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Songs of Change: How Music Helped Spark the Arab Spring Revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia

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Songs of Change: How Music Helped Spark the Arab Spring Revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia

An Honors Thesis in the Oberlin Politics Department
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Music and the Arab Spring: An Introduction

It is the end of January, 2011 in Cairo. Tahrir Square and the streets around it are filled with people, millions of young Egyptians who are angry and fed up with a government that does not represent them but instead oppresses them. The majority of the people in the square are relatively educated adolescents and young adults. 1 23 year-old Ramy Essam stands in the middle of the square with only his acoustic guitar and a microphone, singing “Leave”, a song that calls for the resignation of President Mubarak. 2 The entire square is focused on him and all of the protestors are singing along, chanting and clapping to the music. In this moment, captured in a YouTube video by Itai Anghel titled “The Real Revolution Song of Tahrir Square”, the protestors appear unified, powerful, and full of resolve. The question is, how did the Egyptians get to that point? What is shocking is not that so many people were gathered around in the square but that music was the unifying factor. Ramy Essam is able to unify the crowds because of the years that music has built up this kind of consciousness.

The Arab Spring is thought of as an eruption, as a shocking and unprecedented series of revolutions that took the Middle East by storm. 3 Protests and massive revolt arose in Tunisia, followed shortly behind by protests in Yemen, Egypt, Syria, Libya, and other countries in the Arab World. One by one, the citizens of these Arab nations started to rebel against their governments, sometimes succeeding in toppling the administration, and sometimes failing with devastating consequences. The rest of the world was shocked– not only was the Arab Spring one of the largest series of revolutions in history, but to many people it seemed to come out of nowhere. The real question is not why these revolutions happened, as many of these states were known for having brutal and oppressive governments. The real question is how these revolutions
were able to happen, in such a short time, with so many people rising up. How were people able to mobilize so quickly and with such coordination on such a large scale?

Not only did the Arab Spring seem to erupt out of nowhere, but most people, including political thinkers, did not see it coming. Many studies conducted before the Arab Spring even concluded that a revolution was virtually impossible due to the strength of the authoritarian regimes and up until 2010, experts in Middle Eastern studies and political science were confidently saying that a revolution was not going to happen. After the Arab Spring, many saw the role of social media as the key factor leading to the uprisings, even going so far as to call it “The Facebook Revolution”. There is no doubt that social media played a role in mass mobilization during the Arab Uprisings and indeed a great number of prominent political thinkers have written books about the topic. However, there was a much larger societal buildup going on long before Facebook became prevalent. In this thesis, I will look at the role that arts and culture, specifically music, had in building up long forms of resistance in the Middle East. Relatively few thinkers have directly looked into the role that music may have played during the Arab Spring. Perhaps it is because, as Walter Armbrust points out, “third world pop culture” is not considered a significant part of civil society in the Middle East by most Western academics. Throughout this thesis I will make the claim that music does in fact play a unique and important role in forming political action, looking at the cases of the Arab Uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia as evidence.

I argue that large scale political action can’t just “erupt” out of nowhere, but rather through the long-term building up of networks of resistance. Music had a profound effect on the outcome of the Arab Spring because of what I term as the acoustic communities that formed years before the revolution happened, as people united through the shared experience of music,
leading the way to collective action. Even in the most oppressive governments, these musical networks were able to grow and become politicized precisely because no one expected them to become politicized, as music was seen only as a safety valve where disenfranchised people could vent their emotions. Music became a form of resistance both large and small. While one small act of resistance may not be enough to topple a government, the repeated acts of resistance through music began to build up until the “eruption” happened and there was revolution. Music was so crucial for getting people passionate about resistance because of the deep emotional semiotic effects it has with each individual listener. In this manner, music and politics play a reciprocal role where music affects politics and politics affect music.

**Conditions Leading Up to Revolution**

Unrest had been brewing in Tunisia and Egypt for decades before an uprising happened. In Tunisia, government corruption was a leading cause of this alienation from the state, and former president Ben Ali’s family was infamous for manipulating the state to suit their own needs. Ben-Ali’s wife, Leila Trabelsi, had emerged as a Marie Antoinette figure, resented for her opulent wealth in a country that has seen prices jump while employment decreases.⁷ According to Wikileaks, Ben Ali’s family members get sweetheart deals thanks to Tunisia’s hazy line between business and government— for example, Trabelsi’s brother specialized in buying land the government had deemed historical preserves, then reselling the land to developers for enormous sums.⁸ This caused many citizens to feel like the government was “pillaging” its own country.

Conditions were no better for Egyptians under Mubarak. Egyptians, like Tunisians, often speak of their dignity, which many said had been wounded by Mubarak’s monopoly on power, his iron-fisted approach to security and the corruption that had been allowed to fester.⁹ Mubarak
had been in power since 1981, and appeared to be positioning his son Gamal to inherit political power.\textsuperscript{10} From police brutality to persecution of minorities, from the arrests of journalists to the suppression of political dissent, Mubarak’s Egypt has been a textbook police state.\textsuperscript{11} Police brutality in Egypt against common criminals was pervasive.\textsuperscript{12} Human Rights Watch reported that prisoners were often subject to various forms of torture. Over the last two decades, the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights has followed 460 torture cases, including 125 that led to death between 2000 and 2009 alone. Since 1992, 73 people have been “disappeared.”\textsuperscript{13}

Unemployment and economic stagnation was another issue that lead to widespread unrest in both Egypt and Tunisia; unemployment in Tunisia rose to 14 percent while the price of basic items doubled, creating an economic disaster.\textsuperscript{14} Many of the unemployed were young college graduates who benefited from Tunisia’s good public schools. In the words of Eric Andrew-Gee, “unemployed intellectuals make problems.”\textsuperscript{15} The absence of work violated the unspoken bargain struck between Ben Ali’s authoritarian regime and the people: “you ignore our iron fist, and we will supply you with jobs.”\textsuperscript{16} In 2011, unemployment in Egypt was close to 13 percent, with an even larger percentage of young people being unemployed.\textsuperscript{17} Only 22 percent of women were employed.\textsuperscript{18} The dire economic situation in Egypt is said to be one of the key factors in leading to mass revolt.\textsuperscript{19}

Another problem that both Egyptians and Tunisians had with their government was censorship of the press. Television programs were mostly organized by the state. Websites were often blocked and people could get arrested for the things they posted on social media. The government owned almost all newspapers— in 2009, Ben Ali’s son-in-law bought a publishing house that monopolized newspaper printing in Tunisia.\textsuperscript{20} In 2005, Reporters Without Borders placed Egypt 143\textsuperscript{rd} out of 167 nations on press freedom, citing harassment and sometimes even
imprisonment of journalists. In general, freedom of expression, association, and assembly were limited under Mubarak. Government corruption, media censorship, unemployment, and economic stagnation were all factors that led to unrest and eventually uprising.

**Methodology and Research Design**

To showcase my argument on the role that music played in the Arab Spring, I use three case studies, one in Tunisia and two in Egypt. Tunisia and Egypt had the two revolutions that would most likely be considered “success stories”. The people of Tunisia and Egypt were both able to successfully overthrow their rulers and institute a change of regime, although it is still debatable whether things are better off than they were before the Revolution. Tunisia had the first revolution and was therefore crucial in setting the stage to the other revolutions that were going to happen. My experience visiting Egypt has given me insight into the musical networks that formed around the revolution. My case studies look at three distinct musical communities. The first case study on the Ultras, a tight community of soccer fans that sang and chanted together exemplify the politicization that can happen to acoustic communities over time. The second case study on hip-hop in Tunisia shows the influence that a specific genre of music can have on civil society. Finally, my last case study on music venues in Cairo, exemplifies a musical network built through the spaces where music is played.

Given how interdisciplinary my topic is, I use a variety of different methodologies for research. I use some academic articles for my case studies; given how the Arab Spring is relatively recent and academic works are still coming out, I also use a variety of news sources to obtain information, from large news organizations like the New York Times to smaller independent Arabic news sites like Mada Masr. In researching the songs of the Arab Spring, I go
through YouTube videos and recordings of songs, and I’ve translated some songs from Arabic with the help of an Arabic tutor. Finally, there is a personal aspect to this thesis as I had the opportunity to visit Egypt and experience life in post-revolutionary Egypt firsthand. This experience will be reflected in my case studies, particularly in my case study on Egyptian music venues, as I had the opportunity to attend concerts and interview employees at some of these venues.

Chapter Outline

To provide a framework into looking at the case studies, I first present a theory section that introduces the main concepts of the thesis. I define my overarching theory of acoustic communities and how these networks spark collective action, in contrast to other theories on collective action that view mobilization as an organized, strategic, and often abrupt affair. I then discuss three theories that help explain the politicizing role of music: Asef Bayat’s concept of passive networks in small acts of resistance, Lisa Wedeen’s rebuttal to the safety valve theory and how it relates to Sujatha Fernandes’ idea of the artistic public sphere, and Thomas Turino’s theory on music and semiotics.

My case studies highlight three distinct kinds of acoustic communities. My first case study is on The Ultras, a group of fanatical soccer fans in Egypt that became politicized through their shared demographic similarities, shared love of their soccer team, shared experience of oppression, and shared experience of performing songs and chants. Due to their already-strong brotherhood, they were able to mobilize very quickly and played an integral role in the 2011 revolution in Egypt. By looking at their songs and chants over an extended period of time, I can track their increased politicization, from non-political passive audience members in the soccer
stadium to politically active performers on the streets. The Ultras are an exemplary acoustic community because they are invested in each other personally and were therefore primed to react when people in their network became threatened. Through different semiotic processes and their unique position in the public sphere both as heroes of the revolution and unruly thugs, the songs and chants sung and distributed by the Ultras sent a powerful message to the rest of the Arab World. This is a group that is not afraid to explicitly resist the government, and their music reflects that sentiment.

In my next section, I look at hip-hop artists in Tunisia, and analyze how an acoustic community is formed and mobilized through the appreciation of a shared genre. This case study may be the clearest example of explicitly revolutionary music having tangible effects on a political situation, sparking collective action. The case is centered on El General, a 21-year old rapper who uploads a track denouncing President Ben Ali on Facebook that becomes a viral hit within days. El General is subsequently arrested for his song, sparking massive protests across Tunisia and leading the way for revolution. I then highlight other prominent members of the hip-hop community in Tunisia, looking at their relationship with each other and the state. Finally, I analyze why hip-hop was such a powerful mobilizing force in Tunisia, using Turino’s theory of music and semiotics to argue that perceived indexical relationships between hip-hop and oppression created solidarity between disaffected Tunisian youth, leading the way to revolt.

My last case study looks at a different form of acoustic community, that centering around music venues and spaces where music is performed, specifically looking at music venues in the city of Cairo. In this section I argue that the spaces where music is performed play a role both in forming networks of resistance and act as resistance to the state itself. I focus on three distinct performance spaces: I look at El Sawy Culture Wheel, the oldest non-government owned
performance venue in Egypt; El Rab3, a new venue that opened after the 2011 revolution through networks made at Tahrir Square; and Opera On the Balcony, an initiative that transcends music venues and public spaces entirely. I look at how communities are formed between concert-goers through the shared experience of listening to music, and look at how these different venues engage in small acts of resistance to undermine state authority. Lastly, I look at music venues playing the unique role of being a space where debate and the exchange of ideas is allowed, due to the perception that venues are merely “cultural” and not “political”, and thus at the most serving as a safety valve for the public.
On collective action, semiotics and small acts of resistance: the theories behind music and its relationship to political action

This chapter will focus on theories that help explain the unique effects music has on political action. On the broadest level, I introduce my theory of acoustic communities to show how music can foster communities or networks of people over time that eventually can lead to collective action. I argue that in looking at collective action, most theorists look immediately to mass protests, ignoring long term patterns and trends that lead up to the protests. I use concepts from thinkers like Lisa Wedeen and Asef Bayat to explain how small acts of resistance can lead to larger movements over a period of time. Finally, I present a foil to the “safety valve” theory as presented by Lisa Wedeen and contrast it with Sujatha Fernandes’ ideas of the public sphere, and look at Thomas Turino’s theory on the semiotic power of music. These theories will help provide a framework for looking at the case studies presented later in the paper.

Acoustic Communities

In describing the chants and songs of the Egyptian Ultras, political thinker Dahlia Abdelhameed Ibraheem uses the term “acoustic communities”\(^\text{23}\). I find this term striking and I credit her in creating my own theory on the power of acoustic communities. I define an acoustic community as a network of people that share a musical experience. This could be a group that sings and chants together like the Ultras, a network of people that are passionate about the same genre, like the hip-hop community in Tunisia, or an assemblage of people that experience being in a space together where music is performed, like the concerts at music venues in Cairo. These communities can be strengthened through a shared connection of age, gender, or social class; for example, the Ultras are a community of mostly working-class young men, while the patrons of
certain music venues like El Rab3 tend to often be young, educated women. Acoustic communities can also transcend boundaries of identity; what holds these communities together is their shared experience of music, which often leads to the acknowledgment of a shared experience of oppression or political disenfranchisement. While the term “community” is broad and some communities are stronger than others, the shared experience of music in the three case studies is a uniting factor that leads to solidarity and collective action. I argue that music can play a special role in leading up to mass social movements because of the musical networks or communities that are formed. In my next section, I will look at how music can be a force that inspires individuals to move to collective action.

