



Shayna M. Silverstein

THE  
EMBODIED  
POLITICS  
OF DABKE  
DANCE MUSIC  
IN SYRIA

FRAUGHT  
BALANCE

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The Embodied Politics  
of *Dabke* Dance Music in Syria

Wesleyan University Press   Middletown, Connecticut

Wesleyan University Press  
Middletown CT 06459  
www.wesleyan.edu/wespress  
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Manufactured in the United States of America  
Designed by Mindy Basinger Hill  
Typeset in Minion Pro

The publisher gratefully acknowledges support from  
the AMS 75 PAYS Fund of the American Musicological Society,  
supported in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities  
and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

*Names:* Silverstein, Shayna M., 1978– author.

*Title:* Fraught balance : the embodied politics of dabke dance music  
in Syria / Shayna M. Silverstein.

*Description:* Middletown, Connecticut : Wesleyan University Press,  
2024. | Series: Music/culture | Includes bibliographical references  
and index. | Summary: “Fraught Balance positions one of Syria’s beloved  
performance traditions, dabke, at the center of the country’s political  
contestations and social tensions. Dabke’s embodied politics  
of performance both sustains social life and solidifies bonds,  
while also reproducing divisions” — Provided by publisher.

*Identifiers:* LCCN 2023047034 (print) | LCCN 2023047035 (ebook) |  
ISBN 9780819501028 (cloth) | ISBN 9780819501035 (trade paperback) |  
ISBN 9780819501042 (ebook)

*Subjects:* LCSH: Folk dancing—Syria. | Folk dancers—Syria. |  
Women dancers—Syria.

*Classification:* LCC GV1703.S95 S55 2024 (print) | LCC GV1703.S95  
(ebook) | DDC 793.3/195691—dc23/eng/20231117

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023047034>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023047035>

**TO MY PARENTS,**  
*who inspired me to ask questions*  
*and climb mountains*



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book spans many life chapters, individually and collectively. The origin of the research project can be traced to the Hamra neighborhood of Beirut, Lebanon, in 2006, where ongoing conversations with Bassel Kassam and Raed Yassin guided me towards the topic of *dabke*. Each in their own way, they insisted on the invaluable significance of conducting a major research project on this subject for those committed to the histories, cultures, and societies of the Bilad al-Sham region. I am especially grateful to all the Syrians, named and unnamed, who have likewise radiated their warm encouragement, generous hospitality, and steadfast dedication to sustaining Syrian culture throughout the journey that led to this book.

In particular, my efforts have been supported by Dr. Samer Ali, whom I had the great fortune to meet at his birthday party in Latakia, and who immediately grasped the aims of this research such that his contributions have indelibly shaped the fieldwork that grounds this book. Dr. Ahmad Sadiddin has offered acute insights and enduring friendship since we met in 2004. I hold immense gratitude for Wassim Mukdad, Faadi Hardan, Essam Rafea, Hanan Qassab Hassan, Salma Qassab Hassan, Eyas El Moqdad, Ali Hamdan, Noura Murad, Hannibal Saad, Hassan Abbas, Jumana al-Yasiri, Mohammed al-Attar, Ghazi al-Ammari, Yahya Abdullah, Somar Tarabeh, Tarek al-Saleh, Mithkal Alzghair, Medhat Aldaabal, and Ali Hasan, among many others who have each generously extended hearth, community, conversation, and archival materials. Juhaina and Nazir Mawas enfolded me into their family during my years in Damascus, for which I am forever grateful.

Research and studies in Damascus would not have been possible without the patient encouragement of my esteemed Arabic tutors, Issam Eido, Maha Abu Hamra, and Ahmad Karout. I also benefited from Arabic language studies

at Damascus University and the Institut français du Proche-Orient, funded by the Critical Language Enhancement Award and language study grants from the Department of Music at the University of Chicago. The generous support of the Fulbright-IIE Fellowship, stewarded by the inimitable Katherine Van de Vate, enabled my residency in Syria, during which I had the privileged fortune to be in community with Eyad Houssami, Emily Robbins, Stephanie Hartgrove, Pounch Aravand, Kathleen List, and Elyse Semerdjian.

