

**GREAT ESCAPES: NEOLIBERAL OPTIMIZATION AND THE POLITICS OF
MAINSTREAM RAP MUSIC IN CONTEMPORARY EGYPT**

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Abstract

This study is about the politics of mainstream rap music in contemporary Egypt. It details the relationship between a domestic Egyptian music industry whose current zeitgeist is overwhelmingly dominated by rap, and the structures of power governing the production of culture in contemporary Egypt.

This study is also about economics. Specifically, this study engages in close readings of Egyptian rap songs and music videos to show how neoliberal economic logics undergirding the production of mainstream Egyptian rap overtake and undermine those dominant structures of power, becoming itself the central force shaping the genre.

This study elucidates how, in this way, the ascension of rap music to the cultural mainstream in Egypt represents a kind of “coup” in that rap hinges upon, is a conscious reaction to, and takes advantage of a contemporary Egypt mired in ongoing failure and instability, that which is rooted specifically in the current regime’s pursuit of policies of neoliberal restructuring at the expense of its sociopolitical and cultural stability. This study argues that mainstream Egyptian rappers deploy rap as a vehicle of escape from such instability, and elaborates on how Egypt’s rappers mount their escape through the vehicle of this “coup.”

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Egyptian Culture in the Neoliberal Age	19
Arabic Beyond Arabness: Neoliberal Politics of Language in Mainstream Egyptian Rap	
Music	34
Flexible Visualities: Between Complicity and Excess	48
Epilogue	71
Bibliography	75

Introduction

In November of 2022, the Syndicate of Musical Professions—the administrative body charged by the Egyptian state with enacting its cultural policies with regards to the domestic production of music—called a press conference in which a number of Egypt’s most prominent rappers¹ appeared alongside Syndicate head Mustafa Kamel to announce the so-called return of rap music to the country. Reporting on the matter, Egyptian cultural critic Mohammed el-Aswany narrates how the head of the Syndicate Mustafa Kamel inaugurated a detente in rapper-state relations, turning to speak magnanimously to the entourage of rappers gathered around him: “I’ll grant you [the country’s prominent rappers] permission to work with the musical influences you like... go forth and please Egypt and please the whole Arab world, and we want you all to harvest big awards and make the country proud with beautiful art and beautiful words.” el-Aswany then narrates how, to conclude the press conference, the rappers present all stood up to take a group photo with Kamel, repeating the phrase “long live Egypt” (*tahya Masr*).²

This press conference comes as something of a watershed moment for the relationship between the Egyptian state and the cultural sphere—as well as something of an about-face. Kamel’s predecessor Hany Shaker had been fighting, in the years prior, a protracted battle of attrition against a then-nascent generation of up and coming rap artists. Characterized by an

¹ Marwan Moussa, Afroto, and Abyusif specifically.

² el-Aswany (2022), tr. by me

attitude of overt hostility towards a burgeoning rap scene and its main stars, Shaker's tenure saw violent attempts at repressing the groundswell of those popular artists operating largely outside of state-sanctioned economies of musical production. For instance, in the same year as the press conference—just shortly before Kamel dethroned Shaker in subsequent Syndicate elections—Egyptian rap, alongside the adjacent genre of *mahraganat*, had been entirely banned in the country.³ A year prior to that, Marwan Moussa had been among five other rappers whose licenses to perform were revoked by the Syndicate for an alleged violation of Syndicate rules; indeed, up until 2021, the Syndicate did not even officially recognize rap music as a legitimate genre—rappers in Egypt had to obtain temporary, single-day work permits as DJs or “monologists” in order to perform legally at live concerts.⁴ In addition to the litany of restrictions imposed on their practice in the country, Egypt's rappers were also the subject of public demonization campaigns carried out on the country's leading mainstream media outlets. One public figure after another shunned the genre as vulgar and degenerate “music of the slums,” with one particularly prominent Egyptian composer, Helmy Bakr—a particularly notable “gatekeeper” of Egyptian music—going so far as to say that “the music kitchen is now full of cockroaches and insects, and no kind of insecticide would help.”⁵

Such an approach, however, proved ineffective indeed at stymying Egyptian rap's explosion in popularity. Issues of practicality abounded, as platforms like Spotify, YouTube, and Anghami opened up alternate pathways for financial viability that exceeded the reach of the state

³ Ramadan (2021) p. 7

⁴ *ibid* p. 8

⁵ Qtd. in Rashidi, p. 66

and enabled the continued proliferation of the scene.⁶ By 2022, rap and *mahraganat* artists had handily defeated those sanctioned by the Syndicate, as the latter struggled to find employment while the former enjoyed the many graces of the market, converting waves of online virality into international tour after international tour.⁷

Mohammed el-Aswany’s article, tellingly titled “The Art of Controlling Rap and *Mahraganat*”, situates the 2022 press conference within the context of this failure, reading this moment as the emergence of a new Syndicate of Musical Professions that has taken to heart the lessons gleaned from the recent past. The contrast between Shaker and Kamel is, in many ways, representative of this shift in attitude: where Shaker is preoccupied with matters of maintaining the Syndicate’s cultural prestige and legitimacy as the arbiter of Egyptian music on behalf of the state, Kamel appears wholly disinterested; Kamel’s attention is turned instead towards not repressing but *capitalizing* upon the successes—financial and otherwise—of Egypt’s rap superstars, rerouting them through the Syndicate in such a way as to enjoy their windfalls.⁸

At this, el-Aswany writes with not insignificant pessimism. He portends that this new chapter in rapper-state relations hints at a state of affairs in which a few rappers gain entry into the vaunted pantheon of state-sanctioned art but at the expense of the underground scene from which those rappers came, thereby choking out the scene’s previous vibrancy which so frustrated Shaker’s Syndicate. el-Aswany highlights Kamel’s prudent manipulation of the network of incentives at play for the rappers in question, correctly recognizing that “the most [Egypt’s premier rappers] hope for is financial and commercial success and inclusion in the country’s

⁶ Ramadan (2021), p. 12

⁷ Hariri (2020) (يوسف الحريري)

⁸ el-Aswany (2022)

cultural elite”, and in exchange would gladly agree to play nice with the Syndicate and the various arms of the Ministry of Culture’s censorship wing.⁹

This is indeed the reality that has come to pass in the eighteen or so months following the press conference; symbiosis between Egypt’s rappers and the Egyptian state appears to be the prevailing status quo as of the time of writing (summer 2024). The benefits certainly appear to be mutual: in the roughly eighteen months between November 2022 and now, rap has since thoroughly solidified its status as the dominant sound of the Egyptian cultural zeitgeist. The names Wegz, Marwan Moussa, and Marwan Pablo among others are lauded in the media,¹⁰ having attained household familiarity as the crown jewels of the domestic music industry. They make appearances in advertisements and feature prominently as brand ambassadors for major Egyptian corporations like Telecom Egypt and are unabashed about flaunting the material rewards reaped therein. Uncontested domestic demand and commercial success aside,¹¹ the popularity of Egypt’s rappers attains beyond just the national: Egyptian rap has made appearances as the soundtrack for American television productions,¹² have attracted the investment of international megacorporations like Red Bull, and in 2022—just weeks after Kamel’s press conference—Egyptian rap’s most preeminent star, Wegz, performed during the finals of the World Cup,¹³ taking up the mantle once held by the superstars of the “golden age” of Egyptian music like Umm Kulthum in projecting Egyptian soft power on an international stage.

⁹ *ibid*, tr. by me.

¹⁰ Ali el Kashwaty (2021)

¹¹ Wegz, for instance, has remained the country’s most streamed artist every year since 2020, see Guyer (2022)

¹² Hajjar (2023)

¹³ Makary (2022)

Thus while Egypt's most popular rappers are permitted free reign over the mainstream, the Egyptian state is able to bolster its projects of neoliberal economic reform, as well as project an image of a remolded Egypt hip to global cultural trends.

The benefits extracted by the state continue to compound, particularly when considering the state's decade-long project of reestablishing its grip on Egyptian cultural production following the 2011 uprisings and subsequent political turmoil. The pivotal role popular culture generally—and music more specifically—played during Egypt's 2011 revolution is well studied indeed, with scholars from a diversity of disciplines documenting the phenomenon;¹⁴ as Mark Levine writes, “[it] has become something of a commonplace to argue that music played an important role in the revolutionary upheavals [of the Arab Spring].”¹⁵ Rap music in particular, rooted in Black American reactions to and against a white American mainstream milieu, was uniquely poised to participate in and add to the resistant energies of the time. Processes of global capitalism and commercialization notwithstanding, rap music traveled widely as a global “lingua franca” largely due to “the notion of hip-hop as transformative art and [as] a representation of social and political life”—a “trademark” of rap globally.¹⁶ This is the pattern observed by Ian Condry in his ethnographic study of rap music in Japan,¹⁷ a pattern which holds in the Egyptian context as rap mixed and synergized with the resonant genre of *mahraganat*,¹⁸ forming part of the wave of cultural production mobilized towards revolutionary ends and playing a vital role in overthrowing the state-dominated pre-revolutionary status quo with regards to artistic

¹⁴ see Swedenburg (2019), Rashidi (2023), Kraidy (2017), Pahwa (2012), Pratt (2020)

¹⁵ Levine (2012), p. 794

¹⁶ Morgan (2016), p. 135

¹⁷ See Condry (2006)

¹⁸ Naji (2020)

production.¹⁹ Thus it is the case that, when Abdel El-Fattah El-Sisi's regime came to power via military coup in 2013, considerable energy was expended in order to quash those cultural producers it deemed a political threat, either imprisoning and/or exiling from the country those cultural producers prominent during the revolution like journalist and novelist Ahmed Naji, singer-songwriter Ramy Essam, as well as the rapper MC Sadat.²⁰

From this vantage point, it appears that the state's explicit co-opting of rap and its subsequent mainstream popularity signals a resounding success: not only has El-Sisi's regime been able to effectively silence a previous generation of politically-conscious rappers by force, it has since successfully mounted a counter-revolution within the genre, enlisting a subsequent generation of rappers and exploiting their domestic and international commercial success in order to re-exalt itself as the chief arbiter Egyptian musical culture. Indeed such a vantage point suggests that mainstream Egyptian rap music is of interest only insofar as it indexes the ascendant dominance the Egyptian state exercises over culture domestically.

This study argues the opposite: the mainstreaming of Egyptian rap in fact epitomizes the failure of the regime in reviving a pre-revolutionary cultural status quo. As Yasmine El Rashidi points out: "syndication is a double edged sword"; while on the one hand it "binds you, to some extent, to conform", it can also be a "coup" of sorts; this study seeks to elaborate what this "coup" looks like.²¹ Indeed, far from embodying the preferred cultural practices of the state, a close examination of mainstream Egyptian rap—its particular visual and lyrical motifs, its politics of language, the politics of its aesthetic commitments sonically, its particular mediatic

¹⁹ Naji (2021)

²⁰ El Rashidi (2023), p. 57

²¹ *ibid.* 29

qualities and the infrastructures it mobilizes, as well as the details of its insertion within an economy of marketing and branding—reveals that rap’s current formulation and its mainstream success springs from a deep distrust of the state and the forces governing it. It is rather the case that rap hinges upon, acknowledges, and is a conscious reaction to a contemporary Egypt mired in ongoing failure and instability, that which is rooted specifically in the current regime’s pursuit of policies of neoliberal restructuring at the expense of its sociopolitical and cultural stability. Mainstream Egyptian rappers in this way deploy rap as a vehicle of escape from such instability.

The kind of escape mainstream Egyptian rap enables operates on three different levels: the subjective, the cultural, and the economic. These three levels are intertwined, and indeed one follows from the other in circuitous fashion. The rappers in this study make use of the genre in order to, firstly, construct a Self quite detached from and indeed exceeds beyond the hitherto hegemonic framework of subjectivity provided by the idea of the nation—whether that be Arab or Egyptian—and championed by the state. Far from expressing a notion of subjectivity composed with reference to the imagined community of a national polity, Egypt’s mainstream rappers mobilize language in order to build up an outward-facing identity individuated from that of the national community. In similar fashion, this extranational construction of the Self then animates a markedly neoliberal politics of culture that again breaks away from the centrality of the nation as the governing logic underpinning Egyptian cultural production. Such a politics of culture enables mainstream rappers to take full advantage of an economy of culture centered around brand ambassadorships and corporate sponsorships, as well as the newly-established hegemony of digital platforms like Spotify and YouTube.

Indeed, a pronounced neoliberal ethos is the calling card of mainstream Egyptian rap: it informs the aesthetics of opulence that pervades the genre in Egypt, the subject matter taken up in the lyrics—the desire for wealth, prestige, and luxury among other signifiers of material success, as well as a fixation on putting down rivals competing over or standing in the way of those signifiers—and informs the way in which Egyptian rappers express and assert their subjectivity in authoritarian post-Arab Spring Egypt. In the context of the multiple failures of El-Sisi’s regime and the attendant repression of any and all forms of explicit cultural dissent or the possibility of social mobility, rap in Egypt indexes how neoliberalism offers a space—at once real for the rapper yet fantastical for the listener—where individual excellence, entrepreneurship, and cultural ingenuity sidelines the state and enables the individual rapper to exceed the bounds of El-Sisi’s Egypt and even benefit from its particular limitations. It is in this sense that the moment of syndication is a coup of sorts, in that it represents the subordination of the cultural logic of the state to the cultural logic of neoliberalism.

A paradigmatic example of this antagonism is seen on display in the first verse of the Husayn song “DAWLETNA” (meaning “our state,” “state” here meaning the political institution):

I surpass my limits and the borders of our state

معدي حدودي وحدود دولتنا

I make them hear me inside and outside

مسمع بره وجوه بصوتي

And because I’m known as the big honcho

وعشان معروف بكبير دايرتنا

I give the signal and everything is under my light.

أنا بدي إشارة والكل بصوتي

There's no creature who can judge me

وما فيش مخلوق يحاسبني

because even when I was little I wasn't afraid of my death

عشان من صغري ماهيتش موتي

and the wallet no longer tires me

والجيب مابقاش يتعبني

because I knocked it down with my throat.

