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Abstract: This article explores a number of issues concerning the representation of Iranian popular music outside Iran, and specifically the somewhat romanticized discourses of 'resistance' and 'freedom' which have tended to characterise both journalistic and scholarly writings. The article discusses a number of examples, but focuses primarily on the case of the music video 'Happy in Tehran', which was posted on YouTube in 2014 and which challenged certain local cultural and legal boundaries on behaviour in public space. As a result, those responsible for the video were arrested, prompting an outcry, both within Iran and internationally; they were released soon after and eventually received suspended sentences. The article discusses the ways in which the 'Happy in Tehran' incident was reported in the media outside Iran and offers alternative readings of the video and its meanings. Ultimately, the article considers how such reductionist views feed into wider regimes of orientalist representation and asks whose agenda such fetishisation of resistance serves.

Keywords: Iranian popular music; resistance discourses; orientalisng; representation; discourses of resistance; 'Happy in Tehran'.

Introduction

In a 2013 article titled "Classy Kids and Down-at-Heel Intellectuals: Status Aspiration and Blind Spots in the Contemporary Ethnography of Iran", Zuzanna Olszewska (2013) notes the tendency within the English-language literature on Iranian urban youth culture to focus on "social phenomena that are interpreted as acts of resistance to and rebellion against the political establishment and the moral order it espouses" (p. 842). She discusses several examples of such writing, predominantly by diaspora Iranians based in the US or Europe, and goes on to present case studies from her ethnographic work which illustrate the limits of such claims in the context of Iran's complex class dynamics and profound social divides. One particularly striking example is the story of a young woman ("A.") from a poor neighbourhood of south Tehran who participated in the pre-election rallies in support of reformist presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi in 2009, not because she was a supporter, but because of the opportunity to mix with more affluent north Tehranis – particularly young men - without them looking down on her as they would most likely do in other contexts. Olszewska quotes from a letter written by A. a few

days before the election and sent (anonymously) to a blogger called "Marjan" who posted it online:

> These nights are the only nights when we are not made fun of for our poverty; this is the only time when nobody asks us which part of town we're from; nobody cares how much our shoes cost; the only thing they care about is that we should be "green."[1] … Why should I give up these nights? Why shouldn't I tie a green ribbon to my hand and take part in the green human chain, a chain in which a boy from a better family is standing next to me, and completely forgets to ask me what my father does, doesn't look at my calloused hands, and laughs courteously at me — but I swear he wouldn't be caught dead passing in front of my house? […]
>
> Which one of these candidates wants to remove this class gap? Dear Marjan, my concerns are not the same as theirs that I might want to vote for their candidate, but I don't want to give up the chance of enjoying myself with them; I lose myself among them but I won't vote for Mousavi [the reformist candidate]—that is, I won't vote for anyone, because none of them understand me; but if and only if I had to vote for someone, it would be for Ahmati [Ahmadinejad] and nobody else. But I am not planning to vote at all
>
> …
>
> On these nights, the residents of Qeytariyeh [an affluent residential neighborhood in north Tehran] smile without prejudice, but from Saturday the tales of sorrow will begin again. […] These nights, I've been shouting "Mir Hossein" [Mousavi] with all my might because the more I shout, the more they smile at me—this is more honorable than selling myself just to see the smile of those who are better than us [*az mā behtarān*]. […] I will take advantage of the few days that are left and I'll shout and dance with the Green Wave. (2013, p. 846)

The events which followed the elections are well documented elsewhere. As Olszewska observes, "We can only wonder whether A. eventually voted in the election that took place a few days later, or if she took part in the 'brokered exuberance' of the post-election protests. We can also wonder if the motivations of many others participating in the protests were not equally subjective and ambivalent. One cannot even say for sure if A. exists or if she was a persona adopted by the blogger Marjan" (2013, p. 846-847).

What this narrative reveals - and the reason for quoting at length from it here - is the need for a more fine-tuned understanding of motivations and why people behave as they do. In this case, A. participates in the rally not through political conviction but from a pragmatic desire for upward social mobility. And yet such motivations are all too easily rendered invisible in a broad-sweep analysis that simply observes packed streets or stadia and concludes that everyone is there

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[1] The campaign colour that was allocated to Mousavi.

to support a particular candidate, or indeed to protest an election result. When I first read Olszewska's article, there was an immediate recognition of something I had long been struggling with in the context of Iranian popular music studies: the extent to which the literature, scholarly and journalistic, has tended too easily to reduce the music to a narrow range of meanings centred on discourses of "resistance" and "freedom", without adequately interrogating both the individual motivations of musicians and the music's reception. Olszewska (2013) notes this same tendency within the broader literature on Iranian youth culture,[2] much of it written from the perspective of diaspora Iranians, observing: "There is a danger that resistance may be seen and romanticized in cases where other analytical categories would more accurately represent actors' intentions and self-perceptions" (p. 847). In this article, I explore these issues in relation to representations of Iranian popular music outside Iran, focusing in particular on the ways in which certain discourses are privileged over others. I ask whose agendas such privileging might serve and how and why certain kinds of music and other art forms come to be positioned in relation to discourses of resistance and liberation, whilst others are less likely to be.

Iranian Popular Music Historiography

As a starting point, it is instructive to trace the historiography of Iranian popular music, to reflect more generally on the factors that shape a particular field of study as it emerges and develops its own character and discourses, and to ask how such discourses become embedded and naturalised within the field as "just the way things are". Prior to the early 2000s Iranian popular music attracted little scholarly attention outside Iran, other than one article by Bruno Nettl (1971) based on his fieldwork in Tehran in 1968-9, brief references elsewhere in his writings, and a few pages in Peter Manuel's 1988 volume *Popular Musics of the Non-Western World: An Introductory Survey* (pp. 167-169). The latter reports mainly on Nettl's earlier findings but includes a final paragraph updating the situation following the 1979 Revolution, the restrictions on popular music that ensued and the emergence of a diaspora pop music industry. These early publications rarely mention the political context within which Iranian popular music operated. Manuel's book was indicative both of a relatively new, but growing, interest in popular music within ethnomusicology at this time, and the parallel emergence of popular music studies as a field of scholarship in its own right in the 1980s. This period also coincided with the rise of the "world music" industry and publications aimed at the lay reader, such as *The Rough Guide to World Music*, the first edition of which (1994) has no entry on Iran. It is worth reflecting on such

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[2] Examples of such writings include Varzi (2006), Khosravi (2008) and Mahdavi (2009).

confluences, and particularly the growth of (most notably Anglophone) popular music studies during the exact same period when the tightest restrictions were in place on popular music production in Iran (1980s and early 90s). It is therefore hardly surprising that so little was published on Iranian popular music at this time, although the lacuna in relation to diaspora pop is less easily explained. In fact, there was little research on Iranian music generally at this time (at home or abroad) and many of those outside Iran who had previously written about the classical music either turned their attention elsewhere or republished earlier work (e.g., Nettl, 1987; Farhat, 1990).

With the end of the war with Iraq in 1988 and a growing cultural liberalisation in the 1990s, popular music started to reappear in the public domain. However, it was the election of reformist President Mohammad Khatami in 1997 and the period of cultural thaw that followed that led to the legalisation of certain kinds of popular music; and in tandem, the emergence of a grass-roots "underground" alternative popular music. Few of the musicians involved in the latter gained, or even aspired to gain, the government permits required for live performance or recording, preferring rather to accrue "subversive capital" through their peripheral and legally ambiguous status (see Nooshin, 2005a). One might point to another convergence, but of a very different kind from the earlier one: between the post-1997 cultural thaw, including moves towards repairing Iran's international relations; the re-entry of popular music into the public domain and the growing alterative popular music scene; and the arrival of internet technology and its gradual embedding in Iranian society.[3] Together, these helped create a conducive environment for both scholarly and journalistic writings on Iranian popular music; and in both cases, such writings latched onto popular music as a barometer of Iran's changing cultural and political climate. Examples in the journalistic press include John Ward Anderson's article 'Roll Over, Khomeini! Iran Cultivates a Local Rock Scene, Within Limits' in the *Washington Post* (2001, August 23). In the context of academia, it is interesting to note the gradual shift away from writings on Iranian classical music, which had previously dominated the field,[4] to what can

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[3] Iran was the second country in the region (after Israel) to gain internet technology, in 1992, and by the late 2000s an estimated 23 million people (out of a population of 75 million at the time of the 2011 census) had internet access (Sreberny and Khiabany 2010:13). The history and growth of internet coverage in Iran is discussed in a number of publications including Graham and Khosravi (2002) and Srerbeny and Khiabany (2010). As I have noted elsewhere, the alternative "underground" music movement was only able to develop as it did through the availability of the internet as a channel of communication between musicians and between musicians and audiences, given that such music was not generally available legally in the public domain (see, for instance, Nooshin, 2005b:472-474).

[4] Although mention should also be made of work on the regional rural traditions and traditional popular musics. Whilst the absence of Iranian popular music from the 1980 edition of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, widely regarded as the touchstone of musicological scholarship (and the first significant update of the dictionary since the 1950s), clearly reflects the more general absence of popular music within musicology at that

arguably be described as an almost obsessional focus on popular music, and particularly post-1997 alternative music. This trend is evidenced by a cursory examination of the literature over the last 10 years or so, and indeed the current volume is clearly part of the same trajectory.[5] In parallel, and slightly predating scholarly writings, were a number of newspaper and other journalistic items, made possible in part by increased ease of travel and access to Iran as well as the growth of Iranian cyberspace. Steward (2013) provides a useful list of articles in European and North American press from the late 1990s onwards.