**Collective Action**

No revolution can occur without collective action. Many thinkers have posed theories as to what circumstances and opportunities there must be for collective action to take place. I introduce three collective action theories and then challenge them using my model of acoustic communities, drawing from concepts by Asef Bayat and Lisa Wedeen. In their resource mobilization theory, McCarthy and Zald, two prominent political theorists, look at collective action as a strategic and highly organized affair. They agree that shared beliefs and grievances are necessary for collective action, but not a sufficient cause in itself. Rather, they look at the decision to join social movements as a balance of costs versus benefits, explaining that, “Collective behavior requires detailed attention to the selection of incentives, cost-reducing mechanisms or structures, and career benefits that lead to collective action.” Furthermore, they believe that social movements must be organized and have a number of strategic tasks, where society provides infrastructure that social movements and other industries utilize.
and Zald see social movements as requiring resources like time, money, or influence.\textsuperscript{28}

Therefore, social movement organization is always a complex or formal organization which identifies its goals with the preferences of that movement and attempts to implement these goals.\textsuperscript{29}

McCarthy and Zald’s model clearly states what needs to be in place for there to be collective action, but it is unclear when collective action will occur. Sydney Tarrow builds off of McCarthy and Zald’s resource mobilization theory and expands upon it using a political opportunity model to explain when collective action will happen. Tarrow argues that movements depend on external circumstances to coordinate collective action, “by responding to political opportunities through the use of known modular forms of collective action, by mobilizing people within social networks and through shared cultural understandings.”\textsuperscript{30} For Tarrow, opportunities shift through the opening up of access to power, shifts in ruling alignment, or the availability of influential allies.\textsuperscript{31} He looks at certain institutions as being good “host” settings where a movement can germinate, such as churches, universities, or political parties.\textsuperscript{32} Tarrow uses political opportunity as a lens for analyzing the timing of a revolt. He assumes that people share grievances and are ready to mobilize, but believes they are waiting for the perfect opportunity for it to be safe enough to go out into the streets.

Using the informational cascades model, political scientist Susanne Lohmann counters McCarthy and Zald’s belief that membership in a mass movement comes from an analytical assessment of resources and complicates Tarrow’s theory by saying political opportunity can only happen when people see it. Lohmann defines informational cascades as instances when a person sees another person’s actions and then engages in the same act.\textsuperscript{33} In the case of collective action, Lohmann looks at how the public takes informational cues from changes in the size of
movements over time. Essentially, she treats mass movements as having a bandwagon effect, where if people see enough people protesting, they’re more likely to join the protests themselves. Lohman still sees the decision to join a protest as a cognitive assessment of costs and benefits. However, instead of looking at the decision to mobilize as coming from an assessment of resources or political timing, Lohman sees people changing their cognitive belief about the risks in joining a protest based on a perceived spatial observation.

All three models of collective action presented by these theorists are building off of each other, but there are some core assumptions to all of these theories that I challenge in my model of acoustic communities. These models look at social movements as organized, conscious, and strategic. There is the assumption that either extremely intricate political organization goes into the formation of these movements or mass protests just erupt when the timing is right or when people see other people doing it. The Arab Spring is often thought about as an “organic” eruption, where mass protests suddenly just “happened”. All of the presented theories focus only on the importance of people’s decision to get out and protest, without looking at the long years of buildup that led to that moment. My model of acoustic communities challenges the idea that people have to think about social organization in an explicitly political way, and it goes deeper into the long period of buildup that allows people to join these movements. Acoustic communities have the power to change people’s beliefs through repeated shared experience.

I challenge McCarthy and Zald’s claim that social movements must be organized and that people logically join social movements based off weighing the checks and balances of membership. My model of musical communities looks at how movements become an organized collective through the repetition of music. For example, the Ultras were able to lead large chants during the mass protests in Egypt because they had already spent years singing chants together in
the football stadium. However, to say each Ultra member joined the revolution by carefully weighing checks and balances would be ignoring the nuance of the situation, as the Ultras never intended to be a political group. I concur with Tarrow’s observations about host settings being an incubator for social movements, but point out his failure to acknowledge cultural institutions such as music venues as being a viable host institution for the building of social movements as he chose to look more at political parties and universities. Finally, I counter Lohman’s claim that collective action is about seeing other people protesting. I suggest that people don’t join social movements by seeing other people on the street, but rather through sharing similar experiences, whether that be through mutual oppression or through music. The Ultras never planned to be political but once the revolution began the Ultras already had a network that was easy to mobilize and organize. The following theories by Asef Bayat, Lisa Wedeen joined by Sujatha Fernandes, and Thomas Turino will showcase the different ways that collective action be formed and the unique role that music plays in forming these movements.

**Small acts of resistance**

Asef Bayat and Lisa Wedeen talk about the importance that small acts of resistance can have in undermining state power. For Bayat specifically, these small acts of resistance can eventually lead to large forms of mobilization and collective action. In the case of musical communities, we will see how these groups of performers, listeners, and venue owners often engage in small acts of resistance. Asef Bayat’s theories explain how these small acts can often lead to larger mobilization, and Lisa Wedeen’s theories explain how music and the arts can often get away with acts of resistance that other groups could not. In his book *Street Politics*, Asef Bayat looks at how a community is formed through small acts of resistance among local street squatters in
Iran. Bayat describes it as “a passive network of people who relate to each other in terms of everyday politics.” Bayat looks at illegal squatters, and to him what makes them a collective force is “a way of life that engendered common interests and the need to defend them.” The thing that is interesting about these street squatters for Bayat is precisely the mundane, ordinary, repetitive nature of their acts. Bayat looks at how the “small encroachment of the ordinary” can lead to broader social change. His belief is that social change doesn’t just erupt out of nowhere, but must be formed through the accumulation of networks over a span of time. Bayat wishes to “deemphasize the totalizing notion of ‘revolution’ as the change par excellence, to discard the assumption that real change for all groups can come necessarily and exclusively from a generalized political campaign.”

To many people, the Arab Spring seemed sudden and unpredictable. One moment there was no resistance and the then the next moment there was mass resistance. What people often failed to notice was the buildup of different communities that led over a period of time to mass mobilization. Acoustic communities can be thought of as what Bayat calls “passive networks” that eventually lead to stronger movements. The three case studies in this thesis look at groups of people that repeatedly share an experience, both of music and oftentimes oppression from the government. Eventually, the shared experience of music and the shared experience of oppression become linked, and these groups become politicized. Acoustic communities, like street squatters in Iran, had a common interest and the need to defend it. Many members of these communities engaged in everyday forms of resistance, which repeatedly, through semiotic processes (which will be explained shortly), shifted attitudes in the public sphere. Eventually the small acts of resistance that took place in these networks became much larger acts of revolution.
“Safety valves” and the public sphere

In her book *Ambiguities of Domination*, Lisa Wedeen looks at resistance in the case of Syria and notices that it is primarily made up of mundane transgressions that do not aim to overthrow the existing order. Wedeen believes that ignoring these transgressive practices may mean neglecting the lived circumstances in which collective action is generated and sustained; quotidian struggles can and do grow into large-scale and conscious challenges to the political order. Wedeen uses the example of satire in Syrian media to explain that while Syrians may not be challenging power directly, neither do they uncritically accept the regime’s version of reality. In Arabic, the word *tanfis* means “letting out air” and is often used to describe the perception that the arts operate as a “safety valve”, allowing people to vent frustrations and displace or relieve tensions that otherwise might find expression in political action. Many scholars argue that these tolerated critical practices function to preserve a repressive regime’s dominance rather than undermine it. Other scholars, describing it as a “carnival”, celebrate the chaos-promoting effects or political potential of these spaces. Lisa Wedeen doesn’t believe that these practices function either exclusively as a “safety valve” or as a “carnival”, but rather both phenomena often can occur at the same time. Wedeen says, “abstract juxtapositions of the ‘safety valve’ formulation versus the idea of ‘resistance’ obscures the ambiguity of these practices, which, however, are no less political for being ambiguous.”

In looking at musical spaces, I challenge the idea that these spaces are just a “safety valve” that allows the government to continue with their oppression. Rather, music and the arts can have the unique power to foster change because it is seen as a “safe space”, giving room for greater resistance. Because music isn’t considered “political”, musicians and venues can actually get away with resistance that they couldn’t otherwise be able to do through say, a political
organization or an NGO. People form networks of like-minded people when there are spaces to voice frustrations with a regime. This can be seen at El Sawy Culture Wheel, which is seen as a “cultural” space rather than a “political” space, allowing the venue to get away with different forms of resistance. This is also the case with Opera on the Balcony, as it allows collective action by people assembling on the street without threatening the government. Shock and outrage can occur when this perceived safety valve is ruptured; for example, massive protests happened after El General’s arrest as people felt betrayed that the government arrested a musician, who is supposedly outside the political sphere. Therefore, the idea that music spaces are just safety valves actually allow a lot more politicization to happen under the government’s watch.

In her book *Peripheral Visions*, Wedeen continues with her ideas on the safety valve, this time looking at how public spaces can be considered safe spaces where ideas can be shared without major consequence. Wedeen looks at the case of qát chews in Yemen, communal spaces where people can come together, chat with each other, and chew a tobacco-like substance called qát. These public spaces are an opportunity for people to voice democratic ideas in an otherwise authoritarian society. Qát chews can be seen as a “safety valve” that allows people to vent their frustrations with the state without directly going against it. Lisa Wedeen is interested in how these spaces can contribute to the public sphere, a term coined by Jürgen Habermas. Habermas has two requirements he sees as central to the public sphere: citizens engagement in critical discussion and the role that the public plays in helping to produce the audience-oriented broader public of anonymous citizens, or a “co-membership with indefinite persons.”

Qát chews are an example of how a public space can also generate a public sphere, providing a physical space where political and even radical ideas are discussed. As we will see in Egypt, music venues can provide the same kind of space where new discourses are created and
discussed. The El Sawy Culture Wheel in Cairo is one such venue. It is the first non-governmental controlled cultural venue in Egypt. Because of its position as a counter-cultural venue in comparison to state-owned cultural centers, it creates a new or counter-public sphere, a public space in opposition to the cultural hegemony that the Egyptian state tries to impose.

Similar to qât chews, these venues are both open to the public and insulated from the state, making them a “safe space” where people can talk about new ideas with little fear of government-imposed consequences. Community and therefore trust is built, allowing people to feel open enough to have frank discussions with each other about the state of society. Concerts at these venues often introduce explicit or implicit political ideas that are then discussed and dispersed among the attendees of these shows. We will also see how other public spaces, such as city streets and football stadiums, can create a space where like-minded people can share their ideas.

Sujatha Fernandes, in her book *Cuba Represent! Cuban Arts, State Power, and the Making of New Revolutionary Cultures*, also explores the idea of art and music having a special place in the public sphere that allows for some immunity from government repression. She terms critical spaces within the arts as “artistic public spheres”, defined as sites of interaction and discussion among ordinary citizens generated through media, art, and popular culture. Fernandes centers her ideas in relation to theories introduced by Gramsci. Gramsci views the state not just as “the apparatus of government” but also the “private apparatus of ‘hegemony’ of civil society”. Gramsci distinguishes the state and civil society not as inherent bounded categories but as a set of power relations that make sense only when they are situated in a specific historic and ethnographic context. Cuban art for Fernandes highlights the separateness, or tension, between the state and civil society. And while the government in some senses
controls what art is being produced, the way that the art is interpreted and discussed is beyond the government’s control, allowing new meanings to be created that are sometimes oppositional to government control. Fernandes shows us that in the realm of art, the Cuban state still tries to shape public discourse and establish cultural hegemony, but there is more wiggle room than there would be for other, more overtly political mediums. Cuban art is important in Cuba because it allows ordinary people to discuss politics—as opposed to strict oppositional political groups, which are banned in Cuba.

Fernandes’ theories have significance in looking at music in Egypt and Tunisia. Music in the Middle East can serve as an artistic public sphere, where music has prompted vigorous debates and new ideas. Fernandes’ point that art is harder to regulate than political organizations is important—building on Wedeen’s ideas that certain spaces are seen as “safety valves”, music has a unique place in society where it is not under scrutiny in the same way that political organizations are. While Egyptian and Tunisian artists have still been scrutinized by the government, they have slightly more freedom to express themselves than they would if they were expressing themselves in non-musical ways. As we will see throughout this thesis, public debates can be started at music venues, after concerts, and on an artist’s YouTube channel or Facebook page. By combating the “safety valve” theory, we can see how music plays a unique role in contributing to the public sphere and forming communities.