عشان ع السكة طرشته بزوري²²

Husayn opens up the song with an open spurning of the country's borders. He plays on the double meaning of the word *hudood*, which can denote both the idea of a border (of a country, say) as well as the notion of a limit, as in a personal limitation or shortcoming. In this way Husayn symbolically mobilizes Egypt's borders not as the paradigmatic icon of sovereignty or national pride commanding a measure of respect, but rather processes them as a personal limitation or obstacle to be overcome. Here, it becomes obvious that references to "our state" (*dawletna*, the title of the song), carries with it a note of sardony: Husayn constructs himself as bigger than it, too big for it. This becomes especially obvious in subsequent lines as Husayn brags about wielding a kind of sovereign power over the state, situating himself and the moves he makes as an artist beyond the jurisdiction of any "creature" (*makhlu*). Thus he makes reference to his voice and his throat, literally in operation in the context of the song, as precisely those tools that allow him to wield that power both "inside and outside" (*gowwa wa barra*) and achieve economic security and even wealth; his "wallet" (*el-geeb*) no longer tires him. The listener, actually bearing witness to the power of Husayn's voice, thus enables and actualizes Husayn's agenda.

²² Husayn (2023), lyrics translated by me.

Husayn's verse invites us to consider how situating rap's disruptive presence within the ideological regime governing Egyptian cultural production and within the simultaneous context of Egypt's neoliberal development illuminates a tension latent in the relation between processes of neoliberalization and the sociopolitical interests of the state, even as the El-Sisi regime has accelerated its pursuit of those neoliberal policies.²³ This tension is particularly apparent in culture, as culture comes to form the "central front in neoliberalism's political economic project"; as such, the advancement of neoliberalism "hinges on cultural (re)regulation" based foundationally on a notion of an inevitable, "self-enclosed" individualism²⁴ that makes possible a governing order wherein "all conduct is economic conduct" and "all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics."²⁵ This project aims to outline one specific instance of this cultural (re)regulation taking place, as well as how the governing order that such a process of transformation ushers in competes with the Egyptian state's interests with regards to its own ideological orientation towards culture as a pillar of political legitimacy and, more recently, as a component of the current regime's policy of securitization. Wendy Brown observes that processes of neoliberalization entail—in politically democratic contexts—"remaking" the "precepts and principles of democracy"²⁶; this paper argues how those same processes similarly remake the precepts and principles of the culture of authoritarianism. In other words, capturing an image of neoliberalism as it propagates through Egyptian culture by way of mainstream rap, demonstrates how the logics of neoliberalism yoke to cultural and artistic production and expand

²³ Koussa (2023)

²⁴ Wilson (2018) p. 85, 12

²⁵ Brown (2015), p. 10

²⁶ *ibid.*

outward, all the while undoing heretofore dominant regimes of political subjectivity in an authoritarian context in a manner similar to that which Brown observes in democratic ones.

Such an inquiry is especially pertinent in the context of the iteration of Egypt found under President El-Sisi. In *Egypt Under El-Sisi*, Maged Mandour notes how El-Sisi's regime was a political and cultural counter-revolution directly organized by the military from above. It is hard to overstate the top-down character of El-Sisi's coup in the summer of 2013: for instance his regime stands out amongst Egypt's previous military dictatorships in its "remarkable reluctance to have a junior civilian partner in the ruling coalition", going so far as to neglect forming the customary mass civilian ruling party of which the President was the head, as was typical of regimes past.²⁷ Yet at the same time, Mandour hastens to point out that a top-down analytical approach to understanding the sociopolitical impact of El-Sisi's regime is insufficient; a full account of Egypt under El-Sisi would also employ a bottom-up approach, taking into consideration the "reactions of the citizenry" to the regime's policies.²⁸ This dissertation project makes the case that the mainstreaming of rap music is of relevance as just such a reaction, encapsulating the "shifting subjectivities and identities" undergirding the political dynamics of post-2011 Egypt²⁹—dynamics that evade capture in macro analyses of structural changes in Egypt's political system, but are found in rap's turn toward the promises of neoliberalism which, importantly, entails a necessary turn *away* from the state's historically-preferred construction of Egyptian culture and the basic ideological premises therein.

²⁷ Mandour (2024), p. 3

²⁸ *ibid.* 15

²⁹ Pratt (2020), p. 531

This study also aims to dialogue with the body of literature concerning the role of cultural and artistic production played and continues to play in the context of Egypt's experience of the Arab Spring and its afterlives, with special attention paid to works on music in particular. Specifically, this study grapples with the avowedly apolitical nature of mainstream Egyptian rap music without superimposing those scholarly discourses about art in general and music in particular most prevalent during the height and immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring.

To begin with, it is incumbent to point out the relative drop in the volume of published scholarship on Egyptian cultural production—particularly musical production—in the years following the military's seizure of political power in 2013. While anthologies like *Popular Culture in the Middle East and North Africa: A Postcolonial Outlook* (2013) and *Arab Subcultures* (2017), as well as monographs like *The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World* (2016) among others³⁰ do well to map the “flood of protest movements, political coalitions, advocacy groups, [and] culture and arts collectives” which were “inspired, emboldened by, [and] seen as analagous with” the Arab Spring—what Ramy K. Aly characterizes as a loose “countercultural assemblage”³¹—such scholarly enthusiasm noticeably peters out after such assemblages were largely done away with or dismantled after the accession of El-Sisi's regime to power.

Such dismantling drove the academy to one of two reactions: on the one hand, scholars and researchers experienced a state of whiplash wherein curiosity and excitement at the height of the revolutionary fervor succumbs to disappointment and cynical malaise. This is the case for

³⁰ See Pahwa (2012), Swedenburg (2012)

³¹ Aly (2019), p. 44

Michael Frishkopf and Iman Mersal et. al's chapter entitled "What Happened to the 'Songs of the New Arab Revolutions'?" Published in 2023, Frishkopf and his colleagues reflect on the outpouring of revolutionary music in view of the political silence of artists under El-Sisi's Egypt. Indeed, in reacting to the "exodus" of Arab artist activists out of an Egypt where "the only alternatives are silence, depoliticization, incarceration, or death," Frishkopf himself admits that "it is difficult not to wax a bit cynical and wonder whether we all had overestimated the durable political power of music [...] Perhaps we academicians underestimated the inertia of political structures undergirded by materiality."³² Iman Mersal echoes Frishkopf's sentiments in the same chapter, observing correctly that "the public space that music of the Arab Spring once occupied no longer exists." Yet it appears that the admittedly understandable state of lament that such a retrospective lends itself to in fact obscures accurate assessment of the present: Mersal goes on to write that, now, "the contemporary musical scene is one that is instead preoccupied with songs" which "prais[es] the army," and "courts the state and listeners accustomed to monotonous pop," alluding to a return to a pre-2011 status quo.³³ In this context, this dissertation aims to demonstrate that the depoliticization of the popular music scene in Egypt does not imply a return to the status quo before the revolution. Indeed, the accession of Egyptian rap into the mainstream shows the continued upending of the state's preferred aesthetic hierarchies despite appearances to the contrary—though it should be noted that the specific form of the upending this dissertation outlines through an analysis of Egyptian rap is not identifiable with that outlined by scholarship on the cultural production of the Arab Spring.

³² Frishkopf et. al (2023), p.164-5

³³ *ibid.* 176

The second general pattern the academy exhibits with regard to the doing away of the countercultural assemblage of the Arab Spring is to insist upon applying analytical frames developed in the context of that era's revolutionary cultural output onto contemporary cultural phenomena, irrespective of the continued relevance of such modes of analysis. Nicola Pratt encapsulates this approach as follows: in a circumstance where cultural producers and artistic movements explicitly aligned themselves with the political aims of the revolution, and in a context where destabilizing the boundary between elite, state-sanctioned culture and low, "popular" culture was integral to the active project of "dismantl[ing] the hegemony of state cultural institutions, which had carefully policed those boundaries before 2011," cultural production during this era was understood broadly as a tool of and for resistance and revolution. Such circumstances charged scholarship with situating cultural production within those twin revolutionary imperatives of both reaching and connecting to a broad swathe of the populace, as well as the "reclaiming" of public and cultural space from the state and its various security apparatuses.³⁴

This approach is often exhibited and—as will be argued in greater specificity in following chapters of this dissertation—erroneously applied with regards to the current formulation of the mainstream Egyptian rap scene, amenable as it might seem to be in relation to such a framework.³⁵ This dissertation seeks to corroborate Darci Sprengl's view that such an approach to rap *qua* social resistance is reductive. Relevant here for the purposes of the argument forwarded is that the discourses of revolution and social resistance "privilege the stories of

³⁴ Pratt (2020), p. 533

³⁵ See Qi (2019), Kimball (2013), Levine (2012), Robertson (2015), Gana (2012), Isherwood (2014), el-Zein (2016)

danger, threat, trauma, and repression... *over* the work's content or aesthetic properties."³⁶ This is the framework Yasmine El-Rashidi takes up in her study of contemporary Egyptian rap among others. While she correctly recognizes (albeit in quite general fashion) a certain incommensurability evident in mainstream rap with "any social or cultural norms the country has known before," she understands this as explicit disobedience and as a direct continuation of the events of the 2011 uprisings.³⁷ Rather, in a context where artists "strive to move away from the styles that dominated the revolutionary period," and where Egypt's most prominent rappers avoid ideologically-charged lyrical content "in favor of developing lyrical-linguistic innovation, flow, and poetic techniques," this dissertation recognizes the necessity of locating the politics of mainstream Egyptian rap music within a context of which the Arab Spring and its aftermath are primary antecedents, without making the additional claim that mainstream Egyptian rap music is *of* the Arab Spring.³⁸

In this spirit, the first of this dissertation's three chapters outlines the path of neoliberalism's propagation in Egypt, with particular attention paid to how the neoliberalization of the Egyptian media economy in particular impacted the space of culture. Specifically, this chapter draws from film, media and literary studies to position rap music within the larger field of cultural production in Egypt and to make the point that the sociocultural consequences of neoliberalization in the relevant sectors of the Egyptian economy conditioned and indeed produced expressions of culture incommensurate with the hegemonic cultural logic upheld by the state. From there, this work moves toward developing an understanding of the politics of

³⁶ Sprengl (2020), p. 545

³⁷ El Rashidi (2023), p. 14

³⁸ Sprengl (2020), p. 549

language and the peculiar practice of language mixing and linguistic flexibility characteristic of the mainstream. Here, Egyptian rappers showcase how their use of language turns away from the politics of language that previously undergirded Egyptian cultural production, instead prioritizing responding to the economic incentive to produce language amenable to commercial processes. With this observation on the language politics of Egypt's mainstream rap songs in mind, this dissertation turns its attention towards the visual codes mobilized in Egyptian rap songs. By comparing two music videos by the rapper Marwan Moussa— "Tesla" and "Shahyasa", the one a YouTube video and the other a TV commercial respectively—this dissertation unifies a seemingly contradictory politics of the visual to make the connection between a certain flexibility of the visual field and the divergent incentives structuring the various media systems hosting that are host to that visual field. As with the space of language, the point here is that rappers privilege and seek to maximize the qualities of commercial viability over and above those qualities that would otherwise align their work more closely with the state's preferred politics of culture.

Before proceeding, a quick word here is necessary to clarify the overall bounds of study and the term "mainstream Egyptian rap" used to denote it. "Egyptian" is perhaps the most straightforward, indicating simply rap music composed with a primarily Egyptian Arabic-speaking audience in mind. "Mainstream" here indicates the set of songs and artists that have attained at least some commercial success: they regularly top the charts, make appearances in advertisements as brand ambassadors, tour internationally and hold public concerts domestically, and generally enjoy the fruits of the state's softened stance towards the genre.

The generic moniker “rap” is perhaps the trickiest to stabilize, particularly in the Egyptian case. Elsewhere in this introduction are references to the genre of *mahraganat*, translating roughly to “festival music”. There is considerable ambiguity on the topic of generic distinctions between rap and *mahraganat*. It is often the case that mention of either genre in discussions of contemporary Egyptian musical production follows or entails mention of the other, often in the same breath. Some scholars and cultural commentators formulate the two genres/styles as one, as Yasmine El-Rashidi does, while others posit either *mahraganat* or rap as an offshoot or outgrowth of the other.³⁹ Furthermore, while Egyptian rap and *mahraganat* have distinct genealogies of development prior and leading up to 2011⁴⁰ that reflect in the aesthetic commitments of the two genres/styles (though there is considerable convergence), both violate the state’s politics of culture in similar ways and thus the state subjects artists practicing either style to similar (though not perfectly equal) treatment.⁴¹ To complicate matters further, many of the stars in the contemporary rap field are heavily influenced aesthetically by *mahraganat*, and important figures within the scene have even dabbled in moonlighting as *mahraganat* singers or producers at one point in another.⁴² For these reasons the line between rap and *mahraganat* is blurry, and the relation between them spectral rather than sharply defined.

There is considerable richness here in placing rap and *mahraganat* in conversation with each other, and any fuller book-length works intent on investigating the politics of musical

³⁹ See Guyer (2022)

⁴⁰ Ramadan (2022)

⁴¹ See former Syndicate head Hany Shaker’s statements in Azzam (2021) on rap as a “higher” art form compared to rap.

⁴² The producer Molotof got his start producing *mahraganat* songs before developing working partnerships with Egypt’s mainstream rappers (see Naji [2020]); the rapper Wegz in the song “Dorak Gay” (“You’re Next”) brags about his ability to codeswitch between the musical languages of rap and *mahraganat* seamlessly.

production in post-Arab Spring Egypt would be remiss not to consider the interactions between the two genres. One interesting direction for such an inquiry is to note how *mahraganat* grew out of veritably more “authentic” Egyptian cultural roots, while rap was largely imported from the West⁴³; despite this, *mahraganat* and *mahraganat* singers are generally more vilified and hounded by the state as compared to their rap compatriots. Questions abound also about the politics of how the state constructs generic distinctions through processes of censorship and the application of punitive measures in order to police those boundaries.

That said, the distinction remains analytically useful. As mentioned above, rap and *mahraganat* have distinct origins in Egypt: the latter grew out of the *inshad* music of Sufi spirituality as well as the pop genre of *sha’bi*, which is itself an outgrowth of Egyptian folk music and is associated with the culture of the urban working poor,⁴⁴ while rap music grew out of an independent music scene that operated largely by the good graces of Western sponsorship and support. Thus there remain distinct sonic and aesthetic differences between the two genres that, while resonant and lend themselves to generic fusion, do not reduce to each other. Furthermore, and speaking materially, Mustafa Kamel’s November 2022 press conference institutionalized a wedge between the two genres, as the generic distinctions of rap and *mahraganat* denote material differences in the economy of their production, with rap and rappers occupying a more privileged position both with respect to the state’s stance towards them and, consequently, the degree of access it is availed of to the mainstream. In this way material circumstances force apart the two genres, attracted to each other as they may be. For the purposes of analysis, this study takes up

⁴³ Aidi (2011)

⁴⁴ Garcia (2018), p. 127

those songs and artists that indicate a self-identification with “rap” as such, and relies on an intuitive sense of where on the spectrum between *mahraganat* and rap a given song or artist lands, without firmly delineating the bounds of those generic distinctions.

