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ROUNDTABLE

Neoliberal Expansion and Aesthetic Innovation: The Egyptian Independent Music Scene Ten Years After

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More than any other artistic genre (rivaled perhaps only by graffiti), "independent" music and its musicians (especially Ramy Essam and Cairokee) became symbols of the 2011 Egyptian revolution both within Egypt and abroad.[1] Western scholarship and media over the last ten years have privileged the independent music that most closely resembles Western musical genres and those particular musicians who double as activists.[2] But not every musician has the notion that their music does something political in the world. Many do not consider themselves activists or even public figures. Some view music as a way to make a living, entertain, or experiment, and, even if they support the revolution, view their art as distinct from "revolutionary propaganda," as one independent musician called it.

Yet, in part because this niche musical style burst onto the national and international radar in 2011, one of the primary frameworks for understanding Egyptian independent music in the West has been to associate it with the revolution and thus reduce it to a form of resistance.[3] This discourse, which spans the Western media, exhibitions, scholarship, and performances, privileges the stories of danger, threat, trauma, and repression that Western audiences imagine to be involved in producing a work *over* the work's content or aesthetic properties. According to one arts curator, for example, the reality of fear and trauma was "all I was ever talking about, and that's all that people seemed to be interested in in Europe, North America, or Australia."[4] As many scholars have shown, discourses of resistance in Western scholarship and media often reinforce Orientalist assumptions of Western cultural supremacy, perpetuate neoliberal logics, and serve the interests of empire.[5] The need to frame one's work in terms of

[1]Although there are disagreements about terminology, many of its musicians view independent music as situated in the spaces between state patronage and the multinational music industry represented by Rotana. As this essay demonstrates, that distinction is starting to change (see also Asfour essay in this issue). Independent music (*al-mazika al-mustaqilla* or *al-mazika al-badila*) draws from a variety of eclectic aesthetic influences, including Arab art music (*al-musiqa al-ʿArabīyya*), Western and especially African diasporic popular musics, Nubian music, Moroccan Gnawa, rai, and increasingly Egyptian *shʿabi* and *mahragānāt*.

[2]For an alternative depiction of music in the revolution see Michael Frishkopf, "Songs of the New Arab Revolutions," YouTube video, 6 May 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9u4v7R9yF0o.

[3]Prior to 2011, independent music had only a small, mostly middle-class audience and few performance venues.

[4]"Yes, We're Still Here, but Why?" Naira Antounis, Stephanie Baily, Mariam Elnozahy, Ania Szremski, and William Wells, conversation at the Mosaic Rooms, London, 7 July 2018.

[5]Music scholars have recently been at the forefront of demonstrating that, if 1990s scholarship had a romance with resistance, the 2000s to the present mark a period of fetishizing it, especially in the study of Middle Eastern music and cultures, popular music, and urban youth cultures. Ethnomusicologist David McDonald argues, for instance, that the Western media's emphasis on Arab hip-hop as a framing device for narrating and interpreting the Arab Spring is not only misinformed and superficial but imposes a "neo-Orientalist discourse of American hegemony over forces of reform and democratization in the Arab Middle East"; "Framing the 'Arab Spring': Hip Hop, Social Media, and the American News Media," *Journal of Folklore Research* 56, no. 1 (2019): 105. Performance studies scholar Rayya el-Zein uses the term *neoliberal orientalism* to describe this tendency, concluding that it ultimately fills the lacuna left by the abatement of debate in the West about political alternatives at a time of neoliberal political power; *Performing el Rap el ʿAraby 2005–2015: Feeling Politics and Neoliberal Incursions in Ramallah, ʿAmman, and Beirut* (PhD diss., New York University, 2016), 66. See also Laudan Nooshin, "Underground, Overground: Rock Music and Youth Discourse in Iran," *Iranian Studies* 38, no. 3 (2005): 463–94; Ted Swedenburg, "Egypt's Music of Protest: From Sayyid Darwish to DJ Haha," *Middle East Report* 265 (2012): 39–43; and Cristina Moreno Almeida, *Rap Beyond Resistance: Staging Power in Contemporary Morocco* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017). For the romance with resistance, see Lila Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women," *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 1 (1990): 41–55; Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*

resistance to gain traction with Western audiences is something musicians are often conscious of, with some opting to make certain genres of music, or frame their work in particular ways, as a means of accruing this subversive capital.[6]

Yet independent music as it is understood in Egypt today has been around since at least the 1970s. I encountered considerable pushback from many musicians about contextualizing the music in relation to revolution, politics, or the state.[7] As one prominent musician told me,

