

SHAYNA SILVERSTEIN

The Punk Arab
Demystifying Omar Souleyman's
Techno-Dabke

In June 2011, on a hot afternoon in north Chicago, large crowds turned out for a local music-and-arts festival curated by The Empty Bottle, a bar and alternative-music club. Mark Gergis of Sublime Frequencies introduced the main act: "From northeastern Syria, from the Jazeera region and the Hassake governate, from the villages of Ras al-Ayin and Tal Amir, please welcome to the stage, Omar Souleyman!"

Souleyman entered the stage in his signature brown *thobe* (gown), red-and-white checkered *keffiyeh* (headwrap), and aviator sunglasses, and raised both arms to acknowledge his fans. He began the set with a *mawwal* (nonmetered, improvised, sung poetry) in colloquial Syrian Arabic, to which keyboardist Rizan Sa'id responded with Kurdish instrumental fills. After a few verses, Souleyman paused just long enough to grab the crowd's attention. Then, with an electrifying shout—"Eeeeeeyya!"—he broke into 'ataba and *dabke* (popular Levantine Arab performance genres) and gestured for the crowd to start dancing to Sa'id's hammered beats. Some dancers synchronized their steps to the rhythms while others flailed their arms. A young woman wearing a *keffiyeh* started to *dabke* (the word is both verb and noun for the Arab line dance distinguished by a foot stomp), leading a chain of people in a small circle close to the stage.

"Ya ahti!" (Hey sister!) Souleyman said, affectionately greeting me backstage at the 2011 Do-Division Festival. We had been introduced the previous year at a festival in northern Belgium by Raed Yassin, a Lebanese sound artist helping out as cultural liaison for Souleyman's tour. I asked Souleyman how the tour was

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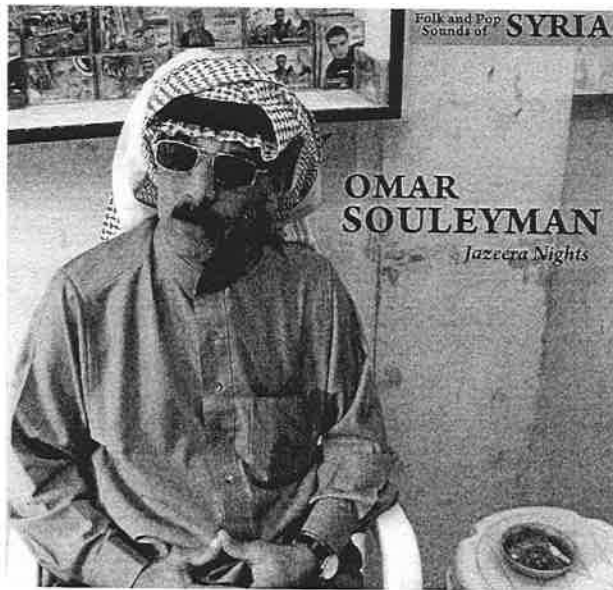
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Omar Souleyman, the Syrian wedding singer featured on Sublime Frequencies albums including *Jazeera Nights* (SF055), now performs around the world.

going. “It is good,” he said. “No accidents and good money.” I wondered if he was referring to the mishaps of earlier tours—the theft of summer earnings in Belgium and a relative’s mishandling of profits. He continued, “They are dancing. It is good to be here. I like Chicago.”¹

Since his international debut on the Sublime Frequencies label, Souleyman has gained broad appeal beyond Syria and the Arab world. The first Syrian wedding singer to cross over to Western audiences, he is embraced as a world-music phenomenon by consumers of punk, dancehall, house, techno, and world beat who dance ecstatically at his live shows. From Chicago to the acclaimed Glastonbury Music Festival in the UK, Souleyman is a global commodity sought after by independent music lovers and global ravers.

He first came to the attention of Sublime Frequencies in the late 1990s, when musician, producer, and collector Mark Gergis—in search of Syrian *sha‘bi* (popular) music—encountered his cassettes in a working-class Damascus street stall.² Several years later, Gergis contacted Souleyman for permission to distribute his recordings on the Sublime Frequencies label. Their collaboration resulted in

the 2007 release of *Highway to Hassake*, a folk-and-pop compilation featuring 13 tracks of *‘ataba*, *dabke*, and *choubi* recorded at live events.³

In 2009, Gergis released a YouTube video collage, “*Leh Jani*” (“When I Found Out”), in conjunction with the album.⁴ “*Leh Jani*” did more for Souleyman’s career than any other project. Supplementing a track of the same name on *Highway to Hassake*, the video depicts Souleyman and his band at various venues, from a local nightclub to outdoor and indoor weddings. The video insinuates the relaxed sexual mores and delirium of wedding dance parties in the borderlands of the Middle East. Souleyman appears as a detached yet controlled “boss” of the Arab street. Titillating and exotic, “*Leh Jani*” became a “gateway cut” for many Souleyman fans, including Qu Junktions, a UK-based organization for independent music, which contacted Sublime Frequencies in 2009 to propose a European tour. With a debut at the Sonár Festival in Barcelona, this tour launched Souleyman’s career in the West. To the amazement of Sublime Frequencies and its followers, “one of the surprising hits at Sonár 2009 was none other than Syrian megastar-in-waiting Omar Souleyman.”⁵

No longer a workingman’s singer from an isolated region of Syria, Souleyman is today a sensation among alternative music fans in Europe and North America. His hipness hinges less on his “legacy status” in Syria (a misleading embellishment conceived by Sublime Frequencies) than on his surreal performance style. Journalist Andy Morgan writes: “to the hip, [Souleyman’s] an adorable techno-*naïf*, a strange apparition from another world . . . for them, the very fact of his improbable existence is already half the charm.”⁶ By casting Souleyman’s music as “new old media” and promoting him as an iconoclast, Sublime Frequencies capitalized on the free flow of globalization and digital culture and targeted outsider audiences, from experimental-music connoisseurs to lovers of global pop and electronic dance music.⁷

This essay focuses on the reception of Souleyman’s concerts during his period working with Sublime Frequencies (2006–2011).⁸ Charting his rise from a local vocalist whose recordings were wedged between Damascus cassette stalls to an internationally recognized artist, his crossover to Western audiences is situated within the cultural context in which he began working in Hassake in the 1990s. Not quite the “legendary” Syrian singer that Sublime Frequencies has touted, Souleyman promoted his parties and adapted to changing conditions in ways typical of popular singers in his region. The trajectory of his career since he began working with Sublime Frequencies is, however, emblematic of how the label fosters cross-cultural understanding—striking the nerve of the exotic. In

the context of post-9/11 politics in the West, the Souleyman project taps into an exotica hyperbolized by Islamophobia. By critiquing the popular music discourse surrounding live concerts and situating these concerts in local contexts, this essay suggests that Souleyman's popularity is driven by countercultural desires for authenticity, cultural tolerance, and political activism.⁹ Motivated by anti-hegemonic resistance to homogeneity and insularity, fans problematically inscribe Souleyman's "techno-dabke" within discourses of race and class that historically have shaped the circulation of non-Western popular musics.