At the University of Chicago, my graduate training was moored by Philip V. Bohlman and Martin Stokes in the Department of Music, and brightly encouraged by Kaley Mason. Noha Aboulmagd Forster and the late Farouk Mustafa pushed my Arabic studies with just the right amount of pressure, while Orit Bashkin, Fred Donner, and others at the Center for Middle East Studies provided welcome fellowship and pedagogy. The Middle East Music Ensemble, directed by Issa Boulos and Wanees Zarour, respectively, was a crucible for friendship and repertoire. I am grateful to my doctoral dissertation committee, which included several of the abovementioned as well as Lisa Wedeen, for their feedback and encouragement. This period was also marked by the vital companionship of Toufoul Abou Hodeib, Laura-Zoe Humphreys, Michael O'Toole, Eun Young Lee, and Carmel Raz, along with my comrades Mike Figueroa, Luis Manuel Garcia-Mispireta, Jim Sykes, Rich Jankowsky, and Andy Greenwood.

Several research fellowships and writing programs granted me the coveted space, time, and resources to draft and revise pages that gradually emerged into a book. I thank Sara Varney for providing support during my Andrew W. Mellon Post-Doctoral Fellowship at the Wolf Humanities Center at the University of Pennsylvania, during which I consorted with Bea Jauregui, Jessica Goethals, and Jason Ward. The Institute for Citizens & Scholars' Career Enhancement Fellowship introduced me to an outstanding cohort of justice-oriented scholars, and a Faculty Fellowship with the Alice Kaplan Institute for the Humanities at Northwestern University enabled me to devote time to my research and writing. Thanks to Joan M. Johnson's thoughtful planning, the Provost's Office at Northwestern University provided an on-site writing group that nudged this work forward. Beyond institutional support, several writing coaches and programs have provided vital interventions and advice that cultivated my writing practice, namely, Michelle Boyd of Inkwell Retreats and Laura Portwood-Stacer of Manuscript Works.

Feedback and dialogue from colleagues across multiple fields of study have propelled my thinking forward and sideways. Portions of this project have been

presented at conferences held at Alwan for the Arts, Lund University, Aga Khan Institute, University of Nijmegen, Cambridge University, City University of London, Oxford University, Westminster University, Duke University, the University of Maryland, as well as academic associations including the Society for Ethnomusicology, British Forum for Ethnomusicology, Dance Studies Association, Performance Studies International Association, American Anthropological Association, the Middle East Studies Association, and the World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies. I am grateful for invitations from colleagues to present talks at the University of California Berkeley, Harvard University, Yale University, the University of Wisconsin Madison, the University of Chicago, Charleston College, and the University of Pennsylvania. Funding from the Buffett Institute at Northwestern University supported a book manuscript workshop at which Roshanak Kheshti, Joshka Wessels, and Clare Croft offered copious remarks and confident assurances that together fortified the promise of this project.

The Department of Performance Studies at Northwestern University has been an incredible and unflinchingly supportive academic home as this book project weathered a war and a pandemic. D. Soyini Madison, E. Patrick Johnson, Ramón Rivera-Servera, and Mary Zimmerman mentored my path into new intellectual and ethical terrain. Joshua Chambers-Letson and Marcela Fuentes encouraged me with passion and care. Nadine George-Graves, Thomas DeFrantz, Bimbola Akinbola and Dotun Ayobade sustain our collective work. It has been a joy to work with sparky colleagues in the Middle East and North African studies program, especially Rebecca Johnson, Jessica Winegar, İpek Yosmaoğlu, Wendy Pearlman, Hannah Feldman, Brian Edwards, and Hamid Naficy. I am equally heartened by the camaraderie of Susan Manning, Dassia Posner, Elizabeth Son, Melissa Blanco Borelli, Neil Verma, Jacob Smith, Masi Asare, Inna Naroditskaya, Ryan Dohoney, and Marwan Kraidy. Graduate students whose efforts have helped this project directly or indirectly include Danielle Ross, Tarek Benchouia, Meiver de la Cruz, and Nathan Lamp. Benjamin Zender dedicated his angelic editorial acumen to the final iteration of this manuscript.