In terms of the chronology that this dissertation deals with, it is incumbent to note that while this study does historicize rap in Egypt, it is not itself a historiography of it. It does not aim to trace the development of rap music in Egypt, nor necessarily consider its position within a larger, global history of hip-hop. Rather, this study aims to provide a contemporary analysis of mainstream Egyptian rap in its present formulation and the ways in which the genre interacts with domestic structures of power with the state at the head of that structure. As such, this study considers the most recent rap releases as of the time of writing, from within the last three years or so.

Egyptian Culture in the Neoliberal Age

In order to understand the exigencies shaping and incentivizing mainstream Egyptian rap music's embrace of neoliberalism and the ways in which this embrace structures the disruptive character of the genre presently, this chapter aims to situate the contemporary cultural moment that mainstream Egyptian rap finds itself in within a larger history of the interactions between Egypt's process of neoliberalization beginning in the 1970s and accelerating in the late '90s and early 2000s, and the postcolonial politics undergirding Egyptian culture. Situating Egyptian rap in this way reveals that the form rap takes in Egypt is in fact an extension of a dynamic where the Egyptian state's attempts to neoliberalize economically introduces certain instabilities to key elements of its hegemony—with one element being culture—and therefore necessitates the simultaneous pursuit of policies of securitization and repression. In El-Sisi's Egypt, rap music thus operates in—and is a result of—a cultural milieu subject to processes of neoliberalization rooted in the decades preceding the 2011 uprisings; mainstream Egyptian rap in its current formulation thus emerges as something of a zenith of this process wherein the force of neoliberalization appears to overpower the Egyptian state's ability to securitize against incursions upon its cultural hegemony.

A short detour here into the published literature on Egypt's political economy in the El-Sisi era proves illustrative of this dynamic. Political scientists and economists both have produced literature describing the particular tensions generated by the interests of the state in maintaining its grip on power, and the requirements and consequences of economic

neoliberalization—even as the former doggedly pursues the latter. Ziad Koussa makes the connection between the accelerating pursuit of neoliberal economic policies and mounting social instability explicit, arguing that an understanding of Egypt’s political economy in the years leading up to and following the regime leads to the conclusion that “the imposition of a neoliberal regime of capital accumulation, with dispossession and upward wealth redistribution at its heart, created the [social] conditions for” the uprisings that took place in 2011. With regards to El-Sisi’s regime, Koussa further argues that he “not only halted the democratic reforms demanded by the Egyptian people but continues, at a faster pace, to impose the same neoliberal economic restructuring that catalyzed the uprising in the first place.”⁴⁵ It is in this context that El-Sisi’s continued pursuit of neoliberal policies entails the simultaneous doubling-down on political repression, producing a neoliberal regime that Koussa calls “authoritarian statist neoliberalism.”⁴⁶

Research into the social consequences of Egypt’s particular strain of neoliberal reform sheds light on some of the specific mechanisms that, in the eyes of the state, obviated policies of repression in order to manage. As the state abandoned a previous welfarism established at the outset of Egypt’s independence—as the state “evacuated the social” and left the question of the distribution of housing, healthcare, education, and public utilities up to a self-regulating market⁴⁷—and as the proportion of Egyptians living in impoverished informal urban slum communities (*‘ashwa`iyat*) excluded from basic social services continues to increase,⁴⁸ the state

⁴⁵ Koussa (2023), p. 165

⁴⁶ *ibid.* 181

⁴⁷ Ismail (2006), p. 21

⁴⁸ About a third of the population as of 2006 (see Ismail [2006]); Koussa (2023) similarly cites nearly 40% of the Cairene population live in *‘ashwa`iyat* slums

was confronted with a constellation of strategies of social organization: Salwa Ismail makes mention of mutual aid societies and informal employment networks, for example. These structures of collectivization are not merely coping mechanisms for those involved in them, and for the state they are not only an “urban management challenge.” Indeed, as far as the state is concerned, such structures and strategies operate outside the bounds of its control and are thus an active “security threat,” active sites of resistance to the state’s efforts to maintain social and spatial hegemony.⁴⁹ The response of the state, then, was to pathologize the informal communities in question as sites of “social disease,” passing laws that outlaw “thuggery” (*baltaga*) in an effort to exert disciplinary and corporeal control over the “thugs” (*baltagiyya*) involved in such structures.⁵⁰ As the state’s security apparatuses inflated lockstep with an increasingly-neoliberalized Egyptian economy, it is in this way that neoliberalism came to be “policed” in Egypt.⁵¹

It is interesting to note here that, as the state “ignores the question of the social costs of marketization” in favor of promoting a neoliberal ethos of “individual responsibility, personal initiative, and entrepreneurship” as the guiding values at the heart of “newly-fashioned selves tantalized and bedazzled by global consumerism,”⁵² those same values—taken up by a downtrodden urban underclass—poses an obstacle to the state in enacting its neoliberal initiatives. This irony recurs in the case of Egypt’s mainstream rap artists.

⁴⁹ Ismail (2006), p. xix

⁵⁰ *ibid.* 140

⁵¹ Abdelrahman (2016), p.186

⁵² Ismail. xx

Here then, is the basic movement: the state neoliberalizes, the consequences of neoliberalization brings to bear undesirable social side effects, which in turn force the state to deploy certain repressive policies to act as a counterbalance. The point here is that this basic movement similarly structures the history of cultural tensions in Egypt since at least the early days of the Mubarak regime (1981-2011). To that end, it is important to mark that the repressive mechanisms the state deploys in order to deal with the undesirable social effects generated by its pursuit of neoliberal restructuring are not only corporeal in nature, but also contain cultural elements.

It is necessary, then, to answer the following questions: firstly, what are the basic ideological elements of the Egyptian state's historically domineering relationship to culture? In what ways does the state's turn to neoliberalism threaten such a cultural regime? And how has the state attempted to manage those tensions and their social manifestations?

In the aptly-titled essay "The Culture Police: Manning the Barricades of Allowable Art and Culture" Ramy K. Aly describes the Egyptian state's culture politics as follows:

"The Egyptian state... sees itself as the arbiter of what constitutes art and culture, which are understood as tools in a national development vision that requires the 'production' of a particular kind of 'consciousness' among both individuals and society as a whole [...] It assumes a tutelary role, which involves the shaping of thought or *fikr*. Absent is any sense that the state should reflect the culture of

Egyptians. Rather it sits above them, hailing them to subscribe to an imagined formulaic and allowable culture.”⁵³

Aly here succinctly summarizes the attitude of not just the Sisi regime, but the overall orientation of a cultural logic rooted in Egypt’s colonial history effective since Egypt gained independence, and “deployed to secure the political survival of officer-presidents since the start of the military state.”⁵⁴ Under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture, matters of Egyptian culture are explicitly framed as matters of Egyptian national security where “militarism is promoted unabashedly as a social-political ideal”; “popular culture” is, then, in the eyes of the Egyptian state, “a tool of statecraft,” a well from which to draw political legitimacy.⁵⁵ By appointing itself chief custodian of Egyptian culture in this way, the Egyptian state takes advantage of and yokes itself to the nationalist meaning sedimented within Egyptian cultural production in order to reproduce the bounds of an Egyptian nation such that the state—and the regime that heads it—is continually vouchsafed the honor of being the truest and most faithful representative of the Egyptian nation. Thus it is a regular tactic of the state to deem that which falls outside the bounds of what it considers permitted or allowable culture as manifestly “not Egyptian.”⁵⁶

Aly emphasises that the salient technologies deployed by the state in order to maintain this formulation rely on the “high drama” of overt displays of censorial power, rather than a quotidian practice of power and censorship in the tradition of Foucault and Bourdieu (though

⁵³ Aly (2023), p. 402

⁵⁴ *ibid.* 404

⁵⁵ *ibid.* 405

⁵⁶ See Sarah Ramadan (2021) and (2022) on the state’s crackdown on *mahraganat*

certainly the latter is still present); as such, the bureaucratic mechanisms that enforce the state's cultural politics—like the Syndicate of Musical Professions— are similarly overt in their functioning. Egyptian law imposes a system of syndication that requires “anyone producing or performing for the public” to first solicit the relevant professional syndicate (for music, theatre, literature, journalism, etc.) for consent; such bodies exercise the authority to impose such requirements as “being of sound reputation” or a degree from one of a few recognized institutions before granting licensure or membership. The consequence of this state of affairs “has been the effective criminalization of independent and amateur production and performance” wherein “the wrong kind of art is also the wrong kind of politics” and thus subject to punitive measures including steep fines and even imprisonment.

The overbearing nature of the state's grip on culture, enacted through a variety of centralized bureaucratic and censorial mechanisms, engenders a dynamic wherein cultural producers are made to dialogue with the hegemony of the state and, in so doing, accept and uphold the basic logic of culture *qua* nation as axiomatic. Numerous studies across a range of genres and cultural modes of expression are remarkably consistent on this front. In *Theaters of Citizenship*, for instance, Sonali Pahwa forwards the basic argument that the stage of independent Egyptian theaters in the late Mubarak era “became a lively stage of citizenship, gathering waves of generational representation of Egyptian identity.”⁵⁷ Lila Abu-Lughod's study of the politics of popular Egyptian television serials similarly reveals how television is “a key institution for the production of national culture in Egypt... [it is] a salient national institution.”⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Pahwa (2020), p. 4

⁵⁸ Abu-Lughod (2008), p. 7

The argument here is not that Egyptian cultural production expresses an ideologically-uniform, programmatic nationalism. The more salient point is that nationalism—the imperative to nation-make and remake—pervades Egyptian culture as a foundational precept, a core logic, an insistent preoccupation that dictates the terms by which Egyptian culture is produced, regulated, and consumed. Jessica Winegar’s *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt*, an ethnographic study of the Egyptian visual art scene, is particularly instructive in this respect. She writes that visual art practice was “necessarily linked to national ideology” in the sense that it is the very precept of the nation that became “the dominant frame” through which artists made sense of the “nature, purpose, and future of Egyptian culture and cultural production.”⁵⁹ She points out that, while there were a multitude of perspectives and active debates as to what exactly constitutes “authentic” Egyptian visual art, it is the very notion of national authenticity itself—the fact that it is nation that comes to form the “dominant frame” of that authenticity—that “almost always reproduced the idea of the state as custodian of art” in the postcolonial era and “contributed to the hegemonic ideal of the state as... caretaker” of national culture.⁶⁰ To borrow terminology from Achille Mbembe, the postcolonial Egyptian state institutes the logic of the nation as a *fetish*—an enclosed “central code”, a “world of meanings”, a system of “signs, vocabulary, and narratives... invested with a surplus of meanings that are not negotiable and that one is officially forbidden to depart from or challenge”—in order to secure and maintain its regime of domination.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Winegar (2008), p. 2

⁶⁰ *ibid.* 137, 141

⁶¹ Mbembe (2015), p. 103

Certainly popular music in the eras preceding the dominance of mainstream Egyptian rap is no different in this respect. Daniel J. Gilman in *Cairo Pop: Youth Music in Contemporary Egypt* writes of how the concept of musical heritage or *turath* refers not to some ancient conception of Arab or Egyptian musical production, but to the paradigmatic “golden age” of Egyptian musical production of the 1880s-1950s—precisely that “time of self-conscious construction of [a] national identity.”⁶² It is thus the case that perceptions of trends in Egyptian pop music tracked with the rise and fall of Egyptian nationalism’s heyday: the new styles and genres of popular music following the political decline of Egyptian-led pan-Arab nationalism and in the years leading up to the 2011 revolution were often evaluated in relation to the styles and aesthetics characteristic of the “golden age.” Indeed, the point Gilman seeks to relay is that pop music in Egypt—known specifically as the *shababiyya* genre—“is fundamentally entangled with discourses and practices of gender, nation, and aesthetics. It is, in fact, a clearinghouse for all of these institutions as they relate to each other in Egypt.”⁶³

That said, Gilman’s study of Egyptian pop music does make note of another interesting dynamic relevant to this study. Gilman observes that, stylistically and aesthetically speaking, Egyptian pop music in the years preceding 2011 drew very little from the “high modernism” that characterized the golden age, instead exhibiting a “structural foundation that Egyptian music professionals have characterized [to Gilman] as heavily influenced by Western-style pop”⁶⁴. What’s more, Gilman notes that at the same time as the industry around *shababiyya* seeks to saturate the market in order to “wring profits,” “the musical icons of Egyptian national modernity

⁶² Gilman (2014), p. 6

⁶³ *ibid.* 16

⁶⁴ *ibid.* 14

[age] poorly in the eyes of contemporary youth.”⁶⁵ Gilman here hints at an inverse relationship between the commercial viability of Egyptian music and its investment in the hegemonic ideal of “proper” Egyptianness championed by the state. The remainder of this chapter tugs on this loose thread to draw out how the turn to neoliberalism in Egypt impacts the economy of cultural and artistic production—with a particular eye turned towards music—such that the new incentive structures established by this turn uniquely disadvantages the cultural ideology of the state and are even contradictory to it.

To start, and as hinted at in paragraphs previous, the precarious economic and social circumstances imposed by Egypt’s turn to neoliberalism created the conditions for cultural modes of expression—like *sha’bi* and, later, *mahraganat*—that challenged the state’s aim of promoting the image of a “cultured” Egyptian nation “free of complex cultural, social, generational, or religious contradictions.” With its depictions of urban poverty and its inclusion of sexual and violent themes widely deemed “vulgar” and “distasteful” by dominant classes in Egypt, modes of expression like *sha’bi* and *mahraganat* represent the seizure of cultural space by a marginalized lower-class, straightforwardly threatening the liberal cosmopolitanism of the state’s cultural agenda, and were thus excluded from participating in officially-sanctioned and approved cultural circuits.⁶⁶ This is a certainly relevant dynamic to keep track of, as rappers like Marwan Pablo and Husayn among others draw from, interact with, and react to the socioeconomic conditions caused by Egypt’s neoliberal turn in their songs.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ *ibid.* 31

⁶⁶ Garcia (2018), p. 125

⁶⁷ El-Rashidi (2023), p. 47

Of perhaps greater significance to rap in Egypt, however, and with regards to what the state permits entry into mainstream circulation, are the material changes to the economy of musical production brought about by Egypt's neoliberal turn. Specifically, it is the neoliberalization of Egypt's media economies that most evidently brings to the fore how the pursuit of neoliberal policies undermines key facets of the state's grip on cultural—specifically musical—production.