ANALOG SYRIA

In 1997, Mark Gergis headed to the Middle East, motivated by personal and political interests. He had lamented the erosion of Iraqi music under Saddam Hussein—and would later produce *Choubi Choubi!* (2005) to abate the loss of Iraqi popular dance music—but, unable to visit his paternal homeland of Iraq, Gergis looked toward Syria, and specifically Syria's border with Iraq, as a substitute destination for his musical pilgrimage.¹⁰ He was also interested in bringing Syrian music to a larger audience, in light of a cultural isolation borne of its quasi-socialist economy and Baathist politics under the Assad regime.

Gergis's musical fascination with the Middle East was tied to both his Arab-American identity and his adolescence in Detroit. In a 2008 interview with the online art and skate magazine *Fecal Face*, Gergis recalled being mocked and feared by his neighbors in suburban Detroit during the first Gulf War: "People in the trash suburb I grew up in would come into our market with 'Fuck Iraq' T-shirts on and ask us 'Where you from?' . . . I vowed artistic revenge on my classmates at an early age."¹¹

This experience connected Gergis to Sublime Frequencies founder Alan Bishop, who also grew up outside of Detroit. Bishop's first encounter with Arab music was through a recording of Farid al-Atrash on *oud* (Arabic lute), introduced by his grandfather, a Lebanese-American musician who frequently invited friends over to play Arab music in his basement.¹² The two met in the late 1990s through northern California's alternative music scene, where they connected over their mutual sense of alienation, punk affinity, and Middle Eastern heritage. Through Sublime Frequencies, Bishop and Gergis would aim to counter gross misperceptions of Arab culture in America by redistributing popular musics from the region and producing "obscure sights and sounds" through collage and cut-up techniques (e.g., *I Remember Syria*, 2004).

This penchant for analog culture drew Gergis to Omar Souleyman. Gergis took an interest in the lowbrow cassettes that circulated pop and dance tracks through Syria's informal music economy. The low fidelity of these tapes appealed to his taste for distorted and experimental sounds, and also happened to deemphasize the foreignness of the Arabic language. As a punk musician and indie music producer, he saw the potential for the "incredibly fast and gritty *dabke* music blaring in the street stalls of every city."¹³ Of Souleyman's music, Gergis said:

[A]fter collecting and listening to hundreds of (*dabke* singers), I deduced that while there are similar acts in the country, none really matches the distinct character of the Souleyman sound. His longtime collaboration with Rizan Sa'id, the Kurdish keyboard player, has yielded some of the rawest and most urgent-sounding examples of "new wave *dabke*" I've heard, and it definitely stands apart from others, to me. Souleyman's voice is unique as well, whether he's singing or MC-ing, there's a rugged beauty to it that is genuine and very likeable.¹⁴

Yet Gergis did not immediately market Souleyman's music. In fact, after sitting on his cassette collection for many years, it was only when a friend asked him for a compilation of Souleyman's tracks that Gergis experienced a breakthrough. He listened again to how "the fidelity varied wildly and some tapes were unmarked and pitched or edited poorly."¹⁵ Not himself an Arabic speaker, Gergis enlisted the help of Raed Yassin, a multimedia artist based in Beirut, to help approach Souleyman in 2006 for permission to distribute his recordings with Sublime Frequencies. Souleyman considered this an opportunity to reach audiences beyond the Middle East and trusted Gergis.¹⁶ What resulted, with help from Yassin and Alan Bishop's support, was the Sublime Frequencies release *Highway to Hassake*.

THE HASSAKE HOMETLAND

Before signing with Sublime Frequencies, Souleyman was a *mutrib*, or wedding singer, who had spent over a decade building a thriving career in eastern Syria and beyond—but he had not always been oriented musically. Not until 1994, encouraged by friends to sing for local *ḥaflāt* (party events) in Ras al-Ain, did he leave behind years of manual labor to pursue this line of work. But once he decided to perform professionally in 1994, he said, he "literally had a party every day. There would be a waiting list for me to sing at weddings."¹⁷

As a *mutrib*, Souleyman developed strategies that made him very popular. His

sets would begin with a *mawwal*, or nonmetered vocal improvisation, that set the tone for the festivities and established his artistic authority and individual touch. The rest of the set would alternate between *mawwal* (pl. *mawawīl*), *ataba*, *dal'una*, and other upbeat dance forms typical of *sha'bi* music, each differentiated by their prosaic construction, poetic meter, rhyming patterns, and rhythms. The band played polymetric arrangements of *leff*, *baladi*, and *wahda* rhythmic patterns typical of *sha'bi* and other popular musics broadcast on Arab radio and television in the 1970s and 1980s. His audiences would participate collectively in the *dabke*, a regional line dance distinguished by a signature foot stomp and improvisational movements.¹⁸ In traditional fashion for a wedding singer, he also served as master of ceremonies, making toasts to the bridal party with wit and grace, and picking up village dialects to cater to local tastes and preferences. Depending on the occasion, he, like other wedding singers, would offer tributes to popular political and religious figures, regardless of his personal views or affiliations.¹⁹ Flexible and agile, able to adapt and improvise anywhere, he was transformed from an average wedding singer into a *fanān*, or artist. Souleyman has said that he was recognized as a *fanān* not only in his local village but throughout Hassake.