In his 2001 article "Reflections on Music and Meaning: Metaphor, Signification and Control in the Bulgarian case", Timothy Rice explores the changing social meanings of Bulgarian music through its varying metaphorical positioning "as art", "as commodity", as "social behaviour", and so on. The role of such metaphors in shaping social meanings is particularly interesting in cases where music becomes caught between competing metaphors, often at times of rapid socio-cultural-political change, as I have discussed elsewhere for the case of Iranian popular music (Nooshin 2005a). In the context of the current discussion, what is striking about the body of writings that emerged from the early 2000s is how it took on a particular character and nuance, some of it shaped by publishers and editors as will be discussed below, and much of it feeding into particular representations of Iran outside the country. Specifically, there has been a tendency for popular music's social meanings to be chanelled through a singular metaphor – what might be called "music as resistance" - to the exclusion of other possible meanings. The reasons for this are fairly evident and have been discussed elsewhere, both by myself and others, but it may be useful to summarise them here. Since its arrival in Iran following the Second World War, mass-mediated, "westernised" (as opposed to traditional) popular music has been intimately tied up with contesting discourses of nationhood and belonging, whether in relation to the kind of modernity imagined and promoted by the Pahlavi regime before the 1979 Revolution, and which such popular music in part came to symbolise; the reaction against this after 1979, which led to popular music's discursive positioning alternately as a symbol of western cultural invasion (by those in positions of political

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time, its continued absence in the 2001 edition is quite striking. In both cases, there are two sections: "I. Art Music" (Farhat, 1980) and "II. Folk Music" (Blum, 1980). The latter includes some mention of rural "Popular Entertainment and Dance Music" (section 6).

[5] See Nooshin (2005a, 2005b), Robertson (2005), Breyley (2008), Johnston (2008), Nooshin (2009), Breyley (2010), Robertson (2010), Nooshin (2011), Robertson (2012, 2013a, 2013b), Breyley (2013), Siamdoust (2013), Steward (2013), Breyley (2014). The work of Shay (2000), Kamangar (2004), Hemassi (2010, 2011) and Breyley (2008, 2014a, 2014b) focuses on diaspora pop music; and Hemassi (2013) and Breyley (2010) are two of the only scholarly articles on pre-1979 Iranian pop. This list includes a number of doctoral dissertations. It is interesting to note that a good proportion of this work is by female scholars and I have often wondered at the reasons for this. Certainly, anecdotal evidence suggests that women feel more at ease researching Iranian popular music than the comparatively exclusive and still (despite changes in recent years) largely male-dominated classical music culture.

power) or as a way of subverting state control (by largely middle class Tehranis who wielded economic and cultural capital); through to its later mobilisation by the government as a symbol of post-1997 liberalism and the parallel emergence of an "underground" music scene which extended the earlier discourses of music and subversion. Given the potency of such discourses, it is entirely understandable that the literature on Iranian popular music has tended to focus on socio-political dimensions and specifically on music as a site of resistance or empowerment, particularly for young people. Indeed, it is arguably impossible to understand the history of Iranian popular music since the mid-20th Century without it. At the same time, such a singular focus risks fetishising resistance and ignoring or relegating other equally important aspects of the music to the margins. It also rests on a somewhat reductionist view of a unified oppressive regime acting upon a similarly unified resistant population, something which is far from the reality, as the anecdote from Olszewska illustrates. In general, the tendency to position westernised popular music as having a certain universality within Iranian society as part of a singular youth culture normatively presented as anti-regime and westward-facing is highly problematic and has implications for representations of the music outside Iran, as will be discussed below.

The Fetishisation of Resistance

The fetishisation of resistance in relation to popular music is clearly not specific to Iran and can perhaps be seen at its most essentialised in writings on hip-hop. Thus, in his work on Cuban rap, Geoff Baker (2006) critiques the ways in which some scholars of the genre have "focused on issues of race and resistance, but have paid less attention to hip hop as urban discourse and practice" (p. 215). He argues that, "An exclusive focus on rap as political or protest song largely fails to account for the variety of performance contexts in which it is embedded or for its improvised forms" (p. 218). One of the central problems is that such approaches often demand a reduction of complex political situations to a simple "oppression/resistance" binary which cannot adequately account for the multifaceted dynamics of an oppositional stance which may stand in relation to a whole range of issues. Thus, Baker describes rap parties which whilst "not *explicitly* 'political', are a reaction by young Cubans against a nocturnal environment that currently marginalizes them and, implicitly, against the rampant dollarization and commodification of culture that engendered it" (p. 223), but which are at same time sponsored by the state. Rather than viewing Cuban rap solely through a resistance lens, Baker argues that there are other ways of understanding this music not as a direct statement of "resistance" but rather as an attempt to foreground marginalised voices and to assert ownership over social space. There are clear

parallels with Iran, as will be discussed below. Baker cites the work of Maxwell who notes 'a prevailing "academicized agenda of enlisting youth cultural forms to positions of progressive political agency" (Maxwell, 2013, as cited in Baker, 2006, p. 231) and "a tendency both to simplify and to over-state the political dimensions of cultural practices" (Baker, 2006, p. 231), often accompanied by an uncritical acceptance of musicians' own discourses and self presentation:

> my status as a researcher frequently elicited highbrow explanations for a given person's involvement or engagement with hip-hop. Virtually everyone I met could, to one extent or another, talk the talk: hip-hop was "the voice of the streets;" it was "giving a voice to people who don't have one"; it was, simply, "political." I am not denying that this is, to an extent, the case. It is not, however, the whole story, and it is the other side of the story that does not get written about enough. (Maxwell, 2001, as cited in Baker, 2006, p. 231)

It is precisely "the other side of the story" that I aim to explore in the context of Iran. Within both academic and journalistic writing, the "music as resistance" paradigm is most frequently invoked in relation to popular music genres (hip-hop being a prime example); and unsurprisingly, more generally, in situations of political contestation. These two come together in the critique offered by Swedenburg (2013) of what he regards as the dominance of the "struggle, or resistance, paradigm, the model that has informed most approaches to popular culture in Palestine/Israel" (p. 17), such that 'Only aspects of Palestinian rap that promote the cause of Palestine are deemed worthy of attention and promotion, and therefore sympathetic accounts focus almost exclusively on rap's role in the struggle for Palestinian liberation' (Swedenburg, 2013, p. 18). Discussing the hip-hop group DAM, Swedenburg argues that "A 'resistance' narrative simply does not capture the complicated political and cultural engagements in which DAM is involved in Israel, and the multiple audiences to whom the group speaks" (p. 22). Similarly, Withers (2015) argues that "over-relying on the struggle paradigm to understand musical production and practices in Palestine risks marginalizing voices that do not always already discursively foreground the national, and resistance, in the way that they make sense of their musical practices", noting that the "resistance paradigm is not the only mediatory dynamic that shapes musical practices in contemporary Palestine". Writing about performances by Palestinian musicians at festivals in the UK, she describes how "Almost always, their musical output is made sense of through the 'resistance' paradigm, which is taken to mark out the 'authenticity' of the performers, effectively exoticising and othering them to their audiences", as

well as through essentialized notions of nationhood.[6] Indeed, in the wake of the post-2011 uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa, there has been a marked proliferation of writings about the role of music - particularly popular music - and other art forms in the so-called Arab Spring, much of which focuses almost exclusively on "music as resistance".[7] Whilst scholars such as those mentioned have questioned the hegemony of such discourses, their voices remain a minority and often struggle to be heard against the overriding and more emotive claims of resistance and liberation. Moreover, since the latter tend to assert a monopoly in relation to what might be termed "ethical capital", those advocating a more critical examination of the dominant discourses potentially open themselves to charges of condoning the powers against whom such resistance is directed.

Clearly, writings on Iranian popular music do not operate in a vacuum and the kinds of discourses found more broadly in the literature on popular music elsewhere in the MENA region and beyond have had an impact. In the discussion that follows, I consider two related issues: first, how Iranian popular music, through its prohibition after 1979 and the subsequent emergence of an associated discourse of opposition, has arguably become fetishized as a site of resistance, particularly by those outside Iran. And second, I ask what kind - and crucially, whose – "liberation" is imagined in this way. I discuss one main case study followed by a number of shorter examples, focusing on English-language writings outside Iran, mainly journalistic but with reference also to the academic literature.

Case Study: "Happy in Tehran"

In November 2013, American singer-songwriter Pharrell Williams released a music video of his song "Happy", originally written for the soundtrack to the film *Despicable Me 2* (2013).[8] Billed as "the world's first 24-hour music video", it comprises images of people in Los Angeles dancing and miming along to the song. The video was posted on 24hoursofhappy.com and soon tribute videos started appearing of happy, dancing people from all over the world. To date an

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[6] See also Moreno-Almeida (2017) for similar issues in Moroccan hip-hop.

[7] See, for example, Kimball (n.d.), Wadhan (2014) and other chapters in Werbner, Webb and Spellman-Poots (2014), and a special panel at the 2012 meeting of the American Anthropological Association on "Aesthetics, Politics, and Religion: The Role of (Performing) Arts in the Arab Uprisings", including 4 papers on music: https://aaa.confex.com/aaa/2012/webprogram/Session5312.html (accessed 12.11.16). The introductory chapter to Werbner et al. draws particular attention to the centrality of performative aesthetics in recent protest movements. It is interesting to note two further edited volumes focused broadly on cultural resistance in the MENA region, both published in the preceding year: Laachir and Talajooy (2013a) and Sreberny and Torfeh (2013).