Aspects of chapters 3 and 4 appear in “Disorienting Sounds: A Sensory Ethnography of Syrian Dance Music” in the edited volume *Remapping Sound Studies* (Duke University Press, 2019), 241–59.

A portion of chapter 6 is published as “‘I Dance, I Revolt.’ The Migratory Politics of Syrianness in Mithkal Alzghair’s *Displacement* (2017),” *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 16, no. 3 (2023), 1–22.

Parts of chapter 4 and 6 appear in “The ‘Barbaric’ *Dabke*: Masculinity, Dance,

and Autocracy in Contemporary Syrian Cultural Production,” *Journal of Middle Eastern Women’s Studies* 17, no. 2 (2021): 197–219.

I offer my deepest appreciation to Suzanna Tamminen at Wesleyan University Press for bringing this project to roost, as well as to the Music/Culture faculty series editors Deborah Wong, Sherrie Tucker, and Jeremy Wallach. I also am grateful to the cogent and highly informed comments provided by anonymous readers.

None of this work would be possible without Fay Florence-Steddum and Carmen Cartianu, who have provided care for and forged loving bonds with my children. Moukhtar Kocache and Theodore Levin each respectively guided me towards this work before its inception as an academic pursuit and continue to encourage my life’s work. My memory of the late Riad Ismat and his conviviality is a blessing. Roya Shanks, Blair Mclaughlin, Ellen Ko, Rachel Derkits-Gelman, Tullia Dymarz, and Fanny Söderbäck have cheered me on for decades and helped me pursue my lifelong dreams. Walking alongside me in every step of this journey is Mandy Terc, whose sharp wit, compassion, and loyal friendship have buoyed me for decades.

My family are my truest champions. Yoshi Silverstein and Abby Bruell laugh, hug, and high five in equal doses. Paula Jackson is a life force who fiercely supports me, as do Clement and June Jackson. My parents, Pam and Steve Silverstein, inspired me to chart my own course by being pioneers in all that they do. This project is indebted to their love, support, and eagerness to experience the world through their children’s perspective. My two children, Kamau and Tayo, have grown up alongside this book and yielded perspective on life’s balance. Since the fortuitous day that we met, my anchor has and always will be Kirabo Jackson. I cannot thank you enough for the manifold ways that you have supported my efforts each and every day across the years.

## COMPANION WEBSITE

Readers are highly encouraged to consult the website that accompanies this book—[shaynasilverstein.com/fraughtbalance](http://shaynasilverstein.com/fraughtbalance)—for video and other media materials discussed throughout the book. These materials are organized online by chapters. Readers can also look for cross-references to online media in each chapter's text. For instance, the video discussed on the first page of the introduction may be viewed on the companion website by finding CLIP 0.1 on the Introduction page of the companion website, and the video discussed on the first page of chapter 2 may be viewed on the companion website by selecting CLIP 2.1 on the chapter 2 page.



## NOTE ON SPELLING AND TRANSLITERATION

In transliterating Arabic, I generally follow the system employed by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES), with certain modifications. My foremost concern is to maintain the pronunciation of spoken Syrian Arabic. I also wish to facilitate accessibility for readers who are familiar with other spoken Arabic dialects or Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). These distinctions play out in my decision to render *dabke* with a feminine *tā' marbūṭa* ending of “e” rather than the standardized “a” that is employed in transliterations of MSA. The pronunciation of the *tā' marbūṭa* is not standard within the broad range of spoken dialects in countries where *dabke* is practiced. Pronunciation depends on the word's relative position within the sentence as well as the possibility of elision. Thus my transliteration of *dabke* remains more faithful to its local pronunciation in Syrian Arabic. Pursuant to IJMES guidelines, Arabic words that are commonly used in English appear without diacritical markers and in conventional spelling. Given names appear in conventional international media forms, such as Bashar al-Assad (Baṣār al-Asad) and Latakia (al-Lādhiqiya). When citing or referring to published work in Arabic, such as that by 'Adnan ibn Dhurayl, I adopt the preferred transliteration of author names in accordance with the Library of Congress. All errors are my own.