To a Syrian ear, what distinguishes Souleyman from other Syrian wedding singers is the syncretic blend of Turkish, Iraqi, and Kurdish sounds typical of the Hassake region. Souleyman is from Ras al-Ain, a village on the Turkish border that reflects the diverse heritage of Armenian, Assyrian, Kurdish, Turkish, and Syrian Arab communities in the region. Performance genres are quite fluid in Hassake, as in other border zones, and Souleyman was known for customizing his sets for audiences as familiar with Kurdish *govend* and Iraqi *choubi* as Syrian *dabke*.²⁰ Souleyman worked closely with several musicians, including Ali Shaker on *bağlama saz* (long-necked lute) and keyboardist Rizan Sa'id, to arrange these sets.²¹ His partnership with Sa'id, who would become a fixture of Souleyman's band, goes back to 1996. Sa'id is recognized regionally for his Kurdish style of playing and he brought with him a distinctly Kurdish intonation, rhythmic complexity, and song repertoire. Sa'id also adapted the *choubi* style of Iraqi dance music to the keyboard by sampling a *khishba* or *zanbour* drum and intermittently disrupting the metric groove with repetitive strikes that sound like gunshots.

Souleyman's sounds evoke a complex set of ethnic and regional distinctions that reinforce sociocultural differences within Syria. Whereas Damascus is often valorized as a cosmopolitan urban center and the seat of political and economic power in Syria, in contrast, nonelite populations from northeastern Syria are

marginalized as rural, popular, and underclass.²² Since before the Syrian war, Hassake was isolated economically and politically by the state and suffered from limited access to education, health care, and other social services. Political antagonism between Kurdish nationalists and the Baathist regime led to intense government surveillance of residents throughout the area, and, like that of the neighboring governorates of Deir el-Zour and Raqqa, Hassake's agricultural economy suffered from major droughts since 2006 that impoverished many. In search of opportunities for seasonal work, thousands left eastern Syria for greater Damascus between 2005 and 2011.²³ These various "push" factors—drought, labor migration, and political isolation—arguably led to the Syrian uprising that broke out in March 2011.²⁴ The Syrian war and the emergence of the Islamic State in 2014 inflamed the region's extreme isolation to the point of crisis. At the time of this writing, Souleyman has sought refuge in Turkey, where he lives with his family when not touring Europe or North America.

In the context of a declining regional economy in the 2000s, Souleyman began to work in the Gulf region, drawing on his knowledge of the Gulf dialect and culture to appeal to these new audiences. The video that brought Souleyman to the West's attention, "*Leh Jani*," portrays Souleyman as a lower-class wedding singer who performs primarily at *Khaliji haflāt* (Gulf- and Iraqi-based parties) rather than in Syrian venues. As such, the video indexes Gulf-based cultural referents rather than Syrian or Kurdish signifiers. For instance, Souleyman acts as MC and sings at weddings where the bride and groom wear formal Bedouin attire rather than the Western ensembles that many Syrian couples rent or purchase. The video captures him in a *besht*, or formal robe popular in the Gulf. Relatedly, the video enhances the *sha'bi* (popular) and more vulgar aspects of Khaliji culture: "Why are the pretty girls from Mosul?" scrolls across the screen in Khaliji dialect.

In keeping with most *sha'bi* videos, "*Leh Jani*" reflects the lo-fi aesthetics of the late 1990s, when a "new wave" of technology altered traditional performance dynamics in Syrian *sha'bi* culture and widened access to music production equipment.²⁵ The video evokes dated television shows; the camerawork and audio are discontinuous and choppy. The audio imperfectly aligns with Souleyman's rhyming and verse structure, and the camera tends to focus on the upper bodies of dancers rather than on their footwork in the *dabke* line. It also focuses more on promotion and entertainment than on the display of artistic talent. The production studio's name and contact information scroll across the screen at regular intervals, often cutting off the content of the recording.

Souleyman worked within a system that cheapened musical labor, including his own.²⁶ He was subject to Syrian “cassette culture”: informal networks that produce and distribute recordings of live shows for low-cost, local consumption through local street vendors.²⁷ This circulation occurs outside the nationalistic state output heavily promoted by the Ministry of Culture and centered in Damascus, and serves as the primary conduit for working-class entertainers such as Souleyman.²⁸ Cheap recordings allow individual wedding singers to market themselves and book their calendars: Souleyman released some 500 such cassettes and CDs over 20 years. Despite this proliferation of recorded material, he remained on the social and political periphery of Syrian *sha’bi* music, performing sounds from the Hassake border, pursuing Khaliji consumers, and constantly adapting to local performance conditions.

THE FEVER PITCH OF TECHNO-DABKE

As a wedding singer, Souleyman’s priority is to make people dance. And on tour in Europe and the United States, it is the danceability of his music that has won him so many fans. “[T]he Syrian musician turned the energy dial to maximum,” *The Telegraph* wrote, of his performance at the 2011 Glastonbury Music Festival. Souleyman “had the whole crowd at the West Holts Stage dancing their socks off.”²⁹ Jon Garelick of *The Phoenix* described a similar scene at a Boston show in 2012:

Dancing was general—line dances, circle dances, break dances. At one point, a kid who had been at the heart of the melee—in full white *thawb* gown and *keffiyeh*—broke from the crowd, ran to the back of the room, and puked. A woman danced by, her face completely veiled by a *keffiyeh*, but wearing a black tank-top and cheetah patterned short shorts, mid-riff exposed. By the end of the show, she was on stage with another woman, her headdress now wrapped around her hips, shimmying wildly.³⁰

Souleyman’s fever-pitch popularity in the West is largely due to the perceived translatability of *dabke* rhythms to Euro-American tastes and dance styles.³¹ *Dabke* as a musical form and beat traditionally accompanies the prescribed line dance that goes by the same name. Yet its regular, fast-paced, duple meter and high-energy sound invite all kinds of global dance expressions. At the 2010 Summerdance Festival in downtown Chicago, for example, audiences danced to Souleyman with salsa, polka, African dance, belly dancing, and EDM movements.

His music is said to conjure a “familiar yet foreign feel in its Syrian manifestation” of Western popular forms.³² Souleyman remarked in an interview, “you know, I came here to Europe and found out that the people not only can handle my *dabke* sound but they like it very much and were dancing to it.”³³

As with Khaliji parties in the Gulf, Souleyman developed new strategies to accommodate his new audiences. Increased schedule demands and a lack of familiarity with communities in the Gulf had affected his ability to engage effectively with the local dynamics of a given party, the quality that had distinguished him from other wedding singers. Looking to maintain his competitive edge and provide his clients with a “unique show,” he began collaborating with local poets, such as Mahmoud Harbi, who provided him with rhyming lines of *mawawil* and bridal party toasts, rather than improvise these himself. When Souleyman began touring Europe, he did so with Harbi, and the poet exoticized the show. At a 2010 concert in Brussels, a young woman said, “the poet whispering in his ear was so cool . . . Like a mystery, inexplicable. I asked myself, what is he saying?”³⁴ The following year, however, Souleyman returned to Brussels without Harbi. He explained that shows abroad had fixed programs—in contrast to live weddings that require customized songs and speeches—eliminating the need for improvised poetry. In place of the poet, virtuosic keyboardist Rizan Sa’id assumed a more prominent role. By reducing the role of vocals, poetry, and improvisation in his touring arrangements, Souleyman again adapted his performance to a new audience. What he lost in exotic allure he gained in Sa’id’s musical contribution.