[8] The original song was a best-selling single in the US and the UK and in September 2014 became the most downloaded song to date in the UK; it was in the official UK top 75 chart listings for over a year. The song was also nominated for an Academy Award for Best Original Song and won the 2014 Grammy Award for Best Pop Solo Performance.

estimated 2,000 videos from 153 countries have been posted online, all sharing the same title opening: "Happy in …" Tokyo, Sydney, Mumbai, and so on. A few months after the release, and wanting to be part of this contagious global phenomenon, a group of young Tehranis made a "Happy in Tehran" video and posted it on YouTube with the following tagline:

> We have made this video as Pharrell Williams fans in 8hrs with iPhone 5S.
> "Happy" was an excuse to be happy. We enjoyed every second of making it. Hope
> it puts a smile on your face.[9]

The video is filmed in and around a private home in Tehran and clearly follows the style of other versions of "Happy", with dancing, word miming and playful antics such as handstands conveying a strong sense of the ludic. The end credits also link the video strongly to Pharell, with the six "performers" listed as playing the following roles:

DIRECTOR: SOL[10]

ART DIRECTOR: REIHANE TARAVATI

COSTUMER DESIGNER: AFSHIN SOHRABI

SPECIAL THANKS TO:

NEDA AS PHARELL'S WIFE

BARDIA AS PHARELL

ROHAM AS DETECTIVE

REIHANET AS HAPPY

SPDH as FIRECRACKER

AFSHIN AS FIRECRAKER'S PARTNER

SIAVASH: META-SOUND CHECK

SINA: AUDIENCE

Many aspects of the video, including the dancing and generally high-spirited behaviour, and women without head covering, challenged local cultural norms and legal boundaries on behaviour in public space. Some of the footage was filmed inside the home, but much of it is outside, but still largely within the "private" space of the home - on a balcony, on a flat roof of the kind so ubiquitous in Iran, with views of Tehran in the background - but also in an alley at

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[9] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tg5qdIxVcz8 (dated 20.5.14; accessed 20.6.16).

[10] Sassan Soleimani, a filmmaker and animator who also worked as a photographer for Hassan Rouhani's Presidential election campaign in 2014.

ground level next to the house. Indeed, read from a "local" perspective, the video clearly presents a playful negotiation of the boundaries between public and private - inside and outside - which become significant in ways which are entirely absent from the original and other versions of "Happy" globally.[11] Much has been written about the cultural significance of the public-private divide in Iran (as in other predominantly Islamic societies) and the highly porous nature of what is often presented as an impermeable barrier. In theory, restrictions on music-making and dancing apply equally to public and private domains, and whilst official and unofficial bodies such as the Revolutionary Guards and the *basij* voluntary military have attempted to exert control in the private domain (and still do from time to time), for example by raiding a home if a suspected party is taking place, there has long been a realisation by the state that it is largely powerless to control what happens in private and nowadays it is more usual for a blind eye to be turned to such activities. In the case of "Happy", however, the public nature of its dissemination led to the arrest of those involved and their detention for a short period; they eventually received suspended sentences in September 2014. The arrests prompted an outcry, both in Iran and abroad, as will be discussed below.

In Iran, the separation between public and private space is typically maintained architecturally through high walls and gates, such that the domestic sphere is entirely shielded from the public gaze.[12] Since 1979, however, spaces such as rooftops, the inside of cars and communal basement (often primarily used as) parking areas have acquired a semi-liminal status, being partly in the public domain and partly in the private. The fact that "Happy in Tehran" was filmed in such contested spaces made it potentially problematic, but why this particular music video should have been singled out from among the many others available online showing young Tehranis making music and dancing is unclear. In the context of such attempts to blur the strict public-private binary, sound becomes particularly significant since it is by nature difficult to contain and easily "leaks" across boundaries determined and policed by cultural norms, and more recently by legislation. Such leakiness renders sound potentially subversive, not just in Iran but elsewhere, as discussed by Georgina Born in her work on the

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[11] As Leone (2015) notes, "Windows, balconies, and rooftops can be considered as semi-private, or semi-public space [in Iran], since they represent a threshold between private and public spaces … It should not be forgotten that the Iranian 'semiotics of roofs' is different from the 'semiotics of roofs' of other cultures, for example in the 'Western world': whereas in the 'West' roofs are mostly a non-inhabited surface that covers the spaces inhabited by people, in Iran roofs are themselves an inhabitable surface, for instance in the hot nights of the Iranian summer" (p. 15).

[12] Traditional Iranian architecture further spatialises domestic areas into the *birooni* ("outside") for visitors and others outside the immediate family, and the more private *andarooni* ("inside"), accessible only to family members. There is a strong gender dimension to this divide, discussion of which lies outside the scope of the current article. For a more detailed consideration of the public-private divide in Iran, see Graham and Khosravi (2002).

mediation of public/private boundaries in which she notes the dialectic between the boundary-ma(r)king capacities of music on the one hand, and on the other its potential "agency in disturbing and confusing these boundaries" (Born, 2013, p. 59). She asks:

> … how is it that music and sound, catalysed by their social and technological mediation, engender such a profusion of modes of publicness and privacy? Sometimes constructing strongly bounded zones of experience, sometimes also recursive and nested assemblages – a range of forms of private-within-public, virtual public-within-private, public-within-public, private-within-public-within-private and so on? How is it that … music and sound can produce not only temporal but spatial horizons and boundaries – boundaries the physical, aesthetic and moral obduracy of which are attested to as much by the leakage of sound across them as by its containment within them? (Born, 2013, p. 26)

With the emergence of the internet, and the global circulation of images across physical borders, sound no longer has a monopoly on permeating and blurring cultural and legal boundaries and the assertion of a clear public-private divide becomes increasingly untenable.[13] "Happy in Tehran" presents a fairly commonplace scenario in contemporary Iran in which a video filmed in and around the relatively private setting of a home is made publicly available on YouTube to be consumed in a variety of spaces, both "private" and "public": in the home, in the semi-privacy of an internet café, on a private mobile device in physical public space, and so on. And it is in relation to this interplay of private-in-public-in-private that Born's notion of "nesting" seems particularly apposite.

Both in the video itself and in its circulation via the public-private space of the internet, "Happy in Tehran" clearly plays with and challenges a series of culturally- and legally-defined boundaries and thereby has the potential to take on, or be accorded, political significance. Unsurprisingly, then, whatever the intention of the producers, it became discursively framed – both in Iran and outside – as an act of defiance and potential empowerment. Within days of the arrests, in a quasi-Spartacan twist, a number of remakes of "Happy in Tehran" appeared on YouTube, and without exception these present a more direct challenge to the status quo than the original, for example in being unambiguously situated in public space and with more explicit dancing and body movement, particularly the women in the clips one of whom is shown with her headscarf gradually slipping off her head as she dances.[14] These remakes and the viewer

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[13] For further discussion of the internet as an alternative public sphere in Iran, see Nooshin (forthcoming).
[14] For two examples, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-T8vOk1NIw (posted 20.5.14; accessed 16.6.16). The credits are as follows: **"**Director: Ehsam Azimi. Idea: Hooman Khalatbari. Sponsored by Maseer e Zaman (Store Watches). Special thanks to: Mahdi Jafary, Mahsa Totia, Sevin Azimi"); and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4OWYCgGOSMA (accessed 18.6.16).

comments clearly position "Happy in Tehran" as a form of resistance, both against government restrictions on public behaviour and, flowing almost seamlessly from this, as a broader form of protest against the Islamic Republic.[15] For example, an intriguing low resolution silent remix of the original mimics the act of running away from a demonstration, with the following comment:

> 'Happy' in Tehran made silent, filmed while running away! I don't necessarily like the 'Happy' song. But I like it more when it's performed in Iran as a civil disobedience project![16]

As well as responses to the arrests at home, there were many outside Iran, of which the following YouTube post by one AmantaDei White in May 2014 is fairly typical: "I love these kids! They stood up for freedom :)". Pharrell Williams himself commented on his facebook page, "It is beyond sad that these kids were arrested for trying to spread happiness".[17] Similarly, a cartoon titled "Anti-Happy Decision in Iran" appeared on the diaspora website IranWire showing a mouth being dragged into a frown by the weight of the scales of justice (see Figure 1). Indeed, as one might expect, diaspora Iranians with anti-regime sympathies were quick to add their voices. One version of "Happy in Tehran" was posted in February 2015 by one Sia Ayrom with the comment "A compilation of Iranian youth dancing to protest the Iranian mullahs repressive and brutal regime".[18] Such comments add further layers of signification to the video.

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[15] It is worth noting that almost any topic of conversation in Iran can seemingly "flow" from very specific complaints to much broader expressions of discontent with the regime. For example, I witnessed a casual conversation in the summer of 2015 among disgruntled (female) commuters on a crowded and slow bus in Tehran which slid easily from complaints about the provision of transport services to criticism of the regime (for not caring enough about its people to provide better transport); from there to comments about how much better the transport system was under the Shah; and on to criticism from young people on the bus directed to older women whose generation had, in their view, been responsible for bringing about the Revolution. The move from crowded bus to recriminations about the Revolution took no more than a few minutes. Interestingly, many of those engaged in discussion seemed more concerned about what visiting foreigners might think, evidently assuming that crowded buses are a problem specific to Iran.

[16] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2MCo98Cr7k ("New Cut 'Happy' in Tehran", posted 22.5.15 by Ehsan Fardjadniya; accessed 19.9.16).

[17] There is a mild irony here - given the accusations of misogyny directed against Williams following the release of the single "Blurred Lines" in 2013 - that a song by him should become a central discussion point in relation to the rights of women to dance in public or uncover their hair.