**Music and Semiotics**

Semiotic theory is another useful lens in looking at the unconscious political effects that music often has. While many scholars had previously discussed semiotics, Thomas Turino was the first to view semiotics from a musical perspective, in his book *Music as Social Life*. American
philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) created a theory of signs known as semiotics. A sign is anything that is perceived by an observer that stands for something else to the observer. Every sign has three aspects: the sign or sign vehicle, the object or idea indicated by the sign, and the effect or meaning of the sign-object relation to the perceiver. The effects of these signs can range from physical reactions to different thoughts, ideas, or memories coming to mind for the perceiver. Thomas Turino identifies three different kinds of semiotic relationships in music: icon, index, and symbol. These three kinds of semiotic relationships create distinct and powerful responses to the listener.

An icon is the first type of relationship. People often make connections based on resemblance. For example, “A drawing of a horse is an iconic sign for the animal if, through resemblance, seeing the picture calls horses to mind.” Resemblance in music can be recognizing a song as belonging to a particular genre because it sounds like other songs we’ve previously heard— a banjo and twangy voice might allow a listener to identify the song as a country song because they have heard country songs before that sound similar. As Turino puts it, “icons can spur imaginative connections of resemblance between the signs perceived and the objects stood for in light of the internal context of the perceiver.” Sounds or lyrics in music may, whether intended by the artist or not, resemble to the listener other ideas outside of music.

The second type of semiotic relationship is an index. An index is experiencing the sign and the object together. For example, smoke is an index of fire, thunder and lightning are indices of a storm, and a siren is an indexical sign for police cars and emergency vehicles. Indexical responses often happen when listening to music. Advertisements often play jingles connected to a product. If heard enough, that jingle becomes an index to the product. Music often indexes a song with a situation. If a person hears a song at a memorable event like a wedding, that song
may call weddings to mind even outside of a wedding situation. *Semantic snowballing* happens when new indices are added to old ones, creating a variety of different meanings. One example is how the Civil Rights Movement used preexisting tunes that indexed the church and progressive labor movements and set new lyrics about civil rights to these tunes. This combined old associations of religious righteousness with progressive politics, adding historical depth and power. Because indexes link a song with a personal event, indexes tend to be the most personal type of semiotic relationship and often evoke the most emotional and powerful responses.

The third type of sign is the *symbol*, which is less relevant for this thesis. A symbol is a linguistic, usually visual agreement based off signs. Written words serve as a symbol because we ascribe an idea behind a set of visual signs. Musical notation is another example of a symbol, since it is a collectively-agreed created language that serves to stand in for the musical note itself. What is important is that the symbol is based off of some sort of agreement that the symbol represents the sign. It is important to distinguish *symbols* from *symbolism*, which is often more metaphorical and more related to icons or indexical responses. Through the use of icons, indexes, and symbols, we can come to a greater understanding on how music affects people and groups in meaningful ways.

Thomas Turino demonstrates how these musical signs can take meaning in political movements. He says, “From Lincoln to Mao to Robert Mugabe, politicians in countless times and places have clearly understood and have effectively harnessed the iconic and indexical power of music to further their own pragmatic needs.” He uses the rise of the Nazis as an example of political movements using music for malevolent purposes and the Civil Rights Movement as an example of a social movement using music as a tool for positive change. The Nazis used a series of rituals and non-verbal signs like the swastika and the Hitler salute to bind
the population into unconsciously following orders. Furthermore, Nazi leaders repeatedly linked “German greatness”, “Jewish degeneracy”, “work”, “freedom”, “unity”, and “military together in Nazi speeches, films, and songs.59 The Nazis used music as a form of propaganda, using singing at mass rallies and required membership in choirs to create a sense of unity for the German people, and they highlighted the greatness of “German music” while not tolerating music written by Jews or “Negro music.”60 Turino then turns to to the Civil Rights Movement. During the civil rights movement, mass singing was one of the primary forces to united people and create a sense of unity. Songs like “We shall overcome” became iconic of the civil rights movement and people developed indexical responses to those songs and the movement as a whole. Turino’s examples of the semiotic power of music in the rise of the Nazi Party and the Civil Rights movements highlight how music has been used as a political tool throughout history.

Throughout this thesis, we will see how Egyptian and Tunisian music created powerful semiotic responses that helped bolster the movement that sparked the Arab Spring. Turino’s theory of semiotics can explain why Tunisian hip-hop was a particularly important genre to Tunisian social movements. In the United States, hip-hop is the “iconic” genre for African Americans, a marginalized group. American hip-hop often deals with issues of oppression, poverty, and rebellion. For much of the world, hip-hop and ideas of fighting oppression have an indexical link. Tunisian hip-hop artists have been especially important in calling out oppression in Tunisia because of the indexical clusters that are associated with hip-hop and fighting subjugation. Certain hip-hop artists like El General have become iconic of the Arab Spring. Because these artists played such a big role in the movement, they have become symbols of the Middle East rebellions. Movements throughout the Middle East have used musical strategies to fight against their government. The Ultras and other activist groups sing political chants over
familiar popular tunes to create a *semantic snowballing* effect that gives the original song new meaning. Through repetition of certain subversive activities in mundane life, revolutionary ideas become internalized within the general population without the government noticing. Semiotic effects play a role on the building of musical communities as a shared sense of community is built through the repetition of certain musical practices, and people begin to associate music with the community that they are a part of.

Throughout my paper, I will continue to incorporate the unique way in which music can form networks of resistance, and how this resistance can be useful in enacting revolution. The broad theory on musical communities ties together how networks that form can lead to collective action and the theories of small acts of resistance, safety valves, and the semiotics of music explain the power that music has in forming these communities and leading to resistance. These theories will be incorporated into the three case studies on the Ultras, Tunisian hip-hop, and Egyptian music venues. The case study on the Ultras can be seen as a culmination of all the ideas presented in this section, as the Ultras incorporate both small and large acts of resistance, use semiotic practices to engage listeners, and serve as a stellar example of a musical community. The chapter on hip-hop in Tunisia will particularly look at the semiotic effect that hip-hop had in building a movement. Finally, the section on music venues in Cairo will specifically present an alternative to the safety valve effect on building networks of resistance.
“We Will Never Stop Singing”: Sports Fandom, Youth Rebellion, and the Acoustic Community of the Ultras

Introduction

A group of hard-core soccer fanatics, the Ultras, played a surprising and consequential role in the Arab Spring. In the span of a few years, the Ultras changed from an apolitical fan club to a leading movement in fighting Egyptian autocracy. As the Ultras grew in prominence, they were praised as martyrs and visionaries of the revolution, but also condemned as thugs, hooligans, and even terrorists. Music is central to the identity of the Ultras, and the members of the Ultras have used songs and chants to strengthen their position as an acoustic community, as well as using their sound to transform themselves from a passive audience to active performers. Looking closely at Ultra music over time can provide insight into their increasing level of politicization. Indeed, their music can be seen as a direct response to the injustices that they were facing—a way of bringing attention to the violence and oppression they received from the Egyptian state. In looking at the broader theories of this thesis, I will highlight how Ultras music can have a semiotic effect on the listener; repetition of different ideas like loyalty, rebellion, retribution, and resistance while sung with similar musical styles creates an indexical response linking all of these ideas together and Ultra songs have become both iconic of the Ultras themselves and of the larger youth movements. I will make the point that the Ultras form an acoustic community by participating in a form of performance labor, as they shift from passive audience members to active performers.

Who are the Ultras?

The concept of Ultras fandom has become a major aspect of global soccer culture around the world. One can find Ultra groups in the United Kingdom, Italy, Argentina, Turkey, Tunisia, and
Egypt. Technically, the definition of an Ultra is simply a soccer fan known for “ultra”-fanatical support. In Egypt, the two main Ultras groups are associated with Egypt’s two largest soccer clubs, Al-Ahly and Al-Zamalek. Soccer fandom is not a new concept in Egypt. Soccer has played a central role in Egyptian cultural and political life for the past hundred years, going back to the anti-colonial struggle, when Egyptians adopted the European game of soccer to prove their worth in modern society.

The Ultras existence emerged in Egypt in the early 2000s, when two main groups were formed: Ultras Ahlawy, fans of the Al-Ahly team and Ultras White Knights, fans of the Zamalek team. Membership in the Ultras grew rapidly. By 2009, Ultras Ahlawy and Ultras White Knights managed to mobilize more than 10,000 young men in their respected curvas, which are the curved sections between the two goals in the stadium (usually the most undesirable seats). The Ultras are incredibly dedicated to their teams and are expected to follow some non-negotiable principles: they must cheer for 90 minutes straight, no matter the results; they must stand throughout the entire match; and they must attend all games, both home and away. The Ultras regard themselves as distinct from regular supporters. They believe it’s important to see games live. They are against the general apathy of fans that watch football on television instead of going to games, and they are against all forms of “media”. The Ultras’ relationship with the press has always been tense. In the Egyptian sports press, they are commonly accused of fanaticism, violence, drug addiction, hatred, and insults. Some in the media have even gone so far as to label them a terrorist organization.

**Demographics of The Ultras**

The Ultras are comprised of almost exclusively adolescent and young-adult males. While membership in the Ultras is open to people of all social classes, the overwhelming majority is
poor and working class. Due to their working class and hyper-masculine identity, the Ultras are often viewed as violent hooligans or thugs; however, theoretically at least, the Ultras do not believe in violence. Rather, they see it as important to maintain the right to defend themselves and their group when attacked.\textsuperscript{70} Sometimes there are small violent scuffles between two opposing Ultras groups, but these have rarely been deadly, and usually play the role of establishing masculine dominance.

The demographic identity of the Ultras is vital to understanding their ultimate role in Egyptian politics. The majority of Ultra members would be considered youth at a time of a youth bulge. Youth bulges occur when a large percentage of a population is between the ages of 15 and 24, which almost always results in a shortage of jobs.\textsuperscript{71} Compared to adults, youth are approximately three times as likely to be unemployed.\textsuperscript{72} Youth bulges inevitably lead to competition for the few jobs available, which results in more people living in poverty. Large youth unemployment can cause feelings of alienation from the larger society and its political processes, giving rise to social unrest.\textsuperscript{73} Overpopulation in youth also results in higher crime rates. Young men are viewed to be the most common perpetrators of criminal and political violence, and worldwide young men are responsible for three quarters of violent crimes.\textsuperscript{74} Because most Ultra members tend to be young, unemployed men, they are often assumed to be criminal or violent. Their status as poor, unemployed youth also increases their alienation and anger toward a state that has failed to give them the opportunity to succeed. The Ultras were born in the early 2000s, the same period in which the country was going through a highly accelerated process of transitioning into neoliberalism.\textsuperscript{75} This is a period in which immense social disparities between business elites and the vast majority of Egyptian masses emerged, and downward social mobility for the middle and the middle lower classes that Ultras youth belonged to took place.
Therefore, it is no accident that the demographics of the Ultras reflect the social and economic disparities that were leading up to the 2011 revolution.

The majority of Ultras live in big cities where the large soccer teams are located, and urbanization has also become a huge factor for social unrest. Overcrowding in urban centers exacerbates problems and inequalities within a society as municipalities outgrow their governing capacities. Cairo is the most populated metropolitan area on the African continent and one of the most densely populated cities in the world. This overcrowding leads youth to feel isolated or trapped. Surprisingly enough, many Ultras members are highly educated (due to free education in Egypt) but are unable to find a meaningful job that gives them a decent living wage after they graduate. This means that the youth are educated enough to feel like they deserve better in this society, but are still poor and underemployed, leading to more disaffection. They are alienated because education does not lead to financial security and this leads them to feel like their education was pointless. For many Ultra members, going to the soccer games and supporting their teams is the only thing that motivates them throughout the week and the only time that they are happy. For many, this 90-minute game is the only time each week that they can escape from the harsh realities of their lives.

Conditions Leading Up to the Revolution

The Ultras were not always considered a political group— in fact, for a while, a core Ultra philosophy was that they did not impose any political identity, and members were free to have whatever political belief they desired. However, the Ultras became increasingly politicized leading up to the Arab Spring revolutions, fueled by their violent confrontations with the police. As Ultras presence in the public sphere grew, the state increasingly began to view the Ultras as a threat to the regime. The Ultras were fundamentally against anyone who tried to take away their
autonomy, and they viewed the police in that light. This hatred of the police can be seen in famous Ultra slogans like “A.C.A.B” (All Cops Are Bastards) or chants that describe policemen as “crows” that prey on innocent civilians. Ultra members were often not allowed in the stadium and the Ultras viewed the police as treating them unfairly and infringing on their freedom. Hatred of authority is a large factor that propelled the Ultras to the unexpected political role that they played in the January 25th revolution and beyond.

