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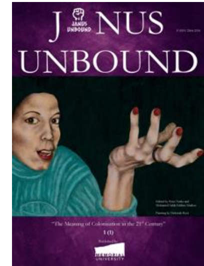

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Review of *Music in Conflict: Palestine, Israel and the Politics of Aesthetic Production* by Nili Belkind

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Louis Brehony

Belkind, Nili. *Music in Conflict: Palestine, Israel and the Politics of Aesthetic Production*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 130 pages.

The intensification of both Zionist repression and grassroots resistance across historic Palestine in May 2021 starkly contrasted Israel's indiscriminate colonial terror with a revolutionary surge of young people embracing their Palestinian roots through mass anger and political culture on the streets. Musicians were drawn into the confrontation, notably with the violent arrest of contrabassist Mariam Afifi in Jerusalem, the siege of Lydd targeting DAM and other musicians, and with Israel's aerial obliteration of the Mashariq studio in Ansar, Gaza. Highlighting the progressive nationalism at the heart of Palestinian counter-mobilizations, singer Rola Azar threw herself into leftist campaigning in Nazareth, while bands of street musicians accompanied strike action with songs of *sumud* (steadfastness) and resistance in Haifa, Ramallah, and many other locations. In Gaza, as with the Israeli bombing of the Said al-Mashal theatre in August 2018, youth have again performed Ibrahim Touqan's "Mawtini" ("My Homeland") and other anthems in the rubble. Musicians have mobilized for Palestine.

These events in themselves suggest renewed significance for research on the politics and aesthetics of Palestinian music-making, or analysis of the spaces and barriers found by performers. This book by Israeli academic Nili Belkind, however, sidesteps a "domination-resistance binary" (26) that sees progressive agency in the political and cultural movements to free Palestine, and instead strives to break down the "binary" of coexistence and national liberation (224). Examining Palestinian-Israeli musical "border-zones," Belkind aims to understand the role music-making takes in the formation of identities and communities, with chapter material built around ethnographies of performing musicianship in the occupied West Bank, Jerusalem, Yafa, and Tel Aviv. These include the Western orchestral and Indigenous musicianship of the Kamandjati project in Ramallah, the performances of '48 Palestinian vocalist Amal Murkus on Israeli platforms, and the street-level gigging of Israeli band System Ali. But by carefully

selecting certain musical narratives and silencing others, Belkind promotes collaborationist approaches to music and politics that "deconstruct Palestinianness," reject the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, and reinforce the normalization of Zionist rule.

Through the history of the conflict, as Belkind terms it, "music has served to mediate the construction of competing social imaginaries in this contested land" (2). At the centre of Belkind's narrative are a set of arguments seen here as indexing the post-Oslo era, which has given rise to a "fraught and complicated cultural politics of music-making in Palestine-Israel" (3). For Belkind, this context sparks performative imaginaries that are post-national, post-armed struggle and, as expressed through culture, have outgrown notions of resistance, *sumud*, and Palestinian national liberation. Responding to Kun's call for theorizing the "aural border" (2005), Belkind seeks to interrogate performative space on "both sides of the border," yet the "border" itself is largely undefined. This allows for exploration of the sometimes collaborative but usually Israeli-dominated music-making in Yafa and Jerusalem, alongside ethnographic analysis of orchestral musicianship in the West Bank, where Belkind was employed rather covertly at the Kamandjati conservatory run by Ramzi Aburedwan in Ramallah (35).

Though the stated aim of the book is to problematize the twin "tropes" of Palestinian resistance and Israeli- and Western-backed "coexistence" projects, Belkind's advocacy clearly favours the latter. A key example is the annual oud festival in occupied Jerusalem, set up by forces allied to the Zionist mayoralty with the aim of promoting Israeli leadership of "oriental" music, claiming ownership of Middle East music traditions and reinforcing spatial domination of the colonized Palestinian capital. Narrating the 2011 festival, by which time Palestinians had led a determined and successful campaign for a boycott, Belkind focuses on Amal Murkus, who sang at the event in defiance of the calls to boycott by the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel, which had labelled the event an "embodiment of Zionist cultural imperialism."

According to Belkind's counter-narrative, the BDS marked the point at which: "Culture became not only a resource but a harnessed weapon, the very terrain of battle" (199). Framed in this way, in direct opposition to the BDS, decades of cultural erasure, colonial theft, and the whitewashing of the outright terror visited upon musicians and other Palestinians within and outside historic Palestine, anti-colonial movements are blamed for conditions of "liminality"—actually, ethnic cleansing—and for creating "hard choices" for '48 Palestinians in particular. That stolen pre-Nakba musical artefacts remain hidden in Zionist archives is not mentioned. In light of the re-emergence of a sense of national unity among oppressed Palestinian citizens of Israel, such arguments and omissions appear dismissive and opposed to the principled stands taken by Rola Azar, Saied Silbak, and Khaled Jubran, to name a few of the many who refuse to work within the Israeli cultural establishment. Indeed, Belkind's response to Jubran's denunciations of the "oud festival" are where the cracks widen in her claim to stand for a third way between coexistence and resistance:

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> The boycotters' appropriation of Middle Eastern culture as the sole propriety of Palestinians in Palestine-Israel negates a long history of Jewish participation in, and contributions to, Middle Eastern music (Seroussi 2010). It also positions Israel as solely the product of colonial Western interventions in the Middle East, as represented by its Ashkenazi (i.e. occidental) elite. This process of essentialization is the outcome of a national movement wanting to establish its own cohesive grand narrative. (218)

In contradistinction to a Palestinian narrative, however, Belkind highlights Israeli musicians "on the ground" whose works "blur" or "change" meanings associated with either resistance or coexistence. Among these are the Yafa-based band System Ali, whose performances are charted through the liberal Zionist "tent city" protests that accompanied the global Occupy movements of 2011. With no sense of irony—or any reference to recent intifadas, Land Days, or other mobilizations—the Tel Aviv protests became the first "sense of community, empowerment, and common purpose" seen "in decades" (157). Narrating the band's use of Hebrew, Russian, and Arabic, Belkind misses the point that attempts to "contain all subject positions" (176) effectively shackle any opposition to Zionism itself. System Ali frequently make statements on their pride at being Israeli, accepting funding from Zionist institutions, and rejecting the pro-Palestine stand taken by DAM (189).