### SEARCHABILITY

For readers interested in learning more about the technical aspects of *dabke* and related dance and music practices, I recommend searching YouTube for any of the following terms: *dabke*, Syrian *dabke*, *da'ūna*, 'ataba, *mawwāl*, and *zajāl*.

I also encourage readers to search for any other specific *dabke* genres, related performance genres, and artists mentioned in this book. A concise definition of these genres is available online in the essay “Folk Music,” authored by Dr. Hassan ‘Abbas (see <https://syrian-heritage.org/folk-music/>). For readers interested in learning how to *dabke*, I recommend asking for recommendations for *dabke* teachers and troupes wherever you reside or subscribing to *dabkema*sters at Zoom Entertainment (<https://zoomenter33.com/how-to-dabke/>).

Fraught Balance



## Introduction

In October 2014, a Syrian friend tagged me on Facebook to share a grainy and low-resolution video of a local *dabke* dance. We had met ten years earlier when I first studied in Damascus, and over the course of our enduring friendship we had discussed local village practices across Syria. I read the video's caption: "Syrian Dabke from Village of Sawran in the countryside of Hama . . . high 'fitness' (kicks?) and fabulous dance [*sic*]." <sup>1</sup> Though I was not familiar with Sawran, a Syrian village located in the inland mountainous region of Hama, I noted that this dance clip had circulated quickly and widely among thousands of Arabic-language users on Facebook. <sup>2</sup> (See CLIP 0.1 on the Introduction page of the companion website, [shaynasilverstein.com/fraughtbalance](http://shaynasilverstein.com/fraughtbalance).)

The video opened with bright fluorescent lights beaming across an outdoor courtyard at an evening celebration in Sawran. A young man led a line of fifteen or so male dancers, who repeated codified sequences of footsteps as they moved in a counterclockwise circular direction around the courtyard. They wore *thawbs* (long robes) rather than the shirts and jeans or athletic pants commonly worn at celebratory occasions such as this. The young man clasped hands with another young man to his left; moving together, they grounded each other's balance and rhythm. Flooding the courtyard was the familiar shrill timbre of *mijwiz*, a reed instrument synthesized for electronic keyboard, that repeated melodic motifs for a mystifying electro-acoustic effect. A *ṭabl* (double-barrel drum) player walked around the open dance space, pounding heavy bass rhythms and erratic treble tremolos oriented to the rhythmic movements of the dancers.

At about twenty-six seconds, I watched the young man expand his agile legwork. Sprightly and light, he bounded around the space, still clasping hands with his fellow dancer. Unusually, he seemed to place his weight on the top of his foot rather than the sole. He broke from the line to improvise in the center

of the dancers. Here, his knee bends were deep, and his solo work was virtuosic and highly stylized. I had not seen movements such as these before, not during fieldwork and not on social media. The *dabbik* (one who is skilled at *dabke*) lunged, spun, twisted, and rotated, all synchronized with the duple meter groove of the dance rhythms.

Viewers across Facebook delighted in the virtuosic performance by the anonymous *dabbik*. In their comments, they admired him for his rhythmic precision, offering praise with compliments like “*Helwe!*” and “*Yā rayt!*” (“sweet! how awesome!”). Generally, as I argue in chapter 3, *dabke* skills are assessed on the basis of rhythmicity, balance, and an energetic display of feeling conveyed by the dance and accompanying music together. Yet at the same time that the *dabbik*’s skills were widely appreciated, most of my friends and interlocutors who chatted with me about this clip were unfamiliar with the style performed by the *dabbik* of Sawran (the music was easily recognizable as the rhythms, melodic phrases, and instrumental timbres of *dabkāt*, or popular *dabke* music).<sup>3</sup> The bounding jumps of the solo performance that took place in the middle of all the participants were particularly fascinating to those I spoke with, who also said they had not seen such movements before. One acquaintance contacted friends in Sawran to find out more about the style. They assured him that Sawran and the nearby village of Morek (separated by about fourteen kilometers) are considered “famous” for their dances.<sup>4</sup>

