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A Sonic Mapping of Arab Canada

The Arab uprisings in 2011 propelled a migration of sounds and sentiments into the diaspora, reviving folk music and musicians, and globally instilling the sentiment of hope among Arab communities. During the uprisings, social media was booming with tweets, videos and photographs of musical moments performed during revolutionary events, connecting those in the diaspora to people on the front lines of the protests. Across South West Asia and North Africa, Arab youth began revamping old songs for the purpose of uniting crowds of demonstrators in uncertain times. This “folk revival” of Arabic, traditional music has attracted attention from ethnomusicologists like myself.

Early one morning in 2016, I heard a “sample” of a popular Arabic folk song mixed into a DJ’s electronic dance music (EDM) set while dancing at an afterhours club in Montréal. As melodies evoke nostalgia and emotion, such samples of Arabic soundscapes have the ability to transport performers and listeners to different temporal locations. Indeed, for a moment, I felt as though I had travelled to a smoke-filled club in 1960s Cairo. I began to explore this countercultural, subaltern space where Arab individuals living in the diaspora are using musical and personal encounters to redefine what it means to be Arab. Through an extensive ethnographic exploration of approximately 25 individuals who are part of Toronto and Montréal’s underground EDM communities, my research explores the flux and flow of sounds in the Arab diaspora. Evocations of “Arab identity” are of particular interest to this study, which asks how such identities are articulated, produced and managed, and considers the range of ways and extent to which music played and performed in underground EDM venues serves to recall and reinforce histories and memories of “Arabness.”

My research outlines the phenomenological experiences of Arabness in underground EDM culture and its spaces that are filled with affectual politics. Although sonic connections are the strongest binding element between members of the scene, the scene is inter-sensorial. EDM is tactile, contracting and expanding not only with booming basslines and “pop-up” parties at unconventional locations, but also with migratory patterns. Dispersed by such patterns, events are experienced differently based on who is there, why they are there, and what they are doing there. The events’ locations are forever moving and changing just as its members are forever swaying, dancing and finding home in the diaspora. By simply showing up to a party, my interlocutors’ everyday actions and experiences speak louder than words; their unspoken, sonic engagement works to resolve the dissonance of their racialized community.

I argue that the construction of identity and articulation of belonging are intimately connected to and bound up in space and sound. In this vein, my work poses questions about the intersection of identity, belonging, space and sound among Arab individuals who produce, manage and attend underground EDM events in



J. Fulton-Melanson photograph

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Toronto and Montréal. On the basis of their shared attraction to underground EDM and aspects of their varied forms of identification, they may be constituted as a social group or “scene.” Members of the EDM scene meet at events to connect through music, art and movement. I examine how EDM culture (re)creates particular past, present and future sociopolitical, faith-based, cultural landscapes with a view to understanding how EDM culture shapes various conceptions of home, migration and the experience of belonging.

The Arab world has historically been interconnected by pan-Arabist sentiments ever since Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt (1954–1970). Many people who once strongly identified as Arab due to these political sentiments are now deconstructing their pan-Arabism and, instead, identifying their ethnicity with pre-colonial, Indigenous and/or nationalist identities. The shift from pan-Arabism to Arabness has carved space for Arab people to perform their Arabness in non-normative, varying ways. However, mainstream media narratives continue to categorize them using pan-Arab tropes, which presents issues regarding how Arab-identified people are misinterpellated in Canada. I argue that this reductive, Orientalist misinterpellation of “the Arab” is not inclusive of those connected to EDM. As Arabness is an ethnic identifier, it intersects with other aspects of one's identity such as gender and class. The weight of ethnicity within the spectrum of identity is thus individual and embodied differently from person to person. Some of my interlocutors produce EDM tracks using traditional instruments to compose the melody, some wear clothing with Arabic calligraphy when playing live DJ sets, some cook meals to remind them of home, and some claim not to think about their Arabness much at all. Simply by showing up and sounding their presence, my cosmopolitan interlocutors disrupt monotonous and reductive pan-Arabism. When used as an identifier of either ethnicity or musical sound, Arabness is being rewritten through my interlocutors' performances of self and musical productions. This rewriting is an important addition to the narrative of what it means to be Arab in Canada.

My interlocutors each have different stories about home, whether home be their birthplace or a place of general, familial heritage. Depending on where their home is, some travel there often, some cannot go back due to political unrest, some choose not to return, and some have never even been. This relationship with home is an important factor in the cultivation of an interior ethnic identity and the exterior performance of this identity. The music my interlocutors produce affects the performativity of this interior-exterior relationship. My work tells my interlocutors' stories and speaks to their experiences of migration, queerness, nationalism, ethnicity and life in the diaspora. By writing these stories onto the greater narratives of EDM and Arab-Canada, I aim to illuminate ongoing practices in the writing and rewriting of Arabness into personal, collective and musical identities.

Note from the author: My project features research-creation outputs where I demonstrate the ways in which my interlocutors fuse EDM with Arabic music to produce unique tracks that speak to their alternative Arab identities. In this video—<https://youtu.be/x1iCFAc5xZQ>—where I “performed” my defence, I am spinning and mixing my interlocutors' tracks while interjecting recordings of my own voice, describing my work, and quotes from my fieldwork and research in the form of ‘samples.’