The Ultras and Their Role in the Revolution

The Ultras ended up playing a key role in the January 25th revolution that broke out throughout Egypt. As a result, the football supporters’ characteristic songs, fireworks, and flags were very much present throughout the 18 days of protest in Tahrir Square and they became a symbol of the revolution. Even though Ultra members joined the revolution as “individuals”, the organization and coordination learned by members of The Ultras meant that they were not only ready to mobilize, but knew how to mobilize effectively. Ultra members were useful to the revolution because they were tough and already knew how to fight police forces; their history of street fights had “prepared them” for the revolution. But each person’s role was different—some Ultra members played the role of supporters, singing chants and cheering people on. Other Ultra members physically fought (and even died) in the streets. Many Ultras fought so hard in the revolution because the concerns of the rebels reflected that of most of the Ultras’ own concerns which up until then did not have an outlet. The 2011 revolutions were a culmination of years of anger against the police state and the general poor living conditions in Egypt.
Port Said Massacre

There were two main turning points that made the Ultras increasingly politicized: the first was during the 2011 revolution, and the second was after the 2012 Port Said massacre, where 72 Al-Ahly fans were killed during a soccer riot that turned deadly. Hundreds of al-Masry fans reportedly attacked al-Ahly supporters with sticks, knives, metal boards, and swords. The police stood by watching the bloodshed and did nothing, some bystanders even reporting that they shot at unarmed supporters in the crowd. What made the death toll so high was that security blocked the exits of the stadium, so no one could escape. There were also insufficient security measures taken before the match, as apparently weapons were let into the stadium. After the horrific event, the streets leading to the Ministry of Interior in Cairo were blocked off by furious Ahlawy fans who harshly confronted security forces and demanded the removal of people they accused of being Mubarak loyalists within the ministry, but little was done to heed their calls. While there was a verdict sentencing 21 al-Masry fans to death and jailing 52 others, none of the security forces involved in the match were convicted. On January 26, 2013 thousands of people went to the city street to reject the verdict; clashes with security forces broke out and 42 people were killed. The Port Said Massacre was so jarring to the general public because it was televised on screen. The death of fellow Ultras seemed to be the spark that radicalized many Ultra members, as this event highlighted the indifference to ordinary citizens by those in power.

Ultras Chants

Music is a central part of Ultra identity. Dalia Abdelhameed Ibraheem describes the Ultras as an “acoustic community”. The sound of the Ultras is instantly recognizable and iconic to their movement. Every Ultra must sing or chant for the duration of the 90-minute match. Of course,
the Ultras did not invent the idea of singing and chanting during soccer matches. Historically football fans across the world would sing for their teams, cheer their players on, and vocally insult the rival team. Another precursor to Ultras group singing can be found in workers songs in Egypt and songs of fighters and soldiers during wars. Nevertheless, the disciplined obsession with harmonization constitutes a significant difference between the chanting of regular fans and the chants and songs of the Ultras. Harmonization is important to the Ultras because it gives each member a sense of contributing to a larger group performance. Chants unite fans through their coordinated vocalization, giving them a shared identity as an acoustic community. This acoustic community was a natural extension from the stadium to the revolution. Because the Ultras shared an identity of sound and not just fandom, their community was able to transcend the space of the soccer stadium. There is a metaphorical significance for why the Ultras sing together because it stresses group identity over individual identity. It is about collective singing, not the individual voice and it allows people from different backgrounds to sing out in one voice to support their team.

During the revolution, the police would know that the Ultras were there when they heard their chants. Because Ultras already had synchronized chants, they were often the leaders of the revolutionary chants that became iconic to the Arab Spring. Synchronized singing is so crucial for these groups that a capo (Ultra leader) will literally make the entire group stop if someone is not keeping proper time or singing the right notes. This emphasizes the values of discipline and unity that the Ultras hold so dear. Memorizing chants is essential for Ultras performance. A fan will buy the CD or MP3 of their team’s chants and listen to it day and night, even using the songs as alarms or ring tones. Ultras members internalized chants through constant repetition. CDs made by the Ultras were sold to millions of people, to the point that these songs were not
just football fan songs but culturally significant anthems that were listened to by people from all areas of life. Looking at the content of these CDs, we can see a pattern where the Ultras songs themselves become more political in response to the injustices that the Ultras collectively had to face and witness.

**Analysis of Three Ultra Songs**

To show how Ultras music grew more political over time, I have translated three Ultras songs from Arabic and analyzed the lyrics of the songs; two of the songs I translated with the help of an Arabic tutor, and the third song had lyrics already translated into English on the YouTube page. The songs are in chronological order: the first song is adapted from a common chant performed before the Arab Spring revolutions, the second song is a response to the death of an Ultras member during the 2011 revolution, and the last song is a tribute to the lives lost in the Port Said massacre. Below are the lyrics of the first song, called “Gathered Around One Idea”, translated from Arabic, taken from the Ultras Ahlawy’s second CD, titled “We Will Never Stop Singing.”

_O one idea makes us gather_  
_This idea is loyalty_  
_I’m crazy about Al-Ahly_  
_And it’s all of my life_  
_It wasn’t a choice_  
_We were born into it_  

_Ahlawy, la, la,la,la,la_

_I do not pay money for membership_  
_I’m not a player on this team_  
_My picture is not on the poster of the Al-Ahly club_  

_But I’m a regular person that loves this club_  
_You can see me cheering on the sidelines_  
_I only have my voice and my heart_  
_And my heart fears nothing_
This song is a quintessential Ultras chant. It stresses the love for the Al-Ahly team, club unity, and undying loyalty, all core principles of Ultra ideology. This song uses repetition, a common strategy in Ultra chants. By repeating the name of the club over and over again, it reinforces Ahlawy’s love for the club. Official football club membership is very prestigious and is only available to a high social class. Therefore, by stating in the song that they do not pay money for membership they are affirming their identity as regular working-class people who simply have a love for the team. Their loyalty cannot be bought or sold. There is nothing overtly political about this song but there are some rebellious undertones if the lyrics are inspected closely. The last line in the song is slightly more defiant than the rest of the song. Saying “my heart fears nothing” implies that they are willing to do anything to support their team and no outside force can stop them. Nevertheless, this song is definitely focused on the love for the Al Ahly team and there does not seem to be any political agenda.

The next song I analyze is performed by the Ultras White Knights and is a tribute to an Ultra member that was killed. This song was released in 2013 and the tone of the lyrics is quite different from the first song. This song is called “White Shirt” and the lyrics are below.

_O’ white life shirt_
_We are the most precious youth_
_Everyone who wears this shirt is fighting corruption_
_Everyone who wears this shirt is free_

_Amr Hussein is the knight of Zamalek_
_And he gave his soul to this movement_
_In all his life he never gave up_
_In all his life he never let down his club_

_He cheered for freedom_
_He hoped to see the Zamalek of the past_
_When he fought corruption, all he faced was the voice of guns_
When he said “Hail Zamalek”, all that he heard was the sound of bullets

The government thought the fire would protect them forever
They thought that money would protect them
The executioner forgot he had children
Children who were in the prime of their lives

The blood of my brother will be a witness on you criminals
The prayer of the mother of the martyr will chase you to the Judgment Day
These dogs will always betray you
You miscreants dug your graves with your own hands
And tonight the judgment of the dead will shake the earth

There is a lot of symbolism in this song that may be difficult to understand without some knowledge of Egyptian culture. The song is called “White Shirt” because the Zamalek T-Shirt is white, while the Al-Ahly T-shirt is red. By specifying that the shirt was white, the Ultras White Knights are establishing themselves as supporters of the Zamalek team. Egyptians have this idea that people are born with a white shirt and the shirt gets darker from stains as the person gets older. This is similar to the “blank slate” idea in that people are born “pure” and begin to lose their innocence over time. Therefore, the phrase “white life shirt” symbolizes the innocence and purity of the Ultras White Knights, but also the loss of innocence that happens due to growing violence as the white shirt gets stained with blood. This particular song is a specific tribute to Amr Hussein. Amr Hussein was a member of the Ultras White Knights who was shot and killed during a clash with security forces at a protest in Alexandria in 2013. Amr Hussein is just one example of young Ultras members who died as a result of conflict with the state. Still, Hussein’s death seemed to leave a significant impact on the Ultras White Knights. The purpose of the song is to commemorate Hussein’s death vow for his revenge. The lyrics show a lot of subtle jabs at the government. For example, the government is called “the executioner” in the fourth stanza. It was never stated that “the executioner” specifically referred to the government, but the context of
the song makes it pretty clear. Later on, the government is referred to as “miscreants”. By associating the government with executioners and miscreants, the government is portrayed as evil to the listeners. The references of “judgment day” in the song brings religious ideas into the picture, as well as the idea of revenge, since during judgment day, all evildoers will get retribution. The lyrics are emotional, charged, and much more political than a typical chant. The music video has pictures of the late Amr Hussein, which makes the song even more emotional because it is about a real human being.

The last song I will analyze is a song called Hekayetna or “Our Story”, and the English translation is taken directly from the music video that was made in the end of 2013. The lyrics are below.

*Soccer when we arrived was lies and deception,*
*It was brain numbing and a shield for the authorities.*
*They (authorities) tried to beautify it but it resembled the Grief of the country,*
*They did not take account for the thousands in the stands.*

*Keep Killing our ideas,*
*Oppression is everywhere.*
*We will never forget your past (police),*
*You are the slaves of the regime.*
*And when the revolution came, we went and participated in every city,*

*We died for freedom and the removal of the oppressive regime.*
*We never kept quiet and will never give up since the regime is still in power.*
*The police dogs (from the Ministry of the Interior) are the oppressors and are still everywhere,*
*Keep killing the revolution.*
*They (police and regime) have killed our dearest friends and dream, in Port Said the victims witnessed treachery before their murder.*
*They lay witness to the authorities that said either accepts our rule or total chaos will be everywhere,*

*Keep killing the revolution.*
*But no matter how cruel and mighty the jailor, my voice for freedom is even mightier,*
*Keep killing the revolution.*
*Keep killing the idea,*
*We chanted in front of millions “down with the regime that kills generation after generation. “*
They trapped us and plotted against us,
Keep killing the revolution.
Keep killing the Idea,

In Port Said the authority said either accept our rule or will set you into total chaos,
I will never let you feel safe as an authority and will never forget what you have done to us, I will never allow you to rule us again one more day,
Keep setting your police on us.
They all died with the dream of ending the regimes grip on the country,
Oh SCAF, you bastards.
You sold the blood of the martyrs in return for protecting your regime that you are part of, Oh SCAF you are bastards.

This song was written to commemorate the 70 members of Ultras Ahlawy who lost their lives in the Port Said massacre. “Our Story” became a massive hit and accumulated tens of millions of hits on YouTube, with many of the views being an international audience. This song is perhaps the most adept at summarizing the Ultras’ history of resistance against autocratic regimes in Egypt. The lyrics in this song are by far the most explicitly political of the songs I analyzed. There is no subtlety or metaphors here– the hatred that the Ultras have towards the regime and the injustices imposed by them is strikingly clear. Police and government officials are called nasty names like “bastards” or “slaves”. Sometimes, government officials are simply referred to as “they” as to strip away their humanity. Certain themes are repeated multiple times in this song. The words “oppression”, “revolution”, and especially “regime” constantly come up in the lyrics. This use of repetition is used to force the listener to pay attention to key points. Certain phrases such as “keep killing the…” are repeated multiple times as well, to signify how the government is trying to kill every aspect of Egyptian youth culture and revolution. The lyrics are also very specific– the Ministry, Port Said, and SCAF are all explicitly mentioned. In this song, there is no doubt on what the subject is about.
This song is powerful for several reasons. First of all, the Port Said massacre has been one of the most horrific events in modern Egyptian history. The massacre symbolized how little the government cares for its people because security guards blocked off the exits so people could not escape, even as they were being killed. The characterization of the government as “the regime that kills generation after generation” strikes a chord with Egyptians across all political spectrums. Everyone knows that the Port Said massacres were so deadly because the government failed to protect ordinary people, but few groups have said it so explicitly and with so much anger as the Ultras, who were most affected by this event. The intent of this song is to be political; not one passage refers to the soccer game itself or any details about the match. Instead, “Our Story” is a political call to action used to mobilize the Ultras and all Egyptian youth inside and outside the stadium. This song has been especially important to the Ultras after they were banned from watching games at the stadium at all. It proves that their group became about more than a love of soccer. It is about building a movement to fight oppression.

