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Navigating Musical Identities, Knowledge Production and "Authenticity" in the Diaspora

Anita Fábos

Clark University, afabos@clarku.edu

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ELEVEN

Navigating Musical Identities, Knowledge Production and “Authenticity” in the Diaspora

A Conversation with Alsarah

Anita Fábos and Alsarah

[11.0]

KNOWLEDGE ON THE MOVE

[11.1]

In this chapter, through dialogue between us co-authors, we attempt to capture and explore the musical and personal identity of singer/songwriter/bandleader Alsarah—at a particular point in time. Our method is to present sections of a recorded conversation between Alsarah and co-author Anita Fábos. The partial transcript presented here demonstrates the opportunities but also real dilemmas inherent in navigating identity and producing knowledge as a person *from*, but not *in*, or in some ways, *of* Sudan.

[11.2]

Alsarah’s music—a style she terms East African retro pop—derives from her multi-layered and dynamic background. Born in Khartoum, Sudan and now living in Brooklyn, New York, USA, via points in the Arab region (Egypt, Yemen) and on the east coast of the United States, she also claims Nubian roots, which emerge in her group *Alsarah & the Nubatones*. Alsarah’s experience of being “on the move,” of claiming multiple identities but also being claimed—and sometimes “corrected”—as “Sudanese” is a window into the dynamics of diaspora and which voices are seen to produce knowledge about the homeland. Alsarah’s ruminations about her relationship to Sudan encompass many geogra-

phies—the nation, the regions in which it is embedded (the Nile Valley, East Africa, the Middle East, and the Global South) but also Khartoum, Nubia, the Nuba Mountains, and the contested provinces east, west, and south. AlSarah brings a sophisticated perspective on race and racialization of identity, a lens that she turns on the music business and her own desires to break out of other people’s conceptions of what she should look and sound like.

Anita is a Euro-American anthropologist with a longtime interest in the Sudanese diaspora and the twenty-first-century effects of mobility on previously place-based culture and identity. She previously produced research with Sudanese participants on their experiences and identities in Cairo, London, Toronto, Dubai, and Boston, learning how their interconnectedness and movement between diaspora nodes produces new meanings of being Sudanese. Her recognition that these movements are often fraught with uneven access to rights and resources, with borders and other obstacles to connecting, and with sadness, loss, and nostalgia has led her to a deeper concern with the creative process through which Sudanese people in the diaspora address their distance and alienation from a national homeland, sometimes referred to as *al-ghurba* (Abusharaf 2002; Fábos 2014). Recently, her interests have driven her to engage with what she calls, “the acoustics of diaspora” for Sudanese-identified musicians and their audiences—the debates over what musics constitute “authentic” styles, and the intersection of music, mobility, and gendered Sudanese identities (Fábos, forthcoming). This ongoing work has led her to invite AlSarah to participate in producing this chapter through a lengthy dialogue, which took place on December 29, 2015. Anita edited the interview transcript for relevance, redundancy, and flow, and reorganized it according to themes. She has also removed her own interjections unless they serve a purpose to clarify the narrative. AlSarah revised her own comments and edited the resulting thematic draft. What follows is a jointly conceptualized and written chapter that seeks to present a diaspora perspective of Sudanese identity negotiation and knowledge production through the eyes of a musician.

[11.3]

RELUCTANCE AS KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

[11.4]

Several concerns emerged for Anita in preparing to produce this piece of writing. No Euro-American social scientist observing, analyzing, or writing about Sudan or the Sudanese diaspora today can sidestep the long history of colonial and imperial relations between global North and South, and the complicity of the US government in a destabilizing war on terror in the East African region. Acknowledging the impossibility of engaging fully in a shared understanding from the vantage point of the global North, Anita uses her own position as a tenured professor to cri-

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tique Western academic conventions and institutional incentives—e.g., promotion processes that give more credit to single-authored articles—that make it easier to avoid meaningful participation with the co-producers of her research. US-born, but first generation immigrant; White, but mother to a Sudanese child; she recognizes that these characteristics may give her insight into, but only partial comprehension of the complicated identities of increasingly mobile Sudanese nationals and diaspora members. Still, she is convinced of the importance of bringing her scholarly and feminist analysis of power relations into the interactions and relations that she has with the people whose lives and concerns she chronicles.

[11.6]

In practice, this has meant a commitment to the “co-production” of knowledge—a clumsy but useful term that requires both parties in an inquiry to take responsibility for shaping what and how we know things. While Anita drove the process of designing interview questions and inviting Alsarah to a conversation, Alsarah has been very clear about her resistance to being defined by others. Alsarah has not repudiated a Sudanese identity, but neither has she limited herself to a national perspective nor shied away from espousing both her ethnic and her regional affinities. She is Sudanese, so the music she makes is, by default, Sudanese, in the same way that she is Nubian and so the music she makes is by definition Nubian. This does not, however, mean she is seeking to make music strictly within those parameters. Some of her opposition to being defined by others comes from her observations of the selective projection of ethnically based musical categories onto certain “non-Western” artists but not others. Her critique of racial hierarchies (from global to local), championing of women’s perspectives, and bold vision to provide an alternative example of what “Sudanese” might look like emerges out of a life story of mobility and personal experience of conflict and forced migration. Alsarah’s retro sensibility plays with the idea of authenticity but offers an unapologetic challenge to the contemporary narrowing of cultural, political, and gender roles in Sudan today.

[11.7]

Alsarah, who describes herself as a “reluctant ethnomusicologist,” views the mainstream ethnomusicologist’s lens as a product of the white Western gaze, but nevertheless acknowledges the usefulness of the tools she has acquired from conventional academic study. Alsarah’s desire to make her own identity, and not someone else’s, represents her contribution to a long tradition of women—and men—from Sudan who draw upon their personal experiences of mobility and resistance to critique freely the production of knowledge about being Sudanese. For Anita, the anthropological insight that people may espouse nested or manifold identities, that these themselves may be fluid or ambivalent, or formed through resistance to ascription by others is rendered even more complex by the fact of Alsarah’s public persona. As an artist, Alsarah is obliged to respond to genre categories imposed upon music and musicians by pro-



ducers, labels, critics, as well as audiences while continuing to grow and change. Some of the ambivalence created by the tension between interviewers' assumptions and questions about AlSarah's persona, and her own self-definition, is captured in the mediated interview text in the next section.

DIASPORA AS A SITE OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

[11.8]

The difficult relationship between theory and practice around negotiating identity have come to the fore for Anita in writing the commentary to support AlSarah's analysis. Even though AlSarah has adopted the label "East African" to refer to the music she makes with *AlSarah & The Nubatones*, Anita first viewed AlSarah's participation in this project in terms of her "Sudanese-ness," thus contributing to the very categorization AlSarah has tried to avoid. In part, social scientists are prone to the same bounded tropes as other listeners who have tried to pin down AlSarah's "authenticity" as a musician whose story and songs are connected to Sudan. Indeed, AlSarah came to Anita's attention first as a person with a Sudan tie, and only then as a musician. This "methodological nationalism" (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003) encourages a habit of mind that makes it very difficult to look beyond the nation-state as a container of people and cultures, and mobility as movement *between* national categories. The focus of many refugees and forcibly displaced people on the national homeland further establishes the relationship between people who participate in a diaspora with a national identity, such as "Sudanese." Yet, as AlSarah demonstrates, the very mobility that has been part of her life since before her family's ultimate departure from Sudan—the nation has set in motion new identity claims and stances. Her diaspora experience not only shapes the music she makes, but also feeds back into the fluid and mobile identity that so many people with claims on Sudan can relate to. In what follows, AlSarah expounds on her relationship to Sudan and its many parts, its legacy of center-periphery racism, and her unwillingness, and even inability, to "perform" according to a particular gender code.

[11.9]

Beyond the Khartoum Lens

[11.10]

ALSARAH: I think the desire to create a homogenous Sudanese identity is one of Sudan's major causes of conflict. With more than 58 separate tribes—we are not even counting sub-tribes and all their languages—you are telling me there is only one way to be Sudanese? Really? . . . To me, when you start questioning someone's Sudanese-ness because you don't like their opinion or where they fit into your preconceived notion of what this identity should be limited to, well, automatically you have entered the danger zone. That is exactly the problem

[11.11]





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with Sudan—there is not room for the different kinds of Sudans. There is just no room for us. I want my music to be part of a larger African story, too—part of a larger community. I want to look beyond these modern borders for where I should find commonality with my neighbor.

[11.12]

But, as the other papers in this volume demonstrate, different approaches to being Sudanese continue to exist and develop despite attempts at silencing them. The 2014 documentary, *Beats of the Antonov*,¹ to which AlSarah contributed, filmed the exuberant responses of people in the Nuba Mountains to Sudanese government aerial-bombing of their villages. The film questions and challenges the ongoing state of civil war in Sudan while celebrating the creativity of those Sudanese caught up in the violence. While the analysis of the Sudanese government’s centralization of power and identity under the banner of an Arabic-Islamic identity has been made earlier (e.g., Idris 2005), the film’s focus on the besieged population’s “defiant assertion of diversity” (Mullen 2014) by way of music, dance, and laughter is unusual in its articulation of a fluid national consciousness. Echoing Wendy James’ insight (2007) that Khartoum’s peripheries are themselves centers with their own cultural logic, AlSarah’s recognition of a Sudanese counter narrative beyond the capital meshes well with her own interpretation of Sudan’s identity issues.

[11.13]

ALSARAH: Khartoum thinks that it’s the only Sudan. I only recently started traveling outside of Khartoum when I go to Sudan, and I’ve noticed that everything is different outside of Khartoum. It’s Khartoum that has all these issues we’ve been discussing about identity and propaganda and this and this and this. The rest of the country operates entirely differently, but it is not part of the dialogue. And so, Sudan’s many insane amounts of conflict to me are very simply based on identity and resources. Just two things. A group wants resources and there’s already a huge issue with identity and with ethnic strife in Sudan that [has] stirred ethnic tension from being ethnic tension and prejudice to systematic racism. . . . They want that, that’s in their best interest because it then allows them to make sure that everyone else in the crowd is turning a blind eye to the way they are destroying everything else, because “other people” aren’t really Sudanese. So you can get rid of them. They’re not “really” Sudanese, they’re just taking over our land.

[11.14]

I have been told that I am not Sudanese before, by Sudanese people mostly, oddly enough. I love the argument about how I’m not Sudanese. So, for me, working on that documentary was like proving to myself that everything people were saying is just filtered to me through their own filters. Even popular culture in Sudan is filtered through this Khartoum based-lens. Activists spend so much time trying to change the regime, but even then, when they speak of what they consider culturally relevant to being Sudanese, it still feels like a one-dimensional picture . . . it’s still filtered through their idea of what high art is,



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of what intellectual looks like, of what beautiful is, you know? And so, [I would say], “You are still filtering a lot of issues through your Khartoum lens.” And what I want to do is to acknowledge this lens, I just want the lens to be spoken about openly, that this is the lens we are looking through. But this is not Sudan, let’s just change the glasses for five seconds. . . . I really just want to take all of the education that’s available for raising a black intellectual in America and take it and teach it to some people in Sudan. And then tell them to look at themselves as White people. Because what is Whiteness? It’s just about who’s in charge, what the system is serving. Who is serving you? . . . We need to start acknowledging this.

Alsarrah’s personal familiarity with multiple local and national contexts and her lived experience on the move has given her the ability to translate across boundaries in ways that reflect a budding diasporan discourse at the intersection of ethnicity, religion, race, and Arab nationalism. While much of what she describes relates to the particular burden of Sudan’s inability to come to terms with its race politics, as experienced by the diasporan children of Sudanese parents, she also references the shared mobile identity of the immigrant.

[11.15]

ALSARAH: There is one common denominator that links being an immigrant in America [and that is] that we deal with the same crap, get asked the same questions. You know, where are you from, how come you speak English so good, what’s that you’re eating, is it even food . . . blah blah blah. There are, of course, differences, I don’t want to say it’s one homogenous thing, but to me that’s my Number One cultural identity at this point, as an immigrant. I spent more time being an immigrant than being Sudanese, you know what I mean? . . . “translating things through the accent,” I call that. I am “translating through the accent.” Because sometimes you can’t even share the conversations you have with your friends to your parents, because they don’t get it, they just won’t get it, because they haven’t had that. But then at the same time I can share it with somebody else who moved here with their parents from Japan, and we both went to school together and we were both talking about that time you need to tell your Mom about your boyfriend. And then how she is going to cry and then talk about all the work she did for nothing. You know, not that my mom would do that, but the whole idea of, “why can’t you find a nice boy, I know so-and-so’s son . . .” I’m, like, really Ma? So-and-so’s son?

[11.16]

On the complexities of race for members of the Sudanese diaspora, especially those navigating America’s national and regional race politics, Alsarrah notes,

[11.17]

We don’t talk about our own Blackness in relationship to American Blackness very often or how we fit into that spectrum of Blackness. The Sudanese diaspora, like many diasporas, brings its old issues from home to the new home with it. So all our internal issues with racism/shadism/tribalism are brought over but never articulated fully. And we

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don't want to relate them to the already existing issues of shade in Black America because we don't want to *acknowledge* our Blackness in America. We don't want to acknowledge that here we are all Black. So we maintain a distance in our heads from America's Blackness in many ways by telling ourselves we are not Black, we are "Arab" or "Afro-Arab" or anything that makes you not "Black." And being Arab or Afro-Arab isn't bad or not true . . . but why do we refuse to relate that to Blackness?

[11.19]

Then you have your first and second generation kids that grew up in the diaspora in the U.S. passing for all kinds of Others—various Latinos, West Indian, and others, and living bizarre double lives to accommodate being "Sudanese" and being the rest of yourself (that being whatever your alter-ego is away from home). Most of us pass for and live as Black in America some pass for "Arab," whatever that means, and some for "Indian" or whatever other ambiguous brown label. Somehow we deal with the staunch racism of Sudanese people against Blackness, while hearing a lot of racism from Black America against "Africans" regularly spewed around you—because maybe you don't look "African" enough to them if you are from a certain region of Sudan and so they feel free to just say whatever they like. I'm not even really sure here what goes through people's heads when they look at me . . . I can only imagine . . . it's very layered . . . I also grew up watching Bollywood movies so my relationship with pop culture aesthetics tends to have some South Asian leanings, with a firm Brooklyn attitude . . . so now what? What does that make me? I don't have a previous role model for how that should be navigated . . . nor do my parents or many Sudanese people living in the diaspora today . . . how do we navigate our new found sense of our Blackness in the diaspora and the Western gaze? Especially if you are from a "northern Arab-assuming" tribe in Sudan and have layers of racism brought from back home with you to unravel? Oddly enough, I find I have an easier time relating to people from creole parts of America and the West Indies on the nuances and layers of race inside the family . . . or maybe it's not odd at all since they understand the shade game better than most.

[11.20]

Alsarah's point about the power race has had in shaping the Western gaze makes this cultural moment of extraordinary mobility and layered identities (and, as she says, their corresponding "layers of racism") different from the cosmopolitanism that accompanied earlier eras of movement and migration. Sadly, Sudan's own precolonial history of mobility, flux, and pluralism (Manger 1994; Sikainga 2010) did not give rise to a mainstream tolerance for difference. The consequences for Sudan and Sudanese due to the inability to address race can be most clearly seen in the recent (2011) truncation of the nation and the establishment of South Sudan. Our brief exchange about Sudan's inability to address its pluralism captures the sorrow and frustration of so many in the diaspora.

[11.21]

ANITA: When South Sudan seceded, one of the things that I heard a lot from my Sudanese friends—my northern Sudanese friends—was that,

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a) it's not going to work; and b) there was this feeling of losing an arm or something like that. It was like an existential crisis, but one they had invented, because [South Sudan] never really was a part of Sudan.

[11.22]

ALSARAH: No, it was a part of the arm but you always treated it as a shoe!

ANITA: Yeah [laughs].

[11.23]

ALSARAH: Yeah, and like an old shoe that you don't particularly even like.

[11.24]

ANITA: Yeah, yeah, yeah but then when somebody . . .

[11.25]

ALSARAH: Yeah, when someone wants to *take* that shoe, now they're like, "That's my shoe. Don't take that shoe, it's my shoe!" And it's like, "No, that's not your shoe."

[11.26]

ANITA: [laughs] Yeah!

[11.27]

ALSARAH: "That's not your shoe!" Yeah, I don't know, I get the sadness of it, because to me the sadness was about our failure. I was sad, because that was the clearest sign of our failure.

[11.28]

ANITA: Did you dream of a New Sudan?

[11.29]

ALSARAH: Yes! And we failed. We failed really hard. We should acknowledge that too. And that is why Sudan is going to be two countries, and it is going to be three and four. It's not going to stop anytime soon if we keep going the way we are going. Eventually what's going to happen is there is going to be East Sudan, West Sudan—Khartoum can just be its own country. That's really what's going to happen. So I don't know. Sudan's identity crisis is the reason we are all here.

[11.30]

Navigating the precarious boundaries of racial and ethnic identities in the diaspora can provide unexpected moments of clarity, as in this reflection on her experience of Nuba Mountains community norms during her part in the filming of *Beats of the Antonov*.

[11.31]

ALSARAH: My love for Sudan is often challenged. Very often challenged, because Sudan doesn't often show you a loving face when you are too different, especially as a woman. And so, a lot of times I wonder to myself, "Sudan, what the hell? Why I am I doing this?" And for me that trip [to the Nuba Mountains] proved to me something on a gut level—that there are, so many different ways to be Sudanese. And that there is room for someone like me in Sudan. If there is room for someone like me in a refugee camp where you are considering everyone [to be in] the most dangerous place, where people are going to be socially oppressed—[well,] I've never felt more liberated; I've never had more personal freedom. And I walked all around; I was recording music, everyone is dancing and I danced with them, nobody says anything. Nobody is questioning. In Khartoum sometimes I'll be just standing, folding my arms and leaning against the door and somebody will say, "Why are you standing like that?" I don't even know what I just did. "You're standing like a hussy!" I had no idea there was a standard hussy pose. Do they teach it to all of you? Put this on a welcome card when you arrive at the airport: "Don't stand like a hussy, don't say

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_____.” There needs to be an instruction manual on how to not be yourself.

[11.32]

Gender, Power, and Music

[11.35]

This section offers a snapshot from AlSarah’s perspective as a musician of a much more elaborate dialectic of social control and resistance reflecting gender and power relations in Sudan. Her analysis of how gender relations, class markers and racial coding endure as specific markers of “Sudanese-ness” demonstrates not only that musicians in the diaspora offer up a rethinking of Sudanese-ness and authenticity from a diaspora vantage point, but perhaps also a means to develop creatively outside the politics and control of the regime. Furthermore, by juxtaposing the regime’s policing and control of the mainstream music scene in Sudan with the World Music industry’s political white-washing of inherent racial and gender inequalities affecting the musicians who produce this music, AlSarah expands our understanding of the problematic politics of authenticity. Despite the industry’s regular nods to Sudan’s history of conflict and strife in write-ups of Sudanese music festivals and concerts (e.g. Eyre 2008), the artists themselves are often portrayed as representatives of authentic, place-based music. Could the tendency to label artists and their music according to apolitical and even ahistorical categories end up cleansing people’s listening experience of the power and politics of its making? Some of AlSarah’s struggle to assert her own musical identity alerts us to the possibility of the World Music industry as an “anti-politics machine” (Ferguson 1990), through which notions of place-based authenticity overlook or even downplay gender, race, and class power struggles. Through her experiential analysis, AlSarah describes the hierarchies of knowledge production that her music-making strives to overturn.

[11.36]

ALSARAH: I didn’t want to be a musician. I knew I wanted to be in music—I just didn’t know what could I be in it. And again the more time I spent in the States, especially being an immigrant kid, you are raised with the idea that you need a practical job, you need a practical education. And even though my parents fully supported us in high school in being heavily involved in the arts . . . they also instilled in us the idea that you need a job. It’s an immigrant thing, every immigrant I know—doesn’t matter where you come through. . . . And when I went to [the university] I studied music with a concentration in ethnomusicology, because I still wanted to be in music, and I figured ethnomusicology could be a practical way of doing music because I could eventually go into graduate school, I could do field research, I could teach. I could do all those things I wanted to do. But then when I got into [ethnomusicology] and started studying it, I realized I did not want to be an ethnomusicologist, especially the way it was taught at the time. I didn’t understand this idea of the “outside gaze.” Of *being* the outside

gaze. Also, ethnomusicology harps on the idea that, as [an] insider you can never be objective. So, as an insider you can never be qualified to write about your own culture, and it's a huge thing they teach you in ethnomusicology, this need to be neutral—as if the White gaze is neutral! And that just burned me. I did not like it. . . . And at the end of college I also realized that I didn't want to be on the outside analyzing other people's work. I wanted to contribute to that story somehow. I didn't know how yet. And, you know, it took me years to try to erase the damage academia did to me as an artist. . . . Because academia . . . puts you in a critical headspace that's really healthy for analyzing what everyone does to you, but it's not healthy for creating art. It's never about developing your voice.

Alsarah has used her training to subvert this outside, academic gaze, repurposing those tools and carving out a path through the thicket of “authenticity.” Here, she describes her stance with respect to the status quo laid out by the Middle East music scene in New York, and by extension, by the Khartoum music industry. To break free of the gendered idea of ‘authenticity’ as managed and reproduced by men—and those women who have made a “patriarchal bargain” (Kandiyoti 1988), Alsarah has opened up an unmediated space for music created by women, such as *agahani al-banat* (girl's songs) that inspire her own creative process. Throughout, Alsarah questions the gender, class, and racial assumptions of not only the mainstream Sudanese industry, but also the Middle East and World Music scenes about what a “proper” Sudanese woman musician should look, sound, and act like.

[11.37]

ALSARAH: I started freelancing in New York in the music scene there. And . . . because I can sing in Arabic, I fell into the Middle Eastern scene at first. I fell in—as I dipped my tail in it and was like, ahhh, no. The Middle East scene in New York, and I think all around the States, is the same thing that's wrong with a lot of World Music scenes at a local level in that is very obsessed with preserving and authenticity instead of innovation. It also doesn't deal with a lot of the inherent problems that it's brought with it from home—its racism and sexism. The Middle Eastern scene is so racist and sexist in America, just like it is in the Middle East. It's just that here we don't talk about it, whereas in the Middle East there is at least a voice of dissonance in the new underground sound that is rising and challenging the status quo, and redefining the sound of the Middle East. We act like we are supposed to be cool with it. . . . Who gets to do it and who doesn't get to do it. What bodies are authentic enough to perform this on, and what aren't. This whole idea of authenticity within World Music and preserving and presenting traditions—I get the idea that nobody can do it better than the people that are from there, that grow up on it. But also, growing up on it isn't necessarily being *from* there in this day and age of mass movement and migration. . . . I realized immediately I am not interested in preserving things, that's not what I am here for. That doesn't

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mean it is not a valid cause . . . but not every artist needs to be involved in that. Preservation doesn’t take a lot of people. It just takes a couple of people and a computer.

[11.39]

And so, I wanted to be a musician but I was told—because I was Sudanese—I had to be a Sudanese musician. And I hadn’t seen many examples of Sudanese musicians that made sense to me. I knew I wouldn’t want to be those guys with the big orchestras. . . . I am interested in adding things; I am interested in learning about where I am from and then saying what I have to say about it. What I have to say about it. . . . Well, everyone told me if you want to be a Sudanese musician you have a few options. You can do the orchestra thing where other people write for you and compose for you, or you can do the Sitona² thing. [With] the Sitona thing, everyone looks down upon it as though it’s not art, because “those” people are not first-class Sudanese, they are second-class Sudanese.

[11.40]

I had always believed that the role of women in Sudan has always been much more powerful than we are taught. You know, like, I don’t mean in the traditional sense of caregivers—Sudanese women at this moment are upholding patriarchy. We’re upholding a lot of old practices that are killing us. And that is the scary part of when a regime comes in at a massive scale and actually re-educates people in a certain way. The average person my age in Sudan knows nothing about the history of Sudan. We’re taught the history of the Arab Peninsula . . . which is also part of why I’m so focused on *aghani al-banat*, even though a lot of people—even women—[will say,] “This is great, but there other things that Sudanese women contributed, much more high-brow art.” True, they have contributed in many ways and that should be acknowledged too . . . but I am interested in this. I’m interested in these tiny little worlds; I’m interested in these simple worlds because I’m interested in hearing the story of the woman who doesn’t have the education you and I have because she doesn’t come from the privileged class of being “Arab Sudanese” versus “African Sudanese,” whatever that means. And so, we have certain privileges. And we need to acknowledge those privileges in what we consider highbrow art. And this is the only form of music women actually write [and record] in Sudan.

[11.41]

In the case of Sudan, the regulation and control of musicians has gone well beyond the policing of cultural and gender boundaries. Musicians were among the first to be targeted by Sudan’s Islamist regime after it seized power in a military coup in 1989 for promoting “inappropriate” comportment such as mixed-gender dancing or expressing political opposition through lyrics, for example. Scores went into exile in protest and to be able to continue their professional activities.

[11.42]

Currently, the Sudanese State regulates and polices public behavior of women through the 1983 Penal Code and 1991 Criminal Act, both of which are part of a trend in some Muslim countries to “re-Islamise” previously secular legal systems by introducing Islamic criminal offences



and sanctions in their codified laws (Sidahmed 2001, 188). As a result of ongoing government surveillance and raids on public and private performance spaces in Khartoum and elsewhere, women's public musical performance is very much sanitized and tamed. Even private weddings are subject to state policy requiring permission papers for wedding parties, an eleven p.m. cutoff time for the festivities, and the prohibition of mixed-gender dancing. These policies have dampened the development of an organic, popular music scene in Sudan and have supported the guardians of the status quo—both inside and outside of Sudan—in reaching out through the internet to direct opprobrium at any musician (but in practice, against Sudanese women musicians in the diaspora) who chart their own path (Fabos forthcoming).

ALSARAH: The Sudanese music industry is not together. We do not have an industry, we just have the broken remnants of something that stopped existing in the 1980's. . . . [The Islamists] killed half of the musicians. And the ones that they didn't kill ran away, and the ones that didn't run away just stopped talking. They did it to all the artists—it wasn't just music. They did it across the board—theatre, cinema, writers, musicians, everyone. Ever since then, it's been literally frozen, and that to me is the difference between Sudan and the west coast of Africa [and why you see more of that music in the western-driven World Music scene]. The musicians . . . were already working [out of] a structure in West Africa. There was already a club scene, a label scene, there was already a circuit. So, what they did is, they took that circuit and rebuilt it, really, in the diaspora. We didn't have anything to rebuild in the diaspora.

[11.43]

Mobility, Identity, and Authenticity

[11.44]

Alsarah's life as an artist has intersected with Sudanese experiences of conflict and forced migration, but her personal mobility and her thinking about "place" and "home" pre-date the political conditions that led her parents to leave Sudan in 1991. She notes that she's always been on the move as part of a mobile family. Alsarah's narrative complicates the often-used metaphor of "betwixt and between" to describe children whose parents were received as immigrants, regardless of her own identification with people who recognize themselves in the moniker "immigrant" and have similar experiences of dealing with parents or other relatives who do not share the same cultural norms. Following from her critique of the World Music industry's tendency to categorize artists according to limited or stereotypical labels, here Alsarah addresses the concept of place-based authenticity and pushes back against the imposition of a duty to "preserve." Recent mobilities-thinking in the social sciences is catching up to the ways in which people's relationships with multiple places generate identities built around connections rather than gaps. In this section,

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Alsarah shares with us her ideas about developing an authentic voice on the move, the active role of the diaspora in moving beyond cultural “preservation,” and her exasperation with those Sudanese who continue to expect her to mold her identity to their perspective of Sudanese-ness.

[11.47] ALSARAH: Sudan’s multiple conflicts are the reason I am here. My parents did not want to leave Sudan at all. My parents were not looking to leave *ever*. And we spent the first 15 years here very much on the edge, like, “We are going to go back soon, we’re going back soon, we’re going back soon.” So, it took a while to let go of the fact I couldn’t go back. It wasn’t until after college that I accepted that I’m not going back, that I accepted it really. You know, there was a while when I was looking forward to it, and then there was a while when I was terrified of being forced to go back, ya know? I was, like, “I don’t want to go back.” I kept thinking if my parents go back now that means all my vacations from now until the end of my life are going to be spent in Sudan. “I can’t do that, Mom!” [laughs] That’s terrible, I want to see the rest of Africa, go somewhere else!

[11.48] ANITA: I wonder if a lot of musicians get asked about their own relationship to movement and mobility. And what I see—and maybe this is one of my discomforts with ethnomusicology—it seems very place-based. I know that place is very important to human beings, and I know that we make meaning out of “place.” But it seems to me to exclude the experiences of people “on the move” until they settle down somewhere and start making their own music in another place, or like we talked about, this kind of “preserving your culture” thing . . . and yet what I see happening—again, I am just an observer and not really a participant in this incredible and ongoing transformation of Sudanese identity—because it is now coming from Brooklyn, Toronto, and from Australia right? . . . So you can’t discount that this identity is spiraling into new dimensions.

[11.49] ALSARAH: I know it is, and it terrifies a part of the Sudanese community so much that the diaspora is becoming so active and vocal now. Especially because our generation is becoming so active and vocal, because we are adding a whole different twist to it, we are not preserving anything, and we wouldn’t even know how to preserve it fully.

[11.50] ANITA: Nowadays, Sudanese live in so many different places, and are influenced—and influence—the cultural fabric of those places. But you have also noted that people’s identity as “Sudanese” is fluid within the country, because Sudan itself is not even fixed—its borders have shifted, and many people within the borders are themselves nomadic. So you’ve got these different diasporic nodes and modes of living. How do you relate to this interconnected network of Sudanese people, and how these different nodes are all talking and not necessarily talking from the same playbook?

[11.51] ALSARAH: How do I connect with them? I think we are all a part of a larger new network. An extension of the Sudanese voice with its own lilts and accents. And those accents are different from one corner to the next. Those differences to me are also an extension and evolution of the

variations of the Sudanese accent within Sudan. We are all still trying to find new ways to connect. I think some of us spent a lot of time running away from being Sudanese since we didn't fit the mold we were told about. I think we are just now beginning to find one another and connect over the wonderful world of the internet.

ANITA: But, inasmuch as you yourself had not only an artistic trajectory but also had a mobility trajectory, how does your music relate to that movement—which wasn't necessarily voluntary—and how does that coercive aspect to your life story relate to the bigger picture of Sudan as fluid, as unfixed? I wonder if you could characterize that.

ALSARAH: I don't know if I can characterize it, because it is the only way I've lived. I don't have an alternative lifestyle. This was the way I grew up, so it's all I know. I grew up moving my whole life. In Sudan we moved multiple times. My mom did a lot of fieldwork outside of the city so I went with her a lot. So I grew up moving; I was never a stable . . . I never had a stable space. Every two years we moved in Khartoum, between family houses. In the summers I was sent to live with my Grandma in Egypt.

ANITA: The other question: your bandmates in *Alsarah & The Nubantones*—are they Nubian, Sudanese, American, Yemenis, or are they . . .

ALSARAH: I try not to hire people strictly based on where they are from . . . The only rule I have for my bandmates, besides being bad-ass musicians, is that they be people who are familiar with displacement. That's the only rule I have with the people I work with . . . or even hang out with actually. . . . Sudanese people in Sudan don't understand what I'm saying either. If you have never gone through displacement and migration and replanting your roots somewhere else, you don't get it.

Authenticity, Music and Knowledge Production

Alsarah's artistic trajectory as a musician, her ambivalence toward the notion of authenticity, and her embrace of her own mobility may provide her audience with an alternative map for navigating the churning waters of Sudanese identity. In his writings on mobility, Henrik Vigh (2009) has argued that the metaphor of "navigation" is particularly appropriate to contemporary circumstances of movement, displacement and precarity and the narrowing of citizenship rights and identity claims to power and place. To navigate, he reminds us, is to chart a route across a body of water that may itself harbor roiling currents and rolling waves. It is thus impossible to rely upon fixed landmarks and predictable pathways. The music of Alsarah lays open the possibility of new encounters along a constantly changing route. Additionally, her insights into navigating race, gender, and Sudanese identity in the diaspora show that these are contextual and fluid, and support the notion that our understanding of authenticity is similarly produced. With a more nuanced notion of identity that incorporates mobile lives, multiple points of belonging, and

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shifting pathways, AlSarah’s music is thus both authentically Sudanese and refreshingly global.

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Yet as AlSarah has pointed out, there is no shortage of people whose map-reading abilities do not extend to this moving form of Sudanese musical identity, and whose response is either to tow the ship to shore or to sink it. From the good intentions of those who seek to “correct” her interpretations, to the cyber-trolls who lurk on internet spaces, unfavorable reactions could be regarded as part and parcel of the homeland politics that has accompanied nation-building and nationalism—and its handmaiden, forced migration—into the twenty-first century. Networks, on the other hand, don’t have borders.

[11.60]

Returning finally to the presumed centrality that geography plays in shaping music, culture, and other forms of knowledge production, Anita asks AlSarah to reflect on whether she feels a responsibility to Sudan, to East Africa, in making her music. The answer is ambivalent; she is wary of the idea of responsibility to a region, and indeed, much of the power of her music-making stems from subverting expectations of national, ethnic, community, and virtual “insides” and “outsides” (Clifford 1997, 36). Nevertheless, in embracing her agency AlSarah is becoming the kind of role model that she did not have as a youth.

[11.61]

ALSARAH: I started the *Nubatones* about five years ago. And also because it reminded me of the great old funk bands from the 1960s and 1970s. But that was my first band [for which I could say,] “I’m the bandleader, I started this, this is the repertoire that I’m choosing.” First, we chose a bunch of covers; then we started adding in a lot of originals. I wrote all the originals in the first album. And so, it started out very organically; the drummer from *The Sounds of Taraab* and I became really good friends, and then my former *oud* player in the band was the *oud* player in *The Sounds of Taraab* as well. So I drew from my network of people that I love. Because the majority of the Middle Eastern [music] community is made up of immigrants. They are all immigrants, and so a common thing I’ve noticed when we are preserving is that we are all looking for home. We’re just looking for a taste of home, and you start making the music because you can’t listen to it on the radio. That’s all, that’s what the preservation obsession is about.

[11.62]

I also get the idea of authenticity. You are not fluent in the language, you’re not from the place, why do *you* get to sing the songs? On the other hand, why should knowledge be passed on only to those within a culture? For example, I love singing old Fairouz songs, should it be that because I am not Lebanese I don’t get to learn that or perform it? Or if I love Bi Kidude³ I shouldn’t get to learn her songs and perform them if they touch me? I think it’s a very grey area ‘cause at the very same time I feel like, knowledge should be freely shared, art should be freely shared. It’s not being made for just one group to enjoy it. That’s the good part about globalization to me—this access to other cultures and people. I think the negative parts of it are acculturation—taking over

someone's culture and pretending it's yours, and not acknowledging where it comes from, its authentic root, and not acknowledging your role in that tapestry. That's a problem. But knowledge is beautiful, there is no reason for anyone not to learn anything, everyone should learn everything, we should! Ideally, this is where I think we should push globalization, less free market politics and more celebration of the access we have to each other now. That doesn't necessarily mean that we need to forget the origins of something, we just have to become much more diligent about researching where something comes from, and now that we know it's there on the internet we can liberate ourselves from the need for ALL OF US to preserve it. Let some of us move on to something else, like putting our touch on it, adding our voice to it. And ultimately, that's what I wanted to do, I wanted to hear songs that remind me of how I wanted to hear them. I wanted to hear them the way I wanted to hear them. Nobody else was making them the way I wanted to hear them—otherwise, I wouldn't have made them. I wanted to hear it like *this*, because I didn't like it *that* way. I just didn't like it that way. Not that it's bad that way, it's just not what I wanted to hear. . . . Honestly, that's why I started *The Nubatones* because there are some things I really want to hear, and I really want to hear them done a certain way, that's it. So I'm gonna do that.

ANITA: The virtual diaspora is a very powerful space both for freedom of expression but also for pushback from detractors. How do you relate to the possibilities for your music and for the internet as a space of knowledge production?

ALSARAH: Back in the day, I remember that Sudanese Online⁴ was the main platform for diaspora network but I am not sure how many people from inside Sudan had access to it or were even aware of its existence. Now with FaceBook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram,, etc. being available on most smart-phones (and many people have smart-phones in Sudan, even if they don't have regular running water). Sudanese people both inside and outside of Sudan are interacting more and with each other. So now there is more access, and also more "cyber-trolling."

ANITA: Do you interact with them? Do you feel it is one of the venues that you appreciate for getting your message out, or no, not really?

ALSARAH: I do not really interact as a rule too much anymore online outside my personal social media, because it's really hard not to get drawn into a fight when you interact on those things. A lot of times the people who are commenting on those things on you are trying to instigate a fight. They want you to lose control so they can be like, "See, see, she's crazy." . . . There are still a lot of people who disapprove, but nowadays a few that seem to like the music are coming through.

ANITA: What about the people who may be sitting in Sudan, and they've never seen anything like you and they've been told all their lives that things are the way they are, and then they come across your work. Is there like a little glimmer of hope that you might be able to reach these young girls and young women in Sudan?

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[11.68] ALSARAH: I hope to reach them. I always hope to reach them. That’s why I’m always making a point of streaming things and sending it towards others and circulating it with other Sudanese people. To me, the whole point of becoming a public figure is, instead of making music in my bedroom— which would be just fine for me, you know, doing the small circuit is fine if you’re making enough money! For me, it was about saying that there is someone Sudanese like me. That we are here, we do exist, we do have a voice and we are Sudanese too. We get to be Sudanese too, and that the only goal is making music reach worldwide and to also bring in a different conversation about Africa. . . . I want to talk about other things about Africa. I want to talk about the problems of Africa too, but me personally, I don’t like to post about the problems of Africa, like an activist would. I post cultural videos, dance videos, music, because all that stuff is there and this stuff is there too. Let’s just put it both out.

[11.69] ANITA: Is there anything else that you feel would be helpful to fill in with regards to your responsibility as an artist, as a musician, as a voice for this region, or the issues that emerge from the region that maybe don’t get an airing outside that region or get the wrong airing in places outside of that region?

[11.70] ALSARAH: I don’t know. I get wary of the idea of responsibilities towards geographic areas, because it takes away a little bit of your agency. . . . I think we have a real responsibility to speak honestly, to speak with enough awareness as possible about what’s happening in our life and around us. I think that’s just [a given] for all artists, everybody’s role as an artist—to be as honest as possible about where they are in their process. I don’t think you ever have to worry about being a part of a region, or that you owe anything to random geographic borders, because—I feel like, if you are from somewhere, *you are*. I don’t question my Sudanese-ness—*other* people question my Sudanese-ness. I don’t. I don’t question my East African-ness. To me, I was born East African and I will die East African. When I die, my story will be told as an East African living in America, because Brooklyn is my home now and I also identify as of it now. . . . So I don’t worry about proving that to anyone else. We define ourselves through our pursuit of knowledge, and knowledge is not something you are born with. Nobody is born knowing their culture.

[11.71]

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NOTES

1. *Beats of the Antonov*, a documentary directed by Hajooj Kuka, 2014. <http://www.pbs.org/pov/beatsoftheantonov/>. [11.89]
2. Setona is a Sudanese artist born in Kordofan and associated with performing and recording the Sudanese folk tradition, *aghani al-banat*, or "girl's songs." [11n1]
3. Born in colonial Zanzibar, Fatuma binti Baraka, known as Bi Kidude, was a Tanzanian *taraab* singer. [11n2]
- [11n3]



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[11n4]

4. www.sudaneseonline.org