The sentiments encircling this moment of encounter, from the local sense of belonging and pride to the keen curiosity to learn more about a *dabke* style that was relatively unknown beyond immediate communal circles, were not uncommon among Syrians. As I found out while researching this practice for almost twenty years, people were often unfamiliar with each other’s local practices. Many surmised that this lack of familiarity resulted from the expansive heterogeneity of local communities located across disparate regions of the nation. To bridge these gaps, many aimed to understand the distinctiveness of a given local dance tradition in terms of the formal conventions of genre and style, that is, the pace of the dance or specific patterns of movement (Abbas 2018). Though these efforts were generative, they presumed an analytic dissection of style that left me wondering if there were other analytic frameworks that could help explain the aura of exceptionalism surrounding the *dabbik* of Sawran.

In other words, what about this video made it so popular? Ahmad Sadiddin, who first shared the video with me, spoke about its emotional effects on him: “This video makes me wish I could return to my village, where I *dabked*

on my wedding day, and dance again on its terroir.”<sup>5</sup> His nostalgia evoked the close association of *dabke* traditions with the joy of weddings, at which *dabke* is practiced for hours upon hours. His sentiment suggests that the *dabbik*’s performance encapsulated what was lost and sacrificed in the armed conflict: village life. For many, the village is the locus for collective identity, the nucleus of Bilad al-Sham (the Greater Syrian homeland that encompasses present-day Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and Lebanon).<sup>6</sup> Some say that the importance of the village to spatial imaginaries of al-Sham is evoked by the colloquial interpretation of “sham” to mean freckle, in poetic reference to the numerous villages that dot the “freckled” geography of Bilad al-Sham. The dance clip from Sawran arguably spoke to and for the place of the village in Syrian national mythology, before and during the war, when half the population of Syria was forced into internal and external displacement. Symbolic of traditional ways of life that purportedly remained unchanged over generations, *dabke* evokes an intimate rural sociability associated with the Syrian village. Syrians loved this video, I suggest, because the dance was so clearly local and because Syrians hold *al-rif* (the countryside) dear to their hearts.

Yet the cognitive dissonance between the popularity of the video and the relative unfamiliarity among Syrian viewers with its formal conventions was still striking to me. How is that which is so deeply constitutive of Syrian life also so unknowable, particularly among Syrians for whom it is an iconic tradition? This book addresses this question on several registers, from the epistemological to the historic and political. In studying one of Syria’s most beloved traditions, *dabke*, I ask who has the authority to perform cultural knowledge and how that authority has been strategic for the performance of authoritarian power. Syria is one of the most heterogeneous societies in the South West Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region, home to social groups with numerous and historically specific linguistic, local, ethnic, and religious practices.<sup>7</sup> Though nationalist movements have striven to integrate these social groups into an imagined community, and though state governance has established institutions (e.g., military, security, communications, state bureaucracy, education, health) that bring individuals from different social groups into contact with one another, societal integration remains arguably more superficial than deep (Al-Haj Saleh 2017). Despite or perhaps because of the friction-causing dynamics between the heterogeneity of Syrian society and its governance, performance traditions such as *dabke* are at once “acts of transfer” from generation to generation that “transmit social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through their reiteration” (Taylor

2003, 2) and performances of cultural heritage deeply imbricated in the divisive politics of postcolonial difference. While these two registers of performance are interrelated, they are also indicative of the broader politics of identity, difference, and representation that comprise Syria's social fabric.