In comparing the three songs, a few patterns emerge. One pattern is that Ultra music seems to have gotten more overtly political over time. Ultras music was not originally meant to be political, but as time goes on the lyrics take on a much more political tone. The first song, “Gathered Around One Idea”, is a classic Ultra chant that mostly discusses the Ultras’ devotion to their team. Even though the song is not political, there is an air of defiance to it. The line “my heart fears nothing” has a rebellious feel and implies that the Ultras aren’t afraid of anything that’s thrown at them– be it the police, the media, or the government. The song also brings up class issues by separating themselves from the upper class and elite. “Gathered Around One Idea” is a classic example of Ultra chants before the Ultras became politicized in the revolution; it is feisty and rebellious, but not political.
After the revolution, Ultras music becomes more political. Tragic events like the death of a member from police brutality or the Port Said massacre were used as a fuel to channel the anger that the Ultras had towards the government. The song “White Shirt” is specifically about the death of Amr Hussein. The lyrics are harsher, and the government is referred to as “criminals” and “executioners”. Nevertheless, the word “government” is never actually used in the song, but the meaning is implied. “Our Story”, a song written as a response to the Port Said massacre, is the most explicitly political. It directly calls out the oppressive regime. None of the lyrics are sugarcoated. It is a call to action designed to inspire the youth of Egypt to fight back against a regime that does not care about their livelihood.

**Ultras music in connection to larger theories**

The Ultras played such a key role during the revolution because they were a group that was already organized and ready to mobilize. The Ultras were not only connected through their love of soccer and through their shared identity as young, working-class, and male, but also through their shared experience of performing chants and songs, making them, as Dalia AbdelhameedIbraheem calls them, the ideal “acoustic community”. The Ultras were a powerful force during the 2011 revolution because of their pre-rehearsed chants and songs that were able to be sung by the masses in the streets. It may seem like the Ultras suddenly became politicized when the Revolution happened, but years of organizing, singing, and feelings of oppression and discontent led up to the moment where the Ultras became “a political group”. Because the state tried to silence the Ultras by banning them from the stadium, their music was the best way for them to resist, and we can see their music become increasingly political and angry as time goes on.
It seems evident that Ultras music has had a powerful emotional effect on many listeners and some songs have been used as a political tool to inspire public action. This is because many of the songs incorporate semiotic tools used to instill a response in the listener. Repetition of different ideas like loyalty, rebellion, retribution, and resistance sung over and over again to a familiar musical sound creates an indexical response by linking these core ideas with the familiar sound. Semantic snowballing occurs as new political meanings are added to old chants. By adding new lyrics to familiar sounds, the listener unconsciously begins to think about old ideas in new ways. Famous Ultra songs have now become iconic of youth rebellion in Egypt. The video for Hekayetna or “Our Story” has been watched by millions of people. Ultras chants can be seen as a form of performance labor; the Ultras are required to sing for 90 minutes straight, learn complex harmonies, and move in unison with each other. This form of elaborate performance has transformed the Ultras from passive fans to active performers. This can be very empowering and it gives Ultra members, a large majority of who are poor or underemployed, a feeling of purpose.

By analyzing the lyrics of Ultras songs, insight can be made into politicization of the group. Originally, Ultra songs were simply chants that were sung at games. However, after the revolution, the Ultras began to use their songs as reaction against injustices they confronted and observed. The second and third songs analyzed were written in direct response to the unjust killing of their own members. The songs were released on YouTube and the lyrics were translated into English to gain international attention. And it had an effect. “Our Story” got millions of views on YouTube and sparked international outrage to the behavior of the Egyptian government during the Port Said massacre. Especially since the Ultras were banned from congregating at stadiums, their songs were used as weapons to fight against the state by issuing a call to action in their lyrics.
Because the Ultras received so much media attention, these songs could be used to force listeners to face injustice happening in Egypt. These songs empower the Ultras because it changes the group from passive bystanders to active performers. Ultras songs now have cultural capital with significance to the public sphere. The Egyptian media loves to talk about the Ultras, both by depicting them as villains and as heroes, and the movement of the Ultras has become a popular subject for aspiring academics, in Egypt and beyond. It has become irrelevant whether the Ultras are actually violent low-class hooligans or rebellious martyrs. These movements transcend simple black-and-white views of morality. The Ultras are entirely unique in that their movement combines sports, music, and politics in a new and powerful way. The relationship that the Ultras have to music cannot be underestimated. The Ultras mobilized their shared musical repertoire to illuminate injustices. Politics have had an effect on Ultras music, but Ultra music has also had an effect on politics.
Tunisian Hip-Hop: The Soundtrack to a Revolution

On January 4th, 2011, Mohamed Bouazizi died from his burns after he publicly lit himself on fire to protest his mistreatment from the Tunisian government. Shortly after, Tunisia started a revolution that soon would spread across North African and the Middle East. When looking back at how the uprising started in Tunisia and how it spread to other countries, two events come to mind: the first was Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation and the second is the arrest of El General, a 21-year old rapper who released a music video that scathingly critiqued the Tunisian government and Ben Ali’s corruption. A few weeks later, and El General’s anthem was being sung in Egypt and Bahrain. But El General is not the only Tunisian rapper that helped hip-hop become the “soundtrack to the revolution”, as so many journalists have called it. Countless other rappers have risked their lives to spread their message through their music, tackling issues ranging from police brutality to religious freedom. And while there were other musical genres that dealt with political issues in Tunisia, hip-hop seemed to be the genre that struck a chord (pun intended) with people, and had the greatest impact on creating a movement. In this chapter, I will analyze how hip-hop had an effect on political change in Tunisia and why hip-hop was such an iconic genre of the Arab Spring.

El General

The youngest of four children, Hamada Ben Amor, also known as El General, was only 21 years old when he became one of the most influential rappers in Tunisia and one of the driving forces of a movement that took down a regime. He grew up in a middle class household in the small city of Sfax. Influenced by American rappers like Tupac Shakur, El General began rapping in 2008, when he was 18 and his songs have always been political; the first song he wrote was
called “Malesh” or “Why” and it discussed the question about why Tunisia was in a situation of corruption, crime and violence. He also wrote “Sidi Rais” or “Mr. President” when he was 18, a song that El General would later describe as a “call to the president to fight corruption.”

While he had posted tracks on the internet for a few years, he was relatively obscure until he posted “Rais Lebled” (which meant “Mr. President your people are dying”) on to Facebook on November 7th, 2010. The song explicitly criticized President Ben Ali in a way that few had dared to do before. Below are the lyrics.

Mr. President, here, today, I speak with you
in my name and the name of all people who live in misery.
It's 2011 and there's still a man who's dying of hunger.
He wants to work to survive, but his voice is not heard!
Go out into the street and see [how] people have become animals.
Look at the police with batons. Thwack-thwack-thwack! They don't care!
There is still no one to tell them the word "stop."
Even the law that's in the constitution, put it in water and drink it [i.e., it's worthless]
Every day I hear of someone prosecuted for a fake offense
even if the official knows that he is an honest citizen.
I see police goons beat women who wear headscarves.
Would you accept that for your daughter? I know my words make the eye weep.
I know you're still a father. You would not accept evil being done to your children.
Alors! This is a message from one of your children
who is speaking with you about suffering. We are living like dogs!
Half of the people are living in humiliation and have tasted from the cup of suffering.

CHORUS (x2)
Mr. President, your people are dead. So many people are eating from the garbage.
There, you see what's happening in the country!
Miseries are everywhere and people haven't found anywhere to sleep.
I speak here in name of the people who were wronged and crushed beneath the feet [of the powerful].

Mr. President, you told me to speak without fear.
I spoke here but I knew that my end would be palms [i.e., slaps and beatings].
I see so much injustice. That's why I chose to speak out
even though many people told me that my end will be execution.
But how long [must] the Tunisian live in illusions?
Where is freedom of expression? I saw that it was [only] words.
They named Tunisia "the Green." Mr. President, you can see today that Tunis has become a desert that's divided into two sides. They steal in broad daylight, confiscate property, and own the land. [Even] without me naming them, you know who they are! So much money was pledged for projects and infrastructure: schools, hospitals, buildings, and improvements. But the sons of bitches stuffed [their] pot-bellies with the people's money. They stole, robbed, dismembered, kidnapped and would not give up the seats [of power]. I know there are many words in the people's hearts that don't reach you. If the situation weren't unjust, I would not be speaking out today.

CHORUS (x2)
Mr. President, your people are dead. So many people are eating from the garbage. There, you see what's happening in the country! Miseries are everywhere and people haven't found anywhere to sleep. I speak here in name of the people who were wronged and crushed beneath the feet [of the powerful].

Okay. The voice of the nation. El Général. 2011:
The same situation. The same problems and the same suffering.
Mr. President...Mr. President...
Mr. President!

CHORUS (x2)
Mr. President, your people are dead. So many people are eating from the garbage. There, you see what's happening in the country! Miseries are everywhere and people haven't found anywhere to sleep. I speak here in name of the people who were wronged and crushed beneath the feet [of the powerful].

The Effects of “Rais Lebled”

“Rais Lebled” was impactful for a variety of reasons. The date of its release was significant—November 7th was a national holiday in Tunisia commemorating the moment in 1987 when Ben Ali ended a 30-year reign of the previous president, Habib Bourguiba, with a bloodless coup.103 The release on this date was a deliberate slap in the face to the government and everything that it stood for. The song dealt with many problems that were occurring in Tunisia—police brutality, anti-Islamic policies, government corruption, poverty, and censorship. The video opens with Ben Ali standing over a cowering schoolboy asking him, “why are you worried?” and then cuts to El
General with his face obscured by a black baseball cap pulled low over his eyes as he barks into a studio microphone. The video makes Ben Ali look less like a protector and more like a molester. It’s hard to see El General’s face in the video but he’s not totally anonymous; it seems like he actually wanted everyone to know it was he who sang the songs, and his facial obscurity is more for a mysterious aesthetic than for protection. The song is a direct condemnation of the president. The lyrics are harsh and direct and there are no subtleties. All of the pent-up years of anger against the state were finally out in the open on one explosive track.

The dangers of publicly posting a song like this were enormous. El General’s friend and fellow rapper RTM tried to warn him not to post the song. “When Hamada recorded that, I tried to convince him to be worried,” RTM said. “Rap like this may lead to his death. I tried to convince him to convey his message implicitly. He just smiled and told me he’s ready for the consequences.” Days after the track was uploaded, there were already hundreds of thousands of views, attracting the attention of President Ben Ali himself. On the orders of Ben Ali, El General was arrested on January 6th, 2011. El General spent three days handcuffed to a chair being interrogated. However, his detainment began to gain national and even international attention; Tunisians learned about his incarceration and started mass protests demanding his release. This pressure eventually forced the government to release El General, and he returned home a celebrity. The public attention that El General received caused “Rais Lebled” to go from a viral hit to a national anthem.

Less than two weeks after El General’s arrest, Ben Ali fled Tunisia. The arrest of El General was one of the final straws that started a revolution— in fact, some even credit “Rais Lebled” with galvanizing Tunisia’s youth to put an end to 23 years of tight-fisted rule. The arrest of El General brought Tunisia far more international attention than it had witnessed since
the start of the uprising—essentially, it caused Tunisia’s revolution to become a world phenomenon. This would have enormous effects later as revolts would spread through Egypt and other parts of the Arab world. As “Rais Lebled” began to be known as the unofficial anthem to the Tunisian revolution, El General gained international attention. He was even listed in Time Magazine’s 2011 most influential people, ahead of Barack Obama. Now he is probably remembered as the most notable face of the Tunisian revolution apart from Mohammed Bouazizi, who lit himself on fire as a protest against the regime. To this day, El General is enjoying success as one of Tunisia’s most well-known rappers, and he is still sticking to his political routes. Recently, he wrote a new rap called “Vive Tunisie!” that honors Tunisian protestors and those killed during the uprising.

Other Tunisian rappers

El General is far from the only important rapper in Tunisia—there is a vibrant hip-hop scene in the country, especially after the revolution. Years before El General even began rapping, underground rappers were finding ways to fight against the government. Underground rapper Lak3y (pronounced Lak-eye-ee) organized a concert back in 2005. At the last minute, representatives of the RCD (the Tunisian ruling party at the time) hijacked the event and hung a huge RCD banner over the stage. Lak3y performed his anti-government rap anyway and ripped down the banner, which earned him a post-concert beating from five policemen. In 2010, police warned him that if he continued to criticize the government, there would be consequences for him and his family. Following that, Lak3y laid low for a while but after El General was arrested he wrote “Touche Pas á Ma Tunisie” (Don’t Touch My Tunisia).
President Ben Ali had a long history of marginalizing rappers; he banned prominent hip-hop artist Mohamed Jendoubi—aka Psycho M—from performing for having Islamist sympathies. Another well-known rapper, Weld 15, was arrested after his release of the viral video “Boulicia Kleb” which means “Cops are dogs.” The video of “Boulicia Kleb” garnered over 2 million views and explicitly accuses Tunisian police of resorting to brutality. In one of his lines he says, “cops are dogs, that if I had a gun I’d kill one, or that I’d strangle one like a sheep”. To the government, these words sounded a lot like threats, but Weld 15 defends himself by saying, “these are only metaphors to express an anger felt by a lot of young people by some of the police’s methods.” However, the Tunisian Ministry of the Interior claimed that the video featured “immoral phrases and references, public slander, and threats to security agents and judges that requires criminal punishment.” Weld 15 was originally sentenced to two years of prison, but his charges were later revoked after the severe sentence drew widespread attention and anger. Thus, his story follows a similar plot to that of El General—he faced criminal punishment due to his controversial lyrics until widespread unrest led to his release.