For most fans, Souleyman’s appeal has less to do with the multicultural tropes of world music and more with the repetitive groove of electronic dance music. Around the same time that Souleyman came to Björk’s attention (discussed later in this essay), the 2009 Sonár Festival launched him into the Western concert market. While festival organizers slotted him into their expansion of “geographical frontiers” to Africa and the Middle East (though, nominally, Souleyman was the only Middle Eastern artist), journalists related his “high octane” *dabke* mostly to punk and electronic dance music.³⁵

For instance, reviewers likened the rhythmic drive of *techno-dabke* to techno and house grooves. One blogger noted that “one of the most striking similarities to have hit me is that of the omnipresent Arabic wedding ululation to the pea whistle of hardcore rave.”³⁶ Whether hardcore or a “thumping house beat,” in “La Sidounak Sayyada” (“I’ll Prevent the Hunters from Hunting You”), these impressions are driven by rhythmic groove.³⁷ As well, reviewers often comment on how the intensity of his music contrasts with his aloof, affectless stage pres-

ence. He appears “straight as a board” and “stationary” to the extent that he “barely moves onstage.”³⁸ His “expressionless” performance seems to contradict the “hyped-up” nature of *dabke*.³⁹ In the context of dance festivals and nightclubs, this emotional flatness can be seen as coextensive with electronic dance music’s synthetic, hypnotic timbres, beat patterns, and aesthetics.

Punk has also been a persistent touchstone in Euro-American accounts of Souleyman’s music. In 2010, *The Wire* cast Souleyman’s *Jazeera Nights* album as pure punk, or “the most joyful, jouissant and probably unintentionally punk celebration of pure sound since the earliest days of Hardcore Techno.”⁴⁰ Allusions to punk became contagious. Journalists stressed the punk-like aesthetics of Souleyman’s fast, aggressive, and hard-edged beats and stripped-down instrumentation. One reviewer commented that Souleyman is “too abrasive to be party music” because his “anthemic energy” is “raw and bloody.”⁴¹ The same reviewer compared *dabke* to spazzcore, a “spastic” punk-derived music that despite being “ostensibly chaotic, is very demanding in terms of precision and physical endurance.”⁴² Aaron Leitko of the *Washington Post* suggested that “the volume and intensity of [Souleyman’s] music recalled the ’70s proto-punk band Suicide, which made similar, if less technically capable, use of keyboards and drum machines to generate minimalist pounding. But that’s still a bit of a stretch.”⁴³

These accounts cater to the punk sensibility of the Sublime Frequencies’ consumer—the kind of listener Andy Morgan has called the “gentleman with a punk attitude.” By recontextualizing Souleyman in relation to punk aesthetics, his music becomes a signifier of punk culture. Moreover, punk consumers express their antiestablishment, subversive, and DIY attitudes by listening to *techno-dabke* with a “simultaneous aesthetic and activist disposition.”⁴⁴

Not unrelatedly, *techno-dabke* has also been connected to Jamaican dancehall. Analogies to dancehall hyperbolize Souleyman’s beats in order to stress the similarly hard, percussive beats of *techno-dabke* and dancehall. Dave Segal noted in a review of *Jazeera Nights* that he “sounds like a Middle Eastern analogue to dancehall, with its hyper-adrenalized aura and stridently emotional vocals.”⁴⁵ Bill Meyer of the *Chicago Reader* speculated in 2010 that “manic tommy-gun drum bursts over rhythm loops could pass for samples from impossibly sped-up dancehall reggae records.”⁴⁶ One blogger compared beats in Souleyman’s “La Sidounak Sayyada” to the “applause riddim” in dancehall artist Sean Paul’s “Temperature.”⁴⁷ *The Wire* related Souleyman’s role onstage to that of a Jamaican toaster or MC.⁴⁸ Ben Yaster of *Dusted Magazine* also asserted that “Souleyman is as much a toaster as he is a troubadour—his refrains are chanted rather than sung.”⁴⁹

Such comparisons underscore the politics of otherness in punk and electronic dance music cultures. Like *dabke*, dancehall is a street-based sound system that encompasses dancing to minimalist beats and vocals improvised by an MC. Dancehall emerged in inner-city Kingston in the late 1970s at a moment of sociopolitical and often violent conflict between Jamaica’s two major political parties. Snubbed by the Jamaican elite for its subversion of middle-class values and ideologically opposed to roots reggae and Rastafari philosophy, dancehall flaunts sexuality and violence in its lyrics.⁵⁰ From reggae to dancehall, Jamaican dance musics historically have been co-opted by electronic dance music producers and punk musicians who “cross genre frontiers and seek out examples of ‘otherness’ to match their sense of alienation.”⁵¹ Just as sociopolitical affinities are projected onto lower-class urban black imaginaries through the embrace of dancehall outside of Jamaica, Western fans of *techno-dabke* embrace Arab otherness in a post-9/11 world of xenophobia.

These sentiments were reflected among audiences throughout Souleyman’s 2010 European tour. At a club event at Recyclart, an alternative arts hotspot in Brussels, Souleyman shared a roster with Gergis (billed as “world music DJ”), a *rai* band from Algeria, and several other DJs from Brazil and Australia.⁵² The crowd raved enthusiastically on the dance floor during Souleyman’s set—shimmying, jiving, breaking. One young woman championed the broader cultural significance of Souleyman’s appearance at Recyclart: “This is so Brussels! It is a mixed crowd and there are some here of Arab descent. It’s a space to dance and share good vibes among those who follow music circuits and festivals, and among those who desire a place to mingle among those ‘in the know.’ This is what Recyclart hopes to be on a good night.”⁵³ At Recyclart, Souleyman’s presence assured audiences of a globalized network of cultural resistance and solidarity that appeals to aesthetic and activist visions for a more inclusive Brussels.