*Fraught Balance: The Embodied Politics of Dabke Dance Music in Syria* positions issues of body, performance, and culture at the center of the country's political contestations and social tensions. Drawing on almost two decades of immersive, multisituated, and digital ethnography, respectively, as well as textual and archival analysis, this book analyzes the affective, sonic, and kinesic dynamics that constitute *dabke* and situates these dynamics in a heterogeneous society governed by a sectarian and authoritarian state. I present this analysis through a historically chronological narrative that begins with the emergence of Syria as an independent state in the mid-twentieth century (part I), continues with the era of postsocialist neoliberalism in the 2000s (part II), and ends with armed conflict and forced migration in the 2010s (part III). Each of these three parts addresses shifting constructions of gender as well as classist tensions between urban elite and rural nonelite and ethnocentric ideologies and discourses in order to establish the role of embodied politics in negotiating the public domain of authoritarian states.

I trouble the limits of authoritarian power by expressly considering the pleasure and play intrinsic to *dabke* circles as evidence of how performance coheres communal bonds in ways that negotiate the tenets of gender, class, and ethnicity on which state power depends. The story of how these fluctuating dynamics shore up political and social forms of power is neither linear nor evenly distributed. Across the chapters of this book, I focus on various loci—including state-sponsored folk dance, social dance music in everyday life, and cultural reckonings with conflict and displacement—in order to tease out these dynamics and demonstrate their interrelatedness. As there is a kinesic balance in the *dabke* circle between and among participants and spectators, there is a social balance unique to contemporary Syria, a heterogeneous society governed by an authoritarian and sectarian state. Examining the historical, political, and epistemological conditions of *dabke* practice reveals the ways that hegemonic forces of gender and the hierarchies of class and ethnicity shape and are shaped by relations between Syrian state and society. As the title of this book suggests, this balance has become fraught in contemporary Syrian society, where a revolution that challenged forty years of authoritarian rule developed into a decade-long armed conflict that produced the world's greatest humanitarian crisis. Ultimately

the book argues that though *dabke* practice sustains social life and solidifies group bonds, it also reproduces the societal divides that are endemic to Syrian authoritarianism because of and through the embodied politics of performance.

## ON *DABKE*

*Dabke* (alternatively transliterated as *dabkah*, *dabkeh*, *debkeh*, *debke*, and *deppka*) is a participatory performance tradition that literally means “to stomp the ground with one’s feet.”<sup>8</sup> It is widely considered a pre-Islamic, Arab performance tradition practiced across the Bilad al-Sham region, though some debate whether the term *dabke* is itself of Arabic origin.<sup>9</sup> Lebanese folklorist Bassel Kassem related a common myth about its origins: “*Min zamān* (back when), villagers would build a house for newlyweds. All the villagers would come together to pound mud on the roof of the new home. Our *dabke* began with this dance of communal labor, which celebrates marriage, the fostering of kinship and the transfer of property. Like this, *dabke* is of the people.”<sup>10</sup> This popular narrative is often reiterated in ways that link performance to kinship, labor, rurality, and infrastructure.<sup>11</sup>

Among those invested in discourses of cultural authenticity, *dabke* is considered ontologically distinct from *raqs* (dance) and *mūsīqā* (music) in ways that demarcate the social values and cultural meanings of the practice. *Dabke* is distinct from *raqs* for several reasons: it is indigenous to the region, it bears its own etymological form (as Nicolas Rowe [2010, 11] points out, “one does not dance *dabke*[h], one *yadbeks*”), and it is perceived emically as a communal activity with social value that distinguishes it from other, often sexualized, movement practices. *Raqṣ* is generally associated with Oriental belly dance (*raqṣ sharqiyya*), folkloric dance (*raqṣ shaʿbiyya*), dance theater (*raqṣ masrah*), and contemporary concert dance (ballet, modern, jazz, etc.). Oriental belly dance carries a complex set of moral values related to the sexualization of solo dancing (Karayanni 2004; Shay 1999). The other three dance industries are complex spaces of postcolonial cultural hybridity; of these, this book looks most closely at the adaptation of social *dabke* into a staged folkloric dance (*raqṣ shaʿbiyya*), performed for festival audiences in Syria and worldwide as a national tradition.