[18] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y35NKNCsPzs (accessed 5.6.16).
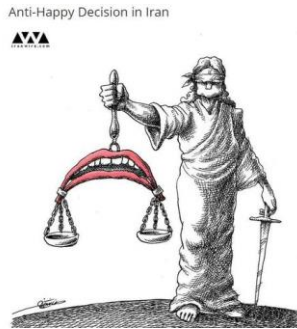
Anti-Happy Decision in Iran

Figure 1

And yet, such crude binaries of oppression and freedom often fail to account for the complexity of power politics in Iran and for the ways in which these "familiar dichotomies [that] have kept people from looking at the most significant aspect of this situation: that power relations take many forms, have many aspects, and interweave" (Abu-Lughod, 1990, p. 48). Directly after the May 2014 arrests, President Rouhani himself spoke up on behalf of the young people, tweeting "Happiness is our people's right. We shouldn't be too hard on behaviors caused by joy."[19] Such binaries also fail to account for the fact that not everyone in Iran interprets the videos' contestation of boundaries in terms of resistance or liberation. Thus, one (perhaps rather extreme) response to the diaspora video referred to above reads: "A bunch of north Tehran door-knobs being used by the usual Washington Neo-Con suspects to agitate against Iran, the Iranian government and the Iranian people". Regardless of the factual basis of such comments, they reflect Iran's deep class divisions in that those making these videos tend to be from the more privileged and affluent middle and upper classes, often well-educated and with secular and cosmopolitan lifestyles and worldviews. For many from less privileged backgrounds, such videos represent little more than a mimicking of western culture by an elite for whom liberation means something very different from those struggling with day-to-day economic and social pressures, exacerbated by international sanctions. I return to this below.

Media Responses Outside Iran

Not surprisingly the western media quickly moved into action following the May 2014 arrests. In the UK there were many articles in the press, including mainstream newspapers such as *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, both in May 2014 and following the announcement of the suspended sentences four months later (e.g., see Moaveni, 2014; Withnall, 2014; Culzac, 2014; Dehghan, 2014). As one might expect, and quite reasonably in the circumstances, these articles

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[19] https://twitter.com/HassanRouhani (accessed 15.9.16).

focus primarily on questions of human rights and specifically the right of these young people to express happiness in public. And yet, there is something about these writings which make me uneasy in ways that are difficult to articulate without seeming to be an apologist for the regime. This is in part related to the highly subtle processes of naturalisation, in this case the naturalisation of western media representations of Iran. Take the following headline in the *The Independent*: "Iranians Behind Tehran Version of 'Happy' Sentenced to Six Months in Prison and 91 Lashes" (Culzac, 2014). Whilst this statement is not untrue, only as one reads on does it become evident that the sentences were not enacted, but suspended. But surely this is just the way journalism works? Headlines simplify. It would be no different if the article was about a different country. Maybe. If this was an isolated case. But this is also how systems of naturalisation work: by setting up a subtle discursive network which is hard to pin down because each instance can be individually explained away as "just the way things are", in this case "just the way that journalism works".[20] Notably, in contrast to some of the online responses to the "Happy" arrests, particularly from diaspora Iranians, and the more overt claims of "resistance" or "liberation", here the writing is more subtle, but no less powerful. There is clearly a fine line between reporting "facts" and the kind of low-level sensationalism conveyed by statements such as the following by Iranian journalist Golnaz Esfandiari, who tweeted: "thousands of Iranians have been arrested in the past 35 years for being happy [and] partying … Iran [is] a country where being 'happy' is a crime" (quoted in the *The Independent*, Withnall, 2014) or another by Amnesty International UK's Head of Campaigns, Champa Patel:

> Arresting people for dancing in a video tribute to a song called Happy is taking things to a new level of dark irony even for the authoritarian Iranian authorities … Iran already stamps all over freedom of expression, banning the use of satellite dishes, filtering the internet, and jailing journalists, artists and film directors. The authorities should stop persecuting these people and drop this ludicrous case against them. (quoted in the *Daily Mail*, Thornhill, 2014)

Individually, none of these statements are untrue; collectively, however, they can be understood as part of a broader discursive network – a "regime of truth" - by which Iran is represented in certain ways, and in which music also plays a role.[21] Whilst Foucault's formulation is of course

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[20] Another example of this kind of narrative trope can be seen in the coverage of the Immigrant Song Contest hosted by the BBCs current affairs programme Newsnight in May 2009, and which was won by the Iranian band Font. The headline of one article by Susannah Tarbush reads: "From a Tehran jail to victory in the BBCs 'Immigrant Song Contest'" http://thetanjara.blogspot.co.uk/2009/05/iranian-band-font-win-bbc-newsnights.html (accessed 3.10.2010).

[21] I have been struck by the number of times that friends and associates who know little about Iran have responded to my visits with questions such as: 'So, is Iran safe to visit now?'. Given that most of their

well-known, it seems worth repeating here for its particular relevance to the case under discussion:

> Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault, 1984, p. 72-73).

What is of interest here are the mechanisms by which a certain "regime of truth" is established and perpetuated through writings on Iran, and how music might be implicated in this. Just as we saw earlier, there is an all-too-easy slippage from specific situations to broader discourses of repression and authoritarianism which might not flow quite so easily when writing about another country. I am reminded of cases outside Iran where legislation against certain musical practices for reasons of public order have been presented quite differently in the media.[22] Among many examples that could be cited, Steward describes the moral panic of the 1950s and 60s in reaction to new forms of popular music in Europe and North America (2013, p. 74); and several decades later, in 1994, similar concerns prompted amendments to the UK's Criminal Justice and Public Order Act (Section 63(1)(b)), giving the police the power to remove people from events at which music is "wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats"[23]. These amendments generated much public debate and opposition from civil liberties groups, but they did not (on the whole) lead to the characterisation of the British government as repressive and authoritarian in the mainstream media; as Steward notes, the "dividing line between regulation and censorship" is a fine one (Steward 2013, p. 78). Also somewhat discomforting in these articles are quotations from rock musicians now living outside Iran who have arguably benefitted from the fetishisation and commodification of the resistance discourse as a promotional tool.[24] I return to this point below.

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information on Iran is gained through the media, it is clear that the kinds of discourses discussed here feed into a general idea of Iran as a dangerous place to live or visit. Ironically, at the time of writing, Iran was probably one of the safest places to be in the Middle East.

[22] Steward (2013, p. 72-82) offers a detailed discussion of censorship practices in a number of countries, including the UK, and particularly after the events of 9/11, focusing on the highly 'convoluted relationship between the censor and the censored' (p. 73). An understanding of this relationship is entirely absent from the newspaper articles discussed here.

[23] http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1994/33/section/63 (accessed 20.10.16).

[24] There are examples of this outside Iran, of course, such as US rapper Kanye West's deliberate creation of what he knew would be an offensive album in order to court publicity (Steward, 2013, p. 77).

Regimes of truth depend not just on what is said but what remains unsaid, "forgotten" or silenced. Many of the media articles on the "Happy" arrests tended to over-simplify or overlook both the complex power struggles behind the arrests, and more generally the everyday "tactics" (after de Certeau) by which Iranians circumvent restrictions such as the banning of satellite dishes or the filtering of websites. There are exceptions, of course, such as the article in *The Guardian* by Iranian-American journalist and author Azadeh Moaveni who explains the arrests less in terms of government "repression" and more in relation to the on-going struggle between more "moderate" and more "extreme" positions within the regime; and which at times of political tension become more intense. It was likely no coincidence that the "Happy" arrests took place just as international discussions over Iran's nuclear energy programme were at a crucial point, with implications for vested interests within Iran. Whilst arguably downplaying the role of class and other social divisions, Moaveni presents one of the most nuanced analyses of the situation and is therefore worth quoting at length:

> Rouhani's election last year dealt an unexpected blow to the conservatives, who had relaxed into a position of total control over the eight years of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's tenure.
>
> Now they are fighting back, desperate to retain their influence and sabotage the possibility of a second term for Rouhani. Because the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has backed Rouhani's nuclear diplomacy, the hardliners can't challenge the president on that front. Instead they are using their supporters in the judiciary, the security apparatus and the state media to undermine him before the electorate as being unable to deliver on his promises for social change.
>
> Vast amounts of money are at stake, in addition to political gain. Many of these hardliners, together with allies in the Revolutionary Guards, have benefited financially from Iran's isolation. A gradual rapprochement with the west is not only politically odious to them, but threatens their financial interests, which are wrapped up in black-market trade and lucrative state contracts.
>
> The police went after the Happy dancers, whose clip had been drawing attention on YouTube for a month, just three days after Rouhani demanded Iran abandon its paranoid digital censorship and embrace the internet. "The era of the one-sided pulpit is over," he said. The message of the Happy arrests was: if you seek to enact digital freedom, we will torment those Iranians who exercise that right.
>
> (Moaveni, 2014)

Similar points are made by others (notably and intriguingly in several articles in the less high-brow tabloid newspaper, the *Daily Mail*; see Associated Press, 2014; Schreck, 2014; Thornhill,

2014) [25], who acknowledge the President's concern over the arrests and more generally over internet censorship. Like Moaveni, they also tie the incident to the broader international relations situation and specifically the nuclear issue.