Similar hopes played out at Souleyman’s appearance at an annual arts festival in Kortrijk, a modest city in the Flemish-speaking area of Flanders. The main stage of the Kortrijk Congé festival was located on Buda-Eiland, an area located on the periphery of the historic city center (now a major shopping district and one of the largest pedestrian zones in Belgium). Kortrijk Congé invited Souleyman to participate in a festival that aims to bring awareness to local community issues through the arts.⁵⁴ He appealed to their visions of pluralist public space and active cultural citizenship, which resonate more broadly within the history of linguistic politics that has long divided the northern and southern provinces of Belgium. Language is a site of contestation between opposing groups of French

and Flemish speakers in Belgium, who maintain separate political parties, newspapers, television channels, and libraries as well as public administration—differences have undermined politics to the extent that there is a movement for a Flemish homeland.⁵⁵ Socially aware and politically motivated, the Flemish festival organizers were keen to promote Souleyman as part of their vision. In Flemish Kortrijk, Souleyman's "folk-psychedelic" spoke to the politics of the vernacular and values of social justice, accompanied by a trace of the ecstatic. Orientalized yet modern, traditional yet reimagined, Souleyman stood for the Flemish ideals of intercultural dialogue, social welfare, and civil society.

Souleyman, Sa'id, and Ali Shaker say that this festival was one of their favorites. At 1:30 a.m., they performed their "boombox-street-party-feel" to a crowd of several hundred ecstatic ravers. Party favors were tossed to the crowd, large plastic balls bounced over their heads, and they waved glowsticks high in the air. As they packed up their equipment after the show and prepared to drive on to the next day's stop, they told me backstage that the *jaw* (atmosphere) was *mutarab* (enchanting); the audience was *zarif* (cool). "It should be like this," they affirmed.

BJÖRK CROSSINGS

In June 2009, indie star Björk endorsed "Syrian techno" in a broadcast on National Public Radio's *You Must Hear This* program.⁵⁶ Her endorsement not only introduced Souleyman to NPR listeners, but also marked *dabke*'s crossover from Arab and Arab-American cultures to mainstream American culture. Björk related his work to her aspirations for populism and experimentalism through the unity of acoustic and electronic sounds in dance music (Dibben 2009). Her endorsement facilitated Souleyman's crossover into the alternative music industry, increased his visibility, and introduced him to her fan base.

In 2011, Björk invited Souleyman to collaborate in her *Biophilia* project. An album and a series of interactive visual apps built for iPad by David Attenborough, *Biophilia* is a foray into voice and computer-generated images. At once gaming, art, science, and music, *Biophilia* represents Björk's experiments at the intersections of nature and technology.⁵⁷ The project has been interpreted as a way of "naturalizing technology" by offering an intimate and emotionally powerful alternative to technological determinism in popular dance music.⁵⁸ The multimedia project resists the predictability of standardized dance tracks and pop music through the affective power of Björk's voice and its user-centered interactive software design.

Like her earlier projects, *Biophilia* was produced through a collaborative ethos that is central to Björk's creative process.⁵⁹ She explains, "I can make all the skeleton and song writing, but then when I am almost finished I am curious to get the real virtuosos in the field to add like some sort of acrobatic things."⁶⁰ Björk was intrigued by Souleyman's collaborations with the poet Mahmoud Harbi: "I always heard interesting stories that he has one man called Mahmoud Harbi who is a longtime collaborator—he writes poems for Souleyman. When they are really warmed up and going for it at a good-times party, Harbi stands next to him on stage and chain-smokes. Then he will whisper poetry in his ear that he's writing at the moment. Omar will sing it immediately in the microphone and run around the room, exciting people there. I thought it was quite exciting for a poet and an MC to work together."⁶¹

She contacted Souleyman, who agreed to remix "Crystalline Series."⁶² Working from their studio in Hassake, Souleyman and Sa'id dubbed over Björk's tracks to produce "Crystalline," "Tesla," and "Mawwal."⁶³ The One Little Indian label released the remix as a 12-inch LP in July 2011 in conjunction with two other remixes—by Matthew Herbert and Serban Ghenea, respectively.

The A-side "Crystalline" is reconceived as a traditional *dabke* track that opens with an instrumental introduction of alternating melodic phrases on keyboard and *buzuq* supported by a downtempo groove. Synthesized *tabl* drum enters as Souleyman breaks into an *'ataba* style of vocalization: "Ehhhh!" These serve to introduce a sample of Björk's vocals from her "Crystalline" track, backed softly by instrumental embellishments and a steady percussive beat. The track shifts between their two voices in alternating sections until they start to sing over each other in ascending and wailing vocal breaks that shatter the soundscape. The remix supplants the frenetic dubstep, bell sounds, and synthesized sonic bursts in the original with *choubi* percussion on the Iraqi *khishba* drum. The juxtaposition of these percussive sounds with Arabic vocal ululations and a *tabl* breakbeat reinforces Souleyman's aesthetic traditions.

On the B-side, "Tesla" and "Mawwal" tend even more to the traditional *dabke* sound in terms of timbre, texture, instrumental arrangement, and melismatic vocals. Both tracks open with instrumental solos—Rizan Sa'id on keys and Ali Shaker on *buzuq*—supported by a drone and heavy in reverb and echo. Creative adaptations play out in the manipulation of voice, rhythm, and studio effects. The remix "Tesla," named after the tesla coil synth that provides a bassline for the original "Thunderbolt," imitates the original's lush texture and samples Björk's voice extensively. While the correlations of "Mawwal" to Björk's compositions are

less explicit, the placement of “Mawwal” at the end of the LP is a clever reversal of its conventional function as an introductory nonmetered vocal section that introduces a dance set.

Acclaimed by media and fans, “Crystalline Series” is an “ecstatic” remix that blurs cultural boundaries of Western and non-Western artists and aesthetic boundaries of improvised vocals and synthesized beats. The broader social significance of this collaboration lies in the subversion of cultural logics associated with non-Western music, indie punk, and EDM.