In popular discourses on music, *dabke* is generally considered a local or vernacular popular music associated with lifecycle events (weddings and circumcisions) and leisure spaces (restaurants, nightclubs, and live music shows). As popular music, it is distinct from the repertoire of classical Arab music beloved by musical connoisseurs across the region (Farraj and Abu Shumays 2019; Racy

2003), especially the *muwashshahī* tradition of Aleppo (Shannon 2006). Often stigmatized because of its status as “low culture” or “street music,” *dabke* circulates in informal markets not as *mūsīqā* but as recorded (and heavily edited) tracks identified by their traditional song genres, specifically *‘atabāt wa dabkāt* (*‘ataba* and *dabke* are the singular form of the song genres).<sup>12</sup> Part of the work of this book lies in unpacking the histories, discourses, and politics that paradoxically claim *dabke* as an indigenous movement tradition and song genre while also adapting *dabke* practices for modern stages and contemporary recording industries.

Given these contradictory and overlapping discourses, I approach *dabke* as a performance practice through which participants negotiate shifting social hierarchies. While my analysis of *dabke* is deeply rooted in local Syrian discourses, practices, and sensibilities, it is also grounded in and opens up new conversations between performance studies, musicology, and dance studies. I offer a phenomenological and ethnographic approach that regards *dabke* as an embodied practice firmly embedded in everyday social relations. I therefore consider *dabke* not as a fixed genre of music, dance, or performance—that is, not an object or product—but as a set of participatory actions that performatively enact affective attachments to historically specific relations of belonging. This approach accounts for how *dabke* inhabits a complex moral, affective, and discursive space that exceeds any fixity of meaning. Across the chapters of this book, I translate the totality of the practice as it is experienced, that is, as a world of action in which intersubjective and intercorporeal relations between people emerge through dancing and musicking, as well as through participation and spectatorship.

I am particularly interested in participants’ “sonic and kinesic interactions” (Turino 2008, 28–29). Listening to *dabke* is less about the aesthetic structures of music, as I argue in chapters 3 and 4, and more about understanding an intensely somatic environment in which the senses constitute a totality through which the body perceives the world (Ingold 2000). Rather than approach listening as a singularly aural phenomenon or assume that listening bodies are poised, seated, or otherwise still, I assert that bodies that listen move just as bodies that move listen. By showing how movement works as a listening practice and considering the listening and moving body as a distinct object of study, I depart from the visual and aural epistememes that have dominated historical and ethnographic scholarship on the senses (Sterne 2003). My focus on the dancing body as a listening subject also challenges elite discourses on Arab music that tend to focus

on musical connoisseurship as a site for the reproduction of social distinction (Shannon 2006; Racy 2003). In contrast to this musical world of serious listeners in which sonority is paramount, I demonstrate how Syrian dance music constitutes a strikingly different “social field of listening” (Kapchan 2017, 1), in which sound, affect, and the participant’s body “fold in on one another” (Kheshti 2015, 55) in ways that engender “vibrational affect” (Garcia 2020). By modulating between the sensory perception of sonic and kinetic phenomena in dance music, my work offers a crucial intervention in the current disciplinary turns of ethnomusicology towards both embodiment and sound studies, respectively, by not only pursuing these two lines of inquiry but demonstrating the ways in which they inform each other.

Also important to the embodied aesthetics of *dabke* practice is the art of the *dabbik* (one who performs *dabke* well; fem. *dabbak*). The solo performer in the video of a *dabke* circle in Sawran that I described earlier is an outstanding example of a *dabbik*. He was admired for his ability to improvise footwork and legwork (*ḥarakāt*, literally: movements) with rhythmic precision at the head of the *dabke* circle. One *dabke* aficionado suggested that a *dabbik* is one who floats.<sup>13</sup> Floating is a paradoxical descriptor for a dance practice that is named, literally, for stomping one’s foot on the ground. By suspending gravitational force, a *dabbik* sublimates the dominant aesthetics of this movement tradition: repeated steps and footstomps that pound the ground in alignment with percussive and musical rhythms. The unnamed *dabbik* of Sawran certainly defied the physics of gravity, weight, and motion.