Whose Empowerment? Alternative Readings of "Happy"

Looking in from the outside, "Happy in Tehran" and the responses to it seem to present a cut and dried case of everyday tactics directed against a regime which has for decades sought to control the public and private behaviour of its citizens. But are there other ways in which this music video might be understood, "the other side to the story" in the words of Maxwell (2001, as cited in Baker, 2006, p. 231)? And what might these tell us about youth and popular culture in Iran? I should be clear: my intention is not to make light of the often crippling restrictions on music-making and consumption in Iran, but rather to examine how and why certain regimes of representation come into being, to ask what might get lost in the frequently uncritical deployment of terms such as "resistance", "protest", "oppression" and "freedom", and further how the creation of a wide-ranging discursive web can even render it unnecessary for these exact words to be used for the semantic overtones to be implied and understood. Certainly, I share the Swedenburg's concern (in the context of writings on Palestinian hip-hop):

> … to highlight what might be overlooked or occluded by this narrow approach to Palestinian rap that is especially endemic among progressive scholars and activists, who tend to regard the Palestinian as synonymous with the counter-hegemonic (Stein 99). The Palestinian rap artists I discuss below certainly do write rhymes that comment on the extraordinary and difficult conditions under which they live ... But they also have other purposes and aspirations that tend to be ignored or downplayed in the rush to promote the issue of Palestine. They desire to be appreciated *as artists*, and in particular as *rap artists* who participate in a global cultural movement. (Swedenburg, 2013, p. 18)

Such views are also widespread among Iranian musicians, as will be discussed below. But beyond this, I'm concerned with what a fetishist reduction of Iranian popular music to a symbol of resistance means: whose purposes does it serve and to what extent does it reflect the reality of life in Iran? I'm also interested in the contrast between writings on Iranian popular music and what is arguably an *under*theorisation of the political in other genres, most notably the classical music.

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[25] For a more typical tabloid report on the events, see:
http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/5640966/iranian-pals-arrested-for-fun-video-dancing-to-pharrells-happy.html (accessed 12.3.15).

This discussion of "Happy in Tehran" has so far focused on the many responses to it, but what of the protagonists and their "side of the story"? Contrary to what one might expect from the proliferation of certain kinds of discourse around the video, the original aim, according to Neda who was interviewed by the IranWire webzine in April 2014, a month before the arrests, was to contribute to celebrations marking the UN International Day of Happiness on March 20th (which also coincided with the Iranian New Year, *norooz*) for which Pharrell Williams had launched a charity campaign; and, significantly, to show people outside Iran that young people have fun like anywhere else:

> We wanted to tell the world that the Iranian capital is full of lively young people and change the harsh and rough image that the world sees on the news … Outside Iran anybody can do this. We want to tell the world that Iran is a better place than what they think it is. Despite all the pressures and limitations, young people are joyful and want to make the situation better. They know how to have fun, like the rest of the world. (quoted in Shahrabi, 2014)

This is a rather different image of Iran from that presented in the media reports cited earlier. Whilst there is of course a deep irony in the fact that the video's message eventually became transformed into the opposite of what was apparently intended, the quotation above clearly speaks to the desire of these young people to participate in the global "Happy" phenomenon and to present themselves to the outside world as *bonafide* global citizens. There are parallels with the Palestinian musicians described by Swedenburg and their aspiration to be part of a "global cultural movement". In the case of Iran, this can be understood in relation to feelings of exclusion following the country's relative isolation, and at times ostracization, on the international stage over several decades. Rather than a politicised call to resistance, then, "Happy in Tehran" can be read as a somewhat playful contestation of official government discourses on Iran's relationship with the outside world which have long dominated the public arena, instead foregrounding alternative forms of nationhood and belonging that engage with emerging trans-national identities through what might be termed a "performance of cosmopolitanism". From this perspective, the various responses to the video might be understood as further performative acts which reveal starkly different visions of what it means to be Iranian in the 21st Century. Indeed, the intensity of the responses to a "mere" music video indicate how much such contrasting visions of identity matter: what for some is a performance of cosmopolitanism for others represents a loss of identity and a neo-colonial mimicking of

western culture.[26] As such, I would argue that an important "side" of this story is about a society divided along fault lines of class and social (dis)advantage and desperately in need of repair.

One of the central issues with the many media reports on Iranian popular music (including those cited above) and much of the academic literature in this area is a tendency to assume a single normative youth culture, one that is predominantly (north) Tehran-centric, "western"-facing and secular in orientation and comprising individuals from the middle or upper classes who are generally well-educated and cosmopolitan in outlook; and by extension to underplay class differences. This is the brand of youth culture most visible from outside Iran, not least because those writing about it - including many diaspora Iranians - tend to identify more closely with it; and it is this that is generally presented as *the* youth culture of Iran as in the following:

> Tehrani youth are consistently circumventing the law. They speed along main streets, passing alcoholic drinks through car windows, blasting illegal rock, they organise illegal concerts, and they sneak out at night to parties. (Steward, 2013, p. 98)

Whilst this may be the case for some, even large numbers of young people, it certainly doesn't represent the majority and is not the only brand of youth culture in Iran. Of course, such writings don't usually claim to represent the views of *all* young Iranians, but the relative absence of alternative voices means that this is what is understood by default by readers outside the country who may know little about Iran. This kind of presentation of a singular western-oriented youth culture brings us back to where this article began and the case of the young woman discussed by Olszewska. Where a normative view might simply assume anyone participating in the 2009 pre-election rallies to be a supporter of Mousavi, A. was motivated by something else: an aspiration to transcend Iran's class boundaries, at least temporarily and possibly more permanently, and thereby enter a very different youth culture from that of her own poorer, more traditional and conspicuously religious neighbourhood of south Tehran. In the same way, understanding the responses to "Happy in Tehran" requires a more nuanced analysis of the intersection of youth culture and class. And here I return to the earlier point that, contrary to what might be deduced from the various media reports and online responses, not

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[26] Tangentially, it is worth noting the strand of postcolonial thought (found in the work of Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, for instance) in which mimicry can be understood as a form of resistance. In such cases, however, it is usually the culture of the "oppressor" which is appropriated and subject to mimicking.

everyone in Iran viewed "Happy in Tehran" and its spin-offs as expressions of freedom or resistance, raising the question of whose "liberation" is at stake here and even the possibility that one person's freedom may be another's oppression. Among many examples that could be cited, an historical perspective is instructive as in the case of the forceful unveiling of women in public in 1936, one of the many policies by which Reza Shah Pahlavi (r.1925-1941) sought to transform Iranian society from what he regarded as regressive traditionalism to progressive modernism, but which was immensely traumatic and far from liberating for many women. By contrast, the introduction of laws on female modesty after 1979, whilst apparently a step backwards for women's liberation in fact allowed many from more traditional and religious backgrounds to enter the workplace and education in ways previously denied to them due both to family objections and the negative associations at that time of full body covering in a public space dominated by "modern" women with their mini skirts and fashionable hairdos. In the same way, a video such as "Happy in Tehran" lies at the fault line between radically different notions of liberation. On the one hand, it can be easily read as a "temporary autonomous zone", a space away from state control (see Bey 1991). On the other, it can also be understood as a mimicking of western culture that is arguably far from liberating. Such fault lines can only be understood in the context of Iran's neo-colonial history and the strong anti-imperialist impulse of the Revolution, as well as the deep inequalities that date back to the Pahlavi period and the creation of a westernised elite whose wealth was ostentatiously displayed with apparent indifference to the country's many social and economic problems. Almost four decades on from the Revolution, such inequalities persist and indeed it could be argued (as it could before 1979) that the economic disparities that give the middle and upper classes access to western culture (and the means to make such videos) are also responsible for much social disadvantage in Iran. In contrast to Baker's description of hip-hop songs in Cuba as "exposés of the underside of city life" (2006, p. 239), then, "Happy in Tehran" can be seen as a flouting of the affluence of the (relatively) well off and an assertion of the economic power of a westernized elite.[27] Thus, one might reasonably ask what kind – and, crucially whose - liberation is represented by "Happy in Tehran". The following post by Ehsan Fardjadniya, which accompanies his "New Cut 'Happy' in Tehran" video discussed earlier, is particularly telling:

> A western audience has a tendency to "romanticize resistance," which only
> offers solidarity if its "own values and ideals seems apparent in the resistance."
> In short, these stories aren't told with the intention of understanding — they're
> told for the sake of consumption.

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[27] I paraphrase here from the work of Lila Abu-Lughod on the Awlad 'Ali Bedouin of western Egypt (1990).

> When Iranians are denied the apparent basic human right to make a Pharrell video, we are maddened and disappointed. When Iranians are unable to access basic medical supplies as a result of our sanctions, we don't even know.

Clearly, liberation can mean many things, including the right to dance in public and to have access to a basic standard of living. The "romanticized resistance" discourses which have proliferated around "Happy in Tehran", and the fetishization of Iranian popular music as a site of resistance more broadly, arguably promotes a singular and very particular model of "liberation" based on Euro-American neo-liberal norms, which becomes privileged over others. One of the ways in which the latter become devalued is through certain kinds of discourse, such as the following rather disdainful comments by prominent US-based artist and musician Sussan Deyhim which reinforce the stereotyped social binaries aligning an internet-savvy youth with "liberation":

> When the image is a bunch of penguin-looking dark-veiled women with bearded men, you know that whole thing … Then, suddenly, you see this whole new generation of young people who are so Internet-savvy, so cyber-eloquent ... it's liberating. (quoted in Pellegrini 2009)[28]

In her April 2014 interview with IranWire, Neda does show some awareness of class issues:

> "Some people commented that if we wanted to show Tehran to the world we should have shot the scenes around luxurious and upscale houses in northern Tehran," says Neda. "But we intentionally chose an average-looking house in central Tehran. We wanted to say: joy is not the exclusive domain of the well-to-do and wealthy. Those on the lower rungs of society can experience joy and happiness too." (quoted in Shahrabi, 2014).

Notwithstanding the reference to an "average-looking house", the identification with "those on the lower rungs of society", and a certain distancing from "the well-to-do and wealthy", at the same time, this statement is very much from the perspective of someone from a fairly comfortable social background. Still, the sentiment of reaching across the class divide (to "every Iranian", see below) appears genuine, if somewhat idealistic. Ultimately, it is the city of Tehran itself that seems to act as a unifying point, and almost becomes a character in its own right. As Shahrabi (2014) observes:

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[28] Note that it is more than likely that Olszewska's "A." is just one such "penguin-looking dark-veiled" woman.

