Beirut. In the previous section, I suggested that spitting disgust in rap lyrics stages politics in process where speakers deconstruct material and affective realities. This process, once started by an act of spitting can encourage others to spit back, furthering a political deconstruction, outside of the control of the initial speaker. In tracing how concerts in the cosmopolitan center of Beirut attract audiences from its “periphery,” I have explored class and other exclusionary dynamics that structure cosmopolitan concert opportunities, building on my expose of neoliberal incursions in Beirut in the first section of this chapter. At the same time, interlocutors’ testimony about mixed audiences encouraged me to look more carefully at the mixing of audiences that happens despite the city’s uneven growth and its deliberate. I have thus noted different ways in which audiences also spit back: via their simple presence, via their exchanges with MCs, and via their refusals of the cosmopolitan vibes of the gentrifying hearts of the city.

**Conclusion**

Time spent in Beirut both while conducting fieldwork over the past five years and with family over the past ten years has led me to notice varying degrees and different registers of disgust in this city. While the city’s denizens’ navigations of the abject was made particularly obvious in the summer of 2015’s garbage crisis, frustration, exhaustion, suffocation and different degrees of fed-up-ness have characterized political discourse and affect in Beirut for years. In this chapter, I have attempted to locate some of the specifics of this expression and behavior in one genre of cultural production – in Beiruti
rap – in order to demonstrate how these expressions of disgust may be understood as politics in progress. Very often, expressions of disgust are responded to with disgust – no small amount of political debates with family and friends also stage this kind of deconstruction of logic, options, and possibility. This formulation of performative disgust – distaste that is meant to be heard – presents a different way to read politics in this affect, diverging from psychoanalytic readings of the collapse of the subject in its confrontation with the borders of the abject. It is also, I hope, another way to point to politics in progress in this corner of the Levant.
Conclusion

*Politics, Positions, Presence*

In 2011, I imagined that this project would be rooted in and reverberate around the affective transformation of revolution: in the breaking of fear barriers, the crumbling of apathy, and a (re)turn of the political that the events of that year would herald. In 2016, it is clear that the majority of the research, writing, and listening I ended up doing instead waded through the anxiety, despair, and despondency of counter-revolution and the helplessness of both spectacular racism and spectacular violence. Five years ago, I shifted gears to position myself as a scholar who could participate in what seemed to be the inevitably new Arab politics that were emerging. In 2016, almost ten years to the week after lying awake listening to Israeli bombs shelling Beirut, I – like so many others – again admit that more caution than enthusiasm colors the search for logic and possibility.

But if in 2011 I proposed a study of the “processes of feeling politics,” it was because even during the heady excitement of the fall of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, it was clear that the political transformations in motion were far from the neat articulations of established political positions and the replacement of one political program or ideology with another. I remember, working on a piece Alex Ortiz and I edited about the protest signs in the Egyptian revolution, struggling with the caption of a photograph of a large banner that had been draped in Tahrir Square. The banner listed “our demands,” and they were seven in number. I remember thinking it fantastically odd that there could be a specific number of demands; and the number seven kept jumping out at me like a harbinger of failure. Some months later, in a jail cell in East New York
Following Occupy Wall Street protests, I leaned up against the bars to ask the other twenty or so women in the block, also from the protest, what they wanted or why they were there. As soon as the words of the question left my mouth they felt empty. I agreed with the requests others voiced, but they felt out of joint. Was campaign finance reform really what had compelled each of us – individually and collectively – in a specific moment to step into traffic on the Brooklyn Bridge under October rain?

If struggling to understand the incredible affective entanglements that pushed many of us onto the streets of various cities in 2011 and 2012 helped me conceive of a framework like feeling politics, struggling to accept and work through the flipside of those feelings following crack down and failure has made me hold onto it. I had initially conceived feeling politics would be a framework through which the ethnographer could lead the reader to apparent but misinterpreted politics driving recent events and expressed in cultural production. Instead, political feeling has become the framework through which I have tried to richly illustrate the present (and perhaps the immediate past) as a testament to the flows of affect that framed everyday political deliberations and negotiations. If I have refused to correlate the music and performance I documented in each case study to specific politics and outcomes, it is because, like my interlocutors, I cannot pretend to know what is coming. But also because such connections did not seem to me to exist. Even in the case of the explicitly more leftist lyrics of some rappers in Beirut (discussed in Chapter Five), the production of political feeling that I suggested was so compelling was for the most part not explicitly connected to specific political projects. Political feeling very much became about processes of engaging with cities, audiences, and artists, not explanations, solutions, or strategies.
I want to bring this study to a close with a final meditation on the question of political feeling in the immediate context of political events during the writing of this dissertation. There are considerations of subjectivism that I acknowledge below while addressing more recent criticism of “feelings” in political expression and debate. Considering the engagement with intersectionality and solidarity in these critiques, I also weave in reflections of solidarity as offered by some of my interlocutors. Here, I am keen to explore some of the very real political divisions that have emerged in rap in the Levant since the Uprisings. These political arguments – hashed out between rappers, between fans, and between both are relevant negotiations of political concerns. I have so far not addressed the shape of this particular position-staking in my identification of specific political feelings and textures of tarab in the case studies above. Moreover, like the politics in process I have lingered on, the claiming of political positions in some rap work also roundly refutes simple frameworks of “resistance” in Arabic rap. This discussion brings me to a final consideration of the ways in which social media and virtual networks are central in the dissemination of this music. I close this study with a more developed acknowledgement of the role of technology in allowing and permitting particular enactments of solidarity and helping to conduct specific political feeling.

Politics

Despite their ready corroboration of the presence of tarab in rap concerts, political invention in rap lyrics, and political processes of listening in both, my conversations with interlocutors often snagged on the connection I was working out during my field work.
between politics and feeling in rap concerts. Consider this exchange with the Syrian rapper Bu Kolthoum, in Amman:

*I’m hearing you say that there is a difference between feeling and politics?*

Of course, 100%.