However, the art of *dabke* does not generally venerate individual talent, skill, and performance. Rather, as I insist, performance in the *dabke* circle, whether leading the circle or following along, is about a balance between bodies. All *dabbikūn* (plural for *dabbik*) depend on the participant next to them in the *dabke* circle to support their sense of balance, rhythm, torque, and other kinesthetic components of the practice. Balance, or *mizān*, is arguably central to the aesthetics of *dabke*. It is vital for achieving a “flow state” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Bosse 2015), which, as I describe in chapter 3, is a necessary performance condition for the effect of “floating” during improvisatory breaks. It also embodies the intersubjective relationships between participants that emerge through *dabke* practice. I use balance as a concept to probe the dynamics of affect, performance, and subjectivity that occur in *dabke* circles and extend these dynamics to analyses of the social structures and political conditions that comprise Syrian history, society, and culture.

The interactions that constitute the *dabke* circle forge, like other embodied performance practices, “collective flows of affect” that saturate “the fabric of the social” (Born 2013, 44). Studying these dynamics of performance “exposes aesthetics’ social work as [an] embodied, processual, rhetorical, and political . . . practice of everyday life” (Hamera 2006, 47). Relationships of power circulate in *dabke* circles in ways that sustain, reinforce, and negotiate the social structures specific to Syrian society.<sup>14</sup> *Dabke* participation, for instance, is highly gendered insofar as the *shakl dāʿira* (*dabke* circle) is valued as a space for the performance of masculinity. This is not to say that women are excluded from participating in the *shakl dāʿira*—there are many contexts in which women’s participation is valued and expected—but that *dabke* is perceived as a means to cultivate a normative sense of masculinity in ways that do not have a feminine equivalency. In other words, the choreographies of power and privilege that constitute *dabke* circles construct “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) in ways that “legitimize patriarchy” through playful bonding “between men” (Sedgwick 1985).

The improvisational play intrinsic to *dabke*, often though not always between men, creates a space for reiterative acts of masculinity that generate what I term “relational masculinity.” Relational masculinity refers to the social bonding that occurs at weddings, in nightclubs, and in other spaces of festivity and leisure. Through this term, which I develop fully in chapter 3, I advocate for an approach to masculinity that centers the role of play, pleasure, and desire, aspects that are often overlooked in studies of Arab gender and sexuality.<sup>15</sup> In the last part of this book (chapters 5 and 6), I extend the discussion of relational masculinity into contexts of armed conflict and mass displacement to look at, respectively, the role of gender in constituting spaces of violence and the performance of masculinized dignity in migratory spaces outside of Syria. Tracing relational masculinity in *dabke* circles across these different contexts demonstrates how that which facilitates social bonding also polarizes social groups during political conflicts—a key argument in this book.

As mentioned earlier, *dabke* traditions are not solely the province of Syria but are widely practiced across the region. Palestinian *dabke* is a deeply communal and intensively political set of performance practices that are shaped by the struggle for cultural and political sovereignty under Israeli occupation (Rowe 2010; McDonald 2013). *Dabke* traditions in Jordan are relatively sustained in local spaces, while folkloric dance companies stage these traditions in ways that integrate Bedouin identity with Jordanian nationalism (Yessayan 2015). In

Lebanon, *dabke* traverses a local and national dyad in which cultural meaning is generally ascribed through local difference (Abou Mrad 2006)<sup>16</sup> and constructed in nationalizing projects such as the Baalbeck Festival, which historically reinforced Christian cultural hegemony (Stone 2008); dance and music practices in Lebanon have also shifted in relation to a rise in piety practices in Muslim public spaces in the early twenty-first century (Deeb and Harb 2013).<sup>17</sup> Beyond the Bilad al-Sham region, adjacent societies practice similar though distinct dance traditions that encompass repeated footwork in a collective dance circle, accompanied by sung verse, instruments, and percