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**Festivals: The Culture and Politics of *Mahraganat* Music in Egypt**

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**Festivals: The Culture and Politics of *Mahraganat* Music in Egypt**

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## **Dedication**

For my mother and father  
And their mothers and fathers...

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## Abstract

### **Festivals: The Culture and Politics of *Mahraganat* Music in Egypt**

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This thesis is an ethnographic study that explores the culture and politics of a contemporary and emergent genre of music in Egypt. *Mahraganat* (“festivals”) describes an energetic musical movement that locates its genealogy in Egyptian Folk music as well as North American Hip-Hop and European Electronica. Although originally produced in the peripheral neighborhoods of Cairo and Alexandria, the performance of *Mahraganat* has permeated throughout the variable spaces of urban Egypt. Through a focus on critical performance ethnography, and in dialogue with affect theory, sound studies, and Middle Eastern studies, I situate *Mahraganat* as a lived and felt phenomenon among a youthful generation of Egyptians. This project poses critical questions that aim to open a dialogue in the literature concerning the affective and political horizons of *Mahraganat* music, including: how do *Mahraganat*’s aficionados feel their way through the suspenseful moment of a post-Mubarak, post-Arab Spring, and post-Muslim Brotherhood Egypt? Also, what are the political implications and possibilities that co-emerge with the irruption of this genre and its accompanying modes of performance? With an emphasis

on the body as an important site of political contestation and possibility, I argue that both the formal components of *Mahraganat* music and the ways in which it is listened to challenge existing modes of being and constitute new and proliferating forms of belonging that are simultaneously homegrown and transnational for a young and disenfranchised group of Egyptian men.

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## Introduction

*July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2014*

After more than a yearlong absence, I arrived in Cairo on July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2014. As my plane from Texas via Frankfurt slowed to a stop, everyone around me pulled out their cell phones to call and message their loved ones and let them know that they had arrived safely. Numerous conversations accompanied by beeps, ringtones, and flurrying text message notifications filled the aircraft. The afternoon Cairene sun made its presence felt on my skin as I made my way from the plane to the bus that would take us to the terminal. I felt embraced by the heat.

In the time since my feet last touched Egyptian soil (June of the previous year), military forces had removed another president from office, Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, and replaced him with then Minister of Defense, Abdel Fattah El-Sisi. Unsure of what to expect from the political and affective landscape of the country, I equipped my face with an unrelenting smile and navigated the visa and customs lines, eventually planting my feet in front of the baggage claim that promised to deliver my luggage. After approximately twenty minutes of waiting and conversing with several fellow passengers that also came from Houston, it seemed that my suitcase had not yet caught up with the rest of me at the Egyptian capital and that I would have to return to the airport the next morning to claim my luggage. Determined to not lose my good mood, I marched out of the terminal and found a taxi driver willing to take me to my hotel in Zamalek, a neighborhood of central Cairo located on an island in the Nile.

Along the way, as it often occurs during taxi rides in Egypt, I struck up a conversation with my driver, asking him how Egypt had changed in the last year. He told

me that while there was less crime and more security, the ability to speak one's mind freely had significantly diminished. Expressing a preference for stability, he argued that this was a worthy sacrifice.

As we weaved through the dense traffic toward Zamalek, he asked what brought me to Egypt. I explained to him that I had lived in Alexandria for a year during the Muslim Brotherhood's time in power and that I missed my Egyptian friends and the feel of Egypt. I also informed him that my primary reason for returning was to perform research for my Master's thesis at The University of Texas, whose object is a contemporary genre of Egyptian music. "What kind of Music?" he asked me as we made eye contact through the rearview mirror. "It's called *Mahraganat*,"<sup>1</sup> I replied. As the word left my lips, his face lit up as he frantically reached into his center console and extracted a USB drive. "*Mahraganat?! I love Mahraganat!*" As he excitedly plugged in the drive to his stereo system he began to drum on the steering wheel, explaining to me that the haste of the beat and the colloquial style of the lyrics spoke to the Egyptian sensibility of joviality, described by the familiar expression *al-damm al-khafif* (light bloodedness/good humor).

When the USB drive finally registered, *Mahraganat* artists Okka and Ortega's song *Anā Aşlan Gāmid* (I'm Awesome, Inherently) flooded the taxi.<sup>2</sup> Turning off the air conditioner and rolling down the windows, the driver turned the volume up to an

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<sup>1</sup> *Mahragānāt* in proper transliteration. However, I have chosen to transliterate the word based on how it is usually typed in chats, YouTube videos, mp3 downloads, etc. Additionally, while *Mahraganat* is technically a plural noun in Arabic I will be referring to it in translation as a singular noun, as it describes the genre more generally.

<sup>2</sup> "*Anā Aşlan Gāmid*" ("I'm Awesome, Inherently"), *YouTube* video, 3:51, posted by "El Sobky Production," November 16, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3a0dHSE18QI>.

uncomfortably loud decibel level and began to sing along with the intensely catchy song. Our taxi transformed from a vehicle merely intended to take an American visitor to his hotel to a travelling celebration of life, broadcasting the bass laden beat and the electronically augmented lyrics to anyone and anything that crossed our meandering path through the urban landscape.

Once we reached the hotel, the driver hurried out of the car to help me with my carry-on luggage and initially refused to accept my money. Although I knew this was a cultural gesture of kindness and hospitality, it would be extremely rude and insensitive not to pay him the agreed upon amount, so I insisted. Not pausing to count the bills, he put the currency in his pocket and shook my hand with a firm grip. After kissing me on both cheeks, he gave me his phone number and wished me good luck. We unfortunately did not keep in touch, but listening to that song together in his car had created an ambience of intimacy usually not available between Egyptian and American strangers. With the knowledge that my luggage was most likely on a conveyor belt somewhere in Germany, a thought that would usually produce a great deal of anxiety in me, I felt a strong wave of peace and comfort wash over me. Every time I listen to *Anā Aşlan Gāmid* I remember that moment, swaying along to the beat in a Cairene taxi as I reintroduced myself to the Egyptian capital.

### *Introduction*

This thesis explores the culture and politics of *Mahraganat* music in urban Egypt, specifically within the public and counterpublic spaces of Cairo and Alexandria.

*Mahraganat* (loosely translated as “festivals” or “parties”) is a plural noun that singularly

describes a popular genre of music among young, especially male, Egyptians. Although *Mahraganat*'s fan base cuts across all socioeconomic classes and geographic regions of Egypt and even crosses international borders at times, it is most commonly associated with young working-class men that live in the peripheral neighborhoods of Cairo and Alexandria. While these areas are usually characterized as the birthplace of *Mahraganat* music and the primary bastion of its popularity, one does not have to travel far from Egypt's central urban spaces to experience its undeniable presence in the soundscape of the Egyptian metropolis. Often heard blaring loudly from a taxi, microbus, or from the haphazardly attached speaker of a motorcycle, *Mahraganat* has emerged as a voluble component of the everyday experience of the Egyptian city for both visitors and inhabitants alike over the last several years.

The current study is an initial attempt to trace the aural and affective horizons of *Mahraganat* music in order to understand how the performative act of listening to this genre initiates and maintains a field of intimate emotional and political possibilities. Taking issue with the sensibility often held by the Egyptian middle and upper-classes that *Mahraganat* music is merely an expression of hooliganism and a lower-class tendency toward criminality and hypersexual activity, I will argue throughout this thesis that both the formal components of *Mahraganat* music and the ways in which people (mostly young Egyptian males) listen to the genre actually challenge existing modes of being and constitute new and proliferating forms of belonging that are simultaneously homegrown and transnational for a young and disenfranchised generation of Egyptian men. I am interested in how these new masculine subjectivities are partly constructed through vociferous and public listening practices, as well as a variable array of bodily postures

and positions that prompt either solidarities or cleavages between *Mahraganat*'s aficionados and other bodies that inhabit and move through the urban publics of Egypt.

The variable and often ambivalent feelings that *Mahraganat* and its accompanying discursive implications insert and promulgate through the affective environment of urban Egypt suggest that this genre, both in and of itself and through its public modes of performance, is somehow disrupting and refiguring the common associations that people have in regards to daily life in bustling Cairo and seaside Alexandria. Throughout this project, I hope to hone in on and contribute to this sonically mediated and affectively charged intervention that is recalibrating the already complex socio-political infrastructure of post-Mubarak (and now, post-Morsi or post-Muslim Brotherhood) Egypt.

*Mahraganat* emerged out of suburban neighborhoods on the peripheries of Cairo in the mid 2000's. The music is generally described and understood as a mixture of popular Egyptian Folk music (*Sha' bī*), North American Hip-Hop, and European Dance and Electronic music. Recorded in haphazard "studios," which usually consist of a laptop, a microphone, and pirated software, the songs often express the struggles and passions of everyday life in Egypt, especially in the poor urban suburbs.

Recent scholarship has begun to graze the surface of *Mahraganat* as an emergent aesthetic genre of political possibility. Elliott Colla, in his engagement with the rhetorical trajectory of a popular revolutionary phrase "*al-sha' b yureed... (the people want...)*," investigates a specific *Mahraganat* song by DJ 'Amr Haha (often stylized online as Amr 7a7a, as 7 refers to the Arabic letter ḥ in common chat transliteration) that parodies the

phrase in order to suggest that the people only want a few pounds of cell phone credit.<sup>3</sup> Colla, however, does not explicitly designate Haha's song as *Mahragan* or *Mahraganat*, suggesting that he is a "Hip-Hop artist."<sup>4</sup> In conversation with Colla, Ted Swedenburg, while challenging the very assumption by Westerners that Egypt's 2011 revolution music of protest is singularly Rap/Hip-Hop, has argued that the proliferation of *Mahraganat* after the 2011 uprisings offers critical insight into both the possibilities opened up by these demonstrations as well as the popular exhaustion with the continued state of social, political, and economic transition that Egyptians have experienced over the last several years.<sup>5</sup> Swedenburg importantly notes that *Mahraganat*, as a genre, often tackles taboo subjects that are otherwise considered inappropriate for proper cultural production, and correctly mentions that the music is "likely to play an important role in the country's immediate cultural and political future."<sup>6</sup>

While these academic engagements with the content and function of certain *Mahraganat* songs are important starting points for understanding the relevance of the genre within Egypt's cultural and political horizons, there has yet to be an academic project in the literature that exposes and analyzes the ways in which people experience *Mahraganat* and incorporate it into the fabric of their everyday lives. In other words, how *Mahraganat* is a lived and felt phenomenon. Furthermore, these studies primarily couch their engagement with *Mahraganat* within the discourse of the popular uprisings of 2011

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<sup>3</sup> Elliott Colla, "The People Want," *Middle East Research and Information Project* 42, no. 263 (2012), <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer263/people-want>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ted Swedenburg, "Egypt's Music of Protest: From Sayyid Darwish to DJ Haha," *Middle East Research and Information Project* 42, no. 265 (2012), <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer265/egypts-music-protest>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

and onward. While I cannot stress the social and political magnitude of these events enough and while I admit that the genre's popularity and proliferation was undoubtedly aided and exacerbated by the discursive space opened up by these very uprisings, I believe it is important to recognize *Mahraganat* as a movement in its own right. As I will demonstrate, *Mahraganat* artists are usually not primarily concerned with touting the slogans and ideologies of the revolution. On the contrary, most songs' thematic content revolves around subjects such as women, drugs, and colloquial turns of phrase. This is not to say, however, that *Mahraganat* is an apolitical movement. In fact, I will argue throughout that the rhetoric of defiance imbued in both the lyrical content of the music as well as the gestural repertoire of its aficionados are manifestly political phenomena.

The present study will pose critical questions, the answers to which will aim to shed light on how *Mahraganat*, its co-emergent public listening practices, and the ways in which *Mahraganat* affects the tenor of everyday life, are initiating important shifts in the experience of the Egyptian city. These questions include: how are young Egyptian men engaging *Mahraganat* as a critical pedagogy for living in and moving through the urban publics of a post-revolution Egypt? Furthermore, how does the performance of *Mahraganat* through public and vociferous listening practices initiate and renegotiate affective modes of belonging and challenge traditional forms of masculinity among its patrons? Also, what kinds of transnational solidarities and cleavages are produced through *Mahraganat*'s appropriation of Western Hip-Hop and black diasporic culture on the one hand, and its genealogy within traditional Egyptian *Sha' bī* music on the other? Finally, what are the political implications and possibilities of *Mahraganat*'s form and content as well as the methods by which it is listened to? It is my contention that

answering these questions requires a sustained and nuanced attention to both the aesthetic developments within the genre and the ways in which it is expressed and re-appropriated through various public performances of audition and bodily movement.

### *Methodologies and Chapters*

My approach to this subject is heavily informed by notions of critical performance ethnography, as elaborated by Dwight Conquergood. Conquergood explained that as anthropologists and cultural critics began to describe ethnographic research as an “embodied practice...an intensely sensuous way of knowing,” ethnography, under the tutelage of scholars such as James Clifford, Erving Goffman, and Clifford Geertz, experienced a shift toward performance as both a critical lens and a site of possible alternative methodologies for doing research.<sup>7</sup> For Conquergood and his contemporaries, the performance-minded ethnographer recognizes his or her proximity to and interaction with the subject matter as the primary locus of mediated analysis:

The performance paradigm privileges particular, participatory, dynamic, intimate, precarious, embodied experience grounded in historical process, contingency, and ideology. Another way of saying it is that performance-centered research takes as both subject matter and method the experiencing body situated in time, place, and history. The performance paradigm insists on face-to-face encounters instead of abstractions and reductions. It situates ethnographers within the delicately negotiated and fragile “face-work” that is part of the intricate and nuanced dramaturgy of everyday life.<sup>8</sup>

As D. Soyini Madison argues, Conquergood’s performative injunction into the methods of ethnographic inquiry “is particularly suited to unveil the oft hidden and

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<sup>7</sup> Dwight Conquergood, “Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies*, ed. D. Soyini Madison and Judith A. Hamera (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2006), 352.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 348.

convoluted processes of power, discourse, and materiality because of the consequences that emerge on the sites and interstices of performing on the borders.”<sup>9</sup> This methodology offers a critical entry point into describing the idiosyncratic and variable ways that bodies perform their cultural identities and, in turn, the political possibilities that are fleetingly played out and etched into discourse through the arbiter of a lived, kinetic, and performing body.