> For Neda and her friends, it was important for Tehran to be recognizable in the video, especially to those who had left many years before. They wanted "every Iranian" to be reminded of the city, so Tehran's famous Milad Tower is featured, as are the air-conditioning units found on so many of the city's rooftops.

Even without the Milad Tower in the background, this video is clearly about being happy in *Tehran* rather than anywhere else: an important dimension of the video is its contesting of widespread and deep-rooted social, cultural and religious norms that have little to do with government policy, and such contestation is seen far more starkly in the capital than elsewhere in Iran.

Challenging Regimes of Representation: "It's about the music, not the politics"

Having considered the case of "Happy in Tehran", I return now to the central question of how it is that particular regimes of representation accrue to certain musical genres for reasons which may have little to do with the music itself but which can impact significantly on the music's social meanings. "Happy in Tehran" offers a specific example of a more general trend by which, from the early 2000s, Iranian popular music came to be framed primarily in terms of politics, resistance, empowerment, and so on, most notably in writings outside Iran and conspicuously more so that other kinds of Iranian music. Thus, without the government reaction against it (in the form of arrests) and the reaction against that (in the form of remakes), it's unlikely that "Happy in Tehran" would have become discursively positioned as a statement of "resistance". Whilst moments of "crisis" such as that prompted by the "Happy" arrests (not, it should be noted, by the original music video postings) or the outpouring of music that followed the contested 2009 Presidential elections, draw particular attention to such framing, [29] it has become a constant theme in the literature and is fed by a long-standing tradition of orientalising discourse which, among other things, often uses sensationalist language to mark otherness. In particular, such writings are characterised by certain recurrent tropes, most notably around notions of danger and victimhood. One of the few academic writers to have critiqued this kind of "orientalising through politicisation" is Theresa Steward (2013) who in her doctoral thesis notes that:

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[29] Steward (2013) notes that such articles tend to appear "whenever there is a peak in political activity in Iran, which usually coincides with a crackdown by the government that results in arrests and further punishment. This leaves long periods of silence, where music and the arts continue to grow, but remain unreported by such publications. Sometimes a report on one markedly tragic event, can create the sense that all musicians are suffering under terrible, irreversible conditions" (p. 27). For discussion of musical responses to the disputed 2009 elections, see Leone (2012), Siamdoust (2013) and Steward (2013, p. 166-194).

> The Western media has increasingly provided an idealised and romanticised view of music-making in the Iranian underground. These reports create an image of popular musicians united under the same political and social challenges, while struggling to be heard against an oppressive regime (ii) … Popular ethnomusicology that focuses upon political and religious censorship inevitably results in a discussion entirely centred upon notions of resistance and protest … The emphasis on political crisis not only sidelines the extremely complex and dynamic music scenes that can emerge as a result of restriction, but also creates the illusion that there is little music-making outside of the realm of resistance music. (p. 11)

A section on "The Portrayal of the Iranian Underground in the Western Media" (Steward, 2013, p. 102-110) describes how the almost exclusive focus on "the element of protest in Iranian music today, presenting nearly all forms of popular music-making under the umbrella of overt resistance" (p. 17) meant that "It was sometimes difficult to discern with many online resources, news media sources included, what was exaggeration and what was truth in regards to the results of music censorship upon practicing musicians and their resistance to it" (p. 27).

The kinds of discourses reported above arguably continue a tradition of negative journalism dating back to 1979 when, following the shock of the Revolution and the sudden and unforeseen loss of one of Britain and the US's staunchest allies in the region, "British and American media presented Iran as a nation that had lost its way, culturally reverting 'backwards' after suffering through a revolution 'against progress,' and away from Western interests" (Sreberny-Mohammadi, as cited in Steward, 2013, p. 102).[30] Such discourses are sometimes dictated by editorial decisions beyond the control of the author as I experienced in the early 2000s when my entry in the second edition of the *Rough Guide to World Music* was changed without consultation. Among other things, the title was altered to include a term offensive to the Iranian clergy, thus creating potential problems for my on-going research in Iran. Further, every instance of the word "diaspora" was changed to "exile", thus replacing the broader and "softer" concept of a diasporic community with a harsher, narrower and more politicised one.[31] It seems clear that such changes were made in order to "spice" the article up through an emphasis on the political, something that I had hardly mentioned, as well as presenting Iran as a dangerous place for musicians to be; and with no regard for the

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[30] Such reporting can also be regarded as part of broader regimes of representation by which the Middle East has historically been "produced" in the "West" through orientalist discourses (following Said) and which, according to Laachir and Talajooy are, "still prevalent today in the way the region is reported as a hotspot for conflict, radicalism, terrorism and backwardness, while it continues to be the site of contesting global powers over its domination because of its considerable reservoir for energy resources" (2013b, p. 2).

[31] "Exile" evoking very different associations from "diaspora". In the case of some musicians, the term "self-exile" would be more appropriate (see Leone 2012, p. 12).

implications for the author.[32] Given the broader context of media representations of Iran in Europe and North America, I should perhaps not have been surprised at this experience. But something like this would be unlikely to happen in academic publishing, one would think. However, a number of authors have reported similar experiences with academic publishers and editors. Writing a chapter for a book on *Jazz and Totalitarianism*, Gay Breyley described how she was initially uncomfortable characterising the Iranian government as "totalitarian" in such an unequivocal manner, but felt somewhat obliged to, given the focus of the book. Indeed, it's interesting to note which countries and regimes are included in this book. With the editor's support, she was able to focus on conditions for differently positioned jazz musicians under both pre- and post-revolutionary governments, rather than on the extent to which each regime may be seen as "totalitarian".[33] Breyley reports, "I tried to be as factual and non-sensationalist as possible" (personal communication, January, 2016). More problematically, Breyley recounts that an abstract for a journal article was revised by the editor and the term "restrictions" replaced by reference to "oppression" in Iran.

A similar experience was reported by Bronwen Robertson in relation to the title of her 2012 book, *Reverberations of Dissent: Identity and Expression in Iran's Illegal Music Scene*, about the rock music scene in Tehran where she undertook fieldwork between 2007 and 2008, and which was based on her doctoral dissertation "Subterranean Sounds and Reverberations of Dissent: Identity and Expression in Tehran's Unofficial Rock Music Scene". She explained:

> It was really important to the musicians to have it called unofficial rather than underground, because they were very well aware of the tendency for the media, etc. to sensationalise and over-politicise their music, when for them it was about the music, not about the politics. But it was a catch-22 really, because living in Iran and being an unofficial musician does carry with it a lot of risk, and many of them had faced the repercussions of that, so what they were doing was of course overtly political, despite the fact they may not have wanted it to be. The title of my book ended up being: *Reverberations of Dissent: Identity and Expression in Iran's Illegal*

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[32] Concerned about the implications for my work in Iran, I complained to the Editor who pointed to the contract I had signed and which allows the *Rough Guide* to make changes without consulting authors (there is a lesson here in reading contracts!). Only when faced with potential legal action did the publisher agree to issue an apology in the next print run of the book; but the damage was done. Essentially, I found myself caught between pragmatic self-censorship and a popular press apparently unconcerned for the consequences of editorial non-specialists making ill-informed changes to texts and often unaware of the implications of such changes. Judging from my informal discussions with others, I am not the only ethnomusicologist to have had this kind of experience.

[33] In part, the book seeks to interrogate the very notion of "totalitarianism", so often used in an uncritical way. As Breyley notes, referring to Johnson's introduction to the book, "Contemporary totalitarianism studies have largely shifted from the formal political structures in themselves, to the point of tension between them and everyday life … for some, the totalitarian framework might be experienced in daily life as no more oppressive than in any democratic society regulated by law … for those in positions privileged by their particular political structures, daily life and musical possibilities might appear freer and more expansive." (2017).

Music Scene. "Illegal" wasn't my choice, but I understand that it's much more interesting to a reader if the title is "sexier". (personal communication, December, 2015)

An endorsement by senior ethnomusicologist Timothy Rice on the back cover of the book reads: "Based on fearless fieldwork in Iran, Bronwen Robertson offers an eye-opening account of music in Iran's illegal music world. This book offers a rich and compelling portrait of courageous musicians in a part of the world that requires such courage." In response to a question about this endorsement, Robertson replied:

Yeah, I mean first-off I was pretty stoked to have the endorsement of someone I respect so much. That said ... Fearless? I definitely was fearful at times, but I put myself in those situations knowing full well what I was doing. Courage ... I do think the musicians are courageous. Their families often don't understand what they're doing, society as a whole definitely doesn't, and for some, like the Yellow Dogs, even leaving the country has brought with it more adversity. (personal communication, December, 2015)

Robertson went on to describe the time she spent in Iran "with the rock musicians I worked with doing what rock musicians in any country do, jamming at parties, goofing around, and pushing the boundaries of what's permissible. What they were doing is illegal, but doing so behind closed doors typically doesn't pose any real danger" (personal communication, December, 2015). Such discourses of danger are interesting: clearly there is a certain amount of risk in producing (or being filmed dancing to) certain kinds of popular music, but whether, as Steward (2013) claims, "young Iranians are constantly putting themselves at risk" (p. 99) is debateable. In the interview referred to earlier, Neda talked about the sequences of "Happy in Tehran" filmed in the alleyway:

"We were really afraid … Whenever somebody looked out of a window or someone passed by, we ducked behind a door to make sure we were not seen."

Shooting on top of roofs presented difficulties too. "To conform to the Islamic dress code, we covered our hair with wigs," she said. They made sure they had appropriate clothing to cover themselves where necessary. But even with all these precautions, they still attracted attention. Neighbors hung out of their windows to see what was going on, but because they did not have a professional camera, it was assumed that "a few silly young people had gathered together to have fun." (Shahrabi, 2014)

For many, in fact, part of the pleasure lies in the illicit nature of the activity and the associated risks. As reported in an earlier article, one teenager I spoke to in the early 1990s about the illegal consumption of popular music responded with a rather typical "What's the fun of it without the danger?" (quoted in Nooshin 2005a, p. 243).

All of the above raises important questions about why certain countries are represented in such ways, and particularly by eminent figures such as Rice. It's hard to tell how widespread such representational practices are in publications on other countries, but there is clearly pressure on authors to politicise writings on Iran, either in order to sell (in the case of *The Rough Guide*) or for other reasons to be discussed below. Such representations are often subtle and, as already noted, can only be fully understood in the context of a larger body of work that sustains the dominant discourses.

Popular musicians in Iran are very aware of the kinds of discourses that have proliferated around their music outside the country and it's interesting to explore the ways in which they have alternately resisted or used these to their advantage. Discussing the term 'underground' which emerged in the early 2000s to refer to music that was circulating illegally without a government permit, Sohrab Mahdavi, Editor of the former arts and cultural webzine TehranAvenue, observed:

> Originally it was a playful term … but once it took on a serious tone we tried to distance ourselves from it … The term "underground" was hijacked by the western mass/global media to attribute [a] political agenda to young, middle class musicians most of whom didn't have any such intentions or claims. (Steward 2013, p. 205)

Robertson (2013a) has also argued that the term underground: "unnecessarily overpoliticises the genre [rock] and that this overpoliticisation works strongly against these musicians who are struggling to gain acceptance and a public platform within Iran through which to disseminate their work" (p. 139), noting that the term "unofficial" ("*gheir-e rasmy*") has gained greater currency among musicians in recent years. As someone who has worked with musicians in the Tehran rock scene and perhaps written more than anyone else on the topic, Robertson describes the impact of both government restrictions and censorship alongside other factors such as social attitudes towards music, and rock music in particular, and the kinds of practical difficulties that musicians face in accessing music education, instruments and spare parts, rehearsal spaces, and so on. Notwithstanding all of this, she notes the struggle of those who are pushed towards politicised readings of their work, often against their will, by a context in which the music:

… even if it is lyrically apolitical, becomes politicised as it embodies the political tensions of its immediate sociopolitical surroundings. Performers at a private concert or party in Iran do not look upon the event as a means for rallying support to overthrow the regime; they perform to escape from the rigidity of their outside world and to explore alternate ways of existing in a society of suppression. And they perform to explore and discover themselves and to diversify their identities. (Robertson, 2013a, p. 140)[34]

I have noted elsewhere that even in those genres that remain largely prohibited and therefore have potential "subversive capital", lyrics tend to deal with the kinds of personal and social issues that affect young people everywhere and which can be found in much non-mainstream popular music globally: this is music that is rebellious rather than directly political (Nooshin 2005a, 2005b). Talking about the 2002 Underground Music Competition, Iran's first online rock festival, musician and producer Ramin Behna (one of those involved in running the festival) claimed that contrary to much of the publicity and writings about the event:

It wasn't political at all. It was *only* about the music. I think that both the Iranian government has the intention of making this [rock music] political, and the rest of the world. Whereas there is nothing political in it. Even the poems are usually not political. I mean, when you look at most of these bands that have become well known, they were all in love with [*āsheq-e*] music, not anything else. They weren't thinking about anything else at all. (Interview 2.9.15, translated by the current author)

He continued:

Most of these musicians are not [political] but because they are young and they want to fly … they want to become famous, they get drawn into this, which in my view is a mistake. The political games of governments are entirely to the detriment of musicians and artists. Yes, there are a small number who are into politics, and they either work or accept their prohibition. But what's clear is that for most of the newer groups, their way of thinking is something else entirely. (Interview 2.9.15, translated by the current author)

Steward makes similar observations:

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[34] Steward (2013) discusses a similar case, that of the Czech rock band "Plastic People of the Universe" which under communist rule operated underground. She observes that "while the band's achievements resulted in headlines such as 'Communism Brought Down By Rock "n" Roll!' its members saw themselves in a less political light. Bassist Mejla Hlvasa freely admits, 'We just loved rock "n" roll and wanted to be famous…'. The resistance of youth culture continues to be an assumption" (pp. 105-106).

> Contrary to representations in the media, the underground in Iran does not necessarily revolve around political or protest music against governmental authority. In many cases, musicians are united more by a shared attitude to experimentation and expression, than political subversion and resistance … Many Iranian musicians insist they are apolitical, and oppose the media enforced labels. British-Iranian rapper Reveal acknowledges the tendency to politicise Iranian music, maintaining, "We just make music, but people push things on us rather than discussing the quality of the music and expression." Rock singer Maral Afsharian remarks, "I know it's really interesting to be an electro/rock female musician from a country that forbids any form of western music and being a female singer! However, I prefer to attract people to my music rather than my story." (Steward, 2013, p. 110)

Of course, for some the insistence on "just making music" may be strategic. As Laachir and Talajooy (2013b) observe with reference to the Middle East more generally, "some writers and artists, who live under strict censorship rules, pass through censorship by arguing that they are tackling social rather than political issues" (p. 10), and this is certainly the case for those in Iran who seek government authorization for their music. Reporting on an interview with prominent pop singer Ali Reza Assar, journalist Martin Hodgson sought to frame Assar's songs, particularly those dealing with social issues, as "a veiled attack on the political establishment – an idea that Assar is at pains to deny", instead explaining (with reference to a specific song): "It wasn't about our government, it was about people who pretend to be religious, and act like they care but don't do anything to help." Whilst the implication is that Assar's denial was strategic, there is clearly a fine line between songs dealing with social (*p*olitical) issues and more overtly *P*olitical songs. However, even musicians who operate "underground" outside the permit system (by choice or otherwise) are ambiguous about being labelled as political. Rapper Salome, for instance, adopts a somewhat tongue-in-cheek-cum-poetic sidestepping tactic, as reported by Khaleeli:

> Salome is keen to stress that not all her songs are political – "I have suffered more for love than I ever have for politics," she says. Yet it's hard not to imagine it was her political songs that caught the attention of the judges of the Freedom to Create prize, an international award for art that promotes social justice … After spending four months in Japan, however, the strong-minded Salome says she is in a more reflective mood, and will be concentrating on her music and the art she hopes will support her, rather than politics. (Khaleeli, 2011)

On the one hand, then, musicians are under pressure from within Iran to downplay possible political readings of their work; on the other, journalists and others outside Iran often seek to

frame their work as political, something that artists can clearly capitalise on in the form of awards by organisations such as Freemuse or Freedom to Create, and which may to some extent encourage or even require them to appeal to discourses of victimhood, particularly in the case of female musicians. Salome picks up on this in the interview with Khaleeli who reports on her:

> … fear of playing into what she sees as the distorted image of women in Iran, which she says is reinforced by Iranian artists, such as Shirin Neshat … "There are a lot of female Iranian artists outside Iran using this image that women here are oppressed [in order to] get themselves famous. If you say things the western media wants to hear, then they will embrace you. Women are really prominent in Iran – 60% of university students are female." (Khaleeli, 2011)

One of few cases where overly-political readings of Iranian popular music have been publicly challenged is in relation to the 2009 docu-feature *No One Knows about Persian Cats* (*Kasi az Gorbeh-hā-ye Irāni Khabar Nadāreh,* Dir. Bahman Ghobadi) which follows the story of two rock musicians, Negar and Ashkan from the group "Take it Easy Hospital" (who play themselves in the film), as they attempt unsuccessfully to leave Iran. The film was widely screened outside Iran where it received much media attention with no small element of "hype." *Persian Cats* has been discussed at length elsewhere, most notably by Steward (2013, pp. 26,122-130), but is of interest here for the contrast between its reception outside Iran and by musicians and others inside the country, many of whom who have criticised the sensationalist representation of the Tehran rock scene and the idea that all musicians are desperate to leave the country, something they see as "playing" to a non-Iranian audience. Behna, for instance, considers that:

> … they used those two kids. I really didn't like the film because it had an entirely political dimension but the people portrayed in it were not at all political. Many rock musicians love their country and are staying here. Many go abroad to give concerts and they come back again. Yes, some leave, and are they successful abroad? Generally, no. Most of the musicians working in Iran have no thought for politics (*fekr-e siāsi nadārand*); each one is trying to work on and develop their music and find new audiences. (Interview 2.9.15, translated by the current author)

Similarly, Steward (2013) quotes from musicians in the documentary film *Sounds of Silence* (2006): "We don't want a revolution. We only want to have fun and do our thing. Somehow we will always find a way. If anybody likes our music, they'll pass it on" (p. 100).

Many of the themes encountered earlier can be found in the debate around *Persian Cats*, including the uncritical deployment of terms such as "repression" and "liberation", the

portrayal of musicians as victims and the idea of Iran as a dangerous place for musicians. Steward (2013) quotes from an article published in *The Village Voice* (New York) in April 2010 in which *Persian Cats* is descried as "An out-front attack on cultural repression" (p. 128) and she observes that the film:

> … was marketed internationally as a radical, ground-breaking film, depicting the real-life stories of struggling musicians in the underground who face danger on a daily basis. The official poster for the film reads, "The film that sings, howls, and chants freedom!" The official international film trailer introduces the film with the statement, "This film shouldn't even exist," and continues: "In a country on the edge of revolution, come the new voices of protest."