CONCLUSION

More so than other releases by Sublime Frequencies, the Souleyman project is laced with intimate undertones and political overtones. Gergis and Bishop have said that their personal experiences with xenophobia in Detroit and alienation from mainstream American society since the Gulf War, respectively, motivated them to take on this project. They have challenged public perceptions of Syria and Iraq through tours and albums of Souleyman, *Choubi Choubil*, and *I Remember Syria*. Yet they also resist overtly politicizing those sounds they promote as antihegemonic. Both Gergis and Bishop have declined press interviews (as of this writing) since the Syrian crisis began. They severely restricted media access to Souleyman, who, when available, has spoken about music but refrained from discussing politically sensitive topics, such as his status as a Syrian refugee in Turkey. The Sublime Frequencies team has eschewed metanarratives—academic, political, or otherwise—in favor of reiterating how Souleyman enchants audiences worldwide through sound and sight. Though their resistance to hegemonic institutions stems from and inspires productive affective alliances, the lack of a metanarrative has enabled the commodification of *techno-dabke* in ways that seem contrary to Sublime Frequencies’ position.

Rather than taking to *dabke* as a distinct genre with its own aesthetic categories, Euro-American consumers depend on musical metaphors that liken Souleyman’s sounds to punk, techno, and dancehall, as well as to world music. Audiences perform global dance styles from open-ended interpretive movements to salsa, bellydance, and rave; journalists fetishize him (and occasionally critique such fetishization) as an anomaly within contemporary popular culture. In order to make *dabke* digestible for non-Arabs, consumers draw on the discursive frameworks that shape alternative and electronic dance musics;

quite literally, they consume *techno-dabke*. These efforts generally resist contextualizing Souleyman and his music within Arab society; nor do they attempt to situate his experiences within the shifting dynamics of popular culture in the Middle East. Such mediations not only perpetuate the mystique surrounding Souleyman’s presence in the West, but ironically reproduce the very logics of the global media commons that Sublime Frequencies originally set out to resist in its experimentalist approach to new old media.

Techno-dabke reinforces the divide between globalized cultural consumption and the ethnomusicological tradition at the same time that it mediates sonic and embodied encounters with alterity. These mediations are situated in the post-9/11 rise of Islamophobia and racialization of Arab bodies, which, as this essay points out, have framed the consumption of Souleyman’s live concerts.⁶⁴ While newly shared spaces of pleasure and leisure have been produced by these encounters, they are predicated on the performance of antihegemonic stances among youth, from Brussels and Glastonbury to Chicago and LA. As discussed above, these concert-going youth position themselves as advocates of racial tolerance, religious pluralism, and multiculturalism through the production of Arab musical difference. Yet even as their consumption of Omar Souleyman’s *techno-dabke* resists insularity and homogeneity, these culturally and artistically elite audiences arguably fail to achieve the decolonizing gesture that they aspire toward. Rather, the commodification of *techno-dabke* reproduces existing relations of race and social class in popular music.

Today, Souleyman is an A-list entertainer who performs for global events, such as the 2013 Nobel Peace Prize Ceremony (alongside Morrissey and Mary J. Blige, among others). His music has been arranged by Kronos Quartet and produced by Kieran Hebden of Four Tet. In his journey from local wedding gigs to the global music industry, his music has represented the syncretic sounds of Hassake and exoticized difference from the Arab world, countercultural resistance, and, in the backdrop of the Syrian war, the iconic refugee displaced by unfathomable violence. His music speaks for the complexities of these moments, in their various scales and contexts, and for the uncanniness of encounter. Though he parted ways with Sublime Frequencies in 2011, Souleyman’s popularity reflects the label’s keen ear for what sounds cross over and enchant countercultural listeners in the West. Ironically, Souleyman is now an iconic figure in the very industry that Sublime Frequencies, and its fans, seek to resist.

NOTES

1. Personal correspondence with Mark Gergis. July 2010. Belgium.
2. *Sha'bi* literally translates as “of the people.” *Sha'bi* practices, which range from popular music to food-based customs, are typically associated with street culture and traditional ways of life in ways that refer to the popular aesthetics of the working class.
3. Omar Souleyman, *Highway to Hassake (Folk and Pop Sounds of Syria)*. SFO31, CD, 2007, [www.sublimefrequencies.com/item.asp?Item_id=34&cd=Omar-Souleyman:-Highway-to-Hassake-\(Folk-and-Pop-Sounds-of-Syria\)](http://www.sublimefrequencies.com/item.asp?Item_id=34&cd=Omar-Souleyman:-Highway-to-Hassake-(Folk-and-Pop-Sounds-of-Syria)).
4. Mark Gergis, “*Leh Jani*” (“When I Found Out”), 2009. www.youtube.com/watch?v=pgRUHleaKOK.
5. Field Day Festivals, 11 June 2011, www.fielddayfestivals.com/features_and_audio/omar-souleyman-live/.
6. Andy Morgan, “The Dabke Demon,” *fRoots*, October 2010.
7. David Novak, “The Sublime Frequencies of New Old Media,” *Public Culture* 23, no. 3 65 (September 21, 2011): 603–34.
8. At the end of 2011, Souleyman departed Sublime Frequencies to work with Mina Tosti. Under her management, he has collaborated with British electronic musician Four Tet, performed at the 2013 SXSW alternative music festival, and contracted “La Sidounak Sayyada” (I’ll Prevent the Hunters from Hunting You) for string quartet arrangement by world-music pioneers Kronos Quartet. I wish to thank Tamara Turner for sharing materials from her personal correspondence with Tosti.
9. Ethnographic research for this study was conducted through interviews, participation-observation at electronic dance music festivals in the United States and Europe, and analysis of popular media discourse. I also draw extensively on fieldwork carried out in Syria (2004–2008) in which I focused on popular *dabke* practices and the production of ethnic and national identity (Shayna Silverstein, “Mobilizing Bodies in Syria: Dabke, Popular Culture, and the Politics of Belonging,” PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2012).
10. Personal correspondence with the author, June 2009, Chicago, Ill. See also Morgan, “The Dabke Demon”; Chris Rolls, “Interview: Mark Gergis aka Porest,” *Fecal Face*, November 18, 2008; Alex Behr, “This Is Your Brain on Souleyman: Interview with Mark Gergis,” *Evil Monito*, May 1, 2010.
11. Rolls, “Interview.”
12. Brandon Stosuy, “No Sleep Til Beirut: A Conversation with Alan Bishop,” *Arthur Magazine*. September 2005.
13. Rolls. “Interview.”
14. Quoted in Behr, “This Is Your Brain on Souleyman.”
15. Ibid.
16. According to Yassin, he and Gergis became acquainted through experimental

music networks in Lebanon and the States. Gergis contacted him to ask for assistance as a cultural liaison and translator. Yassin helped to place the initial phone call to Souleyman and offered translations for *Highway to Hassake* liner notes. He also joined Souleyman’s tours in 2009 and 2010 to translate and facilitate everyday arrangements. Personal correspondence with Raed Yassin, May 2006, Beirut, Lebanon. I also wish to thank Wills Glasspiegel for sharing materials taken from a personal interview with Souleyman, conducted over Skype with a translator.