While many Tunisian rappers had similar experiences to that of El General and Weld 15, there was one artist who followed a very different path. Balti is considered Tunisia’s most commercially successful rapper and is one of the founding fathers of hip-hop music in the country. Balti was able to be so successful because he toned down the political rhetoric and focused more on subjects like love, personal struggle, and family. After rapper Ferid El Extranjero released “3bed Fi Terkana” in 2008 (“In An Open-Air Prison), a song that criticized police and became an underground hit, the government gave other rappers an ultimatum—either make mainstream commercial rap that avoids political topics, or face criminalization. Balti chose the former. Balti then became the “poster rap boy” for the government. The government saw
an opportunity to gain a lot of revenue through Balti, so they supported him as long as he stayed away from revolutionary lyrics.

Balti experienced great success during Ben Ali’s regime, but he was not so lucky after the revolution. After the revolution, rap songs condemning the government proliferated and rappers who did not perform these types of songs seemed cowardly and were criticized. Balti was one of the most criticized rappers after the revolution, being accused of being the puppet of the government. Balti denied that he was allied with the government and claimed he always supported the revolution. “I work for the art, regardless of political identities,” Balti said. “I perform music. I don’t care about politics.” Nevertheless, Balti’s music became more political after the revolution. His latest recording is “Zine el Abidine Ben Ali and the 40 thieves,” a barbed account of the former president deceiving his people. Still, the criticism that Balti was too soft on the government affected his career; “Not a lot of people come to the concerts now,” Balti’s manager admits. “He’s not selling a lot of albums. Before, it was better.”

A pattern seems to emerge when looking at rappers in Tunisia. Revolutionary and political hip-hop artists faced government persecution and criminalization during Ben Ali’s regime, but they gained popularity and prestige after the revolution. In fact, one journalist claimed that these revolutionary rappers are now looked at as the new elite of the country. However, rappers who played it safe during Ben Ali’s regime and avoided political subjects, like Balti, now experience criticism from the hip-hop community and their careers have suffered. Tunisian hip-hop artists are often talked about as one monolithic revolutionary group, but they are more than just symbols of the revolution that the media portrays them to be— they are artists who care about their craft and they are individual people that do not always agree with each other or share the same viewpoints.
Spread of hip-hop and larger consequences

The impact of Tunisian hip-hop artists had a lasting effect on not only Tunisian politics, but the politics of the entire Middle East region. A few weeks after El General had been arrested for his defiant rap against his president, his battle cry was being chanted in Cairo’s Tahrir Square and in Bahrain.\textsuperscript{127} El General himself was actually invited to perform in Tahrir Square during the Egyptian revolution, but he couldn’t go because he didn’t have a passport.\textsuperscript{128} Because Tunisia was the first country in the region to revolt, it served as a prototype to other countries for how a revolution can occur. Therefore, the revolutionary message of Tunisia’s hip-hop artists not only spread to other countries in the Middle East, it may have actually helped galvanize other countries to revolution. As the world became aware of the Arab Spring, these rap songs were played at gatherings and solidarity marches in London, New York, and Washington; exile opposition groups and Muslim communities responded with musical tributes.\textsuperscript{129}

Hip-hop of course was not the only factor that led to an uprising in Tunisia, and revolutionary hip-hop in Tunisia was so successful because it was occurring at the same time as other important events were taking place. The outpour of Tunisian hip-hop happened around the same time that Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor, set himself on fire in despair and in protest of his mistreatment at the hands of local authorities.\textsuperscript{130} Mohamed Bouazizi faced humiliation after police had seized his wheelbarrow and beaten him in public. Bouazizi died from his burns on January 4\textsuperscript{th}, 2011, and over 5000 people attended his funeral.\textsuperscript{131} Bouazizi’s death was seen as a symbol for a country that was on the edge of igniting. He was seen as a martyr, and his death sparked massive protests across the country. Bouazizi’s death occurred at around the same time that rap songs by El General and other artists were blowing up. The death of Bouazizi and the
arrest of El General together were the perfect combination to mobilize people who had spent years in quiet anger to action.

The spread of the Internet and social media also had an enormous impact. Facebook especially loosened the government’s monopoly on information. For example, there were riots in the southern city of Redevef in 2008, but the state-run media ignored the riots and social media wasn’t popular enough at that time to make a difference.\textsuperscript{132} By 2011 however, Tunisia had almost 2 million Internet users—over 20% of the total population and a large percentage of the youth population.\textsuperscript{133} For the first time, Tunisians were able to effortlessly share their frustrations with each other and the world.\textsuperscript{134} The spread of the Internet allowed underground rap to proliferate in a way that it wasn’t able to before. Social media sites like Facebook and YouTube gave virtually unknown artists the opportunity to become viral sensations overnight. In the words of journalist David Peisner, “If Facebook provided the medium that made the revolution possible, underground rap frequently provided the message.”\textsuperscript{135}

Tunisian hip-hop began to often represent the conflict between Ben Ali’s forced secular government and movements for radical Islam. Rapper Psycho M, for example, has a political song called Manipulation, which praises the Muslim Brotherhood to the accompaniment of religiously inspired chants and the words: “there is no other solution than Islam.”\textsuperscript{136} Islamic rappers were often marginalized by the state, as Ben Ali was terrified that radical Islam would lead to terrorism. Unfortunately, in some cases it did. Rapper Marwan al-Dwiri turned radical after he was jailed in 2012—his official charges were possession of marijuana but it seems evident that he was jailed because his lyrics were critical of the police.\textsuperscript{137} He is now committed to ISIS after the secular state failed him and turned him into a criminal. The bitter irony is that
the state is so harsh because they don’t want people to become Islam extremists, but the harshness of the state often turns people who otherwise would not be radical to extremism.

**Why hip-hop?**

Many journalists like David Peisner and Neil Curry described hip-hop music as the “soundtrack to the Tunisian revolution.” Lak3y, a Tunisian rapper, claimed, “Rap reflects the reality of Tunisian society. It is the only music that supported the revolution.”\(^{138}\) Balti, Tunisia’s most commercially successful rapper, agreed saying, “Hip-hop music contributed greatly to the revolution. The revolution is a social movement and rap is always talking about social issues.”\(^{139}\) Finally, journalist El Mekki said, “Now everyone is looking at rappers as the new elite of the country. When everyone was silent, they spoke up. When everyone was at home, they went to the streets shouting and fighting against the police. Today, rappers have more respect.”\(^{140}\) These are just a few of the testimonies highlighting the importance hip-hop had in the Tunisian revolution. And while there were probably other musical genres that were engaged in activism, there seemed to be something specific about hip-hop that sparked such a massive impression with the people of Tunisia. But why is hip-hop in particular such an important genre for Tunisian politics, and why did hip-hop have such an impact on Tunisia in particular? Below I try to answer these questions.

There seems to be something about the genre of hip-hop that resonates with disaffected youth throughout the world. In the words of Ulysses, a renowned hip-hop blogger, “hip-hop has become a universal medium of social and political expression for young, dissident, and marginalized people everywhere.”\(^{141}\) Many Tunisian rappers were influenced by American hip-hop; Tupac in particular inspired something in Tunisian rappers. NPR would later claim that
“Tupac inspired the Arab Spring.”

Tupac was the favorite artist of El General. El General doesn’t know English, so he can’t understand Tupac’s lyrics. “The lyrics don’t matter,” El General said. “The kind of music Tupac used was revolutionary.” Somehow, Tupac had become a symbol of revolutionary rap everywhere. He dealt with issues of institutional racism, poverty, and police brutality in his songs. One of his songs was literally called “Revolution.” Tupac had strained relations with police and spent time in prison– this resonates with many of Tunisian’s artists who have been arrested. Therefore, Tunisian youth look at American rappers like Tupac and see themselves. They see someone who was born into economic and racial disenfranchisement, someone who fought against the police and has been arrested multiple times, someone who uses revolutionary music as a way to achieve a better life, and it resonates with them.

Turino’s theory of semiotics may help explain why hip-hop is such an important genre for revolutionaries throughout the globe. Hip-hop elicits both iconic and indexical responses within people. In the United States, hip-hop is the “iconic” genre for black Americans, a marginalized group. American hip-hop often deals with issues of oppression, poverty, and police brutality. People across the world see an indexical link between hip-hop and ideas of fighting oppression. Hip-hop has been especially important in raising issues of oppression because of the indexical clusters that are associated with hip-hop and anger at authority. Certain artists like El General have become iconic of the Arab Spring, and hip-hop has become the iconic genre of the revolution in Tunisia. That means when Tunisians think of the revolution, they think of hip-hop– and vice versa. Because these artists were so integral to shaping the political movement, they have become symbols of the revolution in the Middle East. By looking at hip-hop as a sign that
resembles abstract ideas, we can reach a greater understanding of why this genre had the impact it had on so many people.

The accessible and underground nature of Arab hip-hop can also explain how it became so revolutionary in Tunisia. While there were a few hip hop artists in Tunisia that were government-approved and played on mainstream radio, like Balti, the majority of hip-hop artists were forced to be underground due to their clashes with the state. Luckily, with the rise of the internet, hip-hop artists no longer need to be attached to large labels to be heard. Therefore, Arabic hip-hop is a widely accessible and unfiltered medium for disseminating revolutionary ideas while at the same time an underground medium that is usually not connect with major labels or companies. As ethnomusicologist Mark Levine argues, the uncommodified, do-it-yourself character of underground hip-hop gives it “the aura” of that pre-modernity artistic expression that highlighted art’s singularity and irreplaceable value that was lost due to commercialization of music the 21st century. Basically, commercialization inevitably leads artists to compromise their politics and message in order to appeal to shareholders that want to hold on to the status quo. Underground hip-hop artists had no allegiance to shareholders and could therefore keep their artistic and political integrity.

Hip-hop was important to introducing revolutionary ideas throughout the Arab world, and yet it seemed to have the biggest impact in Tunisia. Tunisia has one of the oldest hip-hop scenes in the Arab world, but there have been countries in the region with previously more prominent hip-hop scenes, like Morocco and Palestine. It may be that people focus on hip-hop in Tunisia because Tunisia was the first country to have a revolution– hip-hop began to spread around the Arab world as other countries began to have revolutions. While I was in Egypt, I consistently heard that hip-hop was not popular until after the Arab Spring. Hip-hop in Tunisia can therefore
be viewed as a case study to rap having a revolutionary effect in other countries. There is also a delicious irony in the prominence of Tunisian rap music in the events that led to Ben Ali’s overthrow: in 2006, the Tunisian and French governments co-sponsored a (bad) film called *The Making of a Kamikaze* that promotes hip-hop as counter to jihadi ideology. As Hisham Aidi writes, “state officials and diplomats introduce the film reiterating the message that hip-hop is the antithesis to radical Islamism, perhaps even the antidote to it.”147 However, the film and government ignored both the fundamentally anti-establishment character of hip-hop and the deep ties hip-hop had to Islamism in the region.148 In an effort to subdue their populace, the government introduced a genre that in the end contributed to their own downfall.

**Conclusion**

Of course, there were other musical genres that condemned the government, and there were many other aspects that fueled the revolution in Tunisia, like Bouazizi’s self-immolation and the spread of social media. Nevertheless, rap music explicitly expressed dissent in a way that had not occurred before and could not be ignored. With the spread of social media, rap was able to spread and the message was heard by millions of people. Hip-hop seems to be linked with issues of oppression, marginalization, and anger at the police and the state. We can see people writing this form of hip-hop throughout the world. For example, Sujatha Fernandes describes how hip-hop became a popular means for political dissent in Cuba because Cubans associated hip-hop with fighting oppression.149 This linkage of hip-hop with political ideas can be explained using theories of semiotics, which looks at how one sign is used as a substitute for another. In this case, the genre of hip-hop is a substitute for disaffection with the state.
In the case of Tunisia, we see how music can be more than just a political safety valve. The songs written by El General and other hip-hop artists triggered a harsh response from the government. In turn, this response caused shock and outrage in the Tunisian public sphere as the government was imposing their will on the artistic world, a space that is believed to be non-political and therefore allowed more freedom of expression. We see how the hip-hop community in Tunisia was a form of acoustic community. Tunisian hip-hop artists supported each other and built up a strong network of resistance. Hip-hop had such a powerful effect in Tunisia not because of one artist, but because of the large community of hip-hop artists that supported each other and their art. Not only did Tunisian hip-hop artists support each other, but they expressed solidarity with American hip-hop artists and later, other artists in the Middle East making a stand against oppression. These artists were united both by their love of hip-hop and by their shared experience of political disenfranchisement. Artists like Balti, who worked with the government rather than against it, lost their credibility and were not welcome in the acoustic community. Hip-hop artists in Tunisia risked their lives to raise concerns about a government that did not listen to the needs of the people. Hip-hop music was one of the fuels that sparked the Tunisian revolution, and as the first revolution in the Arab Spring, it was one of the inspirations that inspired people in other states to revolt. The domino effect that hip-hop had throughout the region should not be underestimated. This case study in Tunisia is an example of how political lyrics can lead to political action, and how one genre of music can share the responsibility of an entire regime being dismantled.
Revolutionary Spaces: Underground Music Venues and Performance Spaces in Cairo

In my previous chapters I have looked at a particular genre and a particular social network in relation to the Arab Spring. Now I will look at an aspect of music that is often overlooked: the actual venues and spaces where music is performed. I will specifically look at music venues in the city of Cairo, where I had the opportunity to visit and conduct some research. My methods for research are slightly different from the other two chapters. I incorporate research from academic articles, websites of the venues, and news articles from sources like Mada Masr, an independent newspaper in Egypt. At the same time, I incorporate my own experience from attending concerts in Cairo, going to lectures by respected Egyptian thinkers, and speaking to Egyptians about the music scene in Cairo. I will also incorporate interviews (or the lack of interviews) I had with employees at the venues. I discuss a variety of spaces but focus on three main “venues”; the El Sawy Culture Wheel, El Rab3, and Opera On the Balcony. El Sawy is an example of a venue that may have directly contributed to the 2011 revolution; El Rab3 is an example of a venue that was influenced by the 2011 revolution; and Opera On the Balcony, while not technically a “venue”, is an example of how concepts of public spaces and performing spaces are changing. I put “venue” in quotes because I include all public spaces where music is performed, even if the space is different from what people think “traditional music venues” are. I also discuss the claim that venues are “cultural” and not “political” and argue that cultural institutions can be political if they are engaging in acts of resistance or contributing to the public sphere.