According to Sohrab Mahdavi, the film:

> … has given musicians further excuse to pander to illusions of victim-hood. Like in other places in the world, Iranian musicians have to overcome obstacles … to get their music to a wider audience. The nature of these obstacles are different to be sure, but they are there everywhere. (as quoted in Steward, 2013, p. 129)

Similarly, in a review published on the TehranAvenue website in May 2010, Golnaz Jamsheed notes the "over-dramatisation in the film as it exaggerates the troubled lives of underground musicians" (as quoted in Steward, 2013, p.128) and Steward also quotes from female rock singer Maral who regards the film as potentially having:

> … a big role in showing the world more about Iranian underground music scene. It was a very important step, but I wish it could be more real. I mean it's not like we are begging to get a passport or visa at all or having to practice in a cow farm.[35] Most of the underground musicians I know in Iran are not really happy with the outcome of the movie. I wish it could focus on real life and the art that is coming out of this scene … (online interview, 2010, June, as quoted in Steward 2013, p. 129)

Indeed, it is clear that such "troubled lives" and the glamorisation of danger can become commodified as what might be called "victim capital"; whilst some musicians have resisted such commodification, others have embraced it as an exoticising strategy. A good example is the band Hypernova which since moving from Iran to the US in 2007 has benefitted from its

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[35] Behna (Interview 2. 9.15, translated by the current author) commented on this scene in the film: "… and the musician practising in a cowshed is actually quite wealthy – the farm belongs to his father. Sometimes I think that our artists and filmmakers create something that those on the other side ['*oonvarihā*' i.e. those outside Iran'] will like." Again, the orientalising dimensions of this are clear.

previous "illegal" status (Steward, 2013, p. 107).[36] Robertson (2013b) also writes about the self-exoticising/marketing of those who have left Iran, quoting from rock musicians such as Obaash of the band Yellow Dogs: "You know-it's sort of cool to be in our position, because if I were American, I'd just be a normal person, but here I'm really strange and interesting" (p. 258).

Among the many examples cited by Steward, a passing observation in a 2010 review published in the *Miami Herald* that "The similarities between these young people and American teens are striking and surprising" (p. 126) is a good example of a trope which depends on a starting point of essentialised difference against which any similarities engender surprise. As with the writings discussed earlier, this can only be understood in the context of a discursive network of similar statements which serve to subliminally reinforce such messages. Take, for instance, the following ostensibly harmless, even generous, assessment of the Iranian character in the article by Martin Hodgson cited earlier:

> It is a commonplace for visiting Westerners to contrast the austerity of Iranian public life with the openness and downright normality of private life. Likewise, foreign journalists seem obliged to note with surprise that Iranians in general are charming and humorous.

Indeed. No doubt Iran has its fair share of charming and humorous individuals, and many non-Iranian visitors have noted the immense hospitality and friendliness of the people they meet. And yet, this likely well-intentioned statement is curiously disturbing for the ways in which its framing depends on orientalising stereotypes about Iranians and how they live. Observations about "the downright normality of private life" draw on tropes of apriori assumed difference and a dominant discourse in which the opposite is held to be true and which make such statements necessary in the first place. Would such comments (with the same wording "note with surprise") be used in the context of any other country (North Korea, perhaps)? Ramin Sadighi, music producer and founder of Hermes Records, recalled feelings of being "othered" at a WOMEX ('world music' industry) event that he spoke at in the mid-2000s where he was introduced as:

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[36] Steward (2013) quotes from an interview with Freya Petersen published in the *New York Times* in which the lead singer Raam claimed that: "We're jeopardizing our lives every show we play" (p. 111). There is a sense in which such claims to danger make the music more "authentic" to audiences outside Iran. Robertson (2012) has also written at length about Hypernova. Interestingly, the same musician has elsewhere asserted that "I think a lot of people over here [in the US] are unfortunately misinformed about the realities that exist in Iran. Not to be an apologist for the current regime there, but Iran really is not as bad as they make it out to be in the media" (quoted in Steward 2013, p. 111).

… an *Iranian* producer, as if that was something extraordinary. So I said, excuse me, but I'm a producer who happens to come from Iran. That Iranian tag is nothing so unusual. I mean, in Iran also the people produce music. But you know the way they express this is like, we have a ruin called Iran and suddenly a producer can come out of it. No, I'm the result of a big business … and sometimes that orientalist approach hurts deeply. (Interview 22.8.15)[37]

The debate around *Persian Cats* is revealing for the ways in which it lays bare the competing discourses around Iran's alternative music scene in relation to issues of representation, inside and outside the country. Many in Iran are wary of the motivations underlying such representations, even according them political significance of a rather different kind, as expressed for instance by rapper Salome:

All this propaganda about how people are oppressed will give western countries more excuses if they are interested in occupying us. I see Iran as a family – even if the regime is ruling the country, at least they are still Iranian. (Khaleeli, 2011, as cited in Steward 2013, p. 181)

In the context of this discussion, it is interesting to note that the public outside Iran, including diaspora Iranians, have somehow come to expect political interpretations of cultural products and events emanating from inside Iran, and not just in relation to popular culture. For example, in October 2015 I attended a screening at the annual London Iranian Film Festival of the documentary film *6 Centuries and 6 Years* (2015) about a project to restore and record a repertoire of compositions attributed to the highly influential 15th-Century composer, music theorist, author and poet Abd al-Qadir Maraghi. The film follows the musicians over a 6-year period as they gather together, rehearse and finally record the music. The film makes no reference to contextual political issues, including the various permissions needed to record the music, something which appears to have been a deliberate choice on the part of the filmmaking team who wanted to focus on musical issues. However, at the Q&A following the screening, the director Mojtaba Mirtahmasb (who had travelled from Iran for the festival) was asked by an

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[37] Almost the exact same wording is reported by Polly Withers from Ramallah-based musician Jad who also resists such orientalising: "the way that I see myself is that … I am a musician, or artist or whatever you want to call it, but I happen to be Palestinian … Because I am from here … [but] I am not a 'Palestinian' artist …." He continues: "Our goal is not to show the world that we are humans like them, because we already know that, and they already know that. If they don't already know that that's their problem! Not my problem" (2015). See Swedenburg (2013) for similar observations in relation to Palestinian hip hop. I am reminded of the following line from "My Sweet Little Terrorist Song" by the Iranian band 127: "We appear on their TV shows like creatures from another planet" (see discussion in Nooshin, 2005b). Steward (2013) quotes from Raam, lead singer of Hypernova, after the band left Iran: "We'd meet people who'd never seen an Iranian or something. And after they hear our music, they're just so shocked and they become fans" (p. 162).

audience member why the film made no reference to the broader political context, mentioning both the restrictions faced by musicians and difficulties in gaining permits and the wider issue of government support for such projects. In relation to the latter, the question was predicated on the erroneous assumption that the Iranian government does not fund cultural heritage projects; and also that similar projects abroad would automatically receive state funding. Such assumptions are deeply rooted in widespread and simplistic binary representations by which Iran is demonised and the "West" romanticised.

Conclusion

> … what I want to argue is that doing justice to Palestinian rap and what it means in Palestinian life more broadly, requires attending to more than the issues of struggle and politics. By expanding our focus, I believe that we can gain a greater appreciation for Palestinian rap music itself, as well as achieve a deeper understanding of the very local complexities of the Palestinian experience, and of the aspirations and dreams of Palestinian youth. We might even enrich our conceptions of the "struggle" itself. (Swedenburg, 2013, p. 29)

The motivation for writing this article has come from my increasing unease with how writings on Iranian popular music engage with questions of "resistance", "protest" or "liberation". It was only in the final stages of writing that I came across Swedenburg's article and which resonated strongly with my thoughts on Iran. In this aricle, I have argued that the problematic position of popular music within Iran has led to the emergence of an associated discourse of opposition and a somewhat reductionist view of it from outside. Like Swedenburg I'm concerned about what happens when certain meanings become privileged over others and what we miss when music is viewed exclusively through a binary oppression/liberation paradigm. Notwithstanding the small number of authors who have sought to understand Iranian popular music's meanings "as entertainment, personal pleasure, and a sense of belonging to social groups that are often defined by musical taste" (Steward, 2013, p. 17), broadly speaking the general trend has been to sideline other equally important aspects of the music, not least the aesthetic, and to marginalise voices that don't foreground issues of resistance. Linked to this is the question of how such reductionist views feed into wider regimes of orientalist representation and whose agenda such regimes serves. One possible answer is offered by Steward (2013), who suggests that:

> This romanticised politicisation may indicate a nostalgic desire for a revival of countercultural movements in the West … As Western political goals are projected onto non-Western cultures, so is a sense of longing for the West's "lost"

underground. This gives rise to a desire to portray the "new" non-Western undergrounds as embodying the ideals of their lost Western counterpart … (p. 108) The narrative of relatable, "revolutionary" music grants listeners the opportunity to live vicariously through what is often portrayed as the dangerous but "exciting" lives of Iranian underground musicians, fighting for "Western freedom". (p. 109)

I conclude by returning to Olszewska and suggest that instead of unquestioningly reading large election rallies or music videos such as "Happy in Tehran" as "signs of human freedom", we should rather "use them strategically to tell us more about forms of power and how people are caught up in them … If the systems of power are multiple, then resisting at one level may catch people up at other levels" (Abu-Lughod, 1990, pp. 42, 53). For those in Iran for whom making or consuming certain styles of popular music serves as a vehicle for challenging authority of various kinds, whether familial or more broadly socio-cultural, religious or political, Abu-Lughod's observation that the "forms of rebellion against their elders" enacted by young Bedouin "are backing them into wider and different sets of authority structures" (p. 52) is very apposite. In an increasingly global context, one might ask what unsuspected sets of authority structures Iran's freedom-seeking middle classes are backing themselves into, given that the regimes of representation discussed in this article arguably mobilise a singular Euro-American neo-liberal model of what "liberation" - and ultimately, perhaps, society as a whole - should look like.

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