At one point, we read an anecdote about the System Ali concert in Tel Aviv "tent city" interrupted by a man holding a Palestinian flag and "yelling." The reader does not learn what he was "yelling." In an earlier chapter on West Bank concerts under occupation, world renowned Palestinian oud player and supporter of the resistance, Ahmed al-Khatib, isn't given a surname and we don't hear from him either. During sections on Kamandjati leader Aburedwan, Belkind repeats tropes critiqued by Willson, whose work describes his presentation to European audiences as playing "the civilised man among barbarians," through insistence that his instrument represented an alternative to violence (Willson 2013, 286). In Belkind, the contradictions of Western-funded NGOization remain unexplored, while US "goodwill" gestures like sending Israeli musicians on West Bank tours are taken at face value and opposing voices go unheard. Following ethnomusicologist Benjamin Brinner—whose work praised "Israeli-Arab" collaborations and attacked the work of Sabreen, Simon Shaheen, and even Murkus (Brinner 2009)— the narrative of Belkind promotes "the good Arab" who accepts Israeli rule, rather than one who performs openly for Palestine. Both assert that the issue is "complicated." Yet both oppose boycotts of Israel.

Such points clarify claims made earlier in the text, where the history of Palestinian musicianship is presented statically, through what Belkind sees as a post-1967 dichotomy between "martial hymns" mixed with "indigenous (*sha'bi*) genres" (15). Drawing on McDonald's view on the prominence of folklore amidst declining armed struggle (again, Gaza in May 2021 has overtaken them both), Belkind sees an "ideology of silence" in national liberationist politics and music, where "resistance through violence" overwhelmed "production of knowledge" (16). In her view, "resistance"—almost always in parentheses and seen as a fetish

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of Western analyses rather than having any grassroots agency—equates to hegemony and the suppression of individuality (16). Likewise, *sumud* is referred to in the past tense as "mundane survival" (147), rather than as having enduring political and collective relevance. Through this standpoint, rich fields of *watani* (nationalist or patriotic) and *thawri* (revolutionary) Palestinian musicianship are elided, including broad aesthetic experiments accompanying waves of liberation struggle within Palestine and in places of exile. Intifadas of music are replaced in this narrative by "post-national" collaboration, Israeli liberalism, and Western orchestral projects whose class privilege and European-bought curricula are never discussed.

The language employed by Belkind is worthy of attention. Reporting unproblematically on Israel's oud festival allows repeated reference to Jerusalem as a "contested" city in the midst of a "violent conflict," while the Kamandjati concert aimed at "sounding Palestine in disputed territory." At no point does the reader learn that Jerusalem is occupied; uncoincidentally, Belkind works at Hebrew University, built on stolen land in East Jerusalem. Through this casual narrative, Israeli violence and blockade of Gaza is seen as a "response" to both the intifada (3) and Hamas (9), while 1948 can be reinscribed as a war of "independence" (9). Elsewhere in the book, Belkind speaks about the "sense of exile" of '48 Palestinians but doesn't describe the material realities of economic, political, and cultural apartheid faced by those from families internally displaced in 1948. Significantly, the important theme of normalization largely appears in parentheses. Despite pleas to undermine resistance-coexistence binaries, the language of the colonizer fundamentally shapes the narrative.

Palestinian voices are, in reality, few and far between in this text, and in Brinner's, and are highlighted largely when they favour accommodation with Israel and work in opposition to BDS. Important musical figures like Ahmad al-Khatib and the influential Khaled Jubran are mentioned only in passing, with their commitments to musical resistance and pro-boycott narratives dismissed or, in the case of al-Khatib, totally ignored.

Alternatives to Belkind's liberal Zionist position on politics and musical aesthetics are found in the forms of national unity and political creativity springing to life during the new uprising. With the explosion of solidarity over the colonizations of Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan, the onslaught on Gaza, and in facing down internal state terror, grassroots musical expressions have ranged from the nationalized *tarab* of Nai Bargouthi's *Raj'een* (We're Returning), to makeshift street versions of Walid Abdisalam's 1980s socialist anthem *Nzilna 'al-Shawarya* (We Went Down to the Streets), while rapper Daboor depicts in vivid terms the bullets of Sheikh Jarrah.

As artist Fadi Wahsha, son of *buzuq* player Rami, lay dying after being shot in the head by Israeli occupying forces in Ramallah, troops of the same battalions videoed themselves singing Mohammad Assaf's *Dammi Falastini* (My Blood is Palestinian), changing its words to *Dammi Israeli*. Culture and music remain weapons in the war between the colonized and the imperialist-backed colonizer. The Palestinian counterattack needs to be amplified, not obfuscated.

Independent Scholar

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Biography

Louis Brehony is an activist, musician and scholar of culture and politics in Palestine and the Arab world. His work includes the 2020 film *Kofia: A Revolution Through Music*, currently on international release, and the forthcoming book *Strings of the Street*, on Palestinian musicianship and resistance in exile.

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