17. Andy Beta, “Omar Souleyman: The Wedding Singer,” *Spin*, October 22, 2013. This claim is contestable as village locals have noted that local restaurants would not offer him performance opportunities. Personal correspondence with Salah Ammo, October 2014.

18. Silverstein, “Mobilizing Bodies in Syria.”

19. Consider, for instance, the song “Bashar Ya Habibi Shaab” (Oh Bashar, Beloved of the People), which is popularly hailed as a pro-Assad tribute among regime supporters. Just as Souleyman disavows political affiliations, he chooses to position himself as nonoppositional in order to maintain his artistic legitimacy in an authoritarian state that censors cultural production and demands compromises from artists and intellectuals. Shayna Silverstein, “New Wave Dabke: The Stars of Musiqqa Sha’biyya in the Levant,” in *Out of the Absurdity of Life*, ed. Theresa Beyer and Thomas Burkhalter (Solothurn, Switzerland: Traversion Press, 2012).

20. These popular dance musics embody distinctions based on language, ethnicity, and place. Whereas *choubi* and *dabke* have been staged as nationalist cultural traditions since the mid-twentieth century, the more limited circulation of Kurdish *govend* reflects Kurds’ status as a stateless ethnicity residing in places characterized by strong nationalist sentiments.

21. Syrian wedding bands typically consist of electronic keyboard, several percussionists on *riqq* (tambourine), *darbukka* (goblet-shaped drum) and *tabl* (double-headed barrel drum), and local instruments *bağlama saz* (long-necked lute) and *mijwiz* (reed instrument) that articulate Turkish and Arab musical aesthetics, respectively. Additional instruments may include electric bass, electric or acoustic *oud* (short-necked lute), and violin.

22. These attitudes are likely related to the marginalization of Hassake within Syrian constructions of nationhood. Much of what is considered Syrian is centered on Damascene customs and traditions that boast of Damascus as the “cradle of civilization.” Christa Salamandra, *A New Old Damascus: Authenticity and Distinction in Urban Syria* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004). According to this worldview, Bedouin identities serve as nostalgic tropes of a pre-modern history that is set apart from modern worldviews and experiences. Relatedly, local dialects signify distinctions between social groups in ways that sustain class and ethnic divisions within Syria. Amanda Terc, “Syria’s New Neoliberal Elite: English Usage, Linguistic Practices and Group Boundaries” (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2011). The use of a Bedouin dialect and other stylistic tropes in Souleyman’s music therefore may lead to opinions that his singing style is “rough,” “harsh,” and essen-

tially untranslatable for Damascene speakers. As well, the Kurdish and Turkish elements in his style are considered non-national from the perspective of most Syrians. Cultural and linguistic practices help parse the ways in which Hassake identity is culturally alien from dominant constructions of Syrian identity. In Syria's domestic music industry, Souleyman's profile is fairly obscure in comparison to nationally recognized singers such as Ali El Dik, Wael Khoury, and Samara El Samara. His relatively peripheral position in the Syrian music industry may explain why he is more open to pursuing tours for non-Arab audiences outside of the Middle East.

23. Myriam Ababsa, *Raqqa: Territoires et Pratiques Sociales D'une Ville Syrienne* (Beirut: IFPO, 2009).

24. See James L. Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); International Crisis Group, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VI): The Syrian People's Slow Motion Revolution*, July 6, 2011.

25. Silverstein, "New Wave Dabke."

26. Salah Ammo, personal correspondence with author, October 2014.

27. Manuel, *Cassette Culture*. See Ted Swedenburg, "Egypt's Music of Protest," *Middle East Report* 265 (2012), for the recent emergence of a YouTube culture of popular distribution, specifically *mahrajan* popular music in Cairo since 2007.

28. Cécile Boëx, "The End of the State Monopoly over Culture: Toward the Commodification of Cultural and Artistic Production," *Middle East Critique* 20, no. 2 (2011): 139–55. As discussed earlier, tribute songs to political and religious figures such as Bashar al-Assad, Nasrallah, or Imam Ali are common among popular singers. These tribute songs gain popularity through small media and social media rather than through national television or radio broadcasts controlled by state institutions.

29. Lucy Jones, "Glastonbury 2011 Top Ten Highlights," *The Telegraph*, June 28, 2011.

30. Jon Garelick, "Dengue Fever and Omar Souleyman at the Paradise: International Sounds of Love," *The Phoenix*, June 5, 2012.

31. Such translatability is contestable and likely related to the particular contexts in which Souleyman's *dabke* is performed. For instance, Algerian-French *rai* producers intentionally standardized rhythms for the club scene in France by adapting complex triplet patterns into a duple groove that was easier for French clubgoers. Marc Schade-Poulsen, *Men and Popular Music in Algeria: The Social Significance of Rai* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999).

32. Luminous Insect, "Dabke—Sounds of The Syrian Houran," *Enochian Tapestries*, July 15, 2012.

33. Moritz Gayard, "Interview: Omar Souleyman," *electronicbeats.net*, February 16, 2012.

34. Personal interview with author, Brussels, Belgium, July 2010.

35. The roster of African musicians included Konono No 1 (Congo), Mulatu Astatké

(Ethiopia), Mujava (South Africa), Buraka Som Sistema (Portugal/Angola), and Culoe de Song (South Africa), playing genres from "Afro-house" to *kuduro*.

36. Luminous Insect, "Dabke—Sounds of the Syrian Houran."

37. Chizzly St. Claw, "Review of Omar Souleyman, *Dabke 2020*," *Tiny Mix Tapes*, 2009.

38. Damon Krukowski, "Souleyman: Dabke 2.0 Sound of Syria comes to Hub," *Boston Globe*, October 31, 2010, *boston.com*.

39. Rebecca Aranda, "Omar Souleyman at The Echo Last Night," *OC Weekly Blogs*, July 13, 2011; Aaron Leitko, "Omar Souleyman Takes His Brand of Syrian Folk-pop to the 9:30 Club," *Washington Post*, June 7, 2012.