Indeed, one of the landmark policy shifts defining the pre-revolution Mubarak regime is a gradual turn toward a media sector wherein private actors were, for the first time, given the opportunity to own and operate television channels alongside those owned by the state. This, in combination with the influx of satellite television, rendered Egypt's media sector—previously under the direct control of the state—ostensibly more decentralized and opened the arena to a number of different subject positions beyond just the state. While Mubarak's regime casted such reforms as part of a process of “democratization,” such measures were in fact undergone due to pressure exerted by international financial institutions like the IMF, to which the state had become indebted.⁶⁸ At the same time, the state's loosened grip over broadcast media coincided with successive revolutions in product media, as the proliferation of cassette tapes and CDs further contested the state's top-down control over musical production. Finally, the Mubarak regime undertook the project of increasing Internet access in the country, a complex process with far-reaching consequences, not least of which with respect to the question of the politics of popular music in Egypt.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Guaaybess (2023), p. 414

⁶⁹ El-Rashidi (2023), p. 48

Thus it is the case that the popular music of this era—the genre of *shababiyya* referenced in Gilman’s study above—is inextricably linked with developments in the situation of media in Egypt. Indeed, as Michael Frishkopf writes, “increasingly rapid musical change—in sonic content, social relations, and cultural meaning—has been tightly connected to developments in the nature and extent of media in the Arab world.”⁷⁰ In this case, the mainstream pop of this era functioned as a particularly efficient vehicle for maximizing revenue streams in response to the various pressures of the market. Frishkopf points out a number of interesting synergies between the pop music industry and this new media environment that made such a mobilization possible: free-to-air satellite TV broadcasts, combined with the semiotic potential of the visual field, catalyzed the “video clip phenomenon,” through which popular music took on forms that fit snugly into an economy of advertising and mass marketing, such that “[music] clips can be used to sell anything at all as a means of attention gathering, by sequential juxtaposition to the commercial proper.”⁷¹ The ability for private actors to mass produce cassette tapes similarly laid the basis for what one might call a pump-and-dump metagame, where dominant industry players were incentivized to create “inexpensive, catchy albums... aimed at producing a rapidly subsiding flare of sales.”⁷² Additional synergistic relationships formed, as the advent of the internet and mobile phones enabled telecom and mobile phone companies to use music as a means for generating revenue via SMS, and as a means for advertising by way of sponsoring live concerts.⁷³

⁷⁰ Frishkopf (2010), p. 6

⁷¹ *ibid.* 28

⁷² *ibid.* 17

⁷³ *ibid.* 28

Thus in the context of newly privatized media outlets, the concomitant technological changes therein, and the opportunities for revenue production such a system presents, Egyptian popular music's function as an object loaded with ideological suppositions regarding "authentic" Egyptian musical production took a backseat to the profit motive. Frishkopf characterizes this shift as the "gradual victory of capitalist logic over traditional values."⁷⁴ Indeed, the controversies generated by such a transformation indicate the extent to which these shifts clashed acutely with a heretofore longstanding cultural logic. The formulaic similarities of much of *shababiyya*, the sonic influences drawn from ostensibly non-Egyptian musical genres, and—especially—the brazenly lurid sexual mores characteristic of pop music's visual dimension all drew sharp criticism as "aesthetically inferior and low brow, overly-commercial, excessively Westernized, even dissolute."⁷⁵ Egyptian thinker Abdel Wahab El-Messiri, to give one example, lambasts the musical production of this era as entirely disconnected and irrelevant from the contemporary concerns of the Egyptian nation⁷⁶—a critique which, as Patricia Kubala argues, stems from the ways in which the pop music of this era "contradicts the vision of a progressive modern society that art in this postcolonial nation is called upon to stand for."⁷⁷ Critiques of the kind formulated by El-Messiri are especially disruptive to the cultural legitimacy of the state, as the mainstream Egyptian pop music of this era operates with the tacit if not explicit approval of the state's supervisory apparatuses.

⁷⁴ *ibid.* 30

⁷⁵ *ibid.* 5

⁷⁶ El-Messiri (2010), p. 172

⁷⁷ Kubala (2010), p. 174

Michael Frishkopf argues that “what has occurred is not simply a shift from aesthetics to commerce... but a transformation in the system’s economic logic.”⁷⁸ In light of the above, perhaps a slight reformulation here is in order: a transformation in the system’s economic logic—enabled by accelerating technological change—begot a shift in aesthetics in order to better serve commerce. Indeed the era of the pre-revolutionary Egyptian musical mainstream immediately preceding the current rap zeitgeist exemplifies the way in which processes of neoliberal economic reform pursued by the state under the Mubarak regime impinge on both the form and content of cultural output generally, and musical output specifically. What is made plain in this dynamic is that the exigencies of the market do not necessarily track with the cultural politics pursued by the state; Frishkopf understands this misalignment between the state’s political and economic agendas as an “inherent contradiction” that results in a kind of “media schizophrenia” as the state tries to have its cake and eat it too, engaging in brazen attempts to censor the cultural consequences of its neoliberal pursuits while simultaneously persisting in those pursuits.⁷⁹ What is crucial to note here is that, in many ways, a retrospective reading of the development of Egyptian *shababiyya* in the light of Egypt’s neoliberal turn demonstrates how the neoliberalism of the state’s economic agenda subsumes and subordinates the political, gradually incentivizing the displacement of a postcolonial politics of culture—politics that, at one time, stood dominant as the basis for mainstream musical production—in favor of flexibility in the face of the market.

⁷⁸ Frishkopf (2010), p. 18

⁷⁹ *ibid.* 22

Such a dynamic is important to mark in detail in order to properly position the politics of mainstream Egyptian rap music, as the genre continues to build upon and take advantage of the neoliberal economic structures established in the Mubarak era, while incorporating further structural changes in the meanwhile. Of note in this vein are the advent of streaming, and the redoubled presence of multinational corporations as a key aspect of the economy of mainstream rap music.

In the case of the former, and while the internet was certainly a relevant force in the 2000s and the early 2010s, the disruptive presence of streaming for domestic music publishers would only fully come to the fore following the rise of Anghami, a streaming service specific to the Arab world initially launched in 2011. While ahead of the curve at the time, the space has since expanded to accommodate major competition in the form of—most notably—Spotify, which began officially offering streaming in the Middle East in 2018, and YouTube. The effects of this entrance is two-pronged: Joe Khalil and Mohamed Zayani make the point that, given the difficulties of enforcing copyright and intellectual property in the region, the entrance of streaming services into the economy of musical production entailed not “radical disruption” but rather an entrenchment of the status quo outlined above, as features like multi-tier payment structures with a free option allowed the music industry’s key publishers to access revenue that would have otherwise been lost to piracy.⁸⁰ At the same time, Eric Drott describes how the advent of streaming opens up a given market to competition beyond its local context, lowering the barrier to entry for international music publishers and labels to access Egyptian markets.⁸¹ In the

⁸⁰ Khalil & Zayani (2022), p. 1543

⁸¹ Drott 2

Egyptian context in particular, and given the overwhelming and growing strength of the dollar as compared to the Egyptian pound,⁸² this submersion in an international market entails the concomitant access to sources of *revenue* that exceed past the local Egyptian context and the economic opportunities it affords.

Of those key sources of international revenue is the sponsorship of large corporations, including Red Bull, Pepsi, Vodafone, and Samsung. The involvement of these multinationals range in extent from Samsung's use of a rap song to advertise its wares to an Egyptian audience as Samsung has done,⁸³ to Red Bull's "Sound Clash" and "Mat El Kalam"—an entire series of sponsored concerts and online battle rap series starring the scene's finest. Indeed the case of Red Bull's extensive involvement illustrates how arrival of these corporate entities synergizes with the turn to streaming, as both Red Bull's Sound Clash and Mat El Kalam series are posted on YouTube and list Spotify as an "audio partner."⁸⁴

While the particularities of these new elements in the economy of Egyptian musical production exceed the bounds of this study, suffice it to say that their arrival further deepens the contradictions between those neoliberal structures and the sociocultural agenda pursued by the state. As will be argued in greater details in coming chapters, the exigencies of these new elements as sources of revenue that ensure the continued economic viability of mainstream rap in Egypt further entrenches an incentive structure where, like *shababiyya*, flexibility and the ability to optimize musical output according to specific market conditions. This suggests a continuation

⁸² The value of the Egyptian pound has dropped significantly over the last five years, going from around 17LE to the dollar in 2019 to around 50LE to the dollar in the first quarter of 2024.

⁸³ See Samsung Egypt (2024)

⁸⁴ See Red Bull SIKa (2023)

and *acceleration* of the dynamics established in the decades previous with regards to the politics of popular music in Egypt. Indeed, for all of the accusations of cultural inauthenticity and brazen commercialism lobbed the way of *shababiyya*, there still remained some semblance of a latent commitment to an antecedent nationalist cultural politics of Egypt the postcolony. For instance, Gilman points out how *shababiyya*'s trademark preoccupation with love balladry and the frequent resort to themes of betrayal, marriage, sexual desire, and longing reflect how the genre accepts a given basic understanding of a "proper" ordering of gender, which is itself "shot through" with hegemonic notions of "Egyptianness."⁸⁵ Mainstream rap music, save for a few exceptional songs, abandons this trope of the love song and its attendant themes almost entirely. Furthermore, the generic moniker of *shababiyya* at least reflects the basic understanding that the genre is in some sense—Westernized aesthetics notwithstanding—of native Egyptian origin, rather than an importation from outside the country; likewise, mainstream Egyptian rap does away with even this pretense. In fact, the following chapter elaborates upon the brief linguistic example offered here on the difference between the generic monikers "*shababiyya*" and "rap" and how this difference encapsulates one way in which Egyptian rap poses a deeply-rooted challenge to the basic assumptions of the hegemonic culture politics of the state: the question of language, and the politics of language practice.

⁸⁵ Gilman (2014), p. 77

Arabic Beyond Arabness: Neoliberal Politics of Language in Mainstream Egyptian Rap

Music

This chapter expands upon the hypothesis that mainstream Egyptian rap marks a drastic shift in Egyptian politics of culture by demonstrating how such shifts lie not just in the incentive structures governing the economy of musical production in Egypt, but are apparent on the level of lyrical form and language practice. This chapter undertakes a close reading of the language practices of the mainstream Egyptian rapper Marwan Pablo to demonstrate how mainstream rap introduces a new politics of culture that contrast significantly with the symbolic vocabulary typical of Egyptian culture politics prior to rap's accession into the Egyptian mainstream. Framed another way, this chapter seeks to contrast what I call Egyptian rap's "flippant" politics of language with the language politics previously typical of cultural production in the Egyptian context. The argument forwarded here proceeds in a roughly chronological fashion: this chapter will first draw from scholarship on modern Arab subjectivity to establish the ways in which the Arabic language, in the colonial and postcolonial eras, became a staging ground for acting out and enacting a self-conscious, ambivalent Arab subjectivity defined in large part against the colonial domination of the West and framed in explicitly nationalistic terms. From there, this chapter will then demonstrate how this identitarian understanding of Arabic laid the discursive groundwork for cultural production in the postcolonial era and set the terms of negotiation by which moments of cultural conflict were adjudicated. Finally, this paper engages in a close reading of the Marwan Pablo song "Free" in order to demonstrate how the language practices of

Egyptian rappers no longer signal such a marked interest in questions of Egyptian identity as such, neglecting to conform to or actively contest what may be deemed “properly” Egyptian—indeed, the language forms deployed by Marwan Pablo in the song reveal a manifestly *disinterested* orientation towards such engagements in the first place. This chapter then gives answer to the question: What takes the place of nationalist identity politics in the language practices of Egyptian rappers? Taking into account the globalization of culture and the more recent rise of neoliberal digital media platforms, this chapter argues that Egyptian rappers endeavor, through language, to establish not a national identity but a “brand” identity, wherein the goal is to convert cultural capital not into a new understanding of what is or is not “properly” Egyptian, but to secure financial success under a neoliberal system of cultural production.

First, a brief overview of how language functions as the seminal structure around which national identity takes form in the Arab and specifically Egyptian context. As the title of Stephen Sheehi’s seminal *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity* suggests, the movement of intellectual, political, cultural, and linguistic reform known as the Arab “renaissance” or *nahda* (literally to leap or rise up) formed the basis of and for modern Arab subjectivity. In the context of contact with a dominant West in the colonial encounter, the *nahda* grew in response to the copresence of two competing imperatives: the need to assimilate colonial Europe’s secular knowledge base in order to access its civilizational advancements, and the need to maintain a sense of sociocultural autonomy in the face of the dominant, “scornful” colonial presence of the West—Sheehi describes this tension as the “conflict between emulation and authenticity”⁸⁶. Arabic, in this

⁸⁶ Sheehi (2004), p. 65, 40

context, was made to fulfill both imperatives: Arabic was charged with arming the Arab subject with the proper linguistic tools requisite for absorbing and instituting secular European knowledge and principles of social progress (for instance, by inventing Arabic terms for scientific terminology), and producing that subject as one who can demonstrate “mastery of ‘the means of civilization.’”⁸⁷ Simultaneously, *nahda* discourse took advantage of Arabic’s supposed primordality and its connections with a formerly glorious premodern past in order to charge Arabic with the task of shielding an authentic “Arabness” against material and sociocultural domination, mobilizing it to secure the stability of the border between the Arab Self and foreign Others by way of insisting upon essential cultural difference on the basis of linguistic difference⁸⁸. This was the role Arabic was made to take up with specific reference to the Egyptian case, wherein the “ultimate objective” conceived for the role of language “was to create in the minds of the Egyptians a national consciousness based on a vision of Egypt that is modern.”⁸⁹

The point here is not that any specific flavor of Arab nationalism was able to institute its claims through Arabic. Yasir Suleiman points out that, in the Lebanese case for instance, multiple concepts of Lebanese national identity existed coterminously, with each seeking to enact a particular national vision by prescribing various hierarchizations of the linguistic field between the different registers of Arabic as well as French and English⁹⁰; a similar linguistic dynamic presents itself in the Egyptian context.⁹¹ Rather, the more salient point is that while there were competing definitions of what exactly constituted the Arab nation, it is on the field of

⁸⁷ *ibid.* 42

⁸⁸ Suleiman (2014) 40, 78

⁸⁹ Suleiman (1996), p. 36

⁹⁰ Suleiman (2006), p. 128

⁹¹ Suleiman (1996)

the Arabic language that those competing claims of national identity played out. Indeed it is precisely the multiple nationalist claims imposed through and upon Arabic that conceptualized language as fundamentally a space for identity-formation within the framework of modern nation-building. The thing to note for the purposes of this essay is this coupling of language and nationalism broadly conceived, such that the politics of language practice becomes coextensive with the politics of nation. This identitarian ethos of Arab cultural production writ large, as identified by Sheehi, animates the symbolic order undergirding the cultural situation of postcolonial Egypt. As will be elaborated upon in detail below, it is this coupling that the language practices of mainstream Egyptian rappers contests.