> Please don't politicize what I say or associate me with that stuff. Of course, I know everything is related to the political, but that's not how I think of it and I don't want to be a part of it. And of course, everyone is fucked by the system, but I'm still acting and doing things, there are ways and spaces to move. These spaces are what's important.[8]

Such an account demonstrates that revolution and resistance as frameworks do not always represent the artists' own views. Instead I found most musicians to be more concerned with navigating the newly expanded commercial market for independent music and/or developing innovative new musical styles that contrast sharply with those associated with the revolution. The post-2011 commercial market, for instance, has brought unprecedented potential for financial success, but it also has increased obstacles of state and international "security." For many musicians, it is not about resisting these economic and political forces but finding "ways and spaces to move" within them that include sometimes contradictory combinations of commercialization, state patronage, and aesthetic experimentation.[9] Artists' practices are thus multifarious and in constant flux, inviting us more broadly not to reduce our understanding of the revolution to notions of resistance.

For many independent musicians in Egypt today, postrevolutionary hope lies increasingly in imaginaries of a profit-driven private sector. The massive sit-in at Tahrir created a large audience and thus a market for Arabic-language independent bands where there hadn't been one before, making it possible for previously low-profile, unknown musicians to catch the attention of international corporations and major record labels, entities that had previously focused on individual pop stars in the region. One example of this shift is Vodafone's "In" campaign, which launched in September 2015. It targets youth ages sixteen to twenty-five, a new marketing subgroup developed after 2011, by using musicians Youssra el-Hawary, El Madfaagya, Cairokee, Sharmoofers, and Zap Tharwat as the faces of the campaign. Although exact figures are unavailable, it is estimated that Vodafone compensates these musicians in the tens of thousands of Egyptian pounds. According to one Vodafone marketing executive working on the campaign, In's image is cultivated through these musicians because they stand in for rebellion and the need to be unique and have "one's voice heard." In short, the wide popularity of independent music, and some *mahragānāt* music, around the time of the revolution has helped it become associated with these sentiments in ways that are easily translatable into neoliberal values.[10] But for the musicians, this corporate sponsorship that provides not only funding but often also recordings, videos, performances, and advertising creates a new possibility: independent musicians now have the potential to make a living—and become upwardly mobile—solely from independent music. Many musicians consider the larger audience and new commercial market for independent music to be one of the lasting positive effects of the 2011 revolution. Even if the state nearly criminalizes live performance, it can never fully take away this listenership, or its earning potential.

(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

[6]Laudan Nooshin, "Underground, Overground"; el-Zein, *Performing el Rap el 'Araby.*

[7]I began researching independent music and *mahragānāt* in Alexandria in 2010, when I was enrolled in a year-long Arabic language program at the University of Alexandria and working as an intern at an Alexandrian arts organization. I have continued this research until the present during yearly stays in Cairo and Alexandria.

[8]Personal communication with the author, 10 January 2019.

[9]I use the word *patronage* loosely. Sometimes the state thinly veils its interference as a form of support that musicians cannot refuse without some type of state-led retaliation.

[10]*Mahragānāt* (literally "festivals") is a genre of electronic music that emerged from working-class neighborhoods and wedding culture in the early 2000s. It is sometimes referred to in Europe as electro-chaabi (*shʿabi*).

In a context in which the regime views anything or anyone not profit driven as criminally political, many independent musicians desire integration into the national and international economies as a means to both depoliticize their work and make a comfortable living, and they are often critical of the ways they continue to be excluded from these possibilities. In the fall of 2018, for example, the Alexandrian band al-Mena (Harbor) won the Project Aloft Star Contest, an annual music competition and tour to support emerging artists launched that year in Dubai as a partnership between Aloft Hotels (part of Marriott International) and Universal Records. Upon hearing the news of their win, one band member was so overjoyed that he broke down in tears. As part of their award, al-Mena recorded a track at Abbey Road Studios in London and a music video in Dubai. Their recent video for this track, "GTA" (Grand Theft Auto; 2019), directed by a Dubai-based production company run by British nationals, features a young blonde European protagonist who controls the band members via a magic controller (Fig. 1). Shot in the hotel pool, gym, cinema, recreation room, and restaurants, the video doubles as an advertisement for the five-star Aloft Hotel in Dubai. I accompanied the band members on this video shoot, and they were mostly grateful for Universal's expertise and sponsorship because the track and video achieved a level of professionalism that would have been impossible for the artists to finance themselves.[11] Considering that the genre was a niche musical style only ten years ago, and in the context of the current regime's efforts to suppress this music, such private sector sponsorship seems almost progressive or revolutionary to these artists. It opens the potential (not necessarily the actuality) for independent musicians to produce high quality output, reach international audiences, and earn a living solely from their music, possibilities that were almost unthinkable prior to 2011. Perhaps even more significantly, such corporate sponsorship makes musicians feel valued, giving them a sense that they—through their music—have something to offer broader society. Multinational corporations, then, support these artists in all the ways the Egyptian state does not.

Writing in Equatorial Guinea, another authoritarian context, anthropologist Hannah Appel was surprised to find herself "cheering for this imaginary object of desire called a private sector."[12] In a context where dissent was reduced to hushed conversations at home, her interlocutors imagined the private sector as the realm of freedom and opportunity, away from the pervasive feelings of state surveillance and control. For both herself and her interlocutors, activity in this sector "felt down-right radical," with tones of subversion of state power.[13] Appel argues that scholars need to take seriously people's fantasies and not dismiss them as already compromised by the evils of capitalism, and she concludes that the economy does not only work in the service of power—it also can enable a sort of critique of a particular political regime. This could easily be the case for al-Mena. The group was overjoyed to have caught the eye of international music executives who saw value in their music and offered to support them despite the Egyptian regime's best efforts to suffocate this music at home.

Yet the marriage between independent artists and the private sector is precarious and often superficial. Corporate sponsors can and do drop artists at any time, and they often fund artists on a project-by-project basis. Universal did not pay al-Mena for their work. The band instead gained "exposure" while providing free labor to Universal.[14] Additionally, the UK government only granted one of the six band members a visa to travel to record the track at Abbey Road in London. In short, independent musicians in Egypt continue to be excluded from these economies even when they appear to be included. This exclusion includes denial of travel, a form of "visa violence" and passport inequality, as well as the fact that receiving transformative remuneration (that which enables upward mobility) often pigeonholes artists in the neoliberal Orientalist frameworks of resistance previously discussed.[15] For most musicians, then, new post-2011 opportunities for upward mobility and financial security through independent music remain fantasies, a potential seemingly within reach but somehow always just beyond it.

[11]This professionalism included high-quality recording equipment, a director and team in charge of production and storyboarding, makeup artists and wardrobe designers, paid actors and models that appeared in the video, and set design.

[12]Hannah Appel, "Toward an Ethnography of the National Economy," *Cultural Anthropology* 32, no. 2 (2017): 310.

[13]Ibid., 311–12.

[14]This free labor facilitated the partnership between Universal and Aloft Hotels, with the hotel chain providing major funding for Universal's activities in the region.

[15]Abdalhadi Alijla, "Gazzawi as Bare Life? An Autoethnography of Borders, Siege, and Statelessness," *Contemporary Levant* 4, no. 2 (2019): 177–82.

Figure 1. Stills from "GTA," al-Mena.

In some ways, this commercial integration also directly benefits the Egyptian state. Indeed, commercialization does not guarantee immunity from security measures, whether international (by visa denial) or national. On the national level, it is widely known that the post-2011 creation of a large audience and market for independent music increased the reach of neoliberal logics of security and state control over the music and its musicians. For instance, with the passing of new NGO laws in November 2016, the vast majority of small artistic venues and organizations that had been the primary hubs of support for independent music were faced with the options of commercializing or perishing, echoing the logic perpetuated by global financial institutions such as the IMF.[16] Venues that previously operated as nonprofits are now being (re)founded as commercial enterprises, especially by opening restaurants with a small stage in malls in newly built elite desert settlements such as Sheikh Zayed. Even before the passage of the 2016 law, venue operators were (and now continue to be) routinely harassed by police and/or syndicate officials, who regularly show up in the middle of events demanding exorbitant bribes on top of the

[16]Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2007); Farah Najjar, "Why is Egypt's New NGO Law Controversial?" *Al Jazeera*, 31 May 2017, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/05/egypt-ngo-law-controversial-170530142008179.html.

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entertainment tax venues already pay, making concerts financially unviable for those who perform in and organize them.[17] Concerts, large and small, also are routinely canceled for security reasons, and the state has increased its imprisonment of musicians and other artists for reasons from "public morality" to waging the state's "war on terror," shattering what had been a degree of predictability in law enforcement during the Mubarak years.[18]

As the Egyptian state actively attempts to suffocate grassroots and independent artistic activity in the private sector, it is increasing its own selective patronage of these same cultural forms to perpetuate its propaganda. The Alexandria library's Mahragan el-Seif (summer festival) has grown tremendously in the last few years. Now running for an entire month in July and August, it features theater, music, and other performing arts as well as film screenings and workshops. In 2018, for instance, it included concerts by some of the most popular independent bands in the region, including Massar Egbari, Sharmoofers, Maryam Saleh, and al-Mena. Musicians receive little remuneration for these performances that allow the state to project a facade of youth-driven inclusivity although it heavily polices and imprisons these same musicians. The state's incursions into the private realm recently reached new heights when the long-established and well-known independent band Massar Egbari (Obligatory Detour) was forced to release a pro-Sisi song in April 2019 that encouraged voters to approve a constitutional amendment allowing the president to stay in power until 2030 beyond the two-term limit, the implementation of which was one of the constitutional victories of the revolution.[19] Such trends suggest that the military-capital complex is increasing its reach into realms that, prior to the 2011 revolution, were beyond its interest.[20]

In short, musicians gained an audience after 2011 but at the cost of suffocating surveillance and corporate exploitation.[21] One of the ways for scholars to avoid fetishizing resistance is to take seriously the desire of some musicians to integrate into official economies and in so doing depoliticize their relations with the state, while considering the ways this integration embeds them in new structures of power that use their social positions (e.g., race, class, citizenship, age) to accumulate capital and yet allow only partial inclusion.

Also missing from most Western discourse is the way musicians over the last decade have pushed the boundaries of musical expression and explored vastly new aesthetic territory. This is a significant omission, given that what inspires many individuals to become musicians in the first place is music's technical aspects and the drive to experiment.[22] It also is significant because some of these developments display a strong disregard for the aforementioned political and commercial realms and indicate more broadly a shifting terrain of class relations.

Many artists strive to move away from the styles that dominated the revolutionary period—styles that even by 2013 were seen in some circles as cliché, naive, and outdated. The music of the well-established artist Dina el-Wedidi, for instance, has typically featured live musicians—including violin, electric and bass guitars, keyboard, accordion, drum set, and hand percussion—and mixed elements of jazz with Moroccan Gnawa, Egyptian folklore, zar, and the musics of Upper Egypt. Her latest album, *Manam*

[17]Entertainment tax (*ḍarbīyat al-malāhī*) is in addition to income tax and taxes collected by the Musicians' Syndicate for each performer. Many independent and *mahragānāt* musicians are not (and are not allowed to be) members of the Syndicate; they must pay bribes to the syndicate to perform.

[18]Public concerts continue to happen in the poor peripheries, however, where the state does not maintain much power or presence; Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 28.

[19]The band has not stated this directly, likely for safety reasons. However, it is widely accepted that this was not a track made of their own volition. Some of the band members' private Facebook posts about the track's release affirm this suspicion.

[20]As anthropologist Paul Amar argues, this new wave of post-2011 "shock doctrine" sees militarized state institutions and security agencies increasingly moving into areas that neoliberal capitalist logics had formerly relegated to the private and civilian public sectors in Egypt. This sphere is dominated by the logics of security rather than free choice, consumerism, or individual rights, the typical hallmarks of neoliberal ideology; "Military Capitalism," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 50, no.1 (2018): 82–89.

[21]Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002).

[22]See Anonymous and Asfour essays in this issue.

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(Slumber; 2018) departs from her typical style.[23] It is an experimental album, with all the musical components taken from el-Wedidi's field recordings on trains and at various train stations throughout Egypt. By making the album available for free on YouTube and offering few live performances, el-Wedidi appears less interested in commercial considerations than in innovation.[24] In the first, and to date only, live performance of this album in Egypt in April 2019, el-Wedidi told an audience of about forty people that the aim of the album was "to change" (*al-taghīr*) because "one must not always keep doing what one used to do, and what one always does, just because it's a habit."

In hip-hop, there has likewise been a stark move away from what rapper Shahyn called *naṣīḥa* (giving advice or preaching), music that advocates particular action or social change or serves as a form of sociopolitical activism. Although Egyptian hip-hop has always considered diverse topics, the most prominent rappers today avoid conventional politics in favor of developing lyrical-linguistic innovation, flow, and poetic techniques. Key examples include Abyusif and Shahyn, whose recent work revolves around personal stories, family, and exploring (especially dark) moods and emotions. This marks a particular contrast for Shahyn, who was well known before the revolution as a member of Y-Crew, an Alexandrian hip-hop collective founded in 2005 and known for discussing social issues. By focusing on sonic experimentation and the personal, these artists' works do not fit easily into the typical Western narratives of revolutionary rebellion that have dominated the last decade. They instead attempt to rewrite the meanings of subversive capital by eschewing conventional notions of the political altogether.[25]

Additionally, whereas many independent musicians in the early 2000s focused on localizing international genres such as rock, metal, and hip-hop, more musicians today seem to be turning inward to globalize the richness of expression already found within Egypt. For instance, the concept of musical fusions, which was perhaps the most popular descriptor for bands in the early 2000s, is falling out of style.[26] It seems to be being replaced by musical collaborations between artists in different fields, such as independent and *mahragānāt*, and the creation of entirely new styles that mix independent music, *shʿabi*, *mahragānāt*, and hip-hop (known locally as "trap"). The former is seen in Abyusif's collaboration with *shʿabi* musicians Islam Chipsy and Shʿaban ʿAbd al-Rahim and in Cairokee's collaboration with *shʿabi* singer Tarek el-Sheikh. These artists are further developing a sound that incorporates *mahragānāt* and *shʿabi* elements, notably in Cairokee's track "Ana al-Sigara" (I Am the Cigarette) on their latest *ʾAbnaʾ al-Batta al-Sudaʾ* (The Ugly Ducklings; 2019) album and in Abyusif's audible incorporation of heavily auto-tuned vocals. This latter style of cross-genre innovation is further exemplified in the music of young Alexandrian artists Marwan Pablo and Wegz. Pablo, described abroad as "Egypt's Godfather of Trap," features the auto-tuned vocals that characterize *mahragānāt* and lyrical content centering on working-class areas and life (for instance, al-Gamiza, the subject and title of the hit 2019 track "el-Gemeza," is a street in the al-Hadra al-Gadida neighborhood in Alexandria) but with beats, flow, and sound more typical of Egyptian hip-hop and independent music.[27] These trends suggest a blurring of two aesthetic languages that had previously been strongly associated with distinct social classes in Egypt, that is, independent music from the middle class and *shʿabi* and *mahragānāt* from the working class. Prior to at least 2014, most independent musicians viewed *shʿabi*, and *mahragānāt* especially, disparagingly. This shift marks a significant transformation that unsettles the music scene's previous logics. In part, it indicates a reappraisal of the relationship of some artists with "the people" (*al-shʿab*), treating them as a

[23]See also Tucker McGee, "Dina el Wedidi's 'Slumber' Traverses Seven Hallucinatory Train Stations Inside a Dream," Scene Noise, 11 October 2018, https://scenenoise.com/Reviews/dina-el-wedidis-slumber-traverses-seven-hallucinatory-train-stations-inside-a-dream.

[24]The album is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QAbok9NF018.

[25]Performance studies scholar Rayya el-Zein describes a similar phenomenon when describing "political feelings," politics in process that do not depend on speech, emancipation, or subject-based agency. Unlike the artists in el-Zein's work, many of the Egyptian artists mentioned here strongly reject any notion of politics in relation to their music; "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, 2017), 87–112.

[26]Musicians frequently used the word "fusion" (in English) to describe their mixing of different musical genres such as rock or jazz with Arab or Sufi music aesthetics. For a critique of the concept, see Rami Abadir, "Faqr Musiqa al-Mazaj wa Kayf Yehduth al-Tajdid al-Haqiqi," Ma3azef, 22 November 2015, https://ma3azef.com/فقر-موسيقى-المزاج،-وكيف-يحدث-التجديد-ال/.

[27]Vice Asia, "Marwan Pablo: Egypt's Godfather of Trap," YouTube, 3 October 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wYKEREfQ3S0.

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source of—rather than merely an audience for—aesthetic ingenuity. This follows exposure of long-simmering social and ideological cleavages by the revolution.[28] Reducing independent music to a revolution or a reaction against an authoritarian state ignores how it continues to grow and inspire experimentation, finding spaces to move in ways that do not fit easily into the limited framework of resistance.

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[28]Whether this recognition of working-class culture and creativity indicates the increased inclusion of the working classes in other areas of life remains to be seen. For the new recognition of *al-shʿab* by artists, see Darci Sprengel, "'Loud' and 'Quiet' Politics: Questioning the Role of 'the Artist' in Street Arts Projects after the 2011 Egyptian Revolution," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no. 2 (2020): 208–26.

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