Focusing on the performing body as an interstitial vector of potentiality allows us to account for potential political outcomes that would otherwise be considered impossible or at least outside of the official discourse of what it means to *be* in a certain time and space. Channeling Ernst Bloch’s exegesis of the political power of art, Joshua Chambers-Letson argues that:

[P]erformance functions as an *idea* of a better world, an exploration of options for realizing this world, and a *rehearsal* for its possibility. Brought to life during the period of the performance, it allows us to see seemingly foreclosed potentialities as verifiable realities.<sup>10</sup>

Given this definition, performance, both as method and object of inquiry, offers critical insight into how bodies, and the human subjectivities that they host, respond to, interact with, and negotiate their political, social, economic, and spatial context. For the purposes of the current study, mapping performative activity thus enables the critical ethnographer to unpack the various everyday practices that people perform in order to either resist or conform to hierarchical structures of power and punctuated outbursts of institutional violence.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 347.

<sup>10</sup> Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson and Elizabeth W. Son, “Performed Otherwise: The Political and Social Possibilities of Asian/American Performance,” in *Theater Survey* 54, no. 1 (2013), 133.

In accordance with my interest in performance and the body, my theoretical outlook is heavily indebted to affect theory as elaborated by scholars such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Lauren Berlant, Brian Massumi, and Kathleen Stewart, among others. Specifically in this project, I am concerned with how space is both felt and perceived through a complex network of affects that structures people's subjectivities, i.e. how they interface with the world around them. By affects, I mean "pre-personal" forces that flow between and around both human and nonhuman bodies, sometimes registering in the nervous system as emotions, and eventually condense to form a person or a place as a perceived totality.<sup>11</sup> Space, for my purposes, is a complex conglomeration of such affects. It is rhizomatic, constituted by a multiplicity of movements and feelings that are unstable, constantly refraining and changing.<sup>12</sup> Ethnography that is couched in a concern for *felt* realities helps us to temporarily escape the reductive tropes of representation that set up a clear line of analysis between an object and its meaning. In other words, an attunement to affect enables us to admit that meaning is unstable and relative to the dramaturgy of lived experience.

Although my felt encounters with *Mahraganat* are limited to a year abroad (between June 2012 and June 2013) in which researching contemporary Egyptian music was not my primary focus, a month in the summer of 2014, and a sustained virtual engagement with the music via YouTube videos and downloaded mp3's, the current study is grounded in a series of ethnographic instances that inform both my personal and

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<sup>11</sup> Lone Bertelson and Andrew Murphie, "An Ethics of Everyday infinities and powers: Félix Guattari on Affect and the Refrain," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 140.

<sup>12</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 6-7.

theoretical relationship with the genre and its aficionados. Each chapter begins with an ethnographic vignette that situates the chapter's content through an intimate interaction with either a fan of *Mahraganat* or the content of the music itself. I have intentionally structured the chapters to more or less match my journey with the genre. It may seem strange, for instance, that a nuanced musicological analysis of *Mahraganat* is delayed until the third chapter. However, when considering how humans usually encounter music on a daily basis, not via a complex understanding of the formal components of the music but through the lived and embodied practice of listening, I believe the structure ultimately makes sense.

Chapter 1 describes the ways that *Mahraganat* is routinely performed in the spaces of Egypt's urban publics, and focuses particularly on the Alexandrian coastal highway and boardwalk (the *Corniche*). By focusing on public listening practices and the body as a site of political, social, and gendered contestation, I hope to imagine how *Mahraganat*'s aficionados resist normative notions of Egyptian masculinity through embodied practices of audition, driving, and fashion. These practices, I argue, initiate new modes of belonging, apart from traditional pious or nationalist Egyptian masculinities, that allow for novel affective postures and solidarities to emerge across a young generation of frustrated Egyptian men.

Chapter 2 continues the work of the first chapter in that it makes room for aural engagements with *Mahraganat* that are more private and not so vociferous. It also stages a series of fleeting ethnographic encounters in order to understand both how fans of *Mahraganat* perceive themselves in the hierarchical infrastructure of Egyptian cultural production and the way that these fans are often characterized by many individuals from

middle or upper classes. While *Mahraganat* has achieved considerable domestic and international popularity over the past few years, I demonstrate that an unfortunate and expressly class-oriented stigma still surrounds the *Mahraganat* movement, and that these negative associations even permeate the psyche of some fans that characterize the music as not worthy of critical inquiry.

Chapter 3 represents the musicological portion of the project. It engages both the lyrical content and the musical form of the genre in order to trace its complex genealogy in traditional Egyptian Folk music (*Sha'bi*), the early 2000's North American era of "bling" style Hip-Hop, and European Electronic music. Through this genealogy, I will argue that *Mahraganat* music reflects both an intense historical familiarity with rooted Egyptian cultural production and a globalized sensibility that takes seriously aesthetic material travelling from the West through massively marketed and mediated movements, both physical and virtual, of capital and information.

Finally, Chapter 4 traces the political trajectory of Egypt from the election of Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohamed Morsi through the present in order to understand how the activities of *Mahraganat*'s artists and aficionados affect and are affected by the constantly shifting political landscape of the country, and how the specter of institutional violence eventually penetrates *Mahraganat*'s discourse, as it does in nearly all sectors of Egyptian society. Concurrently, recalling the content of the first chapter and in dialogue with Jacques Rancière's notion of politics in *Dissensus*, the chapter argues that the movements and activities of *Mahraganat* music are manifestly political phenomena, and should not be reduced to either the illicit actions of a group of buffoons or merely the incidental product of the 2011 revolution.

It is my hope that through the arc of these chapters, I will begin to glean why *Mahraganat* has gained so much traction among working-class groups of men in Egypt as well as the variable and complex political potentialities that the embodied practices of listening to and playing with the genre engender. It is important to note that while the political and economic future of Egypt's national institutions are uncertain, people continue to find ways to live, work, and play, even in the most seemingly transitional and suspended of realities. Considering *Mahraganat* and its affective range of possibility offers critical insight into *some* of the ways that many young Egyptians negotiate their place in the city, the country, and the world.

## Chapter 1: The *Sarsaggiyya*: Performing *Mahraganat* on Alexandria's

### *Corniche*

*Recollection: Sometime in July 2012*

Despite my short athletic shorts and white Apple headphones that screamed my identity as a foreigner, it was on the boardwalk runs caught between the Mediterranean and the bustling traffic that I felt the most Alexandrian. Around the neighborhood Sporting, I would descend onto the large cubic blocks of cement, intended to prevent the Egyptian city from sinking further into the sea, and do some simple calisthenics. The salty waves crashed on my face as I supported my body with my hands, the Mediterranean steadily imposing itself on my senses. On the way back to my apartment I would always walk at a slow pace and let the city wash over me just as the misty tide had minutes earlier. Everything was where it was, glowing vibrantly in the heat of the afternoon: the taxis honking, the *tirmis* (lupini beans) vendors offering an affordable snack, the persistent hum of the sea that seemed to express a desire to speak of all the events it had seen and the memories that it keeps.

The more I ran, the more one aspect of the *Corniche* seemed to reveal itself. The first few times I noticed the motorcycles speeding past me on the sidewalk, often carrying multiple young men and emitting peculiar sounds from a haphazardly attached speaker, I did not think much of it. However, after a few weeks of daily jogs it became clear that these vehicles, the men they carry, and the music they broadcast were a persistent and noticeable presence in the visual and aural landscape of the *Corniche*. Every once in a while, they would make a point to drive toward me along my intended path and see if I

would move out of the way. It seemed from the level of subsequent laughter that the closer we came to crashing into one another, the more successful the maneuver was.

What intrigued me most were the enticing sounds emanating from speakers of the motorcycles as they sped into, through, and past my field of possible audition. Loud, fast, and robotic sounding in the way the lyrics were electronically augmented, I thirsted to know to what genre of music I was being exposed. It wasn't the archetypical, yet certainly beautiful, Egyptian music of Umm Kulthum or Abdel Halim Hafez that I had listened to in Arabic classes. There was an ambience of levity to both the music itself and the actions of those who listened to it. As such, it was constantly on the move, coming and going before I could really get a grip on what was being said in the lyrics or the exact trajectory of the melodies. Nor could I often interact with the young men for more than the few seconds that our gazes crossed. Although it seemed fully within the grasp of many around me, the fleeting nature of both the music and the men who broadcasted it to the surrounding space became a defining characteristic in my mind, which imbued the entire phenomenon with an air of mystery and intrigue. Simultaneously allowing the *Corniche* to cohere and unhinge, the music initiated a spatial state of aporia that was for me at once clarifying and confusing, incorporating and exclusionary, real and virtual.

### *The Corniche*

Alexandria's coastal promenade and highway (known colloquially by the borrowed French word, *Corniche*) stretches for slightly over ten miles, beginning in the west from the fifteenth-century Qait-Bay Citadel and ending at King Fuad's Montazah Palace and gardens in the east. The concave harbor, located between the Citadel and the

modern Library of Alexandria (Bibliotheca Alexandrina), and the neighborhoods spanning behind it contains Alexandria's oldest extant architecture as well as remnants of its ancient civilization. This includes buildings erected during the Khedival period, Greco-Roman ruins, and everything in between. Most of Alexandria's population dwells east of the Bibliotheca in residential neighborhoods such as Al-Ibrahimiyya and Sidi Bishr. Originally designed under the Mohamed Ali Pasha dynasty in 1870 by an Italian architect, the *Corniche* continues to serve as both the main traffic artery of the city and as an important space for communal gathering and sociality.

In recent years, especially since the uprisings of 2011, the *Corniche* has witnessed the irruption of *Mahraganat* music within the pliable visual, aural, and tactile borders of its geography. Commonly heard blaring loudly from the speakers of a moving motorcycle, bicycle, taxi, or auto-rickshaw (*tūk-tūk*), *Mahraganat* persistently whizzes by those walking through or sitting on the *Corniche*, seeming simultaneously fleeting and omnipresent. Accompanying and interrupting the mundane activities of passing Alexandrians on the *Corniche*, *Mahraganat* has become a ubiquitous background for daily urban life. Although the lyrics are often hard to decipher because of the auto-tune and their obscuration by the Doppler effect of its passing vessel, when listened to closely, they often reflect and parody the concerns of a young generation of Egyptian men. In the wake of Hosni Mubarak's ousting in February of 2011 and due to its unique topographical features, *Mahraganat*'s patrons have found in the *Corniche* a meaningful site for the negotiation and performance of their identity as young Egyptian males through the affective and discursive vehicle of the genre.

In this chapter, I argue that the performance of *Mahraganat* through transversal and voluble listening practices has refigured the common attachments and entanglements that people have with the day-to-day experience of the *Corniche*, and furthermore the experience of being a city-dweller in Egypt. I term *Mahraganat*'s appropriation of space this operation of interruption, recalibration, and taking over, of generating and forcing new affects to come into being and be reckoned with. In other words, the emergence and performance of *Mahraganat* in the public spaces of the *Corniche* carry along with it variable feelings of belonging, fear, hope, aggression, and satisfaction that are sonically conditioned and visually inescapable.

These affective modes of expression and existence thus engender new relationships to space, the city, and citizenship that had not heretofore emerged. Certain literary productions by writers such as Naguib Mahfouz, Ibrahim Abdel Maguid, and André Aciman have established the *Corniche* as an important and meaningful site for nostalgia, reflection, sociality, and conflict.<sup>13</sup> However, for scholars that would cite the *Corniche* as an important conceptual locus for understanding the social infrastructure of post-revolution Egypt and the implications of personal and political existence in Alexandria, to overlook the phenomenon of *Mahraganat* and its accompanying bodily performances would construct an incomplete and incorrect image of the space. In conversation with non-representational and affect theory, sound studies, and notions of performance, I contend that this genre of music has recalibrated the theoretical and physical infrastructure of Alexandria's beach road and pedestrian walkway. Because of

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<sup>13</sup> See André Aciman, "Alexandria: The Capital of Memory," *False Papers* (New York: Picador 2001); Ibrahim Abdel Maguid, *No One Sleeps in Alexandria*, trans. Farouk Abdel Wahab (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press 2007); and Naguib Mahfouz, *Miramar*, trans. Fatma Moussa Mahmoud (New York: Anchor 1992).

its overwhelming and demanding presence in the sensorial register of the space, the performative action of listening to *Mahraganat* provides a useful lens into a self-aware, politically conscious, and expressive generation of Egyptians. In the public spaces of the *Corniche*, this group of people has found a stage for the expression and coalescence of a new community, for the formation of emergent identities within and against existing modes of belonging, exclusion, and masculinity. The proliferation of this genre and its popularity raises important questions concerning both the physical contours of the space as well as the human subjects that occupy it. Namely, what are the specific areas and layers of the *Corniche* that have been appropriated, or resisted appropriation, by the introduction of *Mahraganat* into its discourse? What are the topographical, political, and affective features of the space that account for this emergence and appropriation (or lack thereof)? Additionally, what are the various auditory practices, bodily movements, and gestural refrains that constitute how people perform *Mahraganat* within or outside the space of the *Corniche*?

In order to answer these questions, I will first describe in detail certain parts of the *Corniche* that have either been affected or unaffected by *Mahraganat*'s manifestation, emergence, imposition, and interference in the multi-layered space. I will then spend some time engaging the ways in which *Mahraganat*'s aficionados ornament and position their bodies in order to suggest new modes of citizenship and belonging that challenge codified assumptions of Egyptian masculinity and political identity, and this in an Egypt that is experiencing a persistent and suspenseful state of political transition. I do not wish to argue that *Mahraganat* music expresses the desires and concerns of all Egyptians, or even all of Egyptian youth, nor do I aim to suggest that Alexandria's *Corniche* has been

completely taken over by motorcycles and loud music. In contrast, I explore the *Corniche*'s different physical and theoretical layers that have been affected, or unaffected by the performance of *Mahraganat* in the space. Additionally, it should not be assumed that since the primary focus of this chapter is the Alexandrian *Corniche* that this is the only space in which *Mahraganat* is a noticeable and emergent phenomenon. I have limited the scope of this chapter to the Alexandrian *Corniche* in order to *zoom in* on a particular and performative manifestation of existence in Egypt and to eventually *zoom out* on the broader political implications of finding new affective modes of being in the country, post-revolution, post-Mubarak, and now, post-Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>14</sup> In the wake of continuing political and economic instability, the emergence and persistence of this genre and its consistent presence in such a public and meaningful space points not only to the genre as an effective vehicle of expression, but also to the compatibility of the *Corniche* as one of its primary stages in Alexandria.