40. Peter Shapiro, "Omar Souleyman | Soundcheck," *The Wire*, July 2010.

41. Emerson Dameron, "Omar Souleyman—'Atabat' (*Dabke 2020*)," *Dusted Magazine*, May 12, 2009.

42. According to *urbandictionary.com*: "Punk-derived music that generally incorporates lots of time and tempo changes (imparting the 'spastic' quality referred to in the name), spazzcore is often, while ostensibly chaotic, very demanding in terms of precision and physical endurance. The term was first applied to Frodus, and Shelby Cinca is generally credited as the inventor of the term" (last accessed January 3, 2013).

43. Leitko, "Omar Souleyman."

44. In his study of the aesthetic politics of Australian "post-punk" culture, Graham St. John identifies the "explosion of simultaneous aesthetic and activist dispositions [in which] post-punk actors intervene to express difference and/or make a difference in varied responses to conditions of inequality, injustice, and despoliation. A punk trajectory would be sustained through proximity to the 'streets' and commitment to a 'cause.'" St. John, "Making a Noise—Making a Difference: Techno-Punk and Terra-ism," *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 1, no. 2 (2010): 28.

45. Dave Segal, "Review of 'Jazeera Nights,'" *The Stranger*, June 14, 2010.

46. Bill Meyer, "The List: June 24–30, 2010," *Chicago Reader*, 24 June 2010.

47. David Drake, <http://kingdrake.com/blog/omar-souleyman>, 2009.

48. Shapiro, "Review of 'Jazeera Nights.'"

49. Ben Yaster, "Omar Souleyman—*Highway to Hassake (Folk and Pop Sounds of Syria)*," *Dusted Magazine*, November 1, 2007.

50. Jamaican dancehall has been characterized as "a fast-moving form of reggae with a hard percussive beat, a bass that echoes like a seismic tremor in your gut, a music with an irresistibly deep groove" by Jordan Levin in the *Miami Herald*. "A vocalist/DJ raps ('toasting' or 'chanting') over a track that usually consists of just a rhythmic bassline, drums, maybe guitar . . . A dancehall DJ is musician, producer, and showman all in one." See Levin, "Dancehall DJs in the House," *Miami Herald*, 26 April 1996.

51. Michael E. Veal, *Dub: Soundscapes and Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae* (Wesleyan, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), 225.

52. Also playing that night were Mark Gergis as “World Music DJ”; Cheb Eb El Farah, a *rai* genre wedding band from Morocco; DJ Maga Bo from Brazil/America; and an Australian DJ then based in Barcelona who goes by Suckafish P. Jones. The series was part of a “Holidays” summer festival that included film series, workshops, and special events and was funded by municipal, national, and private sponsors.

53. Interview with author, July 9, 2010, Brussels, Belgium.

54. Kortrijk Congé was curated by local arts organizations including Buda (film and artspace), De Kreun (concert hall), Passerelle (Flemish contemporary dance), Unje Zorgelozen (theater), Kunstencentrum, and the city of Kortrijk. The organizations collaborated to generate awareness and funds for social issues including social welfare for disadvantaged children and social discrimination on the basis of race and ethnicity. The festival ran from sunset to sunrise and was presented at arts galleries, temporary street installations, and an outdoor stage serviced by a full bar and food vendors.

55. Generally, French-speaking communities in southern Belgium are lower-income with higher rates of unemployment and receive greater welfare benefits, conditions that build resentment in Flemish areas in northern Belgium.

56. Björk, “You Must Hear This: Omar Souleyman,” *National Public Radio*, June 29, 2009, www.npr.org/2009/06/29/106047345/you-must-hear-this-omar-souleyman (accessed February 1, 2012).

57. The Biophilia app includes a score, an essay by musicologist Nicola Dibben, a game by which the user controls musical changes, and links to purchase songs through download. “Graphic rendering” of songs like “Crystalline” and “Cosmogony” collide with Björk’s breakbeats. The project’s art directors, known for their post-punk aesthetics, won “Best Recording Package” at the 2013 Grammy Awards. In addition to the app and album, the Biophilia project encompasses a tour of eight cities over three years, a website, a documentary, a music education program, and two remix collaborations solicited by Björk at the time of the project’s release in the summer of 2011.

58. Ian Biddle, “Vox Electronica: Nostalgia, Irony and Cyborgian Vocalities in Kraftwerk’s Radioaktivität and Autobahn,” *Twentieth Century Music* 1, no. 1 (2004): 81–100. Biddle relates issues of technology, modernity, and the electronic voice to argue for how synthetic timbres and beat patterns “empty out” subjectivity and convey emotional flatness. He is interested in how concepts of technology and technological progress become elided with the use and sound of electronic technology in music. Biddle proposes that these elisions align technology with modernity and modernity with industrialization such that the synthesized sounds and beat patterns of electronic music in Euro-American musical cultures have acquired industrial and mechanical associations.

59. Björk embraces the ethos of collaboration and mutualism among those whom she considers peers—recording engineers, instrumental improvisers, experimental vocal artists, film and art directors. She shared that “I have many months of working like that

but then I always arrive to point where it seems too indulgent and lonely . . . And I get overexcited about someone I find brilliant and I want to write with her/him” (posted in online forum, cf. Nicola Dibben, *Björk* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009], 135). Björk attributes her desire to build collaborative working relationships to her working-class childhood and the influence of her father’s union job, her musical background in punk, and her response to the hierarchical working practices she experienced with film director Lars von Trier (*Dancer in the Dark*) (Dibben, *Björk*, 137).

60. Interview with Björk, quoted in Dibben, *Björk*, 134.

61. Björk, “You Must Hear This: Omar Souleyman.”

62. Although sources remain unclear about Souleyman’s professional or aesthetic interests in this project, Wills Glasspiegel has suggested that Souleyman attributes his success and distinction in the Middle East to his open ear and interest in rock, pop, and jazz rhythms. In collaboration with Sa’id, he modifies these styles for the popular traditions of *dabke*, *ataba*, and *mawwal* by mixing and programming beats on his keyboard. See Glasspiegel interview in this volume.

63. Sources are also unclear about the extent to which musical editing was carried out exclusively by Souleyman and Said or whether recording engineers affiliated with Sublime Frequencies also contributed to the remix project.

64. Nadine Naber, and Amaney A. Jamal, eds., *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2008).

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