Utilizing my research in this chapter, I introduce a few main arguments. I expand on my concept of musical communities to say that music venues allow people to form an acoustic
community based on the shared experience of attending performances. I look at the idea of “soft” politics to claim that venues often use small acts of resistance to rebel against the state, and they are rebelling against the state simply by being a space for public assembly and allowing the free flow of ideas. By being spaces that allow dialogue and debates, venues are examples of public spaces that contribute to the public sphere. The claim that venues are “cultural” and not “political” actually gives them more room to allow open discussion than other movements. These ideas will continue to be expanded upon as we look at each individual artistic space.

**El Sawy Culture Wheel**

Of all the music venues in Cairo, El Sawy Culture Wheel is probably the most famous. It is one of the first non-government owned cultural spaces in Cairo and many international acts are known to perform at the space. It was established in 2003 by Mohamed El Sawy, who chose its location in Zamalek after seeing its current condition serving as a garbage dump and refuge for the homeless and drug addicts. The founder was the son of Abdel-Moneim El Sawy, a 20th century journalist, novelist, and Minister of Culture and Information under President Anwar al-Sadat. El Sawy’s mission, as stated on its official website is, “El Sawy Culture Wheel values human beings without any kind of classification. All visitors are treated equally regardless of their social, official, and economic status”.

In terms of the physical space of the venue, El Sawy Culture Wheel is a cultural center lying on a 5,000 square meter area under the 15th of May Bridge on Zamalek Island. The space includes one indoor and two outdoor industrial-style concert spaces, four libraries (including a music library), two large green spaces and a small paved terrace on the banks of the Nile. All of the halls have different names such as “River”, “Word”, and “Wisdom”, reflecting the
location and vision of the venue. The venue itself is nestled between the structure of the 15\textsuperscript{th} of May Bridge, the surrounding roads, and the Nile River. Bedour Ahmed and Basil Kamel, two architects interested in community spaces, suggest that the physical location of the venue itself lends to a project of urban community renewal.\textsuperscript{155} When I had the opportunity to attend a concert at El Sawy, I watched a performance in River Hall, a semi-outdoor space holding a capacity of 1500 people and the largest performing space in the venue. The versatility of the space suggests an emphasis on the wide variety of cultural events that occur at this venue. These events include yoga and music classes, lectures, films, summer camps, art exhibitions, and of course a wide range of concerts.\textsuperscript{156} Therefore, El Sawy is not just a concert venue but also a comprehensive artistic center dealing with many different mediums of art. Even in terms of concerts, the space provides shows from a wide range of genres, from the most well-known artists in the Middle East to very obscure groups that don’t have many other options of spaces to perform in Cairo.

There are debates as to whether El Sawy plays not only a cultural role, but a political role as well. According to Lillie Gordon, who wrote a comprehensive review about the venue in 2008, the administrators had started to gear the center’s programs towards social justice and artistic activism. She described how a large poster on the venue’s grounds announced 2007 as the “Year of Rights” and how the website promoted quality of life campaigns in the face of expanding capitalist ideologies in Egypt.\textsuperscript{157} The venue also made a political statement by the genres that were allowed to perform there. Heavy metal is a genre that is not tolerated by the Egyptian government. Authorities had branded all heavy metal musicians and fans as Satanists; dozens of heavy metal fans were arrested and charged with contempt for religion, in an effort by the state to essentially ban metal concerts.\textsuperscript{158} According to Mark LeVine, a musical historian, El Sawy Culture Wheel was one of the few venues in Egypt where heavy metal was played.\textsuperscript{159}
LeVine viewed Egyptian heavy metal as “obliquely political but not publicly political” and acknowledged that the genre was an outlet for kids who had no other place where they could fight against the system.\(^\text{160}\) Because heavy metal concerts were essentially illegal, it was a political statement for El Sawy to allow metal bands to play at their venue. Whether intentional or not, it was a form of resistance. Mark LeVine calls Mohammed El Sawy a “bit problematic” but nevertheless, “his space still deserves a lot of credit for allowing young people to talk outside what the government and the conservatives in society want to allow”.\(^\text{161}\)

According to two graduate students at the American University in Cairo, the center took an even stronger presence after the 2011 revolutions as the forum for several debates and performances, adding a political dimension to the music scene in Cairo.\(^\text{162}\) One clue from the venue’s website that it supported the revolution was that revolutionary singer Ramy Essam had played multiple shows there. Ramy Essam was one of the most influential singers to perform in Tahrir Square during the revolution. He performed a song called “Leave”, which explicitly called for Mubarak to step down, on stage at Tahrir Square with thousands of people singing along. The video of this song also became a hit that attracted millions of views on YouTube.\(^\text{163}\) He was arrested by the army and was tortured and beaten up inside the National Museum, which caused even more outrage. Now he is somewhat of a celebrity in Egypt and NPR reporter Steve Inskeep described him as “the singer of the Egyptian revolution”.\(^\text{164}\) It is therefore telling that El Sawy Culture Wheel would feature such an explicitly political artist. By looking at some of the groups that have performed at the venue, El Sawy stands out as a place for rebellious youth to meet like-minded people, debate controversial ideas, and listen to artists that were actively rebelling against the government, either through their lyrics or the type of music that they played.
El Sawy Culture Wheel caters to a wide variety of socioeconomic groups. While El Sawy Culture Wheel is probably not catered to the very elite of Egypt (one example is that there was no available toilet paper in the bathrooms), El-Sawy is located in Zamalek, an old aristocratic neighborhood in Cairo, and one of the trendiest places for young and educated Egyptians to live and visit. The neighborhood has refused to have a metro line in the area for fear of giving the lower class too much access into their spaces.\textsuperscript{165} Regardless, the street that El Sawy is on is unassuming, and cheap tickets for most of the shows allow people of lower classes to enjoy the venue as well as the middle and upper class. Even though the programming indicates that people of a variety of social classes visit the venue, it is still able to look like a “legitimate” venue in the eyes of the government compared to some other underground music venues due to the connections of the management and its location in a respectable area.

I had the opportunity to visit El Sawy Culture Wheel and attend a concert while I was in Egypt. The performance I saw was of Ali Al Helbari, a Sufi band that recited the Quran through contemporary music. This style of religious music has recently become more popular, but is still considered unorthodox by older and more conservative Muslims who believe that verses of the Quran should not be altered. I saw the concert in River Hall, a large, semi-outdoor performance space packed with fans. Most of the audience was young, probably in their mid-twenties. Probably more than half of the audience was women, some wearing headscarves and some not. Therefore, the venue attracted both a religious crowd and a secular crowd. There was a very communal feel to the show. The audience would sing along to the music and there was a lot of call-and-response. The audience seemed to know most of the songs by heart (perhaps because the lyrics were verses from the Quran) and there was coordinated chanting and clapping.
I tried to schedule an interview with the manager of the venue to learn more about its cultural significance. I sent him a list of the questions I had for him. These questions were simple and straightforward, and none of them mentioned the government or the revolution. I asked things like what kind of people attended the shows, what kinds of bands performed, and how the venue was created. Unfortunately, he refused to speak with me because “he didn’t want to talk about politics.” I was taken aback by his refusal. The sense I had gotten from researching the venue was that it was progressive and not afraid to discuss political issues. I had sent the manager a list of non-political questions, and his response was that he didn’t want to discuss politics.

A journalist and academic who will remain anonymous at the Center for Political and Strategic Studies claimed in a lecture that El Sawy controls the alternative music scene in Egypt. It provides youth with a nicely packaged “underground” music venue, but the state uses it to control youth. It is clear that the owner of El Sawy has some ties with the state after previously being Minister of Culture, and it is theorized that the owner cut a deal with the state allowing them to feature a variety of alternative acts, but nothing too radical or political that could upset the government order. These claims shocked me– I had visited El Sawy Culture Wheel expecting it to be some kind of mecca for underground music and radicalism, and now I was being told that it’s actually a tool used by the state to subvert the youth into a false sense of security!

The truth is that El Sawy Culture Wheel is a complicated venue with a lot of nuance. It can’t be denied that the venue took some risks in inviting controversial artists and bands to perform. However, while El Sawy promotes the democratic exchange of ideas, there is some self-censorship due to fear of government interference. Too much criticism of the state can be grounds for cancellation of performances, and there have been music venues that have been shut
down by the state for being too critical. As Lillie Gordon puts it, “the principle of freedom of choice and freedom of expression that El Sawy endorses seem to be constantly shaded by fears of going too far, and perhaps shape the venue’s diverse but not necessarily subversive program.” The managers of the venue may have chosen to work with the state instead of against it. The venue also caters to an audience that is better-educated and of a higher socioeconomic status than the average Egyptian. But this is not necessarily a bad thing. Because of the owner’s connections to the government as the son of the former Minister of Culture, the venue can actually get away with things that a lot of other spaces couldn’t. Since the government trusts this venue, people in the space can feel safe to share their thoughts and have frank discussions without the fear of being spied upon. As will be discussed further in the chapter, most forms of collective action in Egypt are illegal. El Sawy presents a legal way that people can meet each other, appreciate art, and discuss ideas.

**El Rab3**

The next venue I looked at is called El Rab3. El Rab3 is an underground music venue and cultural space inside of a larger library in Old Cairo. It hosts a variety of concerts, events, and lectures. It used to function as a nursery before it was abandoned and then became a music performance space and library. The fact that it is both a venue and a library is interesting because it lends credence to the idea that cultural spaces give people knowledge and it shows how versatile the venue can be; people can browse through different books as they wait to watch a performance. One thing I saw when researching El Rab3 was an invitation for a show happening on February 27th called “Underground Revolution.” I thought it was bold of them to call it a revolution after all of the actual revolutions that occurred in Egypt.
I visited El Rab3 while I was in Egypt. El Rab3 is located in the middle of Old Cairo, which is both a major tourist attraction while at the same time being a neighborhood for the lower-middle class. To get to El Rab3, I took a long, treacherous Uber ride that had us navigating narrow streets and badly paved roads. The location of El Rab3 suggests that the management is part of the middle or possibly even lower class, as the most “prestigious” venues in Cairo are all located in ritzier areas, like Zamalek. On the other hand, the fact that it is difficult to get to El Rab3 gives it an “exclusive” and certainly “underground” vibe. Therefore, El Rab3 can cater to a class that is certainly not elite, while still functioning as a hip venue for people “in the know.”

When I visited El Rab3, I interviewed the head of public relations, booking, and social media, a young man who calls himself Darco. Well versed in the Egyptian underground music scene, he is also a student studying engineering and he works at a French news agency called France 24. I asked Darco about the kinds of bands he books at El Rab3. “El Rab3 is a place for underground bands and independent artists,” Darco said. “Not pop music. Music for the people. People speak about love too much in pop music. I want something that speaks about youth, philosophy, and daily life.” Darco hinted that underground artists might bring up themes about Egyptian society that would not have been sung by mainstream pop artists. I asked him about the type of audience that comes to the shows and he said it depends. Youth music like rock bands or hip-hop groups would usually attract younger crowds, while traditional Sufi music might attract an older, more religious audience. Tickets to shows were cheap, which suggests that the venue attracts an audience from a wide array of social classes, especially young college students. Darco commented that people don’t just come to concerts and leave. Because there is a café and library attached, people often hang out at El Rab3 long before a concert starts. This means a diverse
group of people is mingling and meeting each other at this venue, sharing a communal cultural experience.