### *The Space of the Corniche: Layers and Appropriations*

The Alexandrian *Corniche* can be described in broad strokes as both a major thoroughfare and a social rallying point for citizens and visitors of the city. However, investigating the different sections, layers, and areas of the space in detail is pressing for the current study in order to locate how and where *Mahraganat* is operating and appropriating such an environment. As I explained above, the historic heart of Alexandria

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<sup>14</sup> Here, I am channeling Marcela Fuentes' engagement with art-activism (artivism) in the borderlands of Latin America. See Marcela Fuentes, "Zooming In and Out: Tactical Media Performance in Transnational Contexts," in *Performance, Politics, and Activism*, ed. John Rouse and Peter Lichtenfels (New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2013), 32-55.

is ostensibly located in between the Citadel and the modern library. Beginning in Bahari, the neighborhood where the Citadel is located and is most heavily influenced architecturally by Alexandria's previous Turkish population,<sup>15</sup> the coastal sidewalk of the *Corniche* is only a couple meters wide. As an area with a wealth of fish and vegetable markets, popular restaurants, and other commercial activity, both pedestrian and vehicular traffic is heavy on the *Corniche* on this edge of the city. The walkway becomes less crowded as one leaves the area toward Manshiyya, the home to Alexandria's main courthouse, but congestion returns quickly in Ramleh, where the major tram station of the city as well as numerous historical and touristic landmarks are located. Shortly after passing the library, for roughly three kilometers from Shatby (the home to Alexandria University) to Sidi Gaber (a highly residential area that features some of Alexandria's best restaurants and social clubs), the promenade section of the *Corniche* widens and splits into two parts, partitioned by a waist-high concrete barrier. The first is the pedestrian sidewalk adjacent to the roadway, which continues more or less along the entire stretch of the *Corniche*. The second part, closer to the edge of the water, is a wider walkway that is punctuated every few hundred meters by oceanside cafés.

This latter area I will call the boardwalk, as there is not a specific term used for this part of the space (most people just refer to it as the *Corniche* as well). Throughout the day and into the night, the boardwalk is occupied by street vendors selling an array of goods from grilled corn on the cob to children's toys, ice cream to fake designer watches, young locals playing soccer with makeshift balls and goals, families taking strolls, and

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<sup>15</sup> For a wonderful description of Turkish influence in Bahari, see Hala Halim, *Alexandrian Cosmopolitanism: An Archive* (New York: Fordham University Press 2013), 125.

joggers like myself. While the bay is thought to contain much of Alexandria's colonial and Hellenic history, it is in this area where much of the pedestrian traffic and daily sociality occurs because of its central location and its particular spatial characteristics that allow it to accommodate a wide range of bodies, activities, and exchanges.

William David Estrada, in his study of the historic Los Angeles Plaza argues, “[plazas] are settings for everyday urban life where daily interactions, economic exchanges, and informal conversations occur, thereby creating a socially meaningful place in the heart of the city.”<sup>16</sup> Although Alexandria's *Corniche* does not exactly match the spatial dimensions of a central plaza of southern California, the boardwalk particularly brings together similar kinds of affective interactions and exchanges. Political conversations occur in coffee shops, people buy and eat ice cream, bump into each other and shake hands, joke and argue amongst one another. Such interactions are partly conditioned by the *Corniche*'s spatial properties. A kind of elongated plaza, the boardwalk is an epicenter for a diverse array of social correspondence: purposeful congregations, accidental confrontations, or the exchanging of money for food. In addition, while many different kinds of people congregate on the boardwalk, there are certain places and boundaries that serve as distinct markers of class and gender.

Because of their prime real estate, the coffee shops on the seafront are more expensive and attract a predominantly upper class and expatriate clientele. Additionally, women and tourists are likely to be found at these establishments, while mostly Egyptian men populate inner-city coffee shops. As such, it is not strange to see these shops open and operational even during the fasting month of Ramadan, when it is not common to see

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<sup>16</sup> William David Estrada, *The Los Angeles Plaza: Sacred and Contested Space* (Austin: University of Texas Press 2008), 8.

people drinking, eating, or smoking cigarettes in public. Also, because of its proximity to the Library and Alexandria University, students often take breaks in between classes to walk along this section of the *Corniche*. They mark their belonging to the city by carrying their books and notebooks, exhibiting their association with the educational institution.

The boardwalk is also where one experiences *Mahraganat* in its most common mode of expression in Alexandria, streaming from the loudspeaker of a rented motorcycle. Young males who rent these vehicles usually retrieve them from different locations, often in Bahari, that offer daily rentals for a modest price. After the 2011 revolution and the subsequent ousting of the Mubarak regime, police presence in Egypt declined dramatically. In the absence of such a ubiquitous arm of power and control on the Alexandrian *Corniche*, the patrons of *Mahraganat* were able to spill onto the boardwalk and express their own agency and power. Due to its width and high concentration of social activity, these individuals often chose to drive the rented bikes onto pedestrian walkway, riding them up and down the three-kilometer space, weaving between groups of people and around coffee shops, sometimes parking them to enjoy the surroundings statically. I will return to this subject, namely the various movements that make up the performance of *Mahraganat*, in the next section.

An important part of the *Corniche* that, because of its geographical features and positioning, *Mahraganat* has not been able to occupy is the space below it, the concrete erosion rocks (*al-sukhūr*). The final frontier between the water and the shore, these large cubic stones that are intended to prevent Alexandria from being swallowed by the blue belly of the Mediterranean are also platforms for other levels of social interaction. Because the current is not as strong on the western side of Alexandria near Bahari, the

*Corniche* is almost level with the water and there are not as many rocks guarding the city. As you move eastward toward the boardwalk, however, the road and the buildings behind it sit higher above the sea and more barriers are needed to keep the water at bay. Because of its proximity to the water, people engage this space in very practical ways. For instance, fishermen will stand on the rocks in order to lure and catch fish more easily. Also, those who want to take a swim but aren't willing to pay the fee to get into the public and private beaches are happy to danger the jagged edges of the *sukhūr*. Alexandrians and visitors alike also use this space as a productive site for reflection and pontification, often looking into the sea as they have conversations with their comrades.

Moreover, since descending into this area of the city makes you nearly invisible and inaudible to the people and places above, some illicit activities that would not be readily accepted in the typical spaces of Alexandria occur here as well: drug use and exchange, romantic interactions (sexual or otherwise), smoking a cigarette or drinking a soda during Ramadan. The aural construction of this layer also differs from the boardwalk above and contributes to this kind of sociality. The rocks serve as a sonic barrier from the traffic, and the crashing waves further mute the conversations and sounds coming from the city, therefore temporarily insulating those down below from the ethical demands of public society.

Charles Hirschkind, in his study of cassette-tape sermons in Cairo, argues that the ubiquitous presence of these tapes in Cairene society creates a kind of “pious soundscape” in which certain actions are deemed appropriate or inappropriate.<sup>17</sup> Saying “peace be upon him” each time the speaker mentions the Prophet’s name, reprimanding

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<sup>17</sup> Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press 2006), 123-124.

rude behavior in the presence of audible Quranic verses, or acting a certain way while the tape is playing, are all a result of the affective environment that the tapes create and part of what Hirschkind calls “ethical listening.”<sup>18</sup> This space of Alexandria, the *sukhūr*, is accompanied by a very different kind of soundscape that instead enables transgressive practices. Because they are both visually and aurally separated from the city, even in such an open-air setting, the people that temporarily occupy the *sukhūr* are able to suspend the strict ethical standards that prevail in other parts of the city.

Obviously, the *Mahraganat* bikes cannot physically access this part of the city due to the geographical unevenness of the terrain. In fact, due to the way the sound of the city is obfuscated, both the performance and the experience of hearing *Mahraganat* is largely absent from this space. While the soundscape of the *sukhūr* sits beside and below Alexandria’s dominant soundscape and is therefore able to resist it in quiet harmony, *Mahraganat* intervenes and restructures the sonic environment of the boardwalk above, the most explicitly social and open space of the city. Seen and heard by all who are on or near the boardwalk, the omnipresent buzz of this new music encourages different kinds of actions, movements, and associations. *Mahraganat* is played out in variable ways through the bodies of Alexandrians, both of those directly participating in the listening practices of the music and of those who are interpellated by their incidental presence in the space. Something new and exciting is happening, and it deserves serious attention.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 32-39.

## *Sarsagī and Sīs Masculinity*

Now that I have explained some of the physical and theoretical contours of one of the primary spaces in which *Mahraganat* operates as a public expression, a discussion of whom these young men are and some of the myriad ways that they listen to and associate with the genre is pressing. Young Egyptians will often colloquially call one who is a fan of *Mahraganat* “*sarsagī*,” (plural *sarsagiyya*) which denotes a certain style of fashion, attitude, and social status. *Sarsagī* describes one who wears tightly fitting and brightly colored clothes, has long nails, and sports heavily gelled hair. Also a marker of attitude, the term is associated with youth, carelessness, and hapless masculinity. In addition, it phonetically and etymologically resembles the word *sabrsagī*, which in Egyptian dialect very specifically describes a person who picks up a cigarette filter off of the ground and attempts to smoke any remaining tobacco. Through this linguistic tool, the *Mahraganat* follower’s identity often gathers in the public perception as a fashionable, flamboyant, and loud individual that is so stricken by poverty that he would scour the pavement for a nicotine fix. Such an inflammatory and classist categorization sheds light on mainstream Egyptian society’s opinion regarding this group of young men.

At the same time, however, this term becomes a launching pad for the reterritorialization of injurious identities.<sup>19</sup> Resembling American black culture and Hip-Hop’s appropriation of the “n-word,” *Mahraganat* culture often embraces the status of *sarsagī* and turns the term on its head by establishing the lifestyle that the term connotes as a legitimate way of existing. A wealth of comedic YouTube videos, blog entries, and

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<sup>19</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1997), 104-105.

*Mahraganat* songs themselves parody and celebrate the *sarsagī* identity and lifestyle even as it is often viewed as problematic in mainstream Egyptian society.<sup>20</sup>

Through their performative self-presentation of loud clothing, heavily styled hair, and long nails, the self-identified *sarsagiyya* challenge stable and normative forms of modern Egyptian masculinity, which are often expressed either through the hyper-religious aesthetic of Salafism or a mustachioed Nasserist military chic. This emergent masculinity is a source of anxiety for many older Egyptians and those from higher social classes, who see the *sarsagiyya* as a dangerous demographic both in their actions and in the way that they depart from accepted modes of being and self-presentation.

Another term that is often thrown at this group of men, a term that has also been parodically incorporated into the vocabulary of the *sarsagiyya* themselves, is *wlād-l-sīs*. This term is very difficult to translate into English. After numerous conversations with young Egyptians, it seems to describe a similar grouping of traits as *sarsagī*. *Wlād* translates in Egyptian dialect to young men, solidifying the association of these adjectival words to men. *Sīs*, however, reflects a description of one who not only dresses in a flamboyant manner, but also is hopelessly narcissistic and self-absorbed. Someone who is described as *sīs* is also considered to be very connected to the virtual world, persistently

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<sup>20</sup> To see how young Egyptian men parody these designations, see: “*lammā tkūn bitzākīr w tūk-tūk y’addī taht l-beit*” (“When You’re Studying and a *tūk-tūk* Passes Your House”), *YouTube* Video, 0:36, posted by “Islame Mando,” August 27, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJ1yD7VIn\\_c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJ1yD7VIn_c). “*lammā ’yāl sarsagiyya tkūn ’ayza til’ab bār kūr*” (“When Sarsagī Kids Want to do Parcourt”), *YouTube* Video, 1:17, posted by “Islame Mando,” August 27, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJRUnsSBTRA>. “*sarsagiyya gūt tālent*” (“*Sarsagiyya* Got Talent”), *YouTube* Video, 7:47, posted by “Ahmed Elnaggar,” December 15, 2013, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ix\\_-2aFpSWc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ix_-2aFpSWc).

surfing the Internet and checking his phone. In addition, *sīs* men are thought to associate with like-minded individuals, hang out together, and, of course, listen to *Mahraganat*.

When considering these two characterizations, *sīs* and *sarsagī*, simultaneously, it is important to unpack the hybrid and seemingly conflicting brand of masculinity that emerges in the perceptions of both those outside and those within the discourse of *Mahraganat*. While *sarsagī* indicates an association with poverty and low-culture, *sīs* identity is perceived as being overly concerned with oneself and one's personal appearance, which are traits that could also be readily applied to those in higher socio-economic positions that have the luxury to indulge in fashion and accumulate material goods. However, I argue that these terms are not mutually exclusive. Where they align is precisely in the way that they challenge more accepted modes of "true" or "noble" Egyptian masculinity. Traditionally, Egyptian men are expected to be pious, hard working, family oriented, and modest in all facets of their life (both in terms of dress and how they display their wealth). *Sīs* and *sarsagiyya* resist these categories in differing ways. On the one hand, *sarsagī* masculinity, at least in the way it is perceived, does not concern itself primarily with religion, nor does it seek to accumulate social capital through employment and marriage. Instead, social capital is gained through male camaraderie, driving a car or a motorcycle, and, in the case of *Mahraganat*, voluble listening practices. On the other hand, *sīs* masculinity is seen by much of Egyptian society to be ostentatious and materialistic in an almost bourgeois manner.

This suffusion of the ignobility of low-culture and the selfish materialism of the bourgeoisie through the designations of *sīs* and *sarsagī* puts *Mahraganat*'s aficionados in a pejorative double bind. Unable to achieve full status as either a member of the lower

class or a fully initiated member of the bourgeoisie, they supplant the initially pejorative roots of these terms and reorient them toward describing a new and meaningful mode of masculine existence in contemporary urban Egypt.

How can we account for this emerging expression of masculinity that challenges common notions of being male and Egyptian? What space is carved out by this identity that seems hyper-masculine in the way it celebrates male camaraderie on the one hand, but also embraces certain trends that may be considered feminine such as intense self-care and a concern for what is fashionable?

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick deconstructs the gender binary when she argues that masculinity and femininity are threshold effects: “By ‘threshold effects’ I mean places where quantitative increments along one dimension can suddenly appear as qualitative differences somewhere else on the map entirely.”<sup>21</sup> As such, the *sīs* or *sarsagī* identity emerges as a form of masculinity precisely by the embodied action of crossing over the gender threshold and appropriating traditionally feminine characteristics such as long nails or tight-fitting clothing. This process is further complicated when one considers how Egyptian masculinities, and femininities for that matter, do not play by the same rules as gender identities elsewhere. While processes of globalization have made available certain fashion trends to the Egyptian population, these trends and items are not always used or interpreted in the same way as they would be in the various neighborhoods of New York or Paris. Sometimes, certain pieces are incorporated while other parts of dress remain manifestly Egyptian, such as wearing ripped jeans with

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<sup>21</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Gosh, Boy George, You Must be Awfully Secure in your Masculinity,” in *Constructing Masculinity*, ed. Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, and Simon Watson (New York: Routledge 1995), 16.

traditional Egyptian *shib-shib* (sandals). Other times, Western fashion trends may be exaggerated through wearing two pairs of sunglasses at once or multiple collared shirts on top of one another.