If language and language practice, overburdened by the exigencies of European colonial modernity, took on the self-conscious anxieties attending the task of producing and reproducing both the Self and the nation within which the Self is grounded in the *nahdawi* model of Arab subjectivity, then it is on the stage of cultural production that both the task and the anxieties come to the fore. One productive though insufficient starting point would be to return to Sheehi. Referencing literature in particular, Sheehi in *Foundations* shows how the tension between the two driving imperatives of *nahda* discourse engendered “new narratives, genres, and styles”⁹². For Sheehi, *nahda*-era literary production “both [embody] the modern reform project... and acts as a critical space in which to confront the ironies, tensions, and challenges that this very project represents,”; literary production in this case plays host to both the “[lauding] of Arab culture and language” as well as the nominal “[rejection of] Western cultural, economic, and political

⁹² Sheehi (2004), p. 78

imperialism”, resulting in a cultural situation in which the “Western specter lingers... in every vindication, in every defense.”⁹³ For Sheehi, then, Arabic literary production in the *nahda*-era directly inherited the sorts of nationalist ideologizations imbued in the Arabic language, becoming preoccupied with the same questions of national birth and subjective rebirth.

However, in order to attain a holistic understanding of the shape cultural production took beyond the *nahda* in postcolonial Egypt, it is necessary to address the lacunas present in Sheehi’s study, namely those that come about as a result of his narrow focus on elite cultural production in the form of literature.

Ziad Fahmy in *Ordinary Egyptians: Creating the Modern Nation Through Popular Culture* centers colloquial Egyptian cultural texts in the colonial era, showing how *zajal* (i.e. colloquial poetry), vernacular theater, colloquial song, and satire—the genres that Fahmy argues comprise “popular” culture at that time—served as the conduit for negotiating and disseminating the nationalist politics of an elite Egyptian intelligentsia. Fahmy challenges reified paradigms in Western scholarship that hinge on the vernacularization of liturgical languages catalyzed by print capitalism (a la Benedict Anderson) and that a necessarily “high” literary culture is requisite in order for a national community to establish itself (a la Ernest Gellner). Rather, Fahmy argues that the relative inaccessibility of Modern Standard Arabic for the everyday Egyptian in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries meant that the formative years of an Egyptian national identity relied at least as much on vernacular cultural texts disseminated by way of newly-established audiovisual and sound media infrastructure (radio and recording specifically).

⁹³ *ibid.* 108, 114

These works of cultural production privileged specifically the Cairene Egyptian dialect at the expense of provincial or regional accents creating what Fahmy calls “internal Others,” the existence of which “facilitated the hegemony of a Cairene-based national culture.”⁹⁴ Fahmy thus demonstrates how nationalist rhetoric regarding culture and a nationalist conceptualization of and for Egyptian culture find purchase beyond the heady, esoteric debates and cultural expressions of an elite literate class; in other words, the directly correlational equation relating Arabic—Cairene Egyptian Arabic specifically—Egyptian cultural production, and the Egyptian nation is here naturalized as common sense.

Thus, and with the establishment of an independent Egyptian nation-state after 1952, both the content and the form of language became entrenched as the defining pillar of Egyptian cultural politics in the postcolonial era, animating the basic assumption that Egyptian cultural production is to be conducted in the Egyptian language (differences over the specific constitution of the “Egyptian language” notwithstanding), and, in so doing, must naturally dialogue with—and properly represent—the Egyptian nation of which language serves as a proxy. One might here return to scholarship on the centrality of the nation for modern Egyptian cultural production, as well as Achille Mbembe’s concept of the postcolonial “fetish” referenced in the previous chapter.

Yet, for as fundamental and taken-for-granted as the relation between language, culture, and nation may have been, the language practices of mainstream Egyptian rappers seem to exceed past this tripartite link and enact a politics in which this relation is indeed not the default

⁹⁴ Fahmy (2011), p. 10

mode of operation. While Pablo certainly avoids loading the content of his lyrics with explicitly oppositional or so-called “resistant” lyrics—as perhaps the generation of Egyptian rappers preceding his might have done—and while Pablo largely remains within the bounds of the politically-permissible, Marwan Pablo’s song “Free” exemplifies this disjuncture by contesting the *form* of language that serves as the basis for hegemonic Egyptian politics of culture.

On a narrative level, the lyrics of Marwan Pablo’s “Free” as well as the accompanying music video showcase a confident, taunting Pablo flexing the evidence of his dominance as one of the premier rappers in the Egyptian scene. Rapping over a stimulant-laden, distorted albeit still recognizably-standard trap beat, Pablo alternates between taunting and asserting his supremacy over his rivals, and showing off his drug-fuelled, quasi-bohemian lifestyle. What is striking here is not so much the content of the lyrics in and of itself, but rather the form of its delivery. In specific terms, perhaps the most remarkable aspect of “Free” is that a significant portion of the song is rapped in an English broadly styled after AAVE.

Nigga, I don't care

Nigga, I don't care

[If] Pablo dies tomorrow, you'll never find a lookalike

بابلو بكرة مات، مش هتلاقوله دوبلير

Bitch, Imma bounce back

Bitch, Imma bounce back

Don't tell me rap

وما تقوليش راب

Bitch, I am rap, I burn everyone

Bitch أنا الراب، حارق ناس كتير

My success is a fact, [I] kill everyone

كده نجاحي Fact، موّت كل الناس

I don't need a pact, the devil is a whisperer

مش محتاج لـ Pact، الشيطان وسواس

I don't need [to put on] an act to show to people	مش محتاج لـ Act أوريه للناس
Homie we are dogs	صاحبي إحنا كلاب
But the dogs of glory are not the dogs of the dawn	بس كلاب المجد غير كلاب الفجر
You only hate me because I am your mirror	بتكرهني بس عشان أنا مرآيتك
[...]	[...]
You beef with yourself, nothing more to add	Beef ⁹⁵ بتـ مع نفسك مافيش إضافة

In this verse, Pablo delivers a series of rapidfire rhymes interwoven between Arabic and English. The key detail to note here is that Arabic and English are not isolated or cordoned off from one other; rather, Pablo switches between them seamlessly, recruiting English to rhyme with Arabic and vice versa (for instance, rhyming the word “pact”, “act”, “fact” with the Arabic *kilab*, *nas*, *wiswas*); what’s more, Pablo’s particular admixed language practice utilizes a technique wherein an English word is plucked whole and slotted into an Arabic verbal form, operating lexically and morphologically as if it were an originally Arabic verb—this can be seen in the line “You beef with yourself, nothing more to add”, wherein the English slang term “beef” is appropriated in that manner. Also of note here is the bravado, confidence and speed of Pablo’s delivery, the verse is a lyrical fireworks display meant to inspire awe in the astute listener at Pablo’s fluidity and technical ability and intended to communicate and assert *skill*; such a display signals Pablo’s sense of *pride* in his use of language. It is in this way that Pablo assumes the creative freedom to

⁹⁵ Pablo (2019), lyrics translated by me.

pick at will between English and Arabic such that the two languages complement and *mutually constitute* each other within the lyrical logic of “Free”.

What are the political stakes of such a language practice? Given the previously-established context of a linguistic and cultural situation based around the taken-for-granted precept of Egyptian nationhood, the first most immediately striking aspect of Pablo’s practice of language is how his use of language breaks away from the mode of subjectivity established during the Arab *nahda*. Pablo’s practice of language has nothing at all to do with the project of linguistically assimilating Western secular knowledge, and the seamlessness of the melding between English and Arabic belie the anxiety resulting from the conflict between “emulation and authenticity”, as Sheehi would have it—Pablo feels no need to use language as a means to shield and define his authentic identity against a dominant, foreign Other. Indeed, Pablo insists that what he does is not “an act” at all—that is, the listener is to understand that Pablo’s song is an authentic expression of himself as he is. It is in this way that Pablo breaks away from the normative assumption relating language practice, cultural production, and the politics of national identification. For Pablo, language use is not an expression of national identity nor does he dialogue with the “dominant frame” of the nation: language, as Pablo mobilizes it, is thus “flippant” in the sense that Pablo is able to overcome (or ignore) the burden of national meaning latent in language. In allowing English to complete his Arabic, Pablo sidesteps the minimum precedent of *shababiyya* in which “there [is] nothing Egyptian at all... but the language”⁹⁶ thus expressing a subjectivity that feels no obligation to

⁹⁶ qtd. in Gilman (2014), p. 1

dialogue with or position itself with respect to an Egyptian national community whose first language is Egyptian Arabic. Indeed Pablo privileges not an idea of an Egyptian national identity but his own individuality—Pablo is unique unto himself, such that should he “die tomorrow”, one would never find a “lookalike”. Pablo’s interests lie in *capturing* this individuality and putting it on display by way of a rap song, and it is through language that Pablo accomplishes this task.

What, then, takes the place of the “dominant frame” of the nation? To what end does Pablo mobilize such a language practice? One potential answer comes from Arab-American studies scholar Michelle Hartman. Her study *Breaking Broken English: Black-Arab Literary Solidarities and the Politics of Language* provides a theoretical framework that reads such intersectional language practices as an instance of “breaking” conventional language in order to establish political solidarity. Grounded in an analysis of the intersections between contemporary Black and Arab-American cultural producers, she reads the linguistic/grammatical resonances between AAVE and Arabic (the zero-copula,⁹⁷ for instance) as a potential source of “lyrical surplus,” where new meaning is obtained in the “interstices” between the two languages⁹⁸. Citing the shared marginalization and politics of racialization both languages experience in relation to a white “standard” that “deposes both Arab and African Americans... and repositions them as subordinate”⁹⁹, Hartman reads the newly produced interstitial meaning as denoting a political solidarity that “share[s] the experience of being criticized and rejected for their language use”¹⁰⁰.

⁹⁷ Hartman (2019), p. 66

⁹⁸ *ibid.* 56

⁹⁹ Pickens, qtd. in *ibid.* 17

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.* 63

Such a politics is undercut, however, by what we might again call a “flippant” use of AAVE that signals a disinterest in engaging in or establishing a genuine notion of transnational political solidarity. This is most evident in, firstly, Pablo’s glib approach to racialized slang (specifically apparent in his use of the n-word) and secondly, on the level of lyrical content, “Free” is exclusively interested in reveling in self-centered displays of braggadocio and declines to engage in any explicit manner with the local political or material realities of a post-Arab Spring Egypt, to say nothing of Black American politics. It is worth noting here that it is a regular motif characteristic of the Egyptian rap scene to disparage black American rap.¹⁰¹ In such a context, it is difficult to see Pablo’s use of AAVE as “symbolic gesture that evokes identification with the global hip-hop community.”¹⁰²

A more productive approach is to recognize the globalization of culture as well as the neoliberal economic and political context in which Pablo is submerged, a context whose politics and imperatives embed themselves in language and cultural production in a way that seems to chafe against and even displace the heretofore dominant language *qua* culture *qua* nation relation. One can find hints of this dynamic mentioned sporadically in the literature on the politics of Arabic: in *Arabic, Self, and Identity*, Yasir Suleiman notes how Anglocentric processes of globalization are perceived as a destabilizing force. For those who take up language as the signifier of national uniqueness, globalization is perceived as “symbolic violence against Arabic and Arab culture” that works to mold Arabic and Arab culture into a “templated uniformity.”¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ The rapper Abyusif, for instance, describes rappers Kendrick Lamar, Kanye, Lil Wayne, and Drake as *bedan*, a pejorative slang term meaning “fucking annoying” in his song “Begad Freestyle”.

¹⁰² Williams 70

¹⁰³ Suleiman (2011) 5, 123

Indeed, Suleiman notes in another article how, in the Lebanese context, he observes an “...ongoing realignment in favor of a more utilitarian perspective on languages that values them, first and foremost, for their economic relevance...”¹⁰⁴

We might see Pablo’s practices of language as just such a pragmatic recognition of the exigencies of a new neoliberal cultural logic. Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that, in a context in which the neoliberal logic of the business model comes to overshadow all other structuring frameworks, “branding” similarly “[extends] beyond a business model. As it pertains to creative cultural expression, the “quintessential neoliberal creative practice... does not ask for permission but rather takes and rearranges and reuses.” The “‘free’ enterprising individual” is charged with establishing a brand identity using “strategies of recognizable images and slogans, catchy phrases”, or, in the case of Pablo, a unique practice of language.¹⁰⁵ In this way, we might read his mobilization of language as part of a broader process of constructing a “brand” identity amenable for the market: rather than renegotiating an identity based around nationality, Pablo’s self-bestowed authority to pick and choose between Arabic and English shears them of their erstwhile sociopolitical trappings, and in this way he constructs a customized language particular to himself and which exalts and showcases his uniqueness as a musical icon; it is this uniqueness that he captures and mobilizes as the quintessential facet of his brand as an artist and musical icon.

Such insights are not only applicable or exclusive to the particular practice of language mixing exemplified by Pablo above. Indeed, one can generalize the pressures of market

¹⁰⁴ Suleiman (2006) 130

¹⁰⁵ Banet-Weiser (2012), p. 95

competition, and the corresponding imperative to construct a brand identity, to the language practices of even those rappers who prefer to rap exclusively in Arabic. Such is the case for the rapper Husayn who, coming into the 2020s, released a series of songs replete with English like “Gotta Tell”, “Help Me”, and “K-Yotic” and yet lagged behind the heavyhitting mainstream stars in a field dominated by heavyweights like Pablo. His following 2022 EP “Sonseyat”, however, pulls off a successful linguistic pivot, leaning deeply into a heavily-urbanized, slang-suffused, accented Egyptian Arabic characteristic of the working class. Such a pivot differentiated Husayn’s style of rapping from his competition, and played an integral role in establishing Husayn’s brand image as a slick, smooth-talking gangster figure, now one of the top earning artists with nearly 400,000 monthly listeners just on Spotify as of the time of writing.

Indeed, insofar as issues of dialectal variation—in the form of region- and neighborhood-specific accents, slang and figures of speech, as well as the degree, proficiency, and frequency of the use of foreign languages like English—carry local information regarding literacy and education level, and more broadly denote the class position of the speaker, the presence of multiple Egyptian Arabics operating at once in the rap mainstream denotes how the different aesthetics of class—captured and effected by way of language—is a central component around which rappers build their brand identities. Such dialectal diversity, then, indicates the way in which mainstream rap music in Egypt represents how class interests converge in and around cultural production in neoliberal Egypt. In this way, the mainstreaming of rap highlights how the regime of parallel and distinct musical circuits divided approximately along class

lines—described by Gilman in his taxonomy of the pre-2011 Egyptian music industry¹⁰⁶ and structured by the state’s ideological interest in prohibiting the lower classes from accessing the musical mainstream—is no longer in operation. This certainly speaks to the shrinking of the middle class and the sharp increase in economic inequality between Egypt’s haves and have-nots. Rather more saliently, however, such a shift underscores how the neoliberal imperative to capitalize upon the economic potential in expanding the mainstream market to appeal to the tastes of and include those classes designated as unworthy of cultural representation here overpowers those structures and political forces that were at one point charged with ensuring such prohibitions remained intact.

Returning to Pablo’s “Free”, it is not only Pablo’s use of language that might be characterized as “flippant”. Such a politics is also made clear in the visual codes Pablo employs in the accompanying visualizer to the song. The setting of the first two-thirds of the music video showcases Pablo in his hometown of Alexandria, and bounces between scenes of Pablo hanging his body out of a moving car in the city streets, hanging around Alexandria’s corniche, zooming around familiar haunts, and dancing in an alleyway in fashionable streetwear. Here, Pablo appears to position himself consciously as a product of his environment, wearing his regional pride on his sleeve. The third act of the music video, however, seems to abandon those motifs: Pablo is instead shown in the foyer of a mansion. On the back of a black horse and wearing a suit jacket and slacks, Pablo raps the remaining verse surrounded by marble flooring and intricate furniture. The final shot consists of Pablo reclining on said furniture, sipping an

¹⁰⁶ Gilman (2014), p. 12

expensive-looking whiskey, and looking on at the sophisticated decor around him. Taking into account the key refrain repeated several times throughout the song—”if you go crazy you’ll be free” (*lau titgannin tb`a free*—such an ending implies an understanding of freedom that rests on the amassing of material wealth and which requires casting off or exceeding beyond the native milieu of the hometown, a particular tradeoff which Pablo appears happy to make.

The notability of this ending to the music video raises the question: in what ways do rappers employ visuality? How do rappers combine visuality with language in the context of a neoliberal economy of culture? What would an understanding of the visual codes employed by mainstream Egyptian rappers in their music videos add to an understanding of the genre’s politics? These questions are taken up in the following chapter.

Flexible Visualities: Between Complicity and Excess

If, as Marcyliena Morgan and Dione Bennett argue, rap as a mode of expression is as much a visual genre as it is a musical or linguistic one, then attending to the ways in which visibility is mobilized in the context of mainstream Egyptian rap and the economies which enable it is a crucial component of an analysis of the genre's politics in contemporary Egypt.¹⁰⁷ This chapter undertakes a comparative analysis of two music videos—the one a commercial aired on TV, the second a music video for a single from his album “Florida” posted on YouTube—by the rapper Marwan Moussa. In so doing, this chapter demonstrates that the same politics that attend language practice are here present in the mobilization of the visual field: explicit—even useful—political conformity on the surface in order to access a mainstream policed by the state, but that hides an underlying cultural politics fundamentally antagonistic to and in excess of the bounds established by a culturally-hegemonic state. Much like linguistic form, such a politics of visibility privileges flexibility above all: a close reading of “Tesla” and “Shahyasa” shows how conforms and optimizes itself to maximize the benefit extracted from the given particular economy of media that enables it—whether that be TV in Egypt or YouTube. In this way, rap visibility in Egypt pledges no allegiance to any particular logic beside the economic one, conforming and optimizing itself; as such, it is disloyal to both the ideological demands made by hegemony, and the counter-hegemonic impulse to combat or resist such demands.

¹⁰⁷ Morgan & Bennett (2011), p. 176

In May 2023, Marwan Moussa made an appearance in a commercial for the Egyptian telecom company Telecom Egypt. The ad was televised as well as posted on Telecom Egypt's YouTube channel, where it has amassed upwards of 19 million views as of December 2023. The commercial is at once an advertisement for Telecom Egypt's new "Super Kix" mobile service plan, while also doubling as a full-fledged music video for an original Marwan Moussa rap song. At over two minutes long, the commercial stands out for its glossy, high-quality audiovisual production, and its opulent visual language of bright lights—neon pinks and purples, spinning discoballs, flashing lights in a nightclub, the Cairo skyline as seen from the Cairo airport at night—serving as the ideal backdrop for Marwan Moussa himself, seen traveling the world with a large group of friends, partying, skeet shooting, playing video games, taking group selfies at exotic locales, etc. The song's charismatic lyrics follow from both its visuals and the song's title—"Shahyasa" a slang term for luxury, affluence, and extravagance—as Moussa raps about signing lucrative deals, winning awards, and generally reveling in stardom over an energetic, percussive beat. With this commercial, Marwan Moussa, and the genre of Egyptian rap for which he is famous, find not only mainstream acceptance but also direct investment into their potential as ideal ambassadors for one of Egypt's largest commercial enterprises.¹⁰⁸

Such an appearance notably follows the November 2022 press conference in which the state—represented by Syndicate of Musical Professions head Mustafa Kamel—announced a reformed state of affairs between Egypt's mainstream rappers and the security apparatuses responsible for policing Egyptian culture. It is thus the case that Marwan Moussa and his

¹⁰⁸ Forbes lists Telecom Egypt as the third largest domestic corporation by market value as of 2023.

contemporaries' prominent appearances in advertisements for major Egyptian corporations like Telecom Egypt (which, it should be noted, is only nominally private—the Egyptian state controls 80% of the company's assets)¹⁰⁹ emblemizes the ideal niche the Egyptian state wishes for rap music to occupy within its cultural policy. Marwan Moussa's "Shahyasa" presents an ideal opportunity to ask: what kind of rap music does the Egyptian state find palatable—indeed, worthy of promotion and investment? How does the state overcome and indeed utilize for its own ends rap music's erstwhile supposed for dissent and subsequent associations with the Arab Spring? How does Marwan Moussa's music-video-as-commercial demonstrate the ways in which rap is able to mold itself to the contours of such a niche?

A brief discussion of the specific cultural goals pursued by the Sisi regime post-Arab Spring, and the methods by which they are pursued, is here necessary in order to properly locate the politics of "Shahyasa". As mentioned elsewhere in this dissertation, the state has, since gaining independence in 1952, understood and maintained culture as part of a larger system of ideological pillars upholding and reproducing the political legitimacy of the state and the regimes that take control of it as authentic representatives of the Egyptian national body. For such a cultural schema to work, the state has, in various ways, been keen on routing the various modes of cultural production through itself, appointing itself the ultimate arbiter of culture in the process.

This tutelary cultural logic was expanded and given new impetus with the challenge to the post-1952 status quo posed by the largely youth-led Arab Spring revolutionary moment, and

¹⁰⁹ It is likely closer to 70% as of mid-2023, as the state has taken to offloading its assets due to the nature of the nation's dire economic straits. See Middle East Eye 2023.

the military's subsequent return to power in mid-2013. Of critical importance here is a paradoxical task: on the one hand there is the need to reassert and renew not only political, but cultural control over the revolutionary movement, but without openly harkening back to the practices and signifiers characteristic of the regime ousted in early 2011. Thus, after the military recaptured control of the state following the overthrow of democratically-elected Mohammed Morsi in 2013 and the subsequent election of president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi (a military general previously) in 2014, the crackdown on the forms of cultural expression characteristic of the revolutionary period was harsh and swift. On the one hand, the state responded by enacting official policies of repression and suppression: "politics, sex and religion" and works of art featuring depictions of the urban poor, as well as anything deemed to be "in violation of public decency" (*khadish lil-hya' al-`am*)—a policy affecting rap in direct fashion—were prohibited from receiving licensure by any of the relevant professional syndicates;¹¹⁰ in addition, any new musical work were made to pass through the Ministry of Culture's censorship wing in order to be distributed, profited from, or played in public legally (either in concert or simply on a speaker in a public setting);¹¹¹ finally, many artists prominent during the revolution like singer-songwriter Ramy Essam and rapper MC Sadat were exiled from the country entirely.¹¹² A second response, occurring in tandem with the first, was a policy of heavy-handed promotion of the state's militarist, chauvinistic cultural values to flood the void left in a cultural scene largely emptied of the state's rivals. This included commissioning popular musical artists like Mohammed Ramadan and Mustafa Kamel (the current head of the Syndicate for Musical Professions) to compose pop

¹¹⁰ That is, not permitted to pass through the various censorship apparatuses; Aly (2023), p. 408

¹¹¹ Ramadan (2021), p. 6

¹¹² El Rashidi (2023), p. 57

songs in explicit celebration of the military¹¹³ as part of a larger project to exert what ethnographer Frederika Malmstrom calls “sonic control” over Egypt’s affective environment and re-establish/re-legitimate an Egyptian national identity yoked inextricably to an essential notion of masculine militarism.¹¹⁴

It is worth detouring here briefly to note that Egypt’s media economies serve as an additional apparatus through which the state effects and enforces its cultural policies as outlined above. As might be expected, the gains made by the revolutionary coalition in 2011 and the attempts at the liberalization of Egypt's media sector during the Mubarak era were more than reversed after Sisi took power. In addition to passing laws stipulating severe restrictions on content,¹¹⁵ Tourya Guaaybess reports that “the Sisi government also moved into the arena of media ownership through nominally private companies [...] In this way, private media investors of the pre-Sisi era were elbowed out”; quoting journalist Wael Abbas, such circumstances may be summarized as follows:

“Right now, everything is under government control. They own the newspapers and television stations. They interfere in the work of foreign agencies and foreign media. They block sites if they do not appreciate the content. These are the conditions in which journalists live in Egypt.”¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Frishkopf (2023), p. 164

¹¹⁴ Malmstrom (2019), p. 99; 111

¹¹⁵ See Marzouk (2020)

¹¹⁶ Abbas, qtd. in Guaaybess (2023). p. 419

Insofar as this aside pertains to “Shahyasa”, the situation of Egyptian media perforce avails the Egyptian state of access to, and an astounding degree of control over, a vast arsenal of discursive and mediatic technologies to exploit at its beck and call in order to support its various sociopolitical, cultural, and economic projects. This arsenal includes, but is certainly not limited to, advertising. In this context, a close examination of the visual codes employed in Marwan Moussa’s “Shahyasa” reveals the contours of a contemporary Egyptian state’s political priorities and how rap music as a genre and its attendant political potentialities can serve as the ideal idiom with which to carry out them out.

The ad opens with a medium shot of Marwan Moussa in a pearly white hoodie, his back to the camera, walking in slow motion as a band of musicians dressed in black play along with the song’s opening phrase: a looping sequence of notes plucked on a violin. The shot cuts away to Marwan Moussa on the fuselage of a passenger airplane; the beat accelerates, normal motion resumes, and as different elements of the beat fill in the aural space around the plucking violins, Marwan Moussa begins rapping—partially in English—about the feeling of “Shahyasa”, slang term specific to Egyptian Arabic meaning affluence, extravagance, luxury, and opulence. A flurry of rapid tracking shots centered on Moussa cut in and out of a range of environments—a pool party, different chapters of the airplane seen in the opening shots, a nightclub, and a skeet shooting range among others—as Marwan Moussa sustains a verse on the deals he signs “with NASA”, the money he makes by rapping, and the checks he “signs with his tongue” (*kalamy fluus w lisaany byimdy el-sheek*), emphasizing that his “Shahyasa” is an authentic, self-made one. Of the fruits of that “shahyasa”, Moussa is often shown partying with a large group of

demographically-similar friends—that is, the class of young, fashionable, wealthy, socially- and technologically-savvy, photogenic, Westernized influencers. In other shots, Moussa is the sole occupant of the frame, rapping to the camera; and in a few instances, the shot features not Moussa but a young woman in a purple puffer jacket dancing in a newly-constructed apartment, the plastic protective sheets covering the drywall still yet to be pulled off. Here, the ad gestures towards Moussa sharing his “shahyasa”, his opulence. Made especially clear by the glittering, futuristic visual motif of bright neon lights that so characterize the ad, the commercial’s overall engagement with an aesthetic of opulence familiar to the rap genre showcases Marwan Moussa at the top of his game; at the end of this two-minute spectacle of glitz, Marwan Moussa emerges as the tech-savvy neoliberal self-made hustler par excellence. There is a sense of open-mindedness, a sense of neoliberal permissibility before the new class of practices, values, and modes of cultural expression ushered in by the internet generation that Telecom Egypt is more than happy to enable.

When considered in juxtaposition to the familiar cultural language utilized by the state, this ad at first seems to indicate a genuine shift in the position taken by the state with regard to what it views as “correct” or politically permissible Egyptian culture. In contrast to the habitual masculinist jingoism mobilized and upheld by the regime—as demonstrated in the cultural presence of President El-Sisi himself, for example¹¹⁷—Marwan Moussa and his young entourage of friends express a set of cultural values that is at best largely disinterested in, and indeed has no need for, the brand of identity politics most preferred by the militarist state. Marwan Moussa’s

¹¹⁷ Malmstrom (2019) details the public ubiquity of the image of the president

brand of masculinity as expressed in the commercial does not rely on displays of bodily strength, for instance.¹¹⁸ Similarly, the dancer in the purple puffer jacket, her hair uncovered and wearing Western-style streetwear, expresses a femininity divorced from a notion of Egyptian domesticity that is the enforced reciprocal of the regime's patriarchal ethos.

Placing this sense of open-mindedness, the opulent aesthetic impelling it, and considering them both in the context of Egypt's project of neoliberal economic reforms reveals that, in fact, it is this very open-mindedness that serves as an ideal platform for the state's interests.

To begin with, cultural theorist Natalie Wynn notes how the motif of hip-hop opulence "is not just gratuitous glitz and hedonism [...] it's a celebration of success for [those] who are generally deprived of it [...] For the marginalized, opulence is a simulacrum of the wealth and power they've been denied."¹¹⁹ Similarly, Keith Negus argues that "[in] the struggle against racism and economic and cultural marginalization, and in an attempt to 'live the American dream,' rap has also been created as a self-conscious business activity as well as a cultural form and aesthetic practice."¹²⁰ Citing a critique of the particular brand of opulence mobilized in an Ariana Grande music video, Wynn thus makes a distinction between hip-hop opulence and the appropriation of the signifiers of hip-hop opulence without the subtext of past material deprivation. It is those signifiers that take center stage in Marwan Moussa's ad for Telecom Egypt.

Furthermore, Bosmat Yefet writes that, for the Sisi regime, legitimacy is predicated on the pursuit of a number of goals: "economic growth, enhancing Egypt's positions regionally and internationally, transforming Egypt into an advanced international industrial hub, and saving the

¹¹⁸ As is prominently displayed in regular widely-televised military parades; see Holypolitical (2020)

¹¹⁹ Wynn (2019), 5:45; 13:00; 35:40

¹²⁰ Negus (2012), p. 526

state from threats and risks and strengthening its powers.”¹²¹ Yefet argues that these goals are downstream of a larger strategy of legitimation based on the securitization of Egyptian society and the promise of security and stability.¹²²

Placing Wynn and Yefet’s insights in conversation, then, reveals a set of signifiers—the luxury activities, the fashionable clothing, the jetsetting—denoting an opulence that is less a marker of defiance or success against stacked odds, but rather a tool designed to dovetail nicely with the regime’s political projects. This tool works well not in spite of rap music’s confrontational politics, but precisely because of it: as Joyce Van de Bildt points out, the Sisi regime has sought to further advance its project of legitimation not by distancing itself from the January 25th Revolution, but by self-marketing as a loyal extension of it.¹²³ In delivering its political agenda in the visual language of rap, the state avails itself of one of the revolution’s cultural vehicles; in so doing, the state obtains and manages to bend to its will the aura of democratic authority that attends rap as a mode of expression purportedly loyal to the Egyptian street. The hegemonic state does not suppress but embodies the language of rap and its politics of dissent; it translates its masculinist, militarist cultural politics into the supposed language of Egypt’s downtrodden underclass; it is the very politics of dissent that rap traffics in that enables the state to direct those politics so as to expand its cultural legitimacy and legitimate its claim of a modern, prosperous, tech-savvy, globally-connected Egypt that is simultaneously receptive to and accommodative of the culture of the revolution. The same underlying self-preservationist logics are at play, the difference lying in the way in which this logic is sold and thus

¹²¹ Yefet (2021), p. 176

¹²² *ibid.* 177

¹²³ Van de Bildt (2015), p. 253

implemented. The Egyptian state, in this commercial, successfully appropriates rap music and its culture of protest in order to control that protest itself. It is in this way that the state employs rap music as another tool of legitimation.

Such apparently thorough inhabiting of rap music by the state recalls the scene of the November 2022 press conference, wherein a magnanimous, victorious Mustafa Kamel stands over Egypt's rap stars—Marwan Moussa among them—and bids them repeat after him, hand over heart, “long live Egypt” (*tahya Masr*).

That said, what underpins such an interpretation is the fact that “Shahyasa” is taken in isolation. Keeping in mind the peculiarities of the media environment that “Shahyasa” appears in, a comparative look at an additional sample of Marwan Moussa's work quickly reveals that the state's co-opting of the mainstream rap scene is not, in fact, as deeply-rooted as it first appears, and it is rather the case that Moussa's complicity in his partnership with the state is a function of a pragmatics in the service of a higher-order, superseding neoliberal logic.

Marwan Moussa's music video for the song, “Tesla”, a hit single off of Moussa's 2021 album, *Florida*, remains a cornerstone of the Egyptian rap scene, having amassed over 32 million views on YouTube as of December 2023. The music video, certainly aided by the catchiness of the song and its lyrics, stands out for its high production quality and, perhaps more notably, its narrative arc told through the music video's visuals. The video opens with Marwan Moussa driving up to a prison in an old, beat-up BMW—Tesla logo affixed where BMW's would be—at the doors of which stand police officers ready to handcuff him; the video then follows Moussa throughout his stint in prison. It is this setting of the video that is perhaps its most compelling

feature, as the video develops and builds upon an interesting tension: on the one hand, the video depicts Marwan Moussa's day-to-day life in the prison as lavish, kingly; he is served sushi in the mess hall, brings women over to his cell, bosses around the other inmates, and rotates through a collection of high-end sneakers stowed away under his bed. An opulent visual motif is again at play here, again highlighted by the song's lyrical themes, which center around Marwan Moussa's accumulation of wealth and status. At the same time, Marwan Moussa is still a prisoner: he is subject to interrogation, his hair is buzzed, and, as the narrative develops, it is revealed that he has been sentenced to death by electric chair. This is a fate that Moussa manages to slip past, however, as the video ends with a shot of Moussa's prison guards bloodied and dead on the ground (presumably by Moussa's own hand), with Moussa making his escape. The video concludes on a note of serenity and transcendence, as Moussa exits the prison to find not the courtyard he entered from at the beginning but a beach awaiting him outside the prison doors, waves lapping the shoreline. The final shot of the video sees Moussa wading into the water, as the light of dawn reflects off the surface. For Marwan Moussa, the prison is both a palace in which he is king, and a site of oppression to be escaped.

In order to conduct a close reading of the visual codes mobilized in "Tesla" and its interaction with the song's lyrical content, it is necessary to first inquire after the central site of the prison and the ambivalent politics of carcerality involved within the music video's evocation of it, particularly given the Egyptian state's heavy-handed expansion of an explicitly carceral logic of governance following Egypt's involvement in the events of the Arab Spring in 2011. Indeed, the cultural politics of the Egyptian state post-Arab Spring may largely be seen as a

general consequence of the embrace of penal logics and authoritarian carceral practices as a primary means of maintaining power and eliminating opposition including but certainly not limited to mass surveillance, censorship, mass incarceration without trial, forced disappearance, and torture following the military's seizure of power.¹²⁴ As of the time of writing, for instance, an estimated 120,000 Egyptians languish in the country's prisons, 60,000 of whom are political prisoners.¹²⁵

Such logics very much extend to the realm of cultural production, as the storied plight of *mahraganat* singer Hamo Bika and his stints in prison attests, as well as the various confrontations between Egypt's rappers and the state.¹²⁶ Writing on the Egyptian state's crackdown on female TikTok creators, Sara Soumaya Abed describes how such policies occur within the broader imperative to stabilize the sociocultural hierarchy upon which the state sits perched, and work to expand the state's control over citizen behavior.¹²⁷ the Egyptian state polices Egyptian culture much as it does the Egyptian street. In this way, the adoption of a heavy-handed logic of carcerality post-Arab Spring—applied even to the cultural sphere outside of the prison space—exerts disciplinary, political pressure on art and artists to produce obedient works that fall explicitly in line with the state's various sociopolitical and cultural projects, in part pacifying and emptying the motif of the prison and the genre of rap music of their potential political potency.

¹²⁴ Yee (2022)

¹²⁵ These numbers are likely low estimates, as the Egyptian state is not transparent about its population of inmates. See World Prison Brief's 2020 report on Egypt, Dooley (2023), and Otis (2022)

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, see Egypt Today (2022)

¹²⁷ Abed (2024), p. 45

Cast in this light, it seems that it is by design that the prison as it appears in Marwan Moussa's "Tesla" seems somewhat divorced from political reality. To begin with, the video features signifiers of incarceration that break from those markers of the prison most familiar in Arab or Egyptian cultural production. The mess hall, single-person cells, orange jumpsuits, and officers in American-style police uniforms echo the prison of *Shawshank Redemption* more than it does the prison in an Egyptian film like *Al-Baree' (The Innocent)*.

Perhaps more significantly, the prison in fact does not figure in the lyrics whatsoever and is rather found only in the visuals of the music video itself; for many of those only listening to the song—on streaming, say—the prison is silent. This sidelining of the prison and the rendering of it into a mere visual accessory plays into a discourse of rap authenticity, wherein one marks oneself “more gangsta, more ghetto, more hardcore”¹²⁸ than one's contemporaries; the prison, in other words, is recognized less as the key active ingredient of the carceral state and more as an aesthetic to be mined to buttress Marwan Moussa's brand as an authentic representative of the Egyptian street.

This political distancing extends to the video's fantastical, transcendental ending where, again narratively echoing *Shawshank Redemption*, Marwan Moussa finds himself, after having escaped the prison, on a beach. Criminologist Michelle Brown critiques this trope in her analysis of *Shawshank Redemption*. For her, a finale of this kind that takes place in “such a vast, open, expansive space, with such spectacular closure” clashes with the visceral materiality and confined circumstances of the prison. Such an ending exposes a desire to

¹²⁸ Neal (2012), p. 58

“...rebuild hope and redemption, at a moment in which retribution and incapacitation were to achieve unparalleled privilege in the... prison system. [This] culminates in a message so abstract, so fantastic, and so centered within traditional conventions that the audience is seductively encouraged to walk away from the theater deep in metaphors about their own lives and romanticized assumptions about the production of justice.”¹²⁹

The ending here is a salvation reserved only for Moussa, disengaged as he is from the other inmates who, throughout the video, are present only as props in the background, as extras placed for show. This disengagement is further highlighted by the frequent and conscious references to signifiers of opulence present in both the video’s visuals and the song’s lyrics:

“All this drip on my hand I feel like Thanos / Ciroc in my glass, life is good / FaceTime Gabriella from Milano / Supporting Inter Milan because of Adriano”¹³⁰

Moussa is overt in expressing an affinity for, and displaying his level of access to, the finer things in life, frequently mobilizing precisely those Western brands and cultural references—distinct markers of class and privilege in the Egyptian context—exactly with the intention of marking his distinct class and privilege. Though one could argue that considering the ending within the

¹²⁹ Brown (2010), p. 63

¹³⁰ Moussa (2021), 1:54

themes of opulence expressed by the lyrics mobilizes a critique of capitalist accumulation of wealth as a kind of prison, Marwan Moussa's involvement in Egypt's commercial sector as a brand ambassador for some of Egypt's most valuable corporations undermines this point. On the contrary, it is precisely this lauding of neoliberal aesthetics of luxury and opulence that complements the Egyptian state's sociopolitical and economic projects nicely, as Sisi's regime legitimates its rule based largely on the promise of, among other things, "economic growth, enhancing Egypt's positions regionally and internationally," and "transforming Egypt into an advanced international industrial hub"¹³¹. This use of lavishness as a central motif overpowers the prison to become *the* central motif of the video; indeed, despite occasional references to social practices considered deviant in the eyes of the state like references to sex and drug use, the state has chosen to turn a blind eye to "Tesla" the song and music video. It is this final fact—that being the continued survival and indeed popularity of the music video on Marwan Moussa's personal YouTube channel despite the flurry of crackdowns on Egyptian culture—indicates that "Tesla" as a music video employs a brand of rap music and set of motifs that have not only been sufficiently politically-defanged and declawed, but in fact play an active role in legitimizing the state's politics in much the same manner as "Shahyasa".

Yet it would be a mistake of premature dismissal, however, to accept uncritically the notion that the motifs and lyrics in "Tesla" are to be taken wholly at face value. On the contrary, the video features several unmistakable moments of sardony, of tongue-in-cheek self-awareness that aesthetically and politically distinguish it from "Shahayasa"; indeed, an inquiry into the

¹³¹ Yefet (2021), p. 176

politics of this video would be inadequate without at least equal attention devoted to the ways in which this sardony complicates the above indictment of the video as a mere downstream consequence of the state's.

It is worth drawing attention to those specific instances peppered throughout the video that hint at this measure of irony. First is Marwan Moussa's car: a shabby sedan with the Tesla logo sloppily affixed with tape in place of the original hood ornament—this is the opening shot of the music video. Immediately following this, Marwan Moussa is handcuffed and escorted inside the prison by the prison's administration, at which point he turns his back to the camera to reveal his initials, M.M, written with the McDonald's golden arches forming the two M's—the stereotypical symbol of overt corporatist commercialization—on the back of the jacket he's wearing. In visually greeting the viewer in this way, Marwan Moussa's appropriation of the Tesla and McDonald's logos to self-brand as an unabashed corporate sellout indicates a quiet self-awareness that the following performance is, like the Tesla logo, simply a show best taken with a grain of salt.

It is worth revisiting the ending with this grain of salt now in mind. Unlike the central narrative of, say, a *Shawshank Redemption*, in which the main character is brought to the prison against his will and a desire to leave the prison structures the movie's core narrative, Marwan Moussa drives up to the prison in his so-called "Tesla" himself. Indeed, he cooperates with the guards as he's brought into the prison; thereafter he quickly establishes himself as the kingpin of the prison space, and seems to actively enjoy the level of privilege he has attained behind bars—the intent to escape does not find expression for the vast majority of the narrative. It is

only at the very end of the music video's narrative, as the camera cuts to show a bloodied Marwan Moussa surrounded by dead prison guards, that the viewer realizes the extent to which Moussa secretly despised the prison space and wished to escape it. As Moussa exits the prison to find before him the impossible fantasy of the beach, the bass-heavy trap beat fades and is replaced by the ambient sounds of the ocean. Moussa does not look back at the prison as he wades into the water; he throws his head back to gaze at the vastness of the open sky, seemingly overcome with joy. Like the opening scene, this sequence of concluding shots throws into disrepair the sincerity of the video, reversing the viewer's impression of Marwan Moussa's conviction in his own performance lyrically and as the main character in the music video's narrative; Moussa's performance now suddenly appears rather reluctant, even begrudging. As this scene is tangible only in the music video and not in the lyrics, this is a reluctance that is not extraneous but *hidden*.

Nicole Fleetwood's account of the circumstances carcerality imposes on processes on artmaking and creativity provides a framework to understand the ways in which Egypt's political circumstances forces such reluctance to remain hidden. While the primary subjects of Fleetwood's inquiry are imprisoned artists, significant parallels may be drawn between those conditions and the conditions under which nominally "free" creatives must abide by. For instance, the state's official position that rap and *mahraganat* do not count as legitimate art in the first place¹³² directly reflects Fleetwood's argument that art created under conditions of imprisonment "exists in relation to economies, power structures governing resources and access,

¹³² See El Rashidi (2023), p. 55, Ramadan (2021), p.5

and discourses that legitimate certain works as art and others as craft, material object... or trash.”¹³³ Furthermore, and like the subjects of Nicole’s inquiry, Moussa incurs penal risk in experimenting with art in the Egyptian context: he operates under institutional guidelines in which certain agents, like prison administrators in an American context, are able to “seize artwork at any time, control its distribution, and profit off those artworks whose sale is permitted...”¹³⁴ Artists working under such restrained circumstances must thus “craft styles and aesthetic practices that both [arise] from the very conditions of imprisonment and [resist] the isolation and exclusion” that carceral practices and punitive logics enforce.¹³⁵

Fleetwood thus opens up space to consider Egypt itself as a kind of prison in terms of the conditions creativity is subject to. Indeed this is a set of circumstances that pervades Egyptian society at large; this is a central argument made in Frederika Malmstrom’s study of Egypt’s post-coup affective environment in which she cites the “hyperparanoia” as a consequence of the heavy presence of state security and the enforced surveillance of Egypt’s populace as part of the state’s efforts to securitize Egypt’s society.¹³⁶

In this light, we might see the prison in the “Tesla” music video not as a politically toothless aesthetic choice, but as a metaphor for the conditions of rap artistry in Egypt. This understanding of the prison in Moussa’s “Tesla” extends out of a trope most notably found in Arabic literary production, that being the representation of the prison as “spilling out” into society, “[enfolding] the ‘free’ nation-space into the prison-space, thus making prisoners out of

¹³³ Fleetwood (2020), p. 3

¹³⁴ *ibid.* 8

¹³⁵ *ibid.* 23

¹³⁶ Malmstrom (2019), p. xxv

all those who inhabit it.” As literary scholar Joe Farag argues, “whatever the official discourses of postcolonial Arab regimes about liberation, the inhabitants of Arab states remain imprisoned under their dictatorial and oppressive rule.”¹³⁷ This trope serves to “[blur] the distinction between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ prison walls by replicating the power hierarchies and systems of privilege that prevail beyond the prison walls” into the space of prison itself. Importantly, Farag points out that “more than merely constructing microcosms, these narrative strategies expand the prison space outward, enveloping the ostensibly ‘free’ space beyond it... Understood in this way, distinctions between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ prison become meaningless. Indeed, there is no ‘outside’ the prison, only additional layers of imprisonment.”¹³⁸

By homing in on the historical contingencies that attend the specific formulation of carcerality adopted by the Arab states, the framework provided by Farag throws Moussa’s “Tesla” into sharp relief and allows for the restoration of Marwan Moussa’s agency as an artist participating in rap’s hallmark tradition of dissent. Under this interpretation, Marwan Moussa’s music video here figures Egypt itself as a lavish prison plentiful in its opulence, but impoverished of freedom, recognizing an environment that tolerates—even rewards—Marwan Moussa and his artistic endeavors, so long as those artistic endeavors remain within the narrow confines of the limits set by the state. Though lavish as it may be, Moussa here constructs a model of an abusive Egypt that ultimately condemns those within it to death even as it heaps upon them splendor; it is thus an Egypt to be escaped.

¹³⁷ Farag (forthcoming 2024), p. 4

¹³⁸ *ibid* 8

Arriving at such a conclusion underscores how “Tesla” and “Shahyasa” contrast significantly, seeming to exist worlds apart: where “Tesla” is cunning, incisive, personal, critical of the state and its power, and seemingly self-aware of its privileged position within power, “Shahyasa” equals it in its seeming eagerness to jump into bed with power.

Indeed, inquiring further into this core difference in the visual codes mobilized within the two videos illustrates the centrality of flexibility for Egypt’s mainstream rappers and, further, articulates an acute awareness of the particular media economies that rap operates within. On the one hand there is rap as Egyptian TV commercial: tightly controlled and disciplined, subject to high standards of creative compliance, constructed to appeal to a general audience of consumers that, up until a very short while ago indeed, were being continually primed *against* rap music and its forays into the mainstream cultural landscape. In order to survive, rap must not only appear non-threatening to such an audience, but also convincingly sell its potential utility—in terms both economic and political—as a friend of hegemony, as another arm of and for it. And yet, on YouTube, Moussa dispatches with such pretenses, taking full advantage of the digital space provided to craft an aesthetic of carcerality that is certainly still obedient in its subordination to the political pressure exerted by the state, but only minimally; Moussa loads the visual narrative of the music video with a measure of dissembling and obfuscation to a point of excess, enabling himself to exercise a degree of agency and produce meaning that exceeds those bounds officially demarcated by the state. Indeed, to overstep in this way is necessary: as Byung Chul-Han argues, the technology of power at work within a neoliberal digital platform like YouTube does not “prohibit, protect, or repress; instead, it prospects, permits, and projects,” “stimulating” rather

than suppressing, thriving on “voluntary self-exposure.”¹³⁹ Such an environment conceives quite a different politics of rap indeed, as the relevant market here is no longer necessarily the general Egyptian public, but a tighter-knit core audience of Egyptian rap fans, that which calls for and expects a more “authentic” artistic presentation of the self.

Yet it behooves one to question which is the more “authentic” Moussa. Does the simple fact of the nature of Egypt’s media systems mean that Moussa’s involvement within it is entirely artificial—that he is left bereft of any agency whatsoever and, therefore, any output produced by such systems should be properly understood as contrived? Does this mean that “Tesla”, by virtue of it being a video on Moussa’s personal YouTube, should be granted greater credence as an artistic expression? To say so would be to accept uncritically a prior techno-optimist assumption that, in contrast to a creative environment wherein the Egyptian state reigns supreme, digital platforms like YouTube allow for entirely liberated, uninhibited modes of self and modes of creative expression that are somehow not—or at least less—contrived. After all, Sarah Banet-Weister reminds us that the notion of authenticity—normatively demarcating that which is “positioned and understood as outside the crass realm of the market”—is itself “trademarked,” “structured by brand logic and strategies” as a means of “attaching social or cultural meaning to a commodity” so as to “make the commodity more personally resonant with an individual consumer.”¹⁴⁰ Indeed, and insofar as the visual narrative of “Tesla” stages something in the way of an ostensibly “authentic” political critique, it does not do so “detached from merchandising practices, market incentives [or] corporate profits.”¹⁴¹ Thus the delta between “Shahyasa” and

¹³⁹ Han (2017), p. 35

¹⁴⁰ Banet-Weister (2012), p. 5

¹⁴¹ *ibid.* 126

“Tesla” demonstrates how the visual embodiments of rap music in Egypt—as it is with the form of language with which it’s delivered—is primarily modular; it is “authentic” only secondarily, only insofar as the circumstances call for it. The key observation here is that the politics of visuality is in this way a liquid, able to take the shape of several and oft-contradictory containers, capable of adapting to and optimizing for multiple market contexts.

Indeed, it is this crucial final point—i.e the prioritization of the market and the fulfillment of its various needs first and foremost—that brings to bear the throughline connecting the politics of “Shahyasa” and “Tesla”: neither video engages with the question of politics as an end in and of itself, but as a means; it is the market that is the end. For a mainstream star like Moussa, politics serves the pragmatic function of granting access to a given market and maximizing its economic potential. It is thus the market to which Marwan Moussa is beholden, and it is the market that unifies the seeming incoherence between the politics of “Shahyasa” and “Tesla”. The economic imperative to which mainstream Egyptian rap is subject, as well as the corresponding incentive to commercialize, subsumes the genre completely.

Such an observation clarifies a crucial aspect of the relationship between the Egyptian rap mainstream, and the structures of power historically embedded within Egyptian cultural production. From the perspective of Egypt’s rap industry, the regime of the postcolonial state—its tutelary dominance over popular culture, and the basic ideological premise of popular culture as a key pillar of a properly-oriented Egyptian nation which excludes “low class” Egyptian cultural expression, confirms the supremacy of language as the central location for Egyptian national identity, and which obviates the military-state as the sole legitimate heir of the

national will—is, oftentimes, *not profitable*. Indeed such a regime loses its gravity in the presence of the simultaneous existence of digital platforms as a comparable space for promulgating and commercializing Egyptian mainstream rap, platforms which lie ostensibly beyond the jurisdiction of the state and its sociocultural agenda and which can compete with the chapter of the market that the state somewhat arbitrarily positions itself as the gatekeeper to. In this way, market pressures often condition and advantage cultural production that can make use of and play to such digital spaces, undermining the state's cultural regime as a consequence.

Indeed, this state of affairs recasts that scene of syndication outlined at the outset of this dissertation in a new light. The state, represented by Mustafa Shaker's Syndicate of Musical Professions, surmised that it alone held the keys to the mainstream market; the gamble, therefore, was that by setting strict preconditions in return for access to that mainstream, the state could extend and secure its political dominance over at least one aspect of Egyptian cultural production. In light of the above, however, it now seems that Shaker's gamble was more an affectation of political power rather than a true expression of it, for the state has failed to supplant the underlying neoliberal cultural logic which is the primary survival mechanism of mainstream Egyptian rap in El-Sisi's Egypt and which impelled the rap mainstream to take on those forms that the state sought to suppress in the first place. It rather seems that, faced with the undeniable financial success of mainstream rap and the consequent hemorrhaging of its grip over Egyptian culture, the state was forced to cede access to the Egyptian market in exchange for the bare minimum guarantee that Egypt's rappers steer clear of explicitly revolutionary, anti-state politics in their songs. By stamping mainstream rap with its seal of approval, Shaker's November 2022

press conference represents not the absolute supremacy of the state over culture, but the subordination of both the political and the cultural to the economic; it is the neoliberal politics of culture championed by Egypt's rappers that comes out victorious.

Finally, it is this victory that illuminates how neoliberalism propagates by presenting an opportunity to escape the authoritarian sociopolitical context of a post-Arab Spring Egypt. As neoliberal forces increasingly transform the cultural sphere into another wing of economic activity—as the pursuit of rap music and its production becomes an economic endeavor—the arena of culture becomes one of the few where the state does not hold ultimate power, where the logic of the regime currently in power does not determine winners or losers. From the standpoint of Egypt's mainstream rappers, adhering to and thus contributing towards the logic of neoliberalism more reliably provides stability and material certainty in situations where the state is unable or unwilling to do so.

Epilogue

In June 2023, rappers FL EX, Husayn, and Wingii appeared alongside the comedy actor Ahmed Mekky in an ad for Tiger, a potato chip company. The ad drew wide derision online, with many mocking the absurdity of rappers known for their hard edge personas as elements of Egypt’s gangster underground rapping about potato chips next to an actor best known in the public consciousness for his starring role in the TV show *El Kebeer*, a quite tame fun-for-the-whole-family comedy series. Ziad Zaza, a contemporary of Husayn and co. reacted to the commercial in a now-deleted tweet: “What is this cheesy nonsense, you guys?” (*eh el-'abath da ya shabab ya gibna?*).¹⁴²

Though likely posted with the primary intention of joining in on the lampooning of the Tiger ad, Ziad Zaza is himself no stranger to renting out his image and his artistry for the benefit of major corporate entities. One cannot help but to wonder if this tweet doubles as an expression of a clarifying moment of self-awareness: perhaps, seeing Husayn and co. mocked for offering themselves up to a corporation in this way, Ziad Zaza recognized something of himself in the Tiger commercial; perhaps he saw something of all his contemporaries encapsulated therein.

In the chapters previous, this dissertation has sought to demonstrate the way in which neoliberal logics, shaping the economy of mainstream culture, exerts pressure on the form of mainstream Egyptian rap music. Specifically, it was shown how rappers are conditioned to

¹⁴² <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ctm8iCbseHy/>

adhere to such logics by shaping their artistic output circumstantially, and with an eye towards maximizing the commercial viability of a given song or music video. While, in one sense, neoliberalism releases Egypt's rappers from a certain political hierarchy—while it undermines the political standing of the state by rewarding the qualities of commercial viability over and often at the expense of the qualities friendly to the cultural hegemony of the state—it certainly does not release them from *all* political hierarchy; neoliberalism certainly cannot be said to have “liberated” Egyptian rappers in any meaningful sense of the term. If we grant that Egypt's mainstream rappers have accomplished a kind of escape from the politics of the state, we must also recognize the politics they are subsequently captured by. For while this work provides a starting framework for understanding rap music and, by extension, mainstream cultural production in contemporary Egypt, such a framework can only partially capture an image of Egyptian rap without reference to that which Ziad Zaza calls out as “cheesy nonsense.”

In this spirit, a conclusion to this dissertation would do best to point to the rough contours of a necessary second half to the argument submitted here. Firstly, a note on the question of media and medium: the output of mainstream Egyptian rap does not exclusively take the form of songs and music videos. As previously argued, Egypt's mainstream rappers are brands in and of themselves, and their oeuvre of albums and singles is not the only tool defining their brand identity. There exists, for instance, a vibrant streetwear and fashion scene based around the rap scene and often centering rappers like Marwan Moussa, Marwan Pablo, and Wegz among others either in direct likeness, or by way of references to lyrics from their most popular songs. Speaking anecdotally from my experiences visiting Egypt in the recent past, commodities of this

kind are often carried in stores found in Egypt's higher-end malls like—again, in my experience—City Stars in Nasr City and Arrabella Mall in the Fifth Settlement. Also of note here are online Egyptian streetwear brands like Qotoofs, who have had limited runs of exclusive rap merchandise in the past.

On the topic of branding but in a different direction, the question of rappers' social media profiles and the ways in which they cultivate communities of fans around themselves is of interest here. One notable phenomenon in this vein worth mentioning is the slew of accounts across different social media platforms that produce rap-themed or rap-adjacent content like memes, podcasts, sketches, interviews, and so on.¹⁴³ In general, the lacuna identified here is the absence of an ethnographic study of Egyptian rap, including but not limited to fan culture both online and offline.

On this lattermost point, the Egyptian rap scene has interesting connections with the party culture characteristic of the newly-developed resorts and vacation towns lining Egypt's north coast. It is in this area, colloquially called *el-sahel el-shirreer* (literally, the “evil coast”), that Egypt's rappers primarily host their concerts rather than Egypt's major population centers.

It should be noted here that this dissertation's focus on the mainstream in no way intends to preclude or dismiss the output of rappers like Mousv, Seif Mrdeny, or Karim Osama among others, all of whom are musically active but largely excluded from the commercial circuit. Of particular note here is the indie improv comedy *Nesr El Scene (Eagle of the Scene)*, a YouTube miniseries satirizing Egypt's rap scene from the underground to the mainstream. A study of this

¹⁴³ See accounts like @rapdrugs, @qhwelrap, @raportagear, and @raportageg on Instagram; the YouTube channels Rap or Die, Rap Shar3, and Freedom Music.

series, a deeper understanding of how rappers mobilize non-musical mediums for commercial purposes, and combined with a close reading of the artistic output of the underground scene in relation to the rap zeitgeist could prove fruitful in elucidating how and why certain mainstream rap stars come to be made over others.

Finally, as Egypt's mainstream rappers seek to exceed the limitations of the postcolonial nation-state, a fuller work on the politics of rap music in Egypt would be remiss to forego positioning Egyptian rap within the abundance of discourse on the globalization of culture and so-called cultural imperialism, and the connections between globalization and the commercialization of specifically Black American cultural commodities.¹⁴⁴ Of particular interest here is the way in which aesthetics, sonic tradition and technique (sampling practices, for instance), and lyrical composition rooted in a Black American cultural milieu undergoes sublimation and reemerge transformed in the Egyptian context. The question, then, would entail investigating what aspects of Black American tradition are either repurposed in this way or done away with, with special attention given to the aforementioned neoliberal market pressures shaping such decisions.

¹⁴⁴ See Berger & Thomas (2011), Basu & Lemelle (2006), Condry (2006).

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