Underground music venues often face problems with the government. Darco told me that there aren’t enough independent venues right now, but the scene is definitely growing. Sometimes, the government will randomly shut down a venue. El Rab3 usually doesn’t run into trouble, but one time the venue faced backlash from the government when a group associated with an opposition political party performed there. Because of this, Darco says that El Rab3 steers away from politics and focuses purely on culture. “We don’t have the best conditions to speak about politics right now,” he said. “At a certain point, we stopped focusing on the revolution and just started focusing on music.” While music is El Rab3’s main focus, they also host lectures, workshops, and poetry readings. One popular lecturer that often came to El Rab3 was Nawal el Saadawi, a famous Egyptian feminist writer. El Rab3 prides itself as being a comfortable space for women. Darco commented that usually two thirds of the audience is women, which is significant because women are often discouraged from going out due to sexism and harassment.

Darco may be exclusively focusing on music now, but he had a personal history of being a revolutionary. He was just out of high school when he joined the revolution in 2011. He claimed that he started managing artists and meeting musicians while hanging out in Tahrir Square during the revolution. He said he developed his political awareness at the same time that he was meeting musicians and beginning to manage artists. Darco was injured by a smoke bomb while in Tahrir Square, but he does not regret participating in the revolution. “The revolution changed everyone,” Darco said. “When I think about something new, I realize that my thought
process stemmed from the revolution. During my time in Tahrir, I learned about underground music at the same time as I was learning about thinkers like Marx and Nietzsche."\textsuperscript{177}

El Rab3 is an example of a music venue that may have been influenced by the revolution. As Darco indicated, many of the connections he made for booking at the venue were from Tahrir Square. While the venue identifies as just cultural and non-political, the venue engages in subtle forms of resistance against the state as there are lectures by well-known feminists and performances by underground groups that would not be allowed to perform at government-owned venues. These lectures contribute to a sphere of public discourse and different forms of knowledge are simultaneously shared through literature, lectures, and music. El Rab3 functions as a safe place for people to gather and form communities, especially for college students and women.

Other important venues

There are of course, other important music venues and performance spaces in Cairo. One of them is Darb 1718. I learned about Darb 1718 because I was told that they`ve collaborated with El Rab3. Established in 2008 by Moataz Nasr, Darb 1718 is a contemporary arts and culture center located in Old Cairo.\textsuperscript{178} As a registered non-profit and charity organization, Darb 1718 seeks to encourage experimentation by exploring new works by emerging artists.\textsuperscript{179} As can be seen from the website, it features two contemporary art galleries, two live performance stages, a large outdoor cinema, workshop areas, roof lounges, and artist-in residence studio and living space. One critic said it “acts as a trampoline to advance the burgeoning contemporary art movement in Egypt.”\textsuperscript{180} Another important music venue in Cairo is the Cairo Jazz Club, which has also collaborated with El Rab3. Cairo Jazz Club is a restaurant and music venue, acting as both a
social space and a performance space. This concept is getting more popular in Egypt, as cafés with live acts are opening up and starting to gain popularity. Popular among young (generally upper-class) Egyptians, Cairo Jazz Club is an independent venue and an example of Cairo’s growing nightclub scene.

Influential performance spaces in Cairo aren’t limited to traditional music venues. Vibe Studio is an example of a new movement in Cairo that has advanced music facilities and technological expertise. In the words of Maha ElNawabi, journalist for Mada Masr, “Music and social movements have always gone hand in hand. In Cairo’s case, the nation-wide curfew, combined with burgeoning music making platforms, new resources, fresh talent, and experienced producers, is creating an interesting breeding ground for emerging artists during these times of crisis.” Since opening in 2011, the multi-room studio and musical instrument store has become a rehearsal space for many independent artists. In reaction to the curfew that had taken place after the revolution, Vibe Studio offered heavily discounted overnight packages, allowing musicians to book studio spots from the start of curfew until it ended in the morning at 6 AM. This is a creative way of using government repression and a tense political climate to actually increase revenue and create a closer artistic community. ElNawabi concludes, “Overall, the studio is a creative refuge for independent musicians looking to rehearse in a creative or collective environment. The largest room, which holds up to 60 people, is also the perfect space for intimate live studio performances or open jam sessions.”

Finally, underground music festivals have become more popular in Cairo. Disillusioned with what they saw as the low quality commercial pop music available, a group of young musicians began an ambitious project meant to share original, underground music. The result was Cairo Music Festival, a highly diverse festival that featured rock, metal, reggae, jazz, and
hip-hop. The event, which happened in 2006, was free and over 15,000 people attended. The founder of the festival, 28-year-old Ousso, said, “I decided to create a platform for good music, original music, underground music. Confidence is low in Egypt. People tend to imitate more than innovate.” Ousso claims he is aiming to begin a “musical revolution.” It is interesting that Ousso would use the word revolution to describe the festival, only a few years prior to the actual revolution. For Ousso, “music should touch your mind and heart and have a message.” The festival wasn’t afraid to push boundaries. The festival openly had metal bands perform, which was a big risk since many metal fans and musicians had been arrested for liking the genre. Because the founder of this festival called it a “revolution” and because the festival allowed taboo acts to perform, the event as a whole can be seen as a form of state resistance.

**Opera on the Balcony**

Finally, Opera on the Balcony is not a music venue at all but a movement that changes the way that we think about performance spaces completely. Opera on the Balcony is an initiative where young Egyptian singers perform classical operatic songs on a balcony over a street. It is the third of a series of tours called “Art of Transit” that intend to bring art to public spaces through street performances and artistic interventions; the tours aim to boost access to art, whether in terms of viewing art or creating it. Its goal is to create a dialogue between artist and audience and present performances that tackle major issues affecting mankind. It started popping up in cities around Egypt including Port Said, Damietta, Mansoura, and Cairo.

There is nothing inherently radical about this project; singers simply sing classical songs in a casual setting, often only wearing their pajamas. However, the effect that this type of performance is having brings into question the entire fabric of Egyptian society. It breaks down
barriers between the elite and lower class, since people are singing a genre thought of as “elite” in often lower class neighborhoods. It blurs the line between the public and private sphere as people are often singing the songs from the balcony of their own homes to a public space. Since the government doesn’t allow street demonstrations, this is an opportunity for people to legally assemble on the street. After all, nothing anyone is doing is illegal, and who would arrest someone for singing on a balcony? It also raises questions about gender divisions as many women participate in this program since it is safe for them to perform on a balcony without the fear of physical harassment. Opera on the Balcony is an example of how youth movements are moving away from “hard politics” to softer initiatives that nevertheless raise interesting questions in the public sphere. Opera on the Balcony can’t really be considered a music venue but at the same time it makes us question what a music venue has to be. It begs the question that perhaps any space where there is performance can be a venue. I included this initiative because it expands the idea of what are public spaces and a performance spaces.

The Larger Effects of these Venues

In this chapter I make the claim that music venues often engage with acts of resistance against the government. All of these music venues insist that they are not political and are instead just cultural. I argue that the events that occur and the space of the venues themselves can often have political implications. I define political as anything that contributes to the public sphere and anything that can be considered a form of resistance. By public sphere, I am using Habermas’s definition as a space where citizens’ engagement in critical discussion about public issues is mediated. The music venues I have discussed contribute to the public sphere because they are not only a space where there is musical performance, but also a space where debates and ideas
are talked about. Even if these topics don’t directly critique the government (although they sometimes do), they still deal with issues affecting Egyptian daily life, like poverty, human rights, and gender inequality, all issues that are in some way related to the government. People are able to make connections with each other and they become part of an “acoustic community”, as it was previously defined in my chapter on the Ultras.

So how are these venues contributing to revolution in Egypt? First of all, there’s a trend of calling shows or events “revolutions.” We can see this when El Rab3 puts on a concert called “Underground Revolution” or when the founder of Cairo Music Festival calls his event “a musical revolution.” Whether consciously or unconsciously, it sends a strong message about the nature of the venue and through semiotics it creates indexical connections with music venues and revolution. Secondly, these venues all participate in small acts of resistance. These include allowing metal artists to play at shows when it is illegal to play metal in public, providing a space for artists to stay and play music after curfew is called, and including artists and lecturers that are either radical feminists or known revolutionaries. To put it a step further, the mere existence of non-government affiliated music venues is an act of resistance because they are separate from state-enforced cultural hegemony, a concept coined by Gramsci. These venues are breaking down the ideas of social class, gender, and the distinction between public and private spheres.

Music venues in Egypt helped lead to the buildup that eventually became revolution. Artists like Ramy Essam, who performed during the 2011 revolution in Tahrir Square, can be seen performing at these venues; the same demographic of people who were prominent in the 2011 revolution (youth and educated but non-elite university students) are also seen at many of these venues; and the revolution seemed to directly influence at least some of these venues, as
the booking manager at El Rab3 made many of his connections in Tahrir Square. These venues claim not to be political and merely cultural. But when I asked the owner of El Sawy questions about the venue’s “culture” he told me he didn’t want to talk about “politics”, suggesting that there was a political undercurrent to what was going on. And while the main focus of these spaces are for enriching arts and culture in Egypt, it appears evident that arts and culture can often have substantial political effects.
Looking Forward: The Cycle of Musical Networks Continues in a New Era

It is now six years after the Arab Spring. In some ways the Middle East is permanently and fundamentally changed while in other ways things are essentially the same. The revolutions that happened in the Arab World did not all have happy endings; Syria became much worse after the revolution, plunging into a civil war that still has not been resolved. Egypt and Tunisia had the only revolutions that ended in regime change. And yet in Tunisia, poverty, terrorism, and political dysfunction are still pressing issues for the general public. In Egypt, President Sisi is as repressive as President Mubarak was, arguably even worse. There are more political prisoners today than ever before and the economic system is the worst it has ever been. The state has cracked down on civil rights, like the right to assemble and protest. Once again, citizens are looking for different ways to resist since overt political action is not an option; throughout my trip to Egypt, people told me that music and art is currently the safest and most effective form of resistance.

Music played an integral role in creating networks of resistance that led to the Arab Spring. Music was not the only space where this happened, but it provided one of the most important and accessible spaces for fostering political engagement under repressive regimes. Throughout my thesis, I highlight the ways in which acoustic communities can eventually lead to collective action and mass mobilization. This can be seen in the shared experiences of concert attendees in Cairo, of hip-hop artists in Tunisia, and especially of The Ultras, radical soccer fans that became active performers and revolutionaries. These communities were often formed through repeated small acts of resistance, which along with semiotic processes shifted public opinion and inspired large social movements. Music had the unique capability of fostering movements precisely because it was not seen as political; governments were rarely concerned
about artistic spaces, seeing them mainly as a safety valve where people could release their frustrations through the catharsis of music. When governments did respond harshly to artists, the public was shocked and outraged, seeing it as a breach of trust and social contract.

While this thesis focused exclusively on the Arab Spring in Egypt and Tunisia, the musical networks are global and can be applied on a broader scale. After all, the Tunisian hip-hop community expressed solidarity with American hip-hop artists, strengthening their own meaning in relation to their genre and political systems of oppression. We see examples of music shaping politics throughout history, like the civil rights movement and even the rise of the Nazi party. It is my hope that this thesis will allow people in the future to pay closer attention to the ways that arts and culture, particularly music can create networks of resistance that eventually lead to collective action. Revolutions never come out of nowhere and early signs of resistance can be seen years earlier if artistic spaces are looked at more closely. By legitimizing music’s place in politics, we are honoring the labor and activism that many acoustic communities have not been given credit for. Especially in repressive regimes, looking at how people use art for small acts of resistance can be important clues to determining if a state is on the verge of revolution.

One may ask if these musical networks survived or if it is a new era. From my experience being in Egypt, I see the cycle continuing. The relationship between music and politics is reciprocal. Throughout this thesis, I have demonstrated how music can affect politics, while at the same time, political struggles are constantly changing the way that music is performed and interpreted. We see this both in the way that the songs of the Ultras become more politicized as time goes on, reflecting the fraught political situation, and we see this in the way that El Rab3 was formed through connections made during the Arab Spring. This cycle can hypothetically
continue indefinitely. Acoustic networks of resistance form during repressive regimes, there is revolution, a new repressive regime takes hold, and the networks begin again. Currently in Egypt, we see new acoustic communities forming along with old networks that continue to play an important role in resistance. Youth are moving away from “hard politics” to softer initiatives that nevertheless contribute to the public sphere. Despite the repressive political climate, culture is changing. New debates about gender are emerging, like the rights to abortion, rights to marry, and questioning religious conservatism. Even though street music is now banned, there is a growing list of underground artists and venues. One symbol perfectly summarizes the situation—an activist walks the spatial course of the 2011 revolution in Tahrir wearing a shirt that says, “Still January 25th.”

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