Sedgwick continues to explain that her emphasis on defining gender as threshold effects has to do with:

Find[ing]...a ground for describing and respecting the inertia, the slowness, the process that mediates between, on the one hand, the biological absolutes of what we always are (more or less) and, on the other hand, the notional free play that we constructivists are always imagined to be attributing to our own and other people's sex-and-gender self-presentation. I want to mark here a space in which there might be broached some description at a psychological level of how such changes may actually occur: namely through a slow and rather complicated feedback mechanism.<sup>22</sup>

This concern for describing gendered identity as a playful and processual trajectory of idiosyncratic movements, actions, and feelings resonates both with how *Mahraganat*'s aficionados present their identity through the bodily performances explained above and the ways in which they often listen to *Mahraganat* publicly.

### *A Transversal Politics of Being*

As I mentioned above, the taxi, the Halawa motorcycle, the auto-rickshaw (called *tūk-tūk*), and occasionally the bicycle are the most noticeable medium for the everyday performance of *Mahraganat* in the contemporary Egyptian city, especially along the *Corniche* of Alexandria. Because of the sheer number of these vehicles on the streets and in the alleyways, the vociferous sound is omnipresent but continually heard as a Doppler effect. It approaches and distances itself, oscillates between white noise and unbearable clarity. In this way, *Mahraganat* music is a kind of trans-genre in many senses of the

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 18.

prefix. A “festival” continually in transport, it placializes the non-place of the vehicle and fuses the body to its machine, creating something eerily trans-human. It is transgressive, penetrating the porous boundaries between the roadway and the walkway, the sanctioned and the illicit. It is transitional, continually in flux but cohering at nodal moments that feel like the apex of a crescendo. It is also a transmission of affects that stick to human and non-human bodies, unsettling them and setting them in motion.

Nigel Thrift, in his elaboration of Michel de Certeau’s oft cited “Walking in the City” chapter, explains that the emergence of automobility in the general experience of humanity over the past century has dramatically restructured how the city is felt and perceived:

[This] system of automobility has...produced its own embodied practices of driving and ‘passengerin’, each with their own distinctive histories often still waiting to be written...it is still possible to write of a rich phenomenology of automobility, one often filled to bursting with embodied cues and gestures which work over many communicative registers and which cannot be reduced simply to cultural codes. That is particularly the case if we are willing to travel off the path of language...and understand driving...as both profoundly embodied and sensuous experiences...<sup>23</sup>

For Thrift, this system of automobility intimates new ways of knowing and existing in the world. Therefore, considering driving practices as gestures that occur in fleeting moments, is key to understanding the experience of the contemporary city. He goes on to elaborate how the incorporation of software and ergonomics into cars has made car driving a world in itself.<sup>24</sup> The transversal politics of listening that fans of *Mahraganat* enact along the *Corniche* and the streets of Egyptian cities more generally are similarly refiguring how the city is experienced by all: the driver, the passenger, and the passerby.

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<sup>23</sup> Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (New York: Routledge 2008), 80.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

These are embodied phenomena that partly condition the urban experience of many Egyptians, whether desired or not. By imposing itself on the psyche of those around it, the sounds of *Mahraganat* that emanate from the passing vehicles constitute an exercise of political agency, which will be elaborated further in chapter 4.

The movements and bodily positionings that *Mahraganat*'s aficionados practice along the boardwalk can be understood as a performance of a new Egyptian masculinity that demonstrates a mode of being and belonging for young Alexandrian men. The motorcycle becomes an extension of the performer's body and the rhythms of riding, swerving, and parking enact a state of existence that is experienced and reinforced through repetition. This is not to say that the presence of the motorbike always coexists peacefully with other activities and interactions taking place on the boardwalk. When a motorcycle speeds past a family and comes close to striking a small child or blows exhaust in their faces, adults may become visibly upset with the driver and verbal or physical confrontations occur. Even when parked, the auditory component of the motorbike (a running engine, loud music, or both) could annoy a couple trying to have a conversation or hash out an argument. Conversely, to someone who enjoys loud music or riding motorcycles, witnessing these actions and performances evokes intense feelings of solidarity, belonging, and satisfaction.

This plane of actions and reactions, of feelings and intensities, is what emerges when *Mahraganat* and its proprietors generate and distribute a range of affects through public listening. When forced into the visual, tactile, and auditory plane of the boardwalk, the music and its proprietors simultaneously demand recognition, invite participation, and incite retaliation. In other words, the performance of *Mahraganat* on the *Corniche* can be

both the coalescence and the fracturing of social interactions, relationships, and communities.

## Chapter 2: Inside and Outside Perceptions of *Mahraganat*

8/8/2014

August in Cairo assaults the senses from all directions. From above, the sun emits continuous streams of heat that hastily traverse the atmosphere and crash into the cityscape like an apocalyptic barrage of fiery meteors. From below, the blocks of pavement radiate as if freshly baked loaves of bread, ready to be served with beans and pickled vegetables. From all around, a thick cloud of smog envelops the streets and their inhabitants, trapping and intensifying the warmth and lending an extra layer of haze that rounds off the city's edges and renders them opaque.

One day, shortly after the end of Ramadan in 2014, I took a long walk on the bank of the Nile River in the upper-middle-class Cairene neighborhood of Zamalek. I had just landed in Egypt from Algiers where I celebrated Eid El-Fitr (the holiday celebrating the end of Ramadan) with my grandmother and I had a brief 36-hour layover in Cairo before returning to Texas. The air of sleepiness that usually characterizes the fasting month, especially when it falls in the middle of summer, had begun to dissipate as Egyptians returned to their daily routines. On my right stood apartment buildings likely built in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as they reflected colonial Egypt's fusion of European and Fatimid architecture, slightly dilapidated but intensely beautiful. On my left there was the Nile, on the banks of which sat expensive restaurants housed in large cruise ships.

As I rounded a corner onto a street that dead ends into a wall of apartment buildings, I saw a young man smoking a cigarette and directing the driver of a large truck that was attempting to back into a loading station for one of the nearby boat-restaurants. When I heard a steady drumbeat and fast, electronically augmented lyrics cascading out

of his mobile phone's speaker, I walked toward him and his head tilted slightly in confusion. I imagine he was thinking: *why is this person walking in the middle of the day on a street that leads nowhere?* When I approached him, I asked for a cigarette. "I don't have any cigarettes, but he does," gesturing toward the driver. "Just wait here with me and he will give you one once he's finished."

While we waited for the driver to finish his maneuver, I asked the young man if he was from Zamalek. He informed me that he lived on the outskirts of town, and that it took him over an hour to get to work each day. When the truck perfectly aligned with the edge of the docking station, the driver hopped out and his comrade informed him of my request for a cigarette. Without hesitation, he pulled out a single stick from his box of L&M Reds. In response to his generosity I offered an Egyptian pound as payment for the cigarette, to which he adamantly refused. His friend, whom I originally approached, told me that it would be taboo in Egypt for them to accept my money, indicating that by now they had noticed my foreign accent and clothing.

"Where are you from?" one of them asked. In order to accrue some brand of cultural legitimacy as a fellow Arab I told them that I was Algerian but I live in the United States. I also explained that I had just landed from Algeria, where I spent the holiday with my family. After learning that I was an Algerian-American, the two men asked me a question that I had become very accustomed to answering after spending a considerable amount of time in the Arab world: "So which is the best? America, Egypt, or Algeria?" "I like them all for different reasons," I responded diplomatically. "Come on, of course America is the best! There are opportunities there. Times are tough in Egypt

and Algeria,” said the driver, hoping to call out my political correctness and provoke me into brutal honesty.

While exhaling a long drag from my cigarette, I explained my personal affinities with Egypt. Using the current situation as an example, I told them that in America it would be very difficult to strike up a meaningful conversation with a stranger over a cigarette and that people in Egypt are, in general, extremely open and welcoming. After a few more minutes of conversation about the lines of comparison between the West and the Arab world, I asked the phone’s owner about the music that continued to stream out of the speaker.

“That’s *Mahraganat*, right?” I inquired. “Yes...” he responded as he tilted his head again, evidently surprised that I knew of the genre. “How do you know about *Mahraganat*?” he asked. In an attempt to come clean I revealed to him that in addition to being a fan of the music I was also researching the genre for my Master’s thesis in the United States. When I told him this, both him and his friend laughed, arguing that there’s not much to know about *Mahraganat*. Surprised that a fan of *Mahraganat* would belittle the genre so much, I asked them why they were fans of the music: “It’s simple really. It’s fast and fun to listen to. Really, though, you should study classical Egyptian music like Umm Kulthum. That will tell you more about Egyptian culture than *Mahraganat*.”

### *Counterpublics and the Politics of Listening to Mahraganat*

This short encounter with two young Cairene men reveals many things. First, it demonstrates one of the ways in which *Mahraganat*, as a fixture of the contemporary urban soundscape, moves from the periphery of Egyptian cities to its middle and upper-

middle-class neighborhoods. Namely, through the movements of the genre's aficionados as they traverse long distances, often through heavy traffic, in order to go to work or run errands. My interlocutor above travels to the posh Cairo neighborhood of Zamalek on a daily basis in order to make it to work. He uses *Mahraganat* as a soundtrack to the daily grind of restaurant work, employing the weak and static-filled speaker of his mobile phone in order to make the labor more enjoyable. Underneath the cigarette breaks and the conversations with coworkers, the sounds of famous DJs such as Sadat, Fifty, Okka, and Ortega pulse steadily. "Fast and fun to listen to," these songs provide a respite from the tiring drudgery of manual labor.

This encounter also reveals how *Mahraganat* listening creates and maintains counterpublics within and alongside the dominant discursive spaces of the Egyptian city. For Michael Warner, counterpublics are spaces in which the rules of address and sociality are restructured according to the membership and the affective conditions of the space.<sup>25</sup> Counterpublics offer a space where relationships and connections are formed through the counterpositioning practices of those that exist against the grain of normativity in a given societal context. Similar to the Alexandrian *Corniche* discussed in the previous chapter, the alleyway behind the boat becomes a hybrid area for both work and play, for both directing the truck toward the dock as well as having a cigarette and listening to music. *Mahraganat*, in this context, enables and initiates an affective state of comfort and relaxation in the middle of a long workday. It interpellates the listeners, including those who are accidentally listening or "listening in," and the space around it so as to form a locality that is at once a space of possibility, of relationship formation, and a

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<sup>25</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books 2014), 118-120.

space of alterity. Alternate to that of the job or the concert hall that houses more traditional and accepted forms of Egyptian music and performance, and to that of the satellite TV stations playing famous Egyptian pop singers such as Nancy Ajram or Haifa Wehbe. Once I entered the space above, I declared my intent to belong by seeking out a cigarette and engaging in simple conversation. However, my membership was questioned immediately as I revealed my foreign accent and strange sensibilities. Predictably, once the two men enter the boat the conditions of sociality shift back toward an ethos of work, as they are monitored by their supervisors and accountable to customers. In the same way, many taxi and microbus drivers smoke cigarettes and listen loudly to *Mahraganat* as they take passengers from one part of the city to another. However, if an elderly man or woman enters the vehicle, the driver might turn down the music or put out his cigarette.

I argue that moments of affective gesturing and adjusting (such as turning down the volume dial, lighting up a cigarette, pulling out one's phone, etc.) demonstrate in what spaces and instances *Mahraganat* listening is appropriate and when it should be tempered. In some cases, such as the cigarette break explained above, the insertion of *Mahraganat* into the aural register of the space engenders an atmosphere of sociability that makes certain feelings and discourses possible. At other times, such as when an older couple enters a microbus or when dining in an upscale restaurant, volubly listening to *Mahraganat* could be met with a considerable amount of hostility. In this way, how people listen potentially becomes a situational marker of one's age, gender, and class.

Jacques Attali argues that music, and its accompanying practices of audition more generally, is always expressly political in that it is intimately linked with the expression

and maintenance of power, both on the part of the listener and the governmental superstructure:

All music, any organization of sounds is then a tool for the creation or consolidation of a community, of a totality. It is what links a power center to its subjects, and thus, more generally, it is an attribute of power in all of its forms. Therefore, any theory of power today must include a theory of the localization of noise and its endowment with form... And since noise is the source of power, power has always listened to it with fascination.<sup>26</sup>

With this in mind, the way that people listen to *Mahraganat*, whether through a voluble broadcast from the vehicular vessel of a motorcycle or taxi or by creating a soft background to employment with the speaker of a mobile phone, conditions the consolidation of a community that may or may not cut across certain spatial or class-engendered limitations. For example, listening to *Mahraganat* on a cell phone creates an intimate solidarity, albeit virtual, between the listener, the person who uploaded the song onto YouTube or the USB stick, and the artist who originally recorded the song. Additional affects of belonging and connection, of being “plugged-in” to one another, are felt between the owner of the sound-producing apparatus (whether a phone, a taxi, or a motorcycle) and the passerby or passenger that identifies the music and listens along.

At the same time, however, considering the example of a taxi driver turning down the volume dial as a certain demographic enters his vehicle, the genealogy of Egypt’s class structure permeates the discourse of *Mahraganat* at certain moments. Whether or not *Mahraganat* actually offends the sensibilities of older Egyptians, especially those that can afford to take taxis over minibuses or auto-rickshaws, it is perceived by its aficionados to not be an appropriate musical accompaniment in certain vocational

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<sup>26</sup> Jacques Attali, “Noise: The Political Economy of Music,” in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. Jonathan Sterne (New York: Routledge 2012), 32.

situations. This also offers a potential explanation for why a fan of *Mahraganat*, such as my interlocutor above, would position the genre as not worthy of representing Egypt's cultural identity, especially when talking to a foreign person that is partially responsible for representing Egyptian culture to a Western audience. These encounters offer examples of the way that class in Egypt, haunted by the specter of its colonial history, *emerges*, is *felt*, and is *reckoned* with in singular moments.

Muting *Mahraganat* as a result of the entrance of an identifiable other into a space reflects the way that people in Egypt are affected by class-based structures of power. It is important to note that these structures manifest as felt phenomena that emerge in specific moments. They are not wholly constituted by the overlaying superstructure of something like "the law" or "the police," but are associated with and tied up in certain bodies that mark their particular belonging through attributes such as age, dress, and access to certain situations. On the other hand, the ability of *Mahraganat* listening to take place in a variety of different contexts and spaces that sit next to and intervene in more stable iterations of Egyptian public life, such as walking on the Alexandrian *Corniche* or manual labor behind a Nile restaurant, suggests the propensity of these structures to be continually penetrated, challenged, and deconstructed. In this way, *Mahraganat* listening acts as a dynamic force that problematizes notions of class and stable hierarchies of power.

Brian Massumi, in an attempt to insert movement into the critical repertoire of cultural studies, argues that social determinations such as gender, class, and sexual orientation are not primary and stable identifications that condition the rules of culture and sociality, but the result of a continual and processual state of movement that either

reinvigorates existing forms of being and belonging or challenges them, forcing new modes of existence to come into play:

[P]rocessual indeterminacy is primary in relation to social determination... Social and cultural determinations on the model of positionality are also secondary and derived. *Gender, race, and sexual orientation also emerge and back-form their reality* (my emphasis). Passage precedes construction. But construction does effectively back-form its reality... So social and cultural determinations feed back into the process from which they arose... The idea is that there is an ontogenesis or becoming of culture and the social... of which determinate forms of culture and sociability are the result. The challenge is to think that process of *formation*, and for that you need the notion of a taking-form, an inform on the way to being determinately this or that.<sup>27</sup>

This passage helps one understand that constructions such as gender, race, and class, while they certainly appear and should be taken seriously, are subsequent formations of embodied modes of sociality that are themselves conditioned by processes of movement and sensation. As such, *Mahraganat* listening, as a continually happening phenomenon and an embodied state of audition, enacts a kind of subject formation that at once consolidates identities (as a *sarsagi*, for example, or simply a *Mahraganat* fan) as it challenges or destroys certain assumptions (*Mahraganat* fans don't work, *Mahraganat* is not an acceptable form of music). At the same time, these subversive identities may be tempered or muted in certain moments, suggesting that the residue of older and more restrictive forms of being Egyptian (Salafi, Nasserist Revolutionary, upper-class) still hold water in the imaginary of many citizens. This is not to say, necessarily, that *Mahraganat* listening always articulates a call to action to challenge the class structure and force new methods of belonging into the fold of existence. However, it is my contention that the way *Mahraganat* engenders new relationships between people and

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<sup>27</sup> Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press 2002), 8.

other people (an Egyptian and a foreigner) and between people and objects (a *sarsagī* and a mobile phone) suggests that the genre is inherently, if not unconsciously, generative and transformative. Through the sonic mediations of *Mahraganat*, communities are gathered while norms of sociality are either reinforced or temporarily set aside.

### *Outside Perceptions of Mahraganat*

My position as an Arab-American undoubtedly altered the direction of the conversation that began this chapter. My accent, the way in which I offered to pay for the cigarette, and my unusual presence on a side road of Zamalek demonstrated to the two men that I was not one of them. At the same time, speaking in Arabic and identifying as Arab offered a modest amount of access. This is worth pointing out because it lends insight into the way fans of *Mahraganat* perceive the genre's cross-cultural legibility, or lack thereof, and its worth in the context of a Western academic engagement such as the current study. The two men were noticeably surprised when I identified the music as *Mahraganat* and expressed my interest in the genre, but they found it even more appalling that someone from America would consider *Mahraganat* worthy of serious academic inquiry.

Even for some fans, *Mahraganat* does not represent an official medium for understanding Egyptian culture. Daniel J. Gilman, in his book on the aural and visual aesthetics of mass-mediated Egyptian Pop music (*Shabābiyya*), encountered similar resistances by his Egyptian interlocutors when he revealed to them that he was interested

in studying Pop music and not more classical and codified forms of Egyptian music, like Umm Kulthum's or Abdel Halim Hafez's *Ṭarab*.<sup>28</sup>

Helmy Bakr, a famous Egyptian composer, writer, and talent scout, is a harsh critic of *Mahraganat* and has spoken adamantly against considering the genre Egyptian at all. In March of 2013, Bakr appeared on the talk show *Ajra' al-Kalām* (Boldest Conversation) along with *Mahraganat* artists Okka and Ortega and famous *sha'bi* artist Sha'ban Abdel Rahim.<sup>29</sup> After the host interviews Okka and Ortega about *Mahraganat*'s popularity, their fame, and the content of some of their songs for over half an hour, Bakr is brought out to provide his opinions on the genre. For nearly an hour, Bakr berates the two artists and the genre in general, arguing that since most *Mahraganat* artists have no formal musical training, it requires no talent and, furthermore, is not real music. Additionally, he believes that since *Mahraganat* shares roots with Western forms of music such as Hip-Hop and Electronica, it is not actually Egyptian in any way. He repeatedly calls Okka and Ortega ignorant (*gahala*) and cuts them off any time they try to speak or defend themselves against his personal attacks.<sup>30</sup>

In an interview with Elfagr, an Egyptian cultural news website, Bakr insists that *Mahraganat* is contributing to the destruction of Egyptian cultural taste (*takhrīb l-dhūq l-*

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<sup>28</sup> Daniel J. Gilman, *Cairo Pop: Youth Music in Contemporary Egypt* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2014), 17.

<sup>29</sup> See Part 1: "Okka and Ortega and Sha'ban Abdel Rahim on *Ajra' al-kalām* 1," *YouTube* Video, 49:33, posted by "*al-qāhira w-l-nās*" ("Cairo and the People"), March 20, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DzlicKV0gq4> and Part 2: "Okka and Ortega and Sha'ban Abdel Rahim on *Ajra' al-kalām* 2," *YouTube* Video, 48:33, posted by "*al-qāhira wa-l-nās*" ("Cairo and the People"), March 20, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9USd3-6Vsg>.

<sup>30</sup> See "Okka and Ortega 2," 7:00.

‘ām) and the deterioration of Egyptian music.<sup>31</sup> This sentiment, espoused by such a cultural “taste-maker” in Egypt (Bakr has composed over 1, 500 songs for many famous artists across the Arab world), is echoed on the streets and in the hallways of Egyptian universities. Many of my peers during my time at Alexandria University would quickly dismiss *Mahraganat* as soon as I brought it up or asked them their opinion on the genre, exclaiming that it’s awful music and that the people who listened to it are mostly riff-raff. One friend, although usually in jest, routinely poked fun at me for being interested in the genre and persistently referred to my academic endeavors as simply “studying the *sarsagiyya*.” While this banter was often light-hearted, taken in conjunction with the scathing remarks of prominent critics such as Bakr, they shed light on how *Mahraganat* is perceived among certain groups of people.

Interestingly, in the case above, it was actual fans of *Mahraganat* who argued that the music was not worth studying or writing about and that I would find more success in understanding Egyptian culture if I turned my attention to older and more widely accepted forms of music. I would argue that this response to my research interests on the part of my interlocutors indicates less a sincere belief that *Mahraganat* is an inappropriate or insufficient manifestation of Egyptian culture and more the idea that *Mahraganat*, in the affective register of its listeners (or at least some of them), does not automatically satisfy the historical conditions of what contemporary “Egyptian-ness” is or should be. Also, as I argued in the first chapter, since *Mahraganat* expresses more a lived experience than a highbrow component of Egypt’s cultural repertoire and has not

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<sup>31</sup> “*Khāṣ li-Helmy Bakr: ‘Amrū Dyāb khasar kathīran bisabab dhakā’ihi...wa hādhā sirr najāh ‘tislam al-‘ayādī’*” (“According to Helmy Bakr: Amr Diab is a Big Loser Because of His Intellect...such is the Secret to the Success of *tislam al-‘ayādī*.”), *elfagr.org*, last modified September 22, 2013, <http://www.elfagr.org/1572236>.

yet been abstracted into a reifiable object of study, it is understandable that most people would not place it within the category of academic inquiry. This response on the part of my interlocutors in turn represents the repetition of the idea on the part of both the Egyptian political superstructure and on the part of the existing literature in Western academia that Egypt's aesthetic culture can be reduced to a small group of culture-makers such as Umm Kulthum and Abdel Halim Hafez.

Those who produce, listen to, and perform *Mahraganat* on the ground in Egypt both embody and theorize it by demonstrating, in real time, the proper conditions and actions that characterize how to interact and engage with the genre. Therefore, I believe that understanding *Mahraganat* requires more than merely inserting it among the hierarchy of Egyptian cultural production and understanding it only in relation to its predecessors. This is why I chose to approach the subject through the kind of ethnography that is at work here, one that takes concepts such as movement, affect, listening, and performance seriously in order to understand how *Mahraganat* is felt, lived, and experienced. The two young men I met while wandering the side streets of Zamalek, by categorizing *Mahraganat* outside of Egypt's proper cultural repertoire and by defining the parameters of what kind of cultural production is worthy of academic inquiry, both hone in on the subdued status of *Mahraganat* within the cultural imaginary of Egypt and establish the urgency of studying the genre and taking it seriously.

### Chapter 3: I Sing and You Listen: *Mahraganat*'s Genealogy

*El-sha' b yurīd khamṣa gneh raṣīd (The People want five pounds cell phone credit)*

-“Five Pounds Credit” by  
DJ Amr 7a7a, Sadat, and Alaa' Fifty Cent<sup>32</sup>

This line, blanketed in a cheaply produced auto-tune vocal effect and backed by a simple walking drum beat, comes just seconds after the piercing sound of shattering glass disrupts the melody of the Egyptian national anthem. The performers, Sadat Abdel Aziz (his stage name simply Sadat) and Alaa' Fifty Cent, later address the phrase that they were originally turning, the mantra of the 2011 popular Arab uprisings: “The people want the fall of the regime.” That phrase, once uttered, dramatically altered the relationship between those who were shouting it and those who were in power. Years later, these words can still be heard consistently in the streets of Cairo and Alexandria, and other Arab cities for that matter, as the echoes of these massive protests, which came to be known as the “Arab Spring,” have never fully faded.

After beginning to understand how *Mahraganat* is listened to, performed, and embodied in the previous chapters, this chapter engages the genre's form and content. I argue that *Mahraganat*, through its roots in traditional Egyptian Folk music and its solidarities with North American Hip-Hop and European Electronica, represents both an intense connection with a rooted Egyptian identity and the globalized sensibilities of a young generation of Egyptians that is plugged-in to other parts of the world via the internet and transnational flows of culture and capital.

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<sup>32</sup> “Five Pounds Credit,” *Soundcloud* streaming mp3, 3:29, posted by “Sadat&Fifty,” September 11, 2013, <https://soundcloud.com/sadatfifty/sadat-alaa-fifty-cent-five>.

## *The People's Music*

As mentioned in the introduction, *Mahraganat* directly translates to “parties” or “festivals” in Arabic. This is most likely because people primarily associate the genre with traditional Egyptian weddings, which often turn into large neighborhood street parties. In recent years, such weddings have begun to regularly host *Mahraganat* artists and DJ's. Another commonly used name for *Mahraganat* is “Electro-*Sha' bī*,”<sup>33</sup> which refers to a predecessor genre of music that emerged in the 1970's known simply as “*al-mūsiqā al-sha'biyya*” (translated as “traditional music,” “popular music,” or even “the people's music”). This type of music is usually characterized by very high-pitched vocals that border on falsetto and simple melodies that are repeated many times. *Sha' bī* music emerged concurrently with former president Anwar Sadat's economic liberalization project, which exacerbated economic disparity in Egypt and placed many lower and middle-class Egyptians on the brink of poverty.<sup>34</sup> As such, while the sonic components of *Sha' bī* are often upbeat and festive, the lyrical content usually has to do with the trials and tribulations of the working class and the everyday struggle to make ends meet. As Daniel J. Gilman explains, “*Sha' bī* songs, like songs in every genre of Egyptian popular music, may treat the subject of romantic desire, but by common reputation, they are more often lamentations on everyday problems faced by the narrator.”<sup>35</sup> Always sung in colloquial tongue, *Sha' bī* artists often use humorous language and traditional phrases in

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<sup>33</sup> For instance, see: Hind Meddeb, *Electro Chaabi*, Film, directed by Hind Meddeb (2013; Cairo/Paris: produced by Karim Boutros Ghali and Karim Gamel Eldine), Medium.

<sup>34</sup> James R. Grippo, “What's Not on Egyptian Television and Radio! Locating the ‘Popular’ in Egyptian *Sha' bī*,” in *Music and Media in the Arab World*, ed. Michael Frishkopf (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press 2010), 137-162.

<sup>35</sup> Gilman, *Cairo Pop*, 11.

order to simultaneously lament and parody the difficult conditions of poverty in Egypt. It is important to note that this genre, like *Mahraganat*, is often thought of by middle and upper class Egyptians as profane and unworthy of serious attention. This class-based discrimination of *sha'bi* has even at times resulted in government censorship.<sup>36</sup>

*Mahraganat* undoubtedly shares many characteristics with *Sha'bi* music. Sonically, the tempo and tenor of the two genres are very similar. In a way, *Mahraganat* takes the nasally and high-pitched vocals of *Sha'bi* music and extends it into the 21<sup>st</sup> century by augmenting them further with auto-tune and other computerized effects. Additionally, *Mahraganat* songs regularly employ colloquial expressions and jokes in order to imbibe the feeling of everyday existence on the Egyptian street. For example, the chorus of the recent *Mahraganat* song “*law ṣāḥbak ’illa*” (“If Your Friend is Unworthy”) by Amr El-Gazr and Ghandy uses the popular colloquial phrase: “*law ṣāḥbak khānak a’milu dukhānak, law ṣāḥbak ’illa a’milu kartella*” (“If your friend betrays you he is like cigarette smoke, if your friend is unworthy he is like a cigarette filter”).<sup>37</sup> This rhyming phrase, which encourages one to think of bad friends as the disposable components of a cigarette, is both a rhyming phrase and a kind of ethical injunction that explains how people cope with the mundane struggle of either maintaining a meaningful relationship or ending one.

Another important aspect that *Sha'bi* and *Mahraganat* share is their common sites of listening. Like *Mahraganat*, *Sha'bi* music is often heard coming out of taxis and minibuses or on the streets of Egypt’s poorer neighborhoods. However, the patrons of

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<sup>36</sup> Grippo, “What’s Not on Egyptian Television,” 154-155.

Gilman, *Cairo Pop*, 212.

<sup>37</sup> “Mahrgan Amr El Gazar & Ghandy (law sa7bak ala),” *YouTube* Video, 3:38, posted by “Sense TV,” September 28, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BPi2\\_q9vsO8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BPi2_q9vsO8).

*Sha‘bī* music tend to be older than *Mahraganat*’s aficionados, as they most likely came of age in the 1970’s. As such, *Mahraganat* artists almost certainly grew up listening to and taking in the *Sha‘bī* music that their parents enjoyed. This pedagogical action of listening in and the generational transference of values and cultural preferences partly explain how familiar themes and rhythms from *Sha‘bī* music infect the content and tempo of today’s *Mahraganat*.

While the genealogy of *Mahraganat* can partly be traced through the tenor and humor of *Sha‘bī* music, many *Mahraganat* artists have said in numerous interviews that they don’t accept the term “*Electro-Sha‘bī*” as a designation for the genre because they believe their music represents a clear break with tradition and Egypt’s dictatorial past.<sup>38</sup> Alaa’ Fifty Cent, a popular *Mahraganat* artist and frequent collaborator of Sadat, argues that the name is actually derived from a song titled “*Mahragan Salaam City*,” which he calls the first *Mahraganat* song ever created (Salaam City is a working-class suburb of Cairo, home to both Sadat and Fifty). Whether or not this is true and while they wish to disassociate themselves from Egypt’s dominant political discourse, this doesn’t mean that their music is inherently apolitical. In an interview with *The New York Times*, Sadat discusses his lyrical content and cleverly dismisses those that argue that *Mahraganat* isn’t politically charged:

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<sup>38</sup> See Mos‘ab Elshamy, “Mahraganat: New Hybrid Music Wave Sweeps Egypt,” *al-monitor.com*, last modified May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2013. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/05/egypt-new-music-mahraganat-sadat-electro-shaabi.html#>.

Giovanna Locatelli, “Sadat: ‘Mahraganat is Pure Energy,’” *theguardian.com*, last modified November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/dec/01/dj-sadat-mahraganat-salam-cairo>.

Kevin E.G. Perry, “Mahraganat Lets Egyptians Say The Unsayable,” *noisey.vice.com*, last modified January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2014, [http://noisey.vice.com/en\\_uk/read/youneedtohearthis-cairo-underground-dance-scene](http://noisey.vice.com/en_uk/read/youneedtohearthis-cairo-underground-dance-scene).

People ask me, why don't you sing about politics? The social situation is politics! I'm describing the situation of the people! Is politics merely about the presidency, seats in parliament, candidates, and all that noise?<sup>39</sup>

Sadat and his peers often write lyrics that engage subjects such as sex, drugs, traffic, revolution, and *Mahraganat* itself. Sadat sings in another song, called “*al-sha‘b wa-l-ḥukūma*” (“The People and the Government”), “I’ll talk about those that stand, those that are silent, and those that died. I’ll talk about the church, the mosque, and the Brotherhood.”<sup>40</sup> The song is catchy, fast, and lyrically powerful. The last line exclaims, “*illī biḥibb maṣr ma ykharraḥsh maṣr*” (“Those who love Egypt shouldn’t destroy it”). Whether he succeeds or not, there is a tangible desire by Sadat and his peers to speak to and for the concerns of the Egyptian people, more than half of which are under the age of 25.

### *Transnational Affinities*

As mentioned before, in terms of cultural and musical influence, *Mahraganat* also takes many cues from North American Hip-Hop and European Electronic/Trance music. Songs often use sampled sounds as a main component of their structure and sonic construction while lyrics oscillate between being sung (usually draped in auto-tune) and rapped. Some artists stress their affiliation with Western Hip-Hop even more than that with their Egyptian musician counterparts. Famous artists Okka and Ortega, when responding to musician and media personality Helmy Bakr’s attacks toward *Mahraganat*

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<sup>39</sup> Ben Hubbard, “Out of Egypt’s Chaos, Musical Rebellion,” *nytimes.com*, last modified May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/12/world/middleeast/egypts-chaos-stirs-musical-revolution.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/12/world/middleeast/egypts-chaos-stirs-musical-revolution.html?_r=0).

<sup>40</sup> Listen at: “*rāb al-sha‘b wa-l-ḥukūma\_figo\_fifty\_sadat*” (“The People and The Government\_Figo\_Fifty\_Sadat”), *YouTube* Video, 3:22, posted by “*maḥmūd rushād*,” November 27, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LuaQkIJlbog>.

on the Egyptian talk show *Ajra' al-Kalām* (referenced in the previous chapter), argue that *Mahraganat* is not *Ṭarab* (a term that denotes classical Egyptian/Pan-Arab music and musicians such as Umm Kulthum and Abdel Halim Hafez),<sup>41</sup> but specifically *Rap* music.<sup>42</sup> Alaa' Fifty Cent, mentioned earlier, even borrows the name of a very popular American rapper. This simultaneous alignment with North American black culture and departure from traditional forms of Egyptian culture reflects a desire on the part of *Mahraganat* artists, and young Egyptians more generally, to be both homegrown Egyptians and globalized individuals that consume global music trends such as Hip-Hop.

*Mahraganat* artists' solidarities with Hip-Hop suggest the translatability of certain themes cross-culturally. As Emmett G. Price argues, before North American Hip-Hop achieved international and commercial acclaim, "(it was) originally a means and manner of expression for economically disenfranchised, politically abandoned, and socially repressed youth grounded in black expressive culture."<sup>43</sup> Many Hip-Hop artists still focus on social issues such as poverty, gang violence, and racism in their music. However, as Hip-Hop has been commercialized and appropriated by a wide range of North American and international actors, its content has proliferated to include everything from boasting wealth to expressing love. Similarly, *Mahraganat* songs often express lofty political ideas juxtaposed with jokes, insults, and colloquialisms. While Rap and Hip-Hop music is often pigeonholed as wholly sexist and materialist genres, many artists and groups demonstrate that people have complex and mixed associations with the categories they

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<sup>41</sup> For an extended engagement with *Ṭarab* see: A.J. Racy, *Making Music in the Arab World: The Culture and Artistry of Ṭarab*, (New York: Cambridge University Press 2003).

<sup>42</sup> See "Okka and Ortega 2," 28:40.

<sup>43</sup> Emmett G. Price, *Hip Hop Culture* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO 2006), xii.

are forced into occupying. *Mahraganat* artists and fans have also often been categorized as riff-raff, thugs (*balṭagiyya*), and materialistic. However, a closer examination of the music as well as the ways in which its aficionados engage with it demonstrates that *Mahraganat* offers complex commentary and critique on contemporary Egyptian society.

Recently, *Mahraganat* artists and European Dance/Electronic artists have engaged in several collaborations, one of the most noteworthy being “Cairo Calling,” a cooperative effort between London based broadcaster Rinse FM and Cairo based independent label 100 Copies. This project, backed by the UK’s NGO for international cultural relations (The British Council), brings together *Mahraganat* artists from Cairo and Electronic producers from London in order to “develop a mutually beneficial relationship with capacity for creative growth on both sides.”<sup>44</sup> The outcome of this project was a mixtape, done partly in the UK in January of 2014 and finished in Cairo in March of the same year, released in October of 2014. For the album, *Mahraganat* artists DJ Figo, Sadat, Knaka, and Diesel, and London producers Mumdance, Artwork, Faze Miyake, Kode 9, and Pinch worked together to create some of the most professionally produced *Mahraganat* music to date.<sup>45</sup> The tape begins with taxis honking, indistinct chatter, and the slightest tapping of a hi-hat before an echoing snare drum establishes the tempo and a synthesized keyboard sound lays out the melody. After eight bars, the music cuts out for a few seconds in order to make room for a masculine voice that calls out “*Yā*

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<sup>44</sup> “Cairo Calling: 2014 to 2015,” *British Council*, accessed May 2, 2015.  
<http://music.britishcouncil.org/projects/cairo-calling>.

<sup>45</sup> Listen at: “Dummy Mix 205: Mumdance’s Mahraganat Mixtape,” *Soundcloud* streaming mp3, 29:04, posted by “DummyMag,” October, 2014,  
<https://soundcloud.com/dummymag/dummy-mix-205-mumdance/s-ovIRE>.

*Ahmed!*” (Hey, Ahmed!). Immediately the beat returns twice as loud, accompanied by Figo’s voice and other sampled sounds.

While the basic structure of *Mahraganat* music (fast rhythms, auto-tuned lyrics, and colloquial language) remains intact on the album, the bass notes hit harder, the vocals are crisp, and the samples are rendered more clearly. Throughout, the beats that initiate each song are continually deconstructed and broken down, repurposed and augmented with the addition of another sample, instrument, or melody. This process of deconstructing the beat or slightly restructuring the rhythm resonates with the structural style of European Electronic music. As such, Mumdance’s or Artwork’s influence is not readily apparent on the surface of the track. Instead, they operate behind the scenes, integrating their genre-specific knowledge into the very structure of these *Mahraganat* songs. The solidarity between these London producers and the *Mahraganat* artists creates something that sounds very much like *Mahraganat*, but has been removed from the context of cheap laptops and pirated software and placed in expensive European studios.

Even more recently, in March of 2015, artists Sadat and Alaa’ 50 cent traveled to France to collaborate with Paris based producer Acid Arab. The result of the meeting was a very catchy and hard-hitting track called *Hez Hez (Move Move)*,<sup>46</sup> which begins with Sadat exclaiming “Yo, from the land of France, Sadat and Fifty.” The chorus then commands its listeners, “move, move, move, move, move, and stop only with the music.” Later, Fifty says, “I give and you take, I sing and you listen,” establishing the performative relationship between him and the listener. Listening for the artists translates

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<sup>46</sup> “Hez Hez Acid Arab feat. Sadat and Alaa 50,” *YouTube* Video, 3:41, posted by “100Copies Music,” March 22, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2dOHIPwcG0>.

to a full-body performance of their calls to action, to move and to not stop moving unless the music itself ceases. As such, a seamless connection is formed between the artists and the listeners, the beat and the body, and Paris and Cairo.

While I argue that *Mahraganat* is very Egyptian, both through its birthplace in the suburban neighborhoods of Cairo and Alexandria and through its shared genealogy with *Sha‘bī* music, there is something about the genre that is evidently attractive to a Western audience. In an interview with Dummy Mag, a London-based Internet magazine, Jack Adams (stage name Mumdance) explains why he enjoys the genre:

I’m drawn to *Mahraganat* as it has a ton of energy. I would draw a lot of parallels with what happened in the UK with grime when it first started, although the message is completely different. This is another think I love about *Mahraganat* – even though I have no idea what is being said, the energy and vibe from the music is apparent and transcends any sort of language barrier.<sup>47</sup>

For Adams, *Mahraganat* is sonically legible as a “vibe” that resonates with other genres. Just as it shares lyrical and cultural characteristics with North American Hip-Hop, the frenetic tempo and sonic constructions of *Mahraganat* evokes certain solidarities with music movements happening in London and Paris.

### *Mahraganat Cosmopolitanism*

Due to its resonant subject matter delivered in colloquial Egyptian Arabic, festive soundscapes, and technological portability (usually transmitted through USB flash drives), it’s easy to understand why the motorcycle-riding youth of Alexandria gravitate toward *Mahraganat* and want to introduce the musical form into a space as diverse and

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<sup>47</sup> “Dummy Mix 205 // Mumdance by Dummy Mag,” interview with Mumdance by *Dummymag.com*, last modified on October 4, 2014, <http://www.dummymag.com/mixes/dummy-mix-205-mumdance-mahraganat-mixtape>.

meaningful as the *Corniche*. *Mahraganat* is arguably the first genre of music in Egypt in which its primary mode of circulation is characterized by such virtual exchanges. Earlier forms of music were often either heard on the radio (*Tarab*), the television (*Shabābiyya*), or traded via cassette tapes and compact disks (*Sha' bī*, Islamic hymns/sermons [*Dīniyya*]). By compressing *Mahraganat* tracks into small mp3 files and placing them on flash drives, the genre's fans are able to take their music anywhere and easily copy it onto a friend's hard drive or plug it into a car stereo.

In addition, this mode of circulation allows tracks to be emailed or transmitted through instant messaging, which stores a copy of it on Google or Facebook's servers that can be accessed at any time, from ultimately any place with an Internet connection. This kind of virtual transversality is not only the primary mode by which the genre is circulated, but also a vital condition of its emergence and proliferation. In other words, *Mahraganat* is in essence a virtual phenomenon because it is produced almost completely on computers and traded between artists and fans via the Internet. The globalized character of the Internet infects the form and content of *Mahraganat*, allowing different cultures to come together and cohere in certain songs and through certain sounds (sampling an American Pop song, for instance), as discussed above. It is this transnationality that I call *Mahraganat*'s cosmopolitanism, although this term needs to be unpacked a bit.

In her rigorous and thoroughgoing critique of cosmopolitanism, Hala Halim argues that the notion of Alexandria in the Western imaginary as a Hellenic and cosmopolitan place is a European and Eurocentric discourse that has been canonized by the writings and reception of a specific triumvirate of writers (C.P. Cavafy, E.M. Forster,

and Lawrence Durrell). While she locates other forms of “cosmopolitanisms” that fall outside the European discourse (films, novels, Turkish architecture, etc.), she contends that they have largely been overlooked in the popular imaginary.<sup>48</sup> In other words, cosmopolitanism, as a concept, should not be restricted to processes of westernization, but extended to describe how artistic, economic, and political exchange occurs simultaneously between many cultures. In the contemporary world, where multiple forms of information (news, literature, music, etc.) are exchanged across vast distances in milliseconds, cultural production across the world is becoming a globalized and cosmopolitan process. I argue that *Mahraganat* demonstrates how these processes are rendered sonically.

*Mahraganat*, because of its fusion of Egyptian themes and sounds with North American Hip-Hop and European Electronic music, similarly expresses the kind of cosmopolitanism that Halim tries to lend agency. Although not all Egyptians approve of the genre’s content or the conditions of its performance, it has captivated a sizeable portion of Egypt’s young population as well as a certain community of artists in Europe. Both Egyptian and indicative of its aficionados’ international sensibilities, *Mahraganat* offers a contemporary critique of national and cultural borders, demonstrating that even as practical barriers to international collaboration between artists still stand (visa applications, money for plane tickets, etc.), they are circumnavigated and deconstructed through the virtual production and trade of tracks and samples. *Mahraganat* artists sang in Cairo, and some in London and Paris listened.

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<sup>48</sup> Halim, *Alexandrian Cosmopolitanism*, 2-3, 13-14.

## **Chapter 4: *Mahraganat* Activity within the Political Trajectory of Post-Mubarak Egypt**

*June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2014*

On any given Sunday in Alexandria, it's cheap and easy to get from one part of the city to another. Taxis, buses, and minibuses are plentiful, and outside of these common modes of transportation one can easily catch a ride on a *tūk-tūk* (auto-rickshaw), a horse-drawn carriage, or even on the back of a donkey cart. However, the streets of the coastal city were empty and silent on June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2012. The bustling traffic and persistent chirping of street vendors that normally characterized the program of midday had temporarily subsided as millions of citizens remained in their homes, glued to the television. A contentious presidential runoff between Mohamed Morsi (then chairman of the Freedom and Justice Party or Muslim Brotherhood) and Ahmed Shafik (deposed President Hosni Mubarak's former Prime Minister) was coming to a close. The late afternoon sun beat down on the barren pavement while tickers with figures and percentages rolled on the bottom of every news station, indicating the election results of precincts and governates that had closed their polls and submitted their numbers.

The air was heavy with anticipation and anxiety, as if the weight of nearly a year and a half of citizen protests, police violence, and political instability hung suspended between the sky and the ground. While Egypt's sizeable minority of secular liberals felt that Islamists and autocrats had hijacked their revolution, in the more religiously conservative city of Alexandria, there seemed to be a feeling that this election represented a choice between old and new. On the one hand, maintaining the status quo of the former regime through Shafik, and on the other stepping toward combining Islam and democracy

in a way that the world had never seen through Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood. I heard from numerous Alexandria University students that if Shafik were elected there would be another revolution that would exceed the drama and violence of the early 2011 uprisings. Morsi supporters felt that, after the “Arab Spring,” Egyptians could never be deceived into allowing a corrupt authoritarian from the Mubarak regime to assume power again, lest there be a swift and passionate backlash.

At around 4 PM local time, the election commission announced that Mohamed Morsi had indeed won the race with 51.7% of the vote over Shafik’s 48.3%. News stations showed large crowds of Morsi supporters around the nation as they erupted in elation. Streaming embers of fireworks filled Tahrir Square, while a combination of fervent chants and the Egyptian national anthem filled the soundscape of central Alexandria. Although the political future of Egypt was uncertain at the time, many Egyptians felt that the election of Mohamed Morsi marked an exciting shift in the domestic affairs of their country. For the first time in its history, Egypt had a democratically elected president that seemed to represent a departure from the oppressive and corrupt system that had governed it for over 30 years. Unaware of the events that would unfold over the coming years, an atmosphere of hopefulness emerged among Egyptians that the country could burrow its way out of an economic and political hole and move toward building a free and democratic state.

### *Morsi/Swell*

This chapter traces the rise and fall of Mohamed Morsi in order to locate the swelling and waning of what I term “*Mahraganat* activity” in the country’s city centers

and urban publics in general. This activity primarily involves publicly listening to *Mahraganat* music, but it also entails the accompanying movements and activities that occur in tandem with these public audition practices, of which I explored and contextualized in the previous chapters and will further elaborate here. While I will explain that the political priorities of Morsi's administration enabled more expressly public performances of this *Mahraganat* activity in urban Egypt, I do not wish to imply that the Muslim Brotherhood sanctioned or approved of the actions and movements of the genre's fans. Engaging with Lauren Berlant's concept of "ambient citizenship" and Jacques Rancière's evaluation of what constitutes politics and political action, I contend that the discursive space opened up by Mubarak's ouster revealed unprecedented opportunities for *Mahraganat* participants to make themselves *seen*. Unlike the popular conception of these young men as aimless ruffians with little political commitment, it is my belief that their activities are manifestly political in nature.

I began this chapter in Alexandria at the moment of Morsi's election in order to demarcate what I understand to be the apex of *Mahraganat* activity, or the idiosyncratic actions of *Mahraganat*'s listeners, in Egypt's urban publics until now. In the wake of Mubarak's removal, fans of *Mahraganat* suddenly found that the regime with which they associated their disenfranchisement no longer had control over their actions and movements. The weak, sickly, and finger-wagging patriarchal figure had been undermined, ultimately leading to his replacement by the fraternal figure of Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood. The erosion of such a patriarchal authority allowed for a new generation of Egyptian politicians to take over and redefine the methods and priorities of the political machine. Unlike the Mubarak regime, which made sustaining

public order and restricting the bodily positioning of Egyptian citizens its top concern, Morsi's presidency turned its focus away from the day-to-day and toward appropriating the narrative of the revolution, sometimes despotically,<sup>49</sup> in order to gain political legitimacy. As such, the short-lived Muslim Brotherhood administration relied on a more macro-level politics that attempted to arrogate the language of the 2011 uprisings through an emphasis on religious values and constitutional reform. Under this political framework, the administration did not labor to police minor offenses such as traffic violations, drug use, loitering, and vandalism, but focused on broader political projects such as forming a new constitution and consolidating the Muslim Brotherhood leadership.

I argue that this lack of institutional concern for regulating the mundane activities of citizens afforded *Mahraganat*'s aficionados access to discursive and physical spaces in Cairo and Alexandria's urban publics, where they could vent their frustrations and perform their identities, not only through moderately rebellious and illicit activities, but also by virtue of their very existence and visibility. As a result, the performance of *Mahraganat* through vociferous and transversal listening practices erupted in Egypt's most public and pedestrian spaces. As discussed previously, the Alexandrian *Corniche* is a particularly interesting case, as the boundary between the city's most congested highway and its most populated pedestrian walkway broke down and various vehicles spilled onto the sidewalk. Drivers often rode their cars over the curb and parked in front

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<sup>49</sup> For an example of a kind of "despotic" arrogation of revolutionary narrative: On November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2012, Morsi's spokesperson announced that his office would be immune from legal challenge until a constitution was decreed. Included in the announcement was a provision that expressed Morsi's ability to take any necessary measures against a potential threat to "the revolution," without defining what such a threat would look like.

of the sea in order to sit and enjoy the view of the Mediterranean without the fear that they would be arrested or ordered to leave. Motorcyclists used the wide boardwalk as a makeshift motor highway, weaving their way playfully through crowds of people and food carts and sometimes “playing chicken” with other motorcycle drivers or pedestrians. Concurrently, with these mischievous expressions of community and agency, motorcyclists almost always blare the sounds of *Mahraganat* out of the speakers attached to their vessel. Fast, loud, and masculine, the robust tenor of *Mahraganat* perfectly complements the testosteronal mood of naughtily playing with motorcycles.

Performing *Mahraganat* in this way, initiating and broadcasting subversive identities through illicit movements and actions (driving on the sidewalk, loudly listening to music, etc.), enacts a form of resistance that concurrently accompanies and runs parallel to more explicit and heavily codified forms of defiant political action, such as the popular demonstrations of the “Arab Spring.” These young men, usually from the poor, working-class neighborhoods on the periphery of Cairo and Alexandria, vent their frustrations with their marginalized status through cathartic and affective purgings of accumulated bodily movements and positions. These “purgings” embody forceful and near involuntary releases of pent-up energy through various gestures, whether motorcycle tricks, vocal gestures such as laughing or calling to one another, or bodily gestures expressed through finger pointing and the exchange of facial expressions. Here, I intentionally employ the term “gesture” in order to point to Giorgio Agamben’s understanding of these social phenomena. In order to escape the trappings of a hermeneutic system that reduces gestures to a specific set of meanings, Agamben defines gestures as medial acts that do not aim to achieve a certain communicative end, but

instead render *means* visible as a mode of interpersonal sociality that interrupts and shifts common processes of communication.<sup>50</sup> It is also within this realm of pure mediality, of means without end, that Agamben situates the realm of politics.<sup>51</sup>

As he transgresses the boundary between the sidewalk and the road, the pedestrian space and the vehicular space, the human and the machine, the motorcycle-rider broadcasts *Mahraganat* as his cheeky revolutionary anthem. He stakes his claim to the space by arrogating the surrounding soundscape and aggressively weaving between foot traffic, evoking solidarity with his fellow riders and provoking frustration among pedestrians. If a passerby scolds him for his actions he looks back sarcastically, relishing in the sensation that for at least a fleeting moment he unapologetically made his presence felt. In this moment, the motorcyclist and *Mahraganat* listener negotiates the conditions of his urban existence. He asserts his “right to the city,” his ability to make and remake the city, by intervening in the common processes of ordinary urban life both for himself and for those around him.<sup>52</sup>

It is in these moments that I believe *Mahraganat* truly *happens*, or *occurs* as a political gesture in the urban public. *Mahraganat takes place* and *takes up space* in these instances in that it unfolds dramatically across and within the visual, aural, and tactile sensorium that occupy the subjectivities of those interacting with and inhabiting the

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<sup>50</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Cesarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2000), 58.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 116-117.

<sup>52</sup> Henri Lefebvre, “The Right to The City,” in *Writings on Cities*, ed. and trans. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Oxford: Blackwell 1996), 147-159 and David Harvey, “The Right to The City,” in *New Left Review* 53 (October 2008), 23-38.

Alexandrian *Corniche* or the congested streets of downtown Cairo.<sup>53</sup> In this way, publicly listening to *Mahraganat* is always already a political gesture because it challenges sanctioned modes of existence and unsettles familiar associations with how urban space should be experienced. Imposing itself on the routine of the *Corniche*, *Mahraganat*, and the disruptive activity that often accompanies *Mahraganat* listening, disrupts and re-constitutes the common experience of simply being in or moving through Alexandria. The vociferous and persistent hum of *Mahraganat* both upsets the traditional order of things and installs a new kind of order with de-facto rules and attitudes. In this ad-hoc system, one can drive on the sidewalk and play dangerously with others. After the 2011 uprisings and through the administration of the Muslim Brotherhood, *Mahraganat* and its co-emergent antics became a defining characteristic of the urban landscape, especially in areas where there is heavy vehicle and pedestrian traffic.

Although considered mere hooliganism by much of the Egyptian population, these movements and actions by young disenfranchised men constitute intense manifestations of bodily politicking. Against the grain of what is considered acceptable speech by Egyptian laws and norms, *Mahraganat*'s aficionados express their agency not as restricted citizens with a specific set of designated constitutional rights, but as active participants in the evolution of political discourse in the country. In other words, public listening sessions and dangerous vehicular maneuvers for these men initiate a specific mode of citizenship, a method of belonging to a community, that is separate and distinct from official or sanctioned ways of existing as an Egyptian.

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<sup>53</sup> Ben Anderson and Paul Harrison, "The Promise of Non-Representational Theories," in *Taking Place: Non-Representational Theories and Geography*, ed. Ben Anderson and Paul Harrison (London: Ashgate 2010), 22-23.

Lauren Berlant explores this kind of affective modality, of resisting normative states of citizenship while still asserting the desire for the political, in her investigation of various political art projects in the United States.<sup>54</sup> For her, political movements that create and distribute *noise*, sounds (or the absence thereof) that escape and resist mediated forms of communication, enact a sense of “ambient citizenship” among the participating body politic. This “mode of belonging...circulates through and around the political in formal and informal ways, with an affective, emotional, economic, and juridical force that is at once clarifying and diffuse.”<sup>55</sup> Ambience is a productive term for Berlant, as it both expresses atmosphere-producing sounds and the sensation of movement (ambit) that gathers and orients bodies toward political action. By broadcasting *Mahraganat* across the aural environment, in tandem with the visual and tactile performances embedded within *Mahraganat* activity, these young men initiate and maintain the intimate feelings of belonging, of togetherness, that constitute ambient citizenship. This affective solidarity is clarifying in the sense that multiple subjects assert their political virility through similar gestures (motorcycle riding, horsing around, voluble listening), but it is also diffuse in that these gestures emerge and cohere at different times across a vast network of spaces, both physical (the *Corniche*, the taxi cab, the alleyway) and virtual (USB sticks, YouTube and Soundcloud channels).

Jacques Rancière, in his 2010 book *Dissensus*, argues that politics is not the exercise of power, nor is it limited to a process whereby a specific kind of subject

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<sup>54</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press 2011), 223-263.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

partakes in the act of ruling or being ruled in the Aristotelian sense.<sup>56</sup> Rather, “politics, before all else, is an intervention in the visible and the sayable”.<sup>57</sup> In opposition to what he calls the *police*, whose primary concern is to hide undesirable things from view (“Move along! There’s nothing to see here!”) politics is, on the contrary, the work of making its subjects *seen*. Similarly, *Mahraganat*’s followers engage in politics by inserting themselves into the visual and aural field of public space, a move that resists and breaks open the accepted manner of being an Egyptian male, a docile subject, a body that is consistently used, easily coerced, and transformed by the state.<sup>58</sup>

In light of what Rancière has to say about politics, one should not understand *Mahraganat* as a product of the revolution or the “voice” of the “Arab Spring.” *Mahraganat* is a political movement, or rather a dynamic distribution of political acts, that stands on its own and adopts its own affective and symbolic trajectories. The aims of the demonstrations in Tahrir Square (constitutional reform, the end of political corruption, economic opportunity, the fall of Mubarak’s regime, etc.) were not and are not the only concern of *Mahraganat*’s artists and their fans, even if these things are occasionally mentioned. While the domestic and international popularity of *Mahraganat* co-emerges and co-evolves with the narrative of the region’s popular uprisings, this does not mean that the genre required the contextual framework of popular demonstrations in order to obtain political legitimacy. This only reveals that in the world’s reorientation toward the political possibilities of Egypt and the region, *Mahraganat* made itself seen as

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<sup>56</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (New York: Bloomsbury 2010), 27.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>58</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of The Prison*, (New York: Vintage Books 2005), 136.

an important thread in the fabric of Egyptian society. The music's lyrical content (which sometimes, but not always, references the revolution), its sonic infrastructure, and the defiant methods by which its followers publicly listen to it invest *Mahraganat* with political value. It is precisely these factors that make *Mahraganat* political, not its appropriation by a more acknowledged form of political action or its definition through revolutionary narratives. To ascribe *Mahraganat*'s emergence and popularity as merely the result of the Arab Spring limits our understanding of the music's complex genealogy and trivializes the affinities that a large portion of Egypt's youth share with the genre.

### *Tafhīt and Mahraganat*

The performative expressions of identity that *Mahraganat* followers initiate recall a popular practice among young males in other parts of the Arab world, notably across the Red Sea in Saudi Arabia. Pascal Ménoret and Awadh Al-Uthaybi, in their article on male Bedouin driving practices in Saudi Arabia, locate an interesting manifestation of non-religious dissent against the state's violence that is relevant to the current discussion.<sup>59</sup> Young males around the capital of Riyadh regularly participate in *tafhīt*, defined broadly as the execution of dangerous automobile stunts by either individuals (called *mufahhitīn*) or in groups. In a theoretical dialogue with Mauss's body capital, the authors argue that in performing these tricks (which usually consist of speeding, skidding, running traffic lights, and weaving quickly between other cars) the *mufahhit* or "skidder" accumulates social capital and extends his network in a society that has historically

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<sup>59</sup> Pascal Ménoret and Awadh al-Utaybi, "Urban unrest and non-religious radicalization in Saudi Arabia," in *Dying for Faith: Religiously Motivated Violence in the Contemporary World*, ed. M. Al-Rasheed and M. Shterin (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 123-137.

marginalized Bedouin culture through institutional discrimination and displacement. Without access to official sources of political, economic, or cultural capital, the participants of *tafhīt* have found an alternate and underground source of social currency in these delinquent practices that affords them respect and esteem among their community of peers.<sup>60</sup> Verses that mime the style of *Jāhili* (pre-Islamic) poetry are often written by fans of *tafhīt* about the drivers, comparing them to ancient heroes such as Antar and contributing to their underground status. Ménoret and Al-Utaybi demonstrate how these young males cope with a repressive regime that characterizes them as political and sexual deviants.

Like the *mufahhtīn* of Riyadh, the patrons of *Mahraganat* accumulate social capital among their peers through the performance and repetition of voluble listening practices. These performances, as mentioned before, are often similarly embodied while executing assorted moves and tricks on a motorcycle. Additionally, while performances of *Mahraganat* play out in all public sectors of Egypt's urban environments, its aficionados often commute from their homes in the peripheral working-class neighborhoods of Cairo, Suez, and Alexandria in order to meet in the more central areas of the city, either for work or play. Unlike the movement of the *mufahhtīn* from the city centers to the surrounding desert in order to escape the watchful eye of the religious police, *Mahraganat* fans move from the periphery to the center precisely in order to make themselves publicly visible. As referenced in chapter 3, *Mahraganat* artists and fans often trace the genre's origins to the poor Cairo suburb of Salaam City, the home of many famous *Mahraganat* pioneers such as Sadat, Alaa' Fifty Cent, and DJ Figo. Born into the

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 132.

political, economic, and spatial margins, these artists turned to creating and performing a new kind of music in order to vent their misgivings and frustrations. In turn, their loyal listeners use this music as a soundtrack to everyday activities such as play and movement. These idiosyncratic methods of living in and moving through the city are political in that they reveal *Mahraganat* listeners as a particularly loud and noticeable component of Egypt's social infrastructure post-Arab Spring. As such, their imposing emergence into the congested urban spaces of Egypt forced those who had not noticed them before, whether older Egyptians or *The Rolling Stone*,<sup>61</sup> to reckon with their presence and acknowledge the discursive and experiential shifts they induced concerning metropolitan life in Cairo and Alexandria.

### *Sisi/Wane*

While publicly listening to *Mahraganat* has far from disappeared, the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood by military forces in the summer of 2013 marked a considerable decline in *Mahraganat* activity in the most public areas of Egypt, including the popular pedestrian space of the Alexandrian *Corniche*. In the wake of the “*tamarrud*” (“rebellion”) movement that collected over 15 million signatures in opposition to the presidency of Mohamed Morsi, mass political protests, and Morsi's refusal to step down from the presidency, the military forced the president out of office and took control of the country. Importantly, the military and the police apparatus, two entities that had been separated ever since the military refused to back Hosni Mubarak in February of 2011,

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<sup>61</sup> See Mos'ab Elshamy, “Mahraganat: Egypt's Musical Revolution,” *Rollingstone.com*, last modified March 20, 2014, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/pictures/mahraganat-egypts-musical-revolution-20140320>.

effectively merged in order to remove elected Muslim Brotherhood leaders from office and to eradicate “terrorist” influence from the Egyptian public.<sup>62</sup> This re-fusion of military objectives and police enforcement legitimated a return to the kind of everyday suppression of movements and actions constitutive of the Mubarak regime. Under the direction of the military regime, the police force, in the same way that Rancière understands *police* in opposition to *politics*, established their presence as an agent for making things disappear from view. First and foremost, it became necessary to make it seem like the Muslim Brotherhood was a fringe movement. Under this rubric, the Freedom and Justice Party no longer represented a legitimate political entity because it had “failed the demands of the Egyptian people.”<sup>63</sup> More broadly however, Sisi and the military’s emphasis on domestic security and stability extended to all sectors of Egyptian society, including *Mahraganat*’s motorcycle-riding youth in Alexandria.

For instance, upon returning to Alexandria in July of 2014, exactly a year after the removal of Morsi from office, I noticed that while the motorcycles that volubly broadcasted *Mahraganat* were still present on the roads and in the interior neighborhoods of the city, the illicit performance of riding the motorcycles onto the boardwalk (discussed earlier in this chapter and at length in chapter 1) had largely disappeared. In fact, every few hours a very large and imposing armored vehicle with visible machine gun turrets made its way down the *Corniche*, bringing along with it a sense of fear and intimidation. Also, public police presence was noticeably more prevalent, and especially

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<sup>62</sup> See Alastair Beach, “Showdown in Cairo: Egyptian general demands permission to take on the ‘terrorists,’” *independent.co.uk*, last modified on July 24, 2013, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/showdown-in-cairo-egyptian-general-demands-permission-to-take-on-the-terrorists-8729903.html>

<sup>63</sup> Mark Mardell, “Egypt Crisis: Army ousts President Mohamed Morsi,” *bbc.com*, last modified July 4, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-23173794>.

concentrated on the *Corniche*. The Egyptian government also erected a solid wall around the perimeter of the Library of Alexandria, which had been an open air space under the Muslim Brotherhood administration, only allowing access to the institution through one heavily monitored entrance.

These enforcement measures changed the affective environment of the space and limited what *Mahraganat* fans felt they could get away with in terms of their public audition practices. However, this does not mean that *Mahraganat* activity completely disappeared. Instead, it either took new forms or changed venues in order to not fall under the purview of institutional punishment. For example, I noticed many more young men and even children riding bicycles with attached speakers that played *Mahraganat*, albeit at a lower volume. In addition, I saw many vehicles parked on the *Corniche* with the doors left open and the stereo on loudly, often with a group of men huddled around eating, smoking cigarettes, or just listening and talking. Also, on the other side of the Qait-Bay Citadel, before the *Corniche* begins and in the neighborhood Ras-at-Tin near the western port of the city (*al-mīnā' al-gharbiyya*), *Mahraganat* activity was still very high.

In late July of 2014, I remember walking in Ras-at-Tin with some friends in order to buy *rūz w laban*, a dessert of rice and sweet milk, and noticing a high concentration of motorcycle riding, often overlapping with pedestrian traffic, accompanied by very loud broadcasts of *Mahraganat*. I asked one of my friends, a doctoral student in Arabic at Alexandria University, why this kind of behavior still persists in this area and not on the *Corniche*. He responded, “The *Corniche* is for the tourists. This area is very traditional (*sha‘bī*). People here feel like they are the *real*, or ‘original,’ Alexandrians. If the police

tried to regulate the actions of people here, there would be a war in the streets. I'm not kidding. There would be another, even more violent, revolution.”

Even if this was an exaggeration on the part of my friend, things certainly seemed less rigid and regulated just around the corner from the *Corniche*. The exclamation that “the *Corniche* is for the tourists” is telling because it simultaneously expresses what areas of Alexandria are meant to be *seen* by outsiders and those that should remain hidden. The *Corniche*, as discussed in the first chapter, is arguably the most public space in the city as it is both the primary locale for sociality and the main traffic artery of downtown Alexandria. Behind the *Corniche*, however, is a very large city with various neighborhoods and gathering places. For *Mahraganat* fans, after the deposal of the Muslim Brotherhood and the reinstatement of military rule, the *Corniche* no longer oriented the performance of the genre through the listening practices explained above. Adapting to the conditions of the new political order, *Mahraganat* listening began to emerge more rhizomatically, across the city at different times and in different places, than singularly in one place such as the *Corniche*. This is not to say that people in Alexandria *only* listened to *Mahraganat* on the coastal road before the ousting of Morsi in July of 2013. As I explained in chapter 2, *Mahraganat* listening occurs in all kinds of contexts that are sometimes more subtle than blasting the music out of a moving vehicle. However, the fact that much of the illicit activity associated with listening to *Mahraganat* on the *Corniche* disappeared once Sisi took power is indicative of the military's concern with regulating the movements of young Egyptians in certain, very public, areas, such as the *Corniche*.

As previously argued, *Mahraganat* is not only a genre of music, but a lived and felt phenomenon that expresses a particular mode of being in Egypt. As such, the ways that aficionados of the genre engage with and listen to the music shifts and adapts according to the political and affective context of the space in which it exists. It is not so much that *Mahraganat* activity has “declined” in Egypt (although it certainly has become more subtle) since the removal of Mohamed Morsi, but that the performance of *Mahraganat* through its public listening practices has had to find new stages for its expression. Around the corner in the western port or just out of sight behind the concrete curtain of apartment buildings, one can still hear the unique sounds created by the combination of motorcycle engines and *Mahraganat* music. Although slightly more muffled than before, it persists nevertheless.

## Conclusion

### *Zo`la*

On January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2015, Ahmed “*Zo`la*” Mohsen, a *Mahraganat* DJ associated with the popular trio of Sadat, Alaa` Fifty Cent, and DJ `Amr HaHa, went out with his friends to eat lunch and buy clothes. Concurrently, clashes occurred between the police and supporters of deposed president Mohamed Morsi, as opposition groups marched to commemorate the fourth anniversary of the 2011 uprisings. As Mohsen was making his way back home he was fatally shot in the head by a stray bullet. Government officials blamed Muslim Brotherhood supporters for all 23 deaths on that day. However, artist Sadat believes that his friend and collaborator was intentionally shot by police forces.<sup>64</sup> One of the band’s assistants, Ahmed Abdel Aziz, told Egypt Independent that doctors at Zeitoun Hospital tried to convince Mohsen’s family to “sign a postmortem claiming that he committed suicide” in order to avoid a lengthy investigation into the details of his murder.<sup>65</sup>

A few days after the incident, Sadat and Fifty spoke to TV channel Al-Masry Al-Youm about “*Zo`la*,” saying that everyone in the neighborhood knew him and considered him a nice and respectful person, one who constantly aimed to make those around him happy.<sup>66</sup> Regarding Mohsen’s immediate plans, Sadat and Fifty explained that in a

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<sup>64</sup> “Friends of popular DJ: Police killed *Zo`la*,” *egyptindependent.com*, last modified January 28, 2015, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/friends-popular-dj-police-killed-zo-la>.

<sup>65</sup> “Famed rap band DJ accidentally killed during Matariya clashes,” *egyptindependent.com*, last modified January 26, 2015, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/famed-rap-band-dj-accidentally-killed-during-matariya-clashes>.

<sup>66</sup> “‘*fifty*’ and ‘*sadat*’ *yahkiyān tafāṣīl maqtal ‘zo`la’ fī muḏhāhirāt al-maṭariyya*” (“Fifty and Sadat discuss the details of *Zo`la*’s death at the demonstrations in Matariya”),

month's time he was supposed to travel to France in order to perform as a representative for the group and for *Mahraganat* music more generally.<sup>67</sup> Whether killed by accident or purposefully murdered is still unclear. However, his friends and collaborators will continue to live and make songs with him in mind, carrying his memory and allowing the music to solidify his legacy.

### *Questions for Further Study and Concluding Remarks*

This thesis was an initial attempt at explaining the culture and politics of *Mahraganat* music in Egypt. It has argued that *Mahraganat*, both as a genre and through its accompanying and performative practices of listening, is a felt and embodied practice that initiates and maintains new forms of being and modes of belonging in contemporary urban Egypt. Through ethnographic engagements and critical analyses I have focused on how aficionados of the genre listen to the music as well as move, position, and ornament their bodies as they listen. In opposition to the common conception that many in other social classes have of them as ruffians with little political or cultural significance, this project demonstrates that *Mahraganat* fans actually express their political agency, and their desire to be political agents, precisely through the variable performances that surround listening to the genre. In addition, I have shown that *Mahraganat* refigures the common associations that people have with public space in urban Egypt.

While I believe this study represents an important starting point for academic endeavors concerned with *Mahraganat* music and cultural production in Egypt more

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*YouTube* Video, 3:01, posted by "AlMasry AlYoum," January 27, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UR4q4lu3qLU&x-yt-cl=84924572&x-yt-ts=1422411861#t=143,0:20>.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:08-2:40.

generally, it is by no means an exhaustive or complete project. Since every academic project emerges out of a specific historical moment, it will be important and interesting to trace the trajectory of *Mahraganat* music and the conditions of its performance as the political situation in Egypt subsequently unfolds. In the present moment, however, there are still pressing questions concerning the subject of the genre's cultural and political implications.

First and foremost, where do women fit into the discourse of *Mahraganat*? Namely, how do women resist or share in the production and maintenance of *Mahraganat* masculinities and what are either complementary or separate spaces of female aesthetic politicking? It is my hope that future engagements with the genre will include both ethnographic material and discursive analysis that tackles questions about women's engagements with the genre as well as investigates the conditions of feminine exclusion from the public performances of *Mahraganat* discussed at length previously.

Also, subsequent studies will need to deepen the literature's understanding of how fans of *Mahraganat*, and Egyptians more generally for that matter, understand, respond to, and circumvent the specter of violence, whether committed by governmental or non-governmental actors. I begin to argue in the final chapter of this project that fans of *Mahraganat* feel their way through what they can and cannot do in certain places and at certain times based on the affective atmosphere initiated by either the presence or absence of law enforcement actors. However, what are the conditions of this process of "feeling out?" Is it more or less unconscious, or does it come out of an intimate knowledge of the legal and ethical demands of society and the Egyptian state?

Relatedly, a sustained and intimate engagement with Egyptian law and broader legal theory would be productive for asking questions concerning how Egyptians, and aficionados of *Mahraganat* specifically, respond to and interact with notions of law and legality. For example, how does the law (or lack thereof in times of political transition such as the period studied here) impact the movements and actions of *Mahraganat* fans? Or is the code of law in Egypt so diffuse and publicly unattainable that it does not play much into their considerations?

Finally, and most broadly, it is imperative to have much more direct and human engagements with fans of *Mahraganat* in order to understand how the genre is felt and lived in different situations and at different times. Since so little has been said about *Mahraganat* in the academy one cannot yet perform a “discourse analysis” or “literature review” concerning the genre. As such, I believe that further ethnographic studies that are concerned with notions of performance, affect, and the researcher’s subject position are absolutely vital to deepening the literature’s understanding and analysis of the genre.

I chose to conclude this thesis with the story of Ahmed “*Zo’la*” Mohsen in order to zoom out and show that due to the state of political instability in the country, Egyptians are continually forced to circumnavigate the threat of violence. The case of *Zo’la* demonstrates that *Mahraganat* artists are far from removed or insulated from the everyday horrors of a nation that has experienced consistent upheaval and witnessed multiple violent clashes over the last several years. Despite this uncertainty, people in Egypt continue to find ways to work and play, to wake up each day and feel their way through the world, to live their lives. *Mahraganat*, as a genre and a performance, is one of the variable ways in which life is lived in Egypt. It moves through and around,

somewhere between arriving and departing, appearing and disappearing. Somewhere between here and there, Cairo and London, Alexandria and Texas, moving back and forth so quickly and constantly that it doesn't seem to move at all.

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