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BREHONY LOUIS, *PALESTINIAN MUSIC IN EXILE: VOICES OF RESISTANCE*, CAIRO, THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO PRESS, “REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS WITHIN THE MIDDLE EAST SERIES”, 2023.

EL RASHIDI YASMINE, *LAUGHTER IN THE DARK. EGYPT TO THE TUNE OF CHANGE*, NEW YORK, COLUMBIA GLOBAL REPORTS, 2023.

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“Politics and art collapse into one for the Egyptian citizen; they become inseparable. [...] The music becomes a way to write about politics.”¹

“Since music is an integral component of culture, music produced under occupation is inevitably music of resistance, whether it is political or not, politicized or not.”²

The contributions of this special issue demonstrate a renewed scholarly interest in popular music in the Middle East in recent years. In the face of resilient Arab authoritarianism and the continuing ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians, it is not surprising that many scholars seek to identify a glimmer of hope in the everyday cultural practices of the dominated. The two volumes under consideration are representative of this scholarly impetus, as well as the challenges it must overcome to attain a better understanding of “music in everyday life”³: namely articulating art and politics without collapsing one into the other, and *resisting* the temptation to employ the notion of *resistance* in an all-encompassing fashion, with the straight-forward narratives that such an approach entails.

Palestinian Music in Exile: Voices of Resistance is an ambitious work that develops from the doctoral research of British scholar and activist, Louis Brehony. The outcome of twenty years of research, music-making, and community organizing, it constitutes a rich, multi-sited ethnography of artistic practices among Palestinians in exile. The author adopts an expansive approach to the notion of exile: the book recounts the stories of Palestinian musicians in both the “near”

1- EL RASHIDI Yasmine, *Laughter in the Dark. Egypt to the Tune of Change*, New York, Columbia Global Reports, 2023, p. 70.

2- KANAANEH Moslih, In BREHONY Louis, *Palestinian Music in Exile: Voices of Resistance*, Cairo, The American University in Cairo Press, « Refugees and Migrants within the Middle East Series », 2023, p. 25.

3- DE NORA Tia, *Music in Everyday Life*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

and “far” diaspora (Kuwait, Egypt, Turkey, and the United Kingdom), as well as those of their compatriots living in Gaza, the West Bank, and within the borders of the state of Israel. This heuristic move is particularly productive: although musical practices do not hold identical meanings for Palestinians across different political and cultural contexts, they consistently point to their shared conditions of displacement.

Laughter in the Dark: Egypt to the Tune of Change is an essay by Yasmine El Rashidi. It is the third non-fiction monograph published by the Egyptian journalist, and consists of seven concise essays that together paint a kaleidoscopic portrait of the rise of rap and Mahraganat, as well as the careers of some of the two genres’ prominent performers.

Finding *Sumud* among Palestinian Diasporic Musicians

Palestinian Music in Exile begins by exploring the “materialities of musical transmission” among the Palestinian communities in Kuwait during the 1980s and 1990s. Louis Brehony attempts to bridge the gap between the processes of subjectivation involved in communal singing and listening (although the author curiously never refers explicitly to the notion) and the resurgence of the national movement among Palestinians in Kuwait until their collective expulsion in 1991.

The second chapter turns to the political significance of instrumental music. Brehony seeks to integrate this “silent music”⁴ into a linguistically oriented framework centered on “the messages carried by music”.⁵ He analyses the social trajectories and cultural productions of Palestinian musicians in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, arguing that their distinct musical dialects⁶ (or *lahajat*) are outcomes of a “reinvention and reinscription of musical tradition” that incorporates the experiences of Palestinian performers and fighters during periods of turmoil. These musical vocabularies in the region not only reflect the lived experiences of Palestinians, he contends, but also form a mode of “emancipatory politics” through which the “colonized native intellectual” learns to speak in their own dialect.⁷

Chapter three stands out as particularly relevant in the light of the ongoing genocide in Gaza. It examines how the circulation of music cassettes in the Palestinian enclave, as well as communal singing and listening in family gatherings, constituted “a tool of collective resistance”⁸ during the First Intifada (1987-1993). The author argues that these practices created artistic and political opportunities for young girls⁹ and cultivated “non-Gazan” revolutionary identities

4- BREHONY Louis, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

5- *Ibid.*, p. 33.

6- *Ibid.*, p. 56.

7- *Ibid.*, p. 85.

8- *Ibid.*, p. 113.

9- *Ibid.*, p. 94.

among displaced Palestinians.¹⁰ Brehony also analyzes notable songs from the “soundtrack” of the Intifada, although his conjectures regarding how they might have reflected the material realities of Gaza appear less convincing.

The subsequent chapter emerges as perhaps the weakest in the volume. In an almost Adornoian manner, Brehony attempts to find parallels between repetition and rupture in musical and political movements by analyzing the experimental music of Cairo-based Palestinian musician Tamer Abu Ghazale. The author argues that a philosophy of aesthetic experimentation among Palestinian musicians in exile triggered a movement of “critical musicianship” and political renewal in the wider region, breaking with the repetitiveness of Tarab, which the author describes as “a sociomusical relationship [that faces] extinction, [reflecting] a culture perceived to be in crisis”.¹¹ Drawing on earlier work on music, nation-building, and the decline of the Nasserist cultural apparatus,¹² Brehony argues that Palestinian diasporic music’s renegotiation of modern Arab identities prefigured the Egyptian Uprising.¹³

The fifth chapter addresses a different set of themes through an account of the career of a musician living near Haifa: the rejectionism of 1948 Palestinians in the face of assimilationist pressures, Israeli appropriation of Levantine folk music, and the shortcomings of post-Oslo reconciliation initiatives such as the East-West Diwan Orchestra. Theoretically, however, this chapter does not fully realize its potential. Drawing on the work of Paul Gilroy, Brehony suggests that “traces of a painful expression” find their way into Palestinian music, which thereby becomes “an enhanced body mode of communication beyond the petty power of words.”¹⁴, producing a “revolutionary feeling”¹⁵ and serving as a possible “tool for liberation.”¹⁶ Yet Brehony does not explain “how the genie of [Palestinian suffering] originally got into the bottle of music”, nor how it comes to affect the unconsciousness of its listeners.¹⁷

Chapter six categorizes the music of various Palestinian musicians into three “aesthetic modes”¹⁸ folk (*turathiyya*), patriotic (*wataniyya*), and arthouse music (*tarabiyya*). Brehony argues that the shared obstacles encountered by his interlocutors in the pursuit of their musical careers gave rise to a “critical, collective spirit [...] tending toward politicized comradeship”, thereby blurring the boundaries between musicianship and politicization.¹⁹ The final section

10- *Ibid.*, p. 104.

11- *Ibid.*, p. 119.

12- Cf. ARMBRUST Walter, *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996; FAHMY Ziad, *Ordinary Egyptians: Creating the Modern Nation through Popular Culture*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2011.

13- BREHONY Louis, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

14- *Ibid.*, p. 159.

15- *Ibid.*

16- *Ibid.*, p. 160.

17- DE NORA Tia, *op. cit.*, p. 2-3.

18- BREHONY Louis, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

19- *Ibid.*, p. 203.

of the volume turns to “the terms of address, language, and musico-political belonging”²⁰ of a group of Palestinian musicians in Istanbul. It explores the role of music in community-organizing efforts in exile. It considers how the songs these musicians perform reflect the materialities of their lives in Istanbul and become entangled in practices of “revolutionary dreaming.”²¹

Discerning the Ambiguities of Egyptian Youth Culture

Yasmine El Rashidi describes her monograph as an attempt to study “an ongoing moment in time” in the Egyptian cultural landscape²²—a return to self-censorship following the foreclosure of the revolutionary experience.²³ She argues that the cultural practices of Egyptian youth carry the traces of this brief period when the “barrier of fear” collapsed, making them “outspoken, uninhibited, independent, and free.”²⁴

Laughter in the Dark begins by centering on Egyptian rapper Marwan Pablo. It situates his social trajectory against the backdrop of the rise of Salafism in Alexandria, his home city, and a supposed backlash effect that pushed local youth from one extreme to the other.²⁵ El Rashidi also addresses the rapper’s social in-betweenness, growing up in a lower-class neighborhood that reflected the decline of the Egyptian welfare state, while simultaneously attending a middle-class language school.²⁶ She recounts how Pablo went from working service jobs to becoming a “national influencer,”²⁷ highlighting the pervasiveness of dreams of the “good life” among Egyptian youth. The author further insists on the political nature of the songs, arguing that they confront the problems of daily life and subvert conservative norms.²⁸

The second chapter centers on the moral outrage that followed a concert by Mahraganat singer ‘Enba in an upscale Cairo neighborhood in 2022. El Rashidi recounts the musician’s upbringing in one of the capital’s informal neighborhoods, and claims that it is representative of the urban subaltern male youth whose lives are “an ethnographic study served up publicly for the world to read.”²⁹ She mourns the ostentatious display of wealth by the singer after his commercial success, portraying him as “a reflective artist yielding to external pressures.”³⁰

20- *Ibid.*, p. 212.

21- *Ibid.*, p. 226.

22- EL RASHIDI Yasmine, *Laughter in the Dark. Egypt to the Tune of Change*, New York, Columbia Global Reports, 2023, p. 19.

23- *Ibid.*, p. 12.

24- *Ibid.*, p. 19.

25- *Ibid.*, p. 24.

26- *Ibid.*, p. 25.

27- *Ibid.*, p. 34.

28- *Ibid.*, p. 33.

29- *Ibid.*, p. 42.

30- *Ibid.*, p. 44.

In the following two chapters, El Rashidi considers the role of disses and rap battles in popularizing rap music in Egypt³¹ and analyzes the career of Mahraganat singer Mohammed Ramadan. The discussion of Ramadan is noteworthy, as the author appears to accuse him of “setting the standard for what every rap artist in Egypt started to want” by “flaunting wealth in a way [that runs] contrary to common cultural norms”³²—an assertion that underscores her normative outlook and reveals her limited familiarity with the genre. A subsequent chapter, titled “Beginnings”, does little more than reproduce the dominant historiography on Mahraganat.³³ This is followed by an analysis of an episode of “Crackdown” by the Egyptian Musicians’ Syndicate after a controversial performance of the hit song *Bent El Giran* in 2019.

The final chapter of *Laughter in the Dark* represents El Rashidi’s attempt to assess the political potentialities of this cultural phenomenon. She concedes that the political movement she set out to find—one that “[discusses] problems openly [so that] consensus [could] be gained and solutions collectively reached”—does not exist.³⁴ Instead, the author turns to the presence of Egyptian youth in public spaces. The chapter amounts to a non-reflexive statement of moral panic around lower-class masculinities. It draws on personal experience, the sentiments of upper middle-class residents, and a statement of a local police station director who alleges that young people behave frivolously because security forces can no longer arrest them as easily as they could in the past - a dubious claim in a country where an estimated one hundred thousand political prisoners languish in prisons, and one that El Rashidi does little to dispute or contextualize.³⁵ Seeking resistance and finding hooliganism, the author concludes her monograph with a tired trope: “a confluence of forces—of Egypt’s massive youth population and the country’s economic and political woes—is edging toward an implosion of one kind or another, at the very least of the social fabric and cohesion of the country as we have long known it to be”.³⁶

Overcoming the Romance of Resistance

Palestinian Music in Exile and *Laughter in the Dark* both reflect the necessity of ethnographies of the everyday to avoid essentializing Middle Eastern musicians and making romantic generalizations about the extent to which cultural practices constitute a form of resistance. Admittedly, it is difficult to compare the two books from an empirical perspective. El-Rashidi offers little in the way of primary sources, relying predominantly on press articles and

31- *Ibid.*, p. 51.

32- *Ibid.*, p. 57.

33- Cf. PUIG Nicolas, « De quoi le Mahraganat est-il le son ? Compositions et circulations musicales en Égypte », In: JACQUEMOND Richard, LAGRANGE Frédéric, *Culture pop en Égypte : Entre mainstream commercial et contestation*, Paris, Riveneuve, 2020; SCHOUTEN Elisa, « Contentious Culture: The Convergence and Contestation of Class and Identity in Egypt’s Mahraganat Scene », In : *Regards*, n° 34, 2025, à paraître.

34- EL RASHIDI Yasmine, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

35- *Ibid.*, p. 63.

36- *Ibid.*, p. 69.

interviews. Her claims are often unsubstantiated, and she neglects widely available op-eds and academic articles that might have enriched her analysis. The author also reproduces dominant historiographies and self-orientalist tropes without any regard to her positionality. Consequently, her account is marked by numerous factual inaccuracies—using *rap* and *Mahraganat* interchangeably is an especially questionable choice.³⁷ While *Mahraganat* could arguably be considered a functional equivalent to American rap in its status as a prevalent urban music genre, the term *rap* in its Egyptian use refers to a distinct social world with its own set of practices, representations, and class associations. It is therefore not surprising that El Rachidi conflates rappers and *Mahraganat* singers, mistakenly portraying the former as working-class when, in fact, they are often from more affluent backgrounds.³⁸

Conversely, Louis Brehony relies on a rich body of interviews and ethnographic observations. Each chapter begins with a different *Mawqif* (social situation and/or momentary pause) from which a more systematic analysis unfolds. However, the ambitious scope of the volume is perhaps also one of its shortcomings. Although the author occasionally succeeds in comparatively analyzing the material conditions, practices, and representations of Palestinian musicians across space and time, more often than not, the specificities of his interlocutors are sacrificed to the altar of essentialization. For him, “musicians are part of the Palestinian masses”, shunned by the music industry,³⁹ and inclined to “take to the streets in times of social movement”.⁴⁰ Readers of *Palestinian Music in Exile* are left with the impression that Palestinian musicians are invariably working-class and imbued with revolutionary consciousness in the face of Israeli capital.⁴¹ Palestinians who are not politicized, let alone those who cooperate with Israel, are dismissed as *comprador bourgeois*.⁴² Diasporic musicians are seen exclusively through the lens of the national struggle. Louis Brehony dismisses any notion of cosmopolitanism, contending that his interlocutors’ narratives are “explicitly national” and that their incorporation of a broad palate of global sounds ultimately serves a revolutionary nationalist cause.⁴³ The centrality of notions like *sumud* (see below) and attachment to the *land* to Palestinian identity is indisputable, but projecting a coherent and immutable revolutionary self onto these musicians neglects the continuous, contradictory, and necessarily incomplete nature of subjectivation processes. The result is an essentializing portrait of Palestinian musicians as noble freedom fighters. This tendency is further evidenced by Brehony’s need to absolve his interlocutors of imagined moral scrutiny, which he does by refuting a series of strawman arguments on gender roles, social conservatism, and Islamism.⁴⁴

37- *Ibid.*, p. 17.

38- *Ibid.*, p. 46.

39- BREHONY Louis, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

40- *Ibid.*, p. 4.

41- *Ibid.*, p. 149.

42- *Ibid.*, p. 151 - 152 -207.

43- *Ibid.*, p. 49.

44- *Ibid.*, p. 205-206.

Similarly, both authors approach music in a way that fails to account for the “messiness of the social”. What emerges through *Laughter in the Dark* is a rather non-agentive view on the reception of cultural artifacts: Egyptian youth appear to internalize the machismo and ostentatious display of wealth in rap and Mahraganat songs in the same fashion that her own generation, El Rachidi argues, was indoctrinated by state-controlled television.⁴⁵ Although Louis Brehony’s work is more theoretically sophisticated, it, too, insufficiently engages with the social settings in which music is produced, performed, circulated, and consumed. His focus is further narrowed by a linguistic approach to the effects of music, which the author justifies through the questionable assertion that “Palestinian music is primarily vocal, poetically based, and orally transmitted”.⁴⁶ Brehony exhibits a form of textualism: musicians are seen to appropriate various stylistic and narrative materials⁴⁷ to transmit meaningful messages to their audiences.⁴⁸ Despite cautioning against “musical determinism”, he frequently succumbs to it, repeatedly conjecturing on the authoritative meanings of various songs with no regard to alternative interpretations that would challenge his analytical framework. The affective and embodied dimensions of music—those that make it “above all a pleasurable experience”⁴⁹ rather than a sole act of resistance—are relegated to the margins, appearing only as an afterthought at the very end of the volume.

Due to these empirical and theoretical shortcomings, the two authors remain bound to a “romance of resistance”⁵⁰ They search repertoires of songs for lyrical or musicological elements that subvert dominant narratives, treating these as evidence of an oppositional stance among Egyptian and Palestinian musicians. This approach essentializes them and obscures the broader power relationships within which music is produced, performed, circulated, and experienced.⁵¹

Laughter in the Dark is emblematic of this narrow approach to music. El Rachidi is less interested in the cultural practices of marginalized young males than in the political transformations she believes those practices index. She celebrates certain songs as “political commentary” by subaltern voices the government seeks to suppress,⁵² lauding them for “tackling the problems of daily life” and challenging political censorship and social conservatism.⁵³ At the same time, she cannot help but frown down upon most rap and Mahraganat music for promoting machismo and conspicuous consumption.⁵⁴ The author acknowledges

45- EL RASHIDI Yasmine, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

46- BREHONY Louis, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

47- BREHONY Louis, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

48- BREHONY Louis, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

49- BREHONY Louis, *op. cit.*, p. 235.

50- ABU LUGHOD Lila, “The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power Through Bedouin Women”, In : *American Ethnologist*, vol. 17, n° 1, 1990.

51- For an example of an article that successfully addresses these issues while analyzing a highly romanticized figure, Cf. FRANKFORD Sophie, “Listening to Shaykh Imam: Music, National Belonging, and the Egyptian Left”, In : *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 2025, pp. 1-23.

52- EL RASHIDI Yasmine, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

53- *Ibid.*

54- *Ibid.*, p. 42.

her frustration with a reality that challenges romantic notions of resistance.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, intent on finding broader political implications, she reverts to a tradition of othering and securitizing marginalized male youth. The eponymous laughter in the dark is revealed to be less of a mocking challenge to state hegemony than an insidious threat to middle-class citizens by groups of lurking young men, heralding an imminent social collapse.

On the other hand, the argument presented in *Palestinian Music in Exile* hinges on *sumud*, an emic notion denoting Palestinian steadfastness and attachment to the land in the face of displacement. While the author admits that “[not] all Palestinian music represents *sumud*”,⁵⁶ the concept nonetheless becomes the backbone of his analysis. Throughout the text, *sumud* takes on different meanings, hovering somewhere between resilience and resistance. It is portrayed as a form of “stoic persistence”,⁵⁷ evidenced in as little as the preference of Gazan refugees for non-Westernized music.⁵⁸ At other times, it is an act of poetic or musical critique⁵⁹ that challenges Israeli attempts at erasure by transmitting memories of the land⁶⁰ and produces “alternative visions of liberation” through aesthetic experimentation.⁶¹ *Sumud* seems to signify a great many things to Palestinian musicians: “optimism through the pain of loss, a sense of female empowerment through political singing, artistic spirit built up by boycotting Israeli institutions, in asserting Palestine’s existence through music, and enduring conditions of social crisis”.⁶²

Despite the polysemic nature of *sumud*, in his attempt to shape this emic notion into an all-encompassing analytical concept, Brehony adopts a maximalist interpretation of “*sumud-as-critique*”—one in which Palestinian musicians criticize the “contradictions in the status quo” in a revolutionary manner.⁶³ This interpretation makes no distinction between contentious music produced, performed, and circulated in a deliberate effort to produce political change and the more ambiguous nature of most music embedded in everyday life. Contradictions between various viewpoints are smoothed out in favor of a coherent narrative that focuses on resistance. In this way, *sumud* becomes a totalizing theory of social life for Palestinians: “*Sumud* takes on its real life in the assemblage of multiple singular practices and the reorganization of relationships”.⁶⁴

It is certainly harder to interrogate romantic notions of resistance when it comes to Palestine. Louis Brehony rightly emphasizes that Palestinian *sumud* continues to inspire social movements worldwide. Yet not all Palestinians are freedom fighters, and depicting them as an inherently “resilient” people is particularly harmful at a

55- *Ibid.*, p. 60.

56- BREHONY Louis, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

57- *Ibid.*, p. 13.

58- *Ibid.*, p. 4.

59- *Ibid.*, p. 207.

60- *Ibid.*, p. 184.

61- *Ibid.*, p. 237.

62- *Ibid.*, p. 236.

63- *Ibid.*, p. 237.

64- *Ibid.*, p. 192.

time when the ethnic cleansing of Palestine has reached genocidal proportions. To romanticize the “special energy” of Gaza⁶⁵ is to suggest that Palestinians are uniquely equipped to endure extreme violence. Now more than ever, it is crucial to resist the essentialization of Palestine as a metaphor or moral compass:

“The Palestinian is the one who struggles to live a normal life under endlessly extraordinary conditions. [...] Do you seek out the words of Mahmoud Darwish and ignore the lyrics of young rappers? [...] Do you look for the fighter with the gun and the keffiyeh and ignore the fisherman and the farmer and the student who struggle every day to stay alive?”—Egyptian activist and political thinker, Alaa Abdel Fattah.⁶⁶

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65- *Ibid.*, p. 201.

66- ABD EL-FATTAH Alaa, *You Have Not Yet Been Defeated: Selected Works 2011-2021*, London, Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2021, p. 87-96.

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