*But this statement “I feel you” - it’s a political idea as well, no?*

Maybe, it could be. But look, that’s why people go study Political Science. Feeling can’t be studied. It can’t be produced [la yumantiq]. It can’t be industrialized [la yousalsal].

Bu Kolthoum’s separation here of “feelings” and “politics,” in particular his assertion that “feeling cannot be studied” reflects in part a Cartesian division between logic and feeling. But more importantly, I think, it reflects the distance the rapper perceives between the work he does (the “feeling with” listeners) and the “politics” of politicians, ministers, and other official representatives. This conceptualization was shared by others. Many of my interlocutors – especially venue owners – testified to a “social” not “political” impact or effect of their work. This reflects a difference in the understandings and use of the word “political,” one which the rapper El Rass elaborated on at length (quoted in Chapter Five), when he wondered if the issues he addressed in his lyrical work were “political” or if they weren’t just part of his everyday life. These testimonies speak to a refusal to “politicize,” by drawing into parties, camps, and ideology, the *politics in process* in some cultural production. The issue here is to me not a misrecognition of politics; it is a protecting of options and expression by refusing to partake in established political discourses. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, these figurations of

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1 Interview with the author, March 31, 2015. Translation from the Arabic is my own.

2 Interviews with the owners of Beit Anesseh and La Wain in Ramallah; Café Younes (Amin Younes), Tah Marbouta (Bilal el Amine), Radio Beirut (Jihad) in Beirut; and Al-Balad Theatre (Raed Asfour) in Amman.
politics are necessary revisions of the framework of the “political” so frequently projected on Arab subjects in cultural studies (see Introduction).

As one foray into the debate over alternatives, I have argued that looking for “resistance” limits an understanding of what politics may be in progress in some Arabic rap. In “Chapter One: Locating Politics,” I suggested that looking for spectacular behavior that signals the arrival of agency (a protest, a strike, a tattoo, a ballad, a specific response to a ballad) promises to continue to ignore the agency of individuals and the deliberated politics of agents who do not act out. I suggested the pinning of a theoretical framework on the emergence of resistance fails to testify to the texture of deliberations that sustain political life in between and during the more spectacular displays of political engagement. Against this framework, I set out to build an alternative. In “Chapter Two: Feeling Politics,” I suggested that political feeling – held in tension in rap concerts and expressed by MCs lyrically and performatically – point to political processes of deliberation, negotiation, and refusal. I suggested that paying attention to these processes by considering how these feelings are built at the intersections of specific material spaces invites an analysis of ambivalence, wavering, failure, and invention. I have favored this method of feeling politics over the search for the more spectacular instances of dissent, unity, and “hype” that easily evoke “resistance.”

Over the course of the case studies that followed, my hope was to have testified to the importance of thick contextualization of live events like rap concerts in order to reflect on politics in live music – even music as dependent on lyrical invention as rap is. I hope also to have testified convincingly to the aural undercurrents that run against the spectacular politics of visibility and which continue to Orientalize and depoliticize Arab
cities and their denizens. In this way, these aural subcultural practices reflect fluid processes of interrogation and refusal. Without pretending to be harbingers of change or revolution, some Arabic rap nonetheless reflects important patterns of deconstructing and reconstructing politics and sociality. As Jacques Attali says in *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, “Our music foretells the future. Let us lend it an ear.”3 I have proposed that the ear, but also that *feeling* is an important barometer to decipher politics in process.

On the one hand considerations of feeling have been echoed in political psychology for some years.4 The relevance of emotions in voter behavior, for example, is a readily acknowledged, if still understudied, question in US Political Science. My research has been invested in and continues to be committed to the notion that how we feel about issues, behaviors, and each other determines our political positioning. But my study diverges from one of political psychology. I am not interested in how feelings can be harnessed for political projects, nor in how emotional responses can be measured or quantified. The ethnographic work in my case studies documents tension, elation, disgust, resignation – political feelings – without translating these into specific political strategies or outcomes. Indeed, part of my point has been that strategies are in formation, it is this processual reality that helps to generate the feeling I have documented.

On the other hand, recent critiques of progressive political discourse have come down hard on notions of “feeling” in politics: especially during a US presidential election year rife with spectacular racism. Backlash against mobilizing “feeling” in political

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critique, description, and documentation increasingly circulates among leftist commentators concerned with the affect surrounding contentious political issues, especially perhaps when intersectionality and solidarity politics are at stake. For example, Sarah Jaffe has suggested “feelings-as-politics” – where personal feelings block the ability to understand real violence – occlude the mechanisms of oppression in systemic racism. Similarly, Phoebe Maltz Bovy has explained how “feelings journalism” allows even political allies to repeat or duplicate racism and classism. In the latter, the author projects what others must be feeling without bothering to ask them. These critiques of the mobilization of feeling within left-leaning, anti-racist, feminist circles present important limits within which the model of feeling politics that I have proposed be understood or used. The presence of certain feelings I have testified to in this study are not substitutions for politics (as in Jaffe’s feelings as politics). I have not suggested locating resignation or disgust at the expense of deliberating the real exclusions, incursions, and threats that political realities pose to my interlocutors and their communities. Rather, these feelings point to how those politics are deliberated. It is worth noting that occasional and specific expressions of political positions appear within these affective negotiations as well. These articulations of political positions, as I will now argue with a


specific series of examples, draws out further the deliberation of political processes through expression of feeling.

*Positions*

Since the start of the Syrian uprising in particular (March 2011), the announcement of specific political positions has appeared in some Arabic rap. The split among Syrian rappers as some chose to support the regime against the uprising was perhaps just the first in a series of public staking of political positions that further how to understand politics in process in Arabic rap while definitively furthering the genre from categorical expressions of “resistance.” Eslaam Jawaad’s early support for Assad’s regime against the protests divided hip hop audiences in the Levant that were largely riding the enthusiasm of the so-called “Arab Spring.” The affective and political backlash against Jawaad – accusations of treachery went both ways – pinned the artist into a reactionary corner long before the Islamic State and other fundamentalist militias coopted the Syrian uprising and turned other artists, previously sympathetic, against the opposition.\(^8\) While the Syrian crisis has cast high stakes for the expression of solidarity, the politics in process on other issues have also led to the articulation of specific identities or positions.

In order to illustrate how the staking of positions is also a part of political processes, I want to consider here the very public falling out between two of the Levant’s heaviest hitters: El Far3i and El Rass in January of 2016. The growing exchange of “diss tracks” I referred to in Chapter Five exploded in a nuanced, though vitriolic debate about solidarity, selling out, and Arab identity. In the three tracks disseminated in the beginning of 2016, no political party or affiliation is asserted (contrary to the articulation of positions in Jawaad’s work in 2011), but very pronounced stances of authenticity, identity, and where one positions oneself were debated.

In the first, El Rass, the Tripoli-born MC now living in Beirut, raps under the title “Watwateh” or [“Being a Bat”]. He writes, in abstract terms, about the selling off of the *qadiyeh* [the issue]: the Palestinian cause.

> Who do you represent? To what do you assimilate?
> It happens. Who’s your audience? They love you.
> On what grounds? Who makes a distinction?
> You identify, you capture, you evade, you forget it, you count it among your achievements:
> That you were behind her at the time of citing

The track proceeds as a cryptic, but clear enough indictment of “giants” – people who make it big – and their distance from the Palestinian cause, asserting that “small people” are closer to the cause (“Glory to the dwarves, we are the issue”), and aligning himself with the latter. Disgust, though a gentler iteration of it, reflective of the metaphor of being “batlike,” affectively underscores the piece. The track opens with a series of alliterative questions (*meen bitmathel /’ameen bitmathel/ bithasel/ lameen bitwasel*) questioning an

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artist’s or perhaps an activist’s sense of audience, responsibility, and the effect of that orientation.

It is not the first time El Rass or the producer of the track, Boikutt, have entertained similar political questioning and commentary. Recall in Chapter Three, Ramallah Underground’s track “Khaleeni ‘Ayeesh” [“Let Me Live”] also interrogated the intersections of authenticity, distance, and political struggle. In that track, the lyrics centered around the hypocrisy of a diaspora that asked more resistance of Palestinians that lived in Palestine than those outside of it (the lines “You say you’re Palestinian but you’re afraid to come for a visit,” “You turn off the TV we’re still here,” and “You want Palestine? So do I. But I’m also a person,” come to mind). These questions of who can best defend whose interests are reflected in the subject of much subsequent rap, as explored throughout this study. Two tracks in particular – collaborations between El Rass and El Far3i, no less – also interrogated dilemmas of audience make up, representation, and audience reach. The piece “Fi el Jaleed” [“In the Frozen Land”] stages negotiations of identity, community, engagement, and political commitment as the two MCs travel to Sweden and Denmark on tour.¹⁰ The piece opens with El Rass describing interactions with a European border security agent and proceeds to lambast orientalist perceptions of the Arab rapper (“Don’t you dare think I came to sing for the Orientalists/ […] to play the role of wounded kitten, victim/ And to offer up an original copy of the map of Sykes-Picot”). But what makes that piece interesting is that it gives voice to a range of perspectives in Europe, specifically of the Arab diaspora. El Rass raps, “In Stockholm I

heard *ya ba* [a common interpellation] more than I heard ABBA,” continuing, “And when the Syrian girl thanked me with a single tear/ I saw the homeland as an immigrant/ I saw the revolution was still ongoing.” This lyrical work, in combination with the sounds of electronic musician Munma’s scoring produce an engaged interrogation of the positions and meaning of “Arab-ness,” all before the current spectacular misery of the Syrian refugee crisis (the track was released in 2014).

The verse of El Far3i – the Amman-born Palestinian-Jordanian recently relocated to London with the *mijwez* band 47 Soul –follows, and his verse in “Fi el Jaleed” stages similar negotiations. He begins by asserting, “Don’t think that the knowledge of the homeland is geographic,” pointing to a network of Syrian and Iraqi immigrants surviving in “the frozen land.” His verse points to the important diasporic communities that also make up Europe. He acknowledges the switches and weakness of language accompanying these demographic movements “It’s ok my Arabic is weak… but I still pronounce the *qaf*,” offering an expression of pride even in what is usually considered a weak identity position (not knowing the language). In their verses and their attention to the experiences of Arabs in Europe, both rappers are clearly conscious of complicating positions voiced on a previous collaboration, “E-stichrak” [“Orientalism”]. El Far3i references it specifically in his verse: “we were worried Jimmy would respond with a track called ‘Istighrab’ [‘Surprise’].”

“E-stichrak” constructs a character “Jimmy” (hanging over whose bed at home is a picture of Lawrence of Arabia), who arrives to the Arab world with an NGO job and in the name of making things better. He condescends, steals jobs, changes the economic and

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demographic landscape. (As I have discussed in each of the three case studies, the political concerns with the presence of NGOs and the accompanying humanitarian economy were a regular concern of my interlocutors.) El Far3i raps, “Political Science students coming from abroad change the demographic of Ramallah.” Jimmy, El Rass asserts, “doesn’t see the difference between himself and the Zionists who infiltrate our protests.” The whole piece is underscored sonically with the whistling sound of a rocket. “E-stichrak” is based in Amman, Beirut, and Ramallah and features perspectives from those localities about the attitudes of those coming from abroad, including those Arabs who “return.” “Fi el Jaleed” flips these positions. In the latter they point to questions of orientalism but from the position of Arabs in Europe.

This is to point to a healthy development of questions of “inside/outside,” diaspora and authenticity, and the politics attached to one’s geographic position and mobility between these two MCs and in the scene in general. As I have mentioned, in 2014, El Far3i relocated from Amman to London with the electro-mijwez group 47Soul. The group’s music is an electronic interpretation of “wedding music” musiqat el-a’ras, setting the mijwiz music of the dabkeh and other folk music of the Levant to hip dance beats. The group’s approach to and take on the music has proved appealing to Arabs in the diaspora, Arabs in the Arab world, and foreigners. They played to sold-out crowds in the UK and elsewhere throughout 2015.

The popularization of this traditional music and El Far3i’s relocation from Amman to London has not been without criticism, however. For example, while Omar Suleiman’s popularity among hipster-inclined audiences that took to his mijwez-techno has for the most part not been interpreted as selling out, the “boy band” enthusiasm of 47
Soul and the accompanying pop-like framing of the music has alienated El Far3i in particular from an audience that followed his solo lyrical rap work closely. The attitudes of the group’s members – their obvious eagerness about the interest the new sounds received, and their assertions about how their work re-invents while speaking for the fellahaen [peasantry] – has perhaps not really helped much. Their boyish enthusiasm about “making it” has been interpreted as condescending (if not plain absurd) by some of their colleagues and accusations of “selling out” have accompanied the group’s assertions about their own success.\textsuperscript{12} Here it is worth noting that the dynamic I observed in Amman and wrote about in Chapter Four – about rappers being eager to leave the city – confronted different expectations about the role of socially-engaged rap shared among various audiences in Ramallah and Beirut, but also in Jordan. That is, the orientation toward “making it” that is shared among many rappers in Amman, and that is reflected for them in opportunities to perform and make a living off of their music outside of the Middle East, ran up against the different expectations of others who, for a host of reasons, invest authenticity and political grounded-ness in proximity, in local engagement, and in addressing Arab audiences. Finally, the peak of 47 Soul’s summer successes coincided with the overtly protest-oriented rap in Beirut surrounding the garbage crisis (discussed in Chapter Five).

\textsuperscript{12} For example in our interview, the Amman-based rapper Synaptic (whose family, readers will recall, boasts famous Palestinian wedding singers) spoke at length about how he saw the 47 Soul project as a betrayal of local, traditional sounds and a selling out of these sounds to orientalist fantasies. In a comment on the discussion board of the collaboration track “E-stichrak” [“Orientalism”] on Sound Cloud Synaptic wrote without explanation, “47 Soul” in early 2016. El-Far3i responded “hmmm.” This is to point to the latter’s obvious awareness of how others have interpreted and received some of his new work. In our own interview, El Far3i spoke haltingly about his struggles to retain his former audiences, and his eagerness to prove to them he was still the musician they respected.
It is in this context that El Far3i responded to El Rass’s abstract musings in “Being a Bat” in January of the following year as a personal affront. El Far3i clearly interpreted the “giants” El Rass ridicules as himself. In response, he scoffs at the extra-engaged politics of his former collaborator’s alignment with the “little people” who are the real defenders of al-qadiyeh [Palestine]. His retort, entitled “Washwasheh” [Whisperings] plays alliteratively on El Rass’s title [Watwateh], and starts by spinning one of El Rass’s lines rapping, “Glory to the heroes.” He continues, rapping sarcastically: “Dear committed rapper that has been betrayed… where are you going?”

The track pokes fun at the seriousness with which El Rass and others in Beirut (which he calls cynically, “the city of rebellion”) couched themselves in the midst of the “You Stink” protests. “Wow, a café we want to build a fight with our dreams!” he mocks, drawing out the hypocrisy of progressive sociality others have also identified in Beirut (discussed in Chapter Five). Unlike those Lebanese rappers that also offered expressions of disgust with these forms of sociality, El Far3i invokes that hypocrisy not as reason for rebellion but reason why the protests were not able to really take off. Sonically, the vocals are not clear and El Far3i’s voice is low, as if he is whispering. But the barbs at El Rass are pointed accusations of intellectualism and elitism. As in the lines “bihabouha el moukh shou bihabouha el moukh, w el nokhbeh nokhbeh w li’nha aslee.” [“They love the brain, how they love the brain, and the elite remains elite because that is its origin.”] Here El Far3i plays on the word moukh, which means brain, but also marrow, aligning those who like intellectual matters with an elite vantage point on society.14 As discussed in

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14 Readers will recall El Rass means “the head.”
Chapter Five, this is similar to the critique Osloob leveled at rap that was “leaving the street” as it embraced more formal forms of Arabic poetry.

El Far3i’s critique of the intellectual politics coming out of Beirut are welcome, especially in the wake of a protest movement that by many accounts did stumble into the politics of middle class respectability and accompanying exclusiveness that have played out in other cities in the US and elsewhere.15 That is, his criticism of the self-inflatedness of some organizers and particularly the political mood accompanying the exclusivity of protests in Beirut are on point. But his personification of this problem in his former collaborator may have (at least at time of writing) backfired. When El Rass responded to El Far3i’s diss (it was impossible not to read it as a personal affront) he mobilized the wave of recent skepticism engendered by his work with 47 Soul. His response track, “Habout Idrari” [“Emergency Landing”] denies categorically that he had El Far3i in mind writing “Watwateh” and sprays a series of accusations back at his former collaborator, in the process revisiting many of the subjects they covered in their previous collaborations.16

The opening sample of El Rass’s response, a dialogue, precisely plays on this narrative of “making it.” Heavily distorted sonically, the dialogue stages an interview with the press. A reporter asks, how did you meet “Jimmy”? – the character El Rass and El Far3i constructed in previous collaborations. The dialogue as a whole mocks a pursuit of authenticity and “making it” [the word used is waselet – literally, you’ve arrived],

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conjuring El Rass as the interviewed artist and El Far3i as the orientalist “Jimmy.”17 The recorded exchange frames the expertise El Far3i claims with 47 Soul as an accident of being in the right place at the right time (“we met at a wedding”). The piece proceeds from here to respond to El Far3i’s jibes, reciting back to him lyrics from their previous collaborations. Sonically, El Rass is louder (there is no whispering here), but the whole piece is couched in offended but sardonic laughter. There are pages of lyrical and political analysis that could be offered here. The debate the rappers stage, despite the personal acrimony that they fling at each other, is an important deliberation of what counts as political, who counts as political, and who is truly able to represent “Palestine,” the “poor,”18 and their musical traditions.19

The exchange over these several tracks discussed here is a good example of how rappers negotiate political positions without aligning themselves with parties, politicians, or ideologies. Moreover, the fluidity of these positions – as made especially clear by this exchange between rappers who used to collaborate – points to how politics in process, reflected lyrically and musically in this genre, is not an oscillation between fixed points

17 The dialogue plays like this:
- Can you tell us how you came to know Jimmy?
- I was in this place, and I asked him, ‘What are you looking for?’ And he told me ‘I am looking for mijwez.’ I told him, well you found it!
- Ah, you told him “you found it” because you yourself are an expert in wedding music?
- No, no. I told him, “you found it” because we were in a wedding. We happened to meet at a wedding. He told me he was interested in wedding music and we were in a wedding, so that’s how we met.

18 A particular good example of this is when El Rass retorts to El Far3i “you’re the one who made el felaaheen [the peasantry] felaaheen [drawing out an exceptionally long Palestinian accent].” Here, El Rass makes fun of the political representation of Palestine and its resilient stewards through this Orientalized and depoliticized figure of the peasantry in the work of 47 Soul. This intersects nicely with the discussion of “classing” political discourse in Palestine that I explored in Chapter Three.

(with one party or against it). Rather these negotiations point to a wholly different kind of motion: wading through realities where there seem to be no options. It is this wading through and staking of positions (that then morph) that I suggested in the introduction to this study points to the series of “third rails” or third options operating beside the political status quo.20 This fluidity also affects how one might conceive of expressions of solidarity – as this exchange here has already illustrated. Expressions of solidarity and the fact that most engagement with this music, the exciting opportunities of live concerts not withstanding, involves interfacing with a screen underpins my closing thoughts to this study.

Presence

While I have focused my attention on the live concerts that are the intersections of urban change, orientalist representation, struggles over the right to the city, and changing perceptions about hip hop and hip hop culture, the vast majority of listener engagement with Arabic hip hop and the MCs and producers who make it is not during live events but mediated through technology. Sound Cloud, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter are the primary sites for hosting and disseminating this material. Bandcamp, Indiepush, and Reverbnation, are less frequently used networks. This means that the primary mode of interaction between rappers and their listeners are comments on tracks and the virtual affectivity of “likes,” “shares,” and so on. My emphasis in interviews on the live event often came as something of a surprise to musicians (see Chapter Two). They recognize

that most of their interactions with fans are virtual at the same time that their assertions about the importance of the concert in “feeling with” their audience are genuine.

Negotiating the politics of positionality and negotiating physical space during years when parts of the Arab world are engulfed in occupation, siege, uprising, or war is also a question of determining the shape of solidarity. Indeed, solidarity in these cases is often specifically about negotiating engagement when one cannot approach physically: as in the case of Lebanese and Syrians wishing to enact “solidarity” with Palestinians, whose territory they are forbidden from entering, and vice versa. In Chapter Five, we saw how expressions of disgust with an apathetic Arab populace worked as expressions of solidarity with Gaza; in Chapter Four, expressions of resignation could similarly be interpreted as muted expressions of solidarity with Palestinian struggle. In the most recent tracks I have discussed here, how to express that solidarity also emerged as a consideration. Solidarity, without being a political feeling, emerged in these cases as politics in process. That is, the declaration of solidarity was not a statement but a negotiation of and active engagement with the options available. When I asked El Rass what solidarity meant to him and his work, if anything, he offered:

To me, solidarity is the system of how you make sense of your belonging to different collectivities. You cannot just make sense by saying that you’re in solidarity. Making sense involves a whole process of action, of release, of spreading the word, of questioning things, of being critical, of sometimes trying to get the morale back, of sometimes saying let’s take two steps back so we can see the bigger image, sometimes people who are in the struggle are maybe depressed or down, you understand that maybe you have to take them to different kind of moods and thinking — I am thinking about the music here.

Here, El Sayed offers a refreshingly active view of solidarity, one in which the individual who expresses solidarity is also permitted to act, and not only in ways sanctioned or
prescribed by those with whom one expresses this political affinity. In this way even a position becomes a process, one that, with and through technology, is not only not prohibited by distance, but in fact may also take advantage of it. Consider this social media exchange between a late-night super market checkout clerk’s screen in Ramallah and the Lebanese rapper El Rass, just quoted.

Figure 6.1: “Exchange between a late-night supermarket clerk in Ramallah and the Lebanese rapper El Rass.” Mazen El Sayed, the rapper who goes by El Rass, reposts Ansar 3 AlRifai’s photo. His caption reads: “When the guy is working all night in a Ramallah supermarket and decides to make the customers listen to El Rass’s tracks.”
The caption of the photo reads, “Because it’s a duty to spread culture… The entire supermarket must listen to El Rass. Of course people couldn’t handle more than two tracks and asked to hear Elissa or Wael Kafouri [Lebanese pop stars].” In response to the photograph in which he was tagged, El Sayed’s caption reads, “When the guy is working all night in a Ramallah supermarket and decides to make the customers listen to El Rass’s tracks.” Here the virtual reality of the two computer screens – the one channeling El Rass’s music into the supermarket and the one reflecting the aural soundscape and reactions of the supermarket back to El Rass – emerges as a horizon in which listeners and performers can meet despite the restrictions of space. (The ability of rap music to play across boundaries is discussed in Chapter Three).

In the exchange above, the computer screen is figured as the primary medium through which listeners receive and exchange with musicians while it simultaneously draws the forbidden Lebanese voice into occupied Palestinian space. The clerk stages for the viewer expectation, hope, despair, and solidarity – within the recognizably neoliberal framework of the all-night supermarket, no less. Because culture is a “duty,” so the hourly employee tells us, he weaves in instruction, exposure, and acculturation through the tools available to him: the wifi and speaker system in the store. While he does not hope to change their opinions overnight (“of course they could only stand two tracks before asking for Elissa”), he nonetheless deems the experiment successful enough to share it with a public audience – and to specifically bring it to the musician’s attention. For his part, the musician is touched enough by the effort that he reposts it, with his own interpretation of the impact – political and aesthetic – of his own work. This exchange on social media frames a fluctuating spectrum of hope and despair that has anchored the
affective political spectrum within which this study was composed. It also points to how technology, and social media in particular, is able to generate and transmit presence, substituting for the call and response of the live concert when geopolitics and logistics render such embodied exchanges impossible.

* * *

In these pages I have attempted to draw this study of ongoing political processes, aesthetic experimentation, and lyrical invention to a close. The moments in which these pages were written affected the ways in which I interpreted the processual politics I heard expressed and negotiated online, in live concerts, and in my recorded and unrecorded interviews. The politics I observed and participated in have only stayed still long enough to be captured in analysis. Nonetheless, in a world in as much flux as ours, listening has suggested this is perhaps all one can ask for. Having recorded what I heard, it is now for others to see what “fills the head.”
APPENDIX A

"خليني عيش"
Ramallah Underground

بحاول أنسي الحياة الماضية
بس بحث يابدي في جيبتي و فاضية
و امي لسا مش راضية
خليني اعيش وين ما اروح في نقطة تتفتيش
بتهدل حتى لو معيش سلاح أو حشيش
و بديش اخد من اي حاد بخشيش
قبل ما امد ايدي لحد، بنهي حياتي بسحب الفيش
بس في امل
حا وقف على رجل و مش راح يهزني الريح مثل الجبل
ماظلش وقت للهبل
عقرب الساعة بيسابق للمستقبل
ومش راح اقبل اي شي اقل من حقي الكامل
مش راح اجام
راح انفجر زي اسلهة دمار شامل
فأذا بذك اتاعمر
كون عارف: مش حياء و انت مرتاح زي المجنون صارف
بي قولولي انساك، و ساكتين مش عارفين يعبرو
عن حالهم بالكلمات اللي مش عم بيطلعو
زي الامساك
بس الرسالة راح تنتشر لانو "بويكت" اجاك
خليني اعيش وين ما اروح في نقطة تتفتيش
بتهدل حتى لو معيش سلاح أو حشيش

عامل حالك فلسطيني بس خايف تيجي زيارة
خايف بروح عليك البيت الكبير و السيارة
طيب اذا هيك، اشلح الحطة و تحكيش بساسي
بتكرب من بعد بس الطلقة بيفوت بجسمي
بتحكي سياسة؟
احنا منحكي كلام شوارع و خيرة
من وجهة نظر ناس بتعرف ناس من قبرة
بذك فلسطين، و انا كمان
بس أنا كمان انسان
بدي اكل، اشرب، اشخ، و انام
بس انت ما بدي سلام
بدك انتضلنا اتحارب و كل هي الافلام المحروقة
و انت قاعد بامريكا و اروبا بتحكي عن ارضك المسروقة
الاضاع السياسة الحالية مخنوقة و مشنوقة
انت بتطفي التلفزيون احنا منفض هنالك
بدك اتحرر فلسطين و احنا انروح ننتاك؟ لا!
لا هو الاحلام شي يوم راح تاكلك
و انا اصلاً هيك مش مرتاحلك
تحت طيزيك اكم من مليون شكله الوضع عم بزيد على داخلك
شوف لوين المصري بتاخدك
بتخبك و بتدبتك
و اذا حاولت تتذكر اشي من ماضيك بتسيبك
بتخبك و بتدبتك
و اذا كنت مذكر اشي من ماضيك بتسيبك

خليلي اعيش وين ما اروح في نقطة تفتيش
بتهدل حتى لو معيش سلاح أو حشيش
(٢٥٤)}
“Let Me Live”
Ramallah Underground

I try to forget my past life
But I put my hand in my pocket, and it is empty
And my mother still is not at ease
Let me live; wherever I go there is a checkpoint
I am given a hard time even though I have neither weapons nor drugs
And I don’t want to take a bribe from anyone
Before I reach my hand out to anyone, I will end my life as a friend of nothingness
But there is hope
I am going to stand on my feet, just like a mountain, the winds will not move me,
There’s no time for foolishness
The hour hand is racing the future
And I will not accept anything less than my full rights
I won’t flatter
I will explode like weapons of mass destruction
So if you want to be dealt in
Know this: I will not represent you while you relax
They tell me to forget about you, and they are silent, not knowing how to express themselves with words that don’t come
As if they are constipated
But the message is going to get out because Boikutt is coming for you

Let me live; wherever I go there is a checkpoint
I am given a hard time even though I have neither weapons nor drugs
(x2)

You pretend you’re Palestinian but you’re afraid to come for a visit
Afraid to lose that big house and car
If that’s the case, you can take off the kuffiyeh and don’t speak in my name
You mess things up from afar, but that distance invades my body
You talk politics?
We have street talk and experience
With one glance people distinguish each other from the grave
You want Palestine? So do I.
But I am also human.
I need to eat, drink, piss, and sleep.
But you do not want peace.
You want us to keep fighting like in all those played out films
While you sit in the US or Europe talking about your stolen land
The political situation has been hanged and strangled
You can turn off your television; we stay there
You want to liberate Palestine while we are extinguished? No!
Because these dreams will one day eat you up
In any case I’m not at ease with you
How many millions are you sitting on?
Looks like the situation is increasing your income
See where money will take you
It brings you and it takes you
And if you try to remember anything from your past, it lets you forget
It brings you and it takes you
And if you remembered anything from your past, it forgets you

Let me live; wherever I go there is a checkpoint
I am given a hard time even though I have neither weapons nor drugs
(x2)
APPENDIX B

"عقرث الثواني،
الفرعي

منثرع على الأرض بغفرة إلى فيها صديق نايم
و عندي حلم و حرفه بس المصير فيها عايم
زي كل إشي في البلد الموضوع قعد
وعدت ما أجا تحت شو أسوي بعد
طيبا رهيت عليه بجوز بدل المرة عشرة
إيش هاي المزيكا إسمها؟ ز مين إلي نشرك؟
قشرت كل البروباغندا و الرسائل المباشرة
إيحاء داشرة لفلكي فاضي لعا فشرك
أنا و الحياة العملية زي ما تقول منلعب 1-2
بلاش "يوم نسأل" الواقع ليش ما غيروا
حيرتو لسبتم ما بالنهاج قيدنوه
"لماعا في المجتمع فلنوه قام فاع و دقت "نتر
أنا مش بيهت بس مهو كل واحد حر بحالة
كل واحد بيدى راية بالطريقه إلي بتحلاله
لو غيروا رأي بيتصور بدق حضلة على ظهري
عشقن لمو نسي بالبحر الميت تشوفوا وجهه على صدري
لتنا متحضر للطرد فما إنثي العرض
و يابا هذا الراب تاع أوطى نقطة على الأرض
و للناس إل شابهة إنه في إشي ناقص بالأطروحة
مبن إلي فلكي إنا ما نرقص القلوب المجروحة
ع عقرث الثواني
شا شقليلني مكتبي
شا شقليل المعاني
شك شكلتني بزمان
مين إلي قال إنا ما نرقص القلوب المجروحة؟
بكلك سكراب "الجبيلة" إبتنت إشترية مرجعة
حتينا إنلن شعب إنه التلفزيون فلم رعب
و الشارع صعب أبسط لقمة بدها تعب
فإذا على مين العتب؟ مهو بقل حسب
في عند المزارع بس برى الحبكة إنه غضب
و في عند التاج بتهييل غترش فكسب
و في إلى على الحدود الغربية سخَّل بكسة عنبر
أكثر من طلب حطب ناز عصب غضب بيسكن فينا
بمسوي لأي فوتون بينقربي حجاب
بلد صغير يس الكروك عجيب
الأمور كيف بيتكرب وبكبسة بيتكرك
فوفين أحسن مكان بالغرفة الرزنامة فيه تتعلق
إلا بكرة و مبارح قاعدين عم بسالوني عن هالاً
التغيرات وين حطاني مش قادر أحدى مكان
الساعة إلي معاي "ديجيتال" مش شايف عقرب الثواني
منتجات مصنعة خصيصا بس الخيار إلزامي
إشتريت سيارة جديدة بس ما فيها مقعد أمامي
كيف أشعِّلها و أطلع عشان أرجعها على المصنع
مضطر أقعد بالخلف و للتصميم أخضع
“The Second Hand”
El Far3i

Sitting cross-legged on the floor, in a room where a friend sleeps
I have a dream and a craft but fate is floating in it.
Like everything in this country, the subject is paralyzed:
He promised but did not show; what should I do?
Of course he called, not once but like ten times:
What’s this music called? And who distributes it?
Down with propaganda and dumbed-down rhetoric
Unfounded suggestions: they found you empty when they peeled you!

Me and my career, we play 1-2 offense
So that they don’t ask on Judgment Day why we didn’t change things
You confused the kid when you put him in school
And when they let him loose in society, he got up and got a tattoo
I’m not hating: that’s the point, to each his own.
Everyone speaks his mind in his own way, in the way it serves him,

If I change my mind, I imagine I’ll want handala on my back:
So that when I swim in the Dead Sea, you can see his face on my chest.
We’re still being kicked out, “ethnically cleansed,” so the show’s not over
Daddy-o, this is the rap of the lowest point on Earth
And to the people that see that something’s missing in the write-up:
Who said that we don’t make broken hearts dance?

The second hand
You changed my place,
You switched the meaning
You made me doubt my history

Who said that we don’t make broken hearts dance?
Our playground was sold as scrap metal; I bought a swing instead
We wanted to entertain the people because the television is a horror film
And the street is hard; the simplest bite is tiring.
So who is to blame? It depends.

There are the farmers, but they’re not at market because they got angry;
There are the merchants clowning cockily to earn a penny;
And there are those on the western borders, smuggled in crates of grapes.
More than one request, a log on fire, an angry nerve lives in each of us
It blocks every photon of light that comes towards us.
A small country but the planet is strange:
How things come together and, in a push, become a mess.
So where is the best place in the room to hang the calendar?
Because tomorrow and yesterday are here asking me about the present.
Where the changes have put me, I cannot locate my location:
The clock I have is digital, I can’t see the second hand!
Products produced with intention, but the choice is mandatory.

I bought a new car but there’s no front seat;
How to turn it on to go return it to the factory?
I am compelled to sit in the back and be subjected to the design!
APPENDIX C

"بالعثمة"

ساطي

مش منيح تكون عارف شو ببك غيرك موقفك
دابيا في حدا برمي شغلة ثقيلة بطيئة بلقلق
بتذكر فقدتي بغرفتي زي اليوم ومخلبها دفعة
 كثير بحس حالى مهاجم عاجلون بستي الرفعه
شوف وين كنت و وين صربت بطلت مكاني
طلع مع كثير بيوت ببنفس الني خضت مباني
درت بالي علي ذاتي صربت تا كبرت ودخلت
عرف شو الخساره بايدي ناس عزيزة دفنت
وقفت قدم قاضي راسي بالأرض مش غلطان
بلك الصراحة بيني وبين حالى كنت خجلان
تبيت الرئة صارت سودة قد ما أخذت نفس دخان
هاظ منتج محللي ما بنشالي كياس بالدكان
شوي قلقان من اللي براسي كل مالها بتعتم
آخر كم أغنية هجمت على حالى ع غبي مستلزم
بتعرف لما تكون مستلحن وجاي عبلكك تعزف
لأزم تكون بنفس الراس وفاهم عشان تعرف
ميز خسران اطلع عابر عامر
بطل اللك مكان عباب الجامع زي حفاي
صرت امشي بالعثمة احس دايم ما في حدا وراي
قد ما ببعدي بحكى وبرد عمالي هيني جاي
همجو ثامنهم فتحو عيني شرار قحو
مرة رتبت الأفكير بس حاسبيه غنم رجعو سرحو
مشبت حافي وعارف في جمر وجزاز مكسور
شكلي تعودت على قصة اض ناق وعمر
مش عارف شو بتسوى لما تكون بدون جمهور
مش عارف شو المر عشني دايم عاهل مجابر
اخرك مش بطل بس تعود مهو البصرة حاصلة
زحمان يبي اشيخ عالموضوع مهو الحصوة عاطلة
الطخ فوق وتحت حاسس حياتي حصة نحت
التي ثاث سنين نامي على كنبني نسبت النخت
مرة وحدة انجنت وقت خليني اعرف البخت
فتحت الفنجران وكررت هاي هسترة انضحت
تخدرت قد ما انفصمت فا بصمت عشاني غشيم
سالت البروف قالي شوف الفاتيكان عشانه حكيم
مش عارف اتنفس بدون تف عندي خيالهم
قد ما أنا فوق راحت الجاذبية الهرم بحرف الشين
“In the Dark”
Satti

It’s no good to know what you want; they stop you
There’s always someone to throw something heavy; watermelons thrown in the way
I remember my seat in my room like it’s today; it’s a motivation
I really feel like I’m at attacker of the goal, I wait for greatness
See where I was and where I am at now; I’m no longer in my place
I wrote so many poetic lines, it’s like I built buildings
I paid attention to what I listened to, I was patient ‘til I grew up to never screw up
I know what it means to lose; I buried so many close people with these hands,
I stood there in front of a judge, staring at the floor, not guilty
If you want the truth, between myself and I, I was ashamed
My lungs are dying, turned to black from inhaling all this smoke
This is a local product, nobody touches it, there are no bags in the store
I’m kinda worried from all the thoughts in my head, it’s getting darker
The last few songs I dropped stupidly, I dissed myself
You know when you’re feeling musical and you feel like composing?
You need to be in the same state of mind and understanding in order to know:

Refrain:

Who’s the loser? Look in the mirror
You no longer have a place at the door of the mosque, like slippers do
I’ve started to walk in the dark and I always feel like there is someone behind me
As far as I go, I say and respond to myself, I’m coming

(repeat)

They attacked with open mouths, my eyes opened and turned red from anger
I organized my thoughts but it feels like they are sheep, they wander off to graze elsewhere
I walked barefoot, knowing there were embers and broken glass
It seems I got used to being overprotective and betrayed
I don’t know if you’re worth anything if you’ve got no audience
I don’t know what bitterness is because I’m always forced to foolishness
Your brother’s no hero, I got used to the idea of submission
I’ve got to go, I want to piss on the subject, but I can’t the gallstones are bad
Shooting everywhere, up and down, I feel my life turned into an art lecture
For three years I’ve been sleeping on the sofa, I’ve forgotten the bed
Once I got fed up and told myself let me know my destiny
I tried to read my fortune from a coffee cup and cards; its hipsterism that caught me!
I felt numb because in my head I was lost, I couldn’t write, so I left a fingerprint
I asked the prof; he told me look towards the Vatican, he is wise
I can’t breathe without spitting rhymes, it’s like I’m a fish with gills
I’m so high up in the clouds, I lost gravity. I’m on the top of the pyramids just like the dots in the letter sheen.

Who’s the loser? Look in the mirror
You no longer have a place at the door of the mosque, like slippers do
I’ve started to walk in the dark and I always feel like there is someone behind me
As far as I go, I say and respond to myself, I’m coming.
APPENDIX D

"يا بحر خداني معك"
جعفر الطفار و عبد الرحمن جاسم بِلاشتراك مع خضر سلامه
باص: زياد صادر

البرستيج الكليشيء و العالم الكلاس
الدعاة بالفن الراقي ما يتعبون الناس
فنان اللحظة السعدي
قهوة سيرجارت جريدي و عقدة عائلة
مش كوفية بالألواح شرف طائرة
شالة حلفاء مسكاناً و ابدا طابع
لينان الوادي الأخضر بالعلم المقنع
إقتصادو من السبحة و النسب المزينة
تيبس أرض السهل
نربين نحن رجل
تقلني و بيك تقنعني انو نحن أهل؟
الحكي عالم ريتيج سهل و البلاط بأرض السهل عاشه بأرضو غريب ابنو بوزويه
مثل ما ينمثل الشمس مثل ما يغيب
عندو أضعف الايمان يكره شيء اسمو لبنان
عندو أضعف الايمان اكره شيء اسمو لبنان

يا بحر خداني معك
يا موج بعيدي
مقطوع هون الامل
عيشة جهنية

قالوا لي أن حسان ذهب إلى السويد؛ هناك يلتقي الفلسطينيون ببعضهم
ضيقة هي بلادنا?
واسعة لأوروبي يتحدث العبرية
وموظف جمعية يصرف أمواله يساراً في الحمرا
في المخيم، الوقت أقل ضيغاً
الناس أوسع صدرأ امر بين الأسلاء
ودعنا ابن خالياً قبل أسبوع، ليسته الكهرباء
فما أطل النقاء؟
مجروح مياه لا حل له، يحدثك كلمة اقتربت
حسان ذهب إلى السويد لا يأخذ معه
لأنك لست بهيا ولا أوروبي! حسان تعرّف بديفيد
وديفيد جميل بهي الطلعة أشعر
ديفيد رأى حسان مخيراً
وحسان رسمه جسرا بسم ديفيد، فرح حسان،
حسان ركب الطائرة دون دموع،
فلس في لبنان ما يودعه غير الألم،
هو ترك رسالة واحدة على هاتف أصدقائه.
الفلسطيني لا يحب لبنان، يكره لبنان ويكره أهله.
بريدوننا إما بندقية نقضب كلامنا بفلسطين دون عمل,
دون هوية،
وباهتة لاجئين.
تشذب منهم صفوفنا,
يا أخوتي: أنت بلا غي هنا!
الحقوني إلى السويد! الفلسطيني لا يحب لبنان.
يكره لبنان ويكره أهله.
الفلسطيني لا يحب لبنان.
يكره لبنان ويكره أهله.

على باب المخيم يوقفني كاب الحراسة
يشتهي لحمي وحلمي وعلمي.
الأرز وقود جهيم أقول.
وهذه البلاد بطولها وعرضها، بشعبي وأرضها للأبول.
على باب المخيم كاب الحراسة.
ورجال السياسة.
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يمنعون فلسطين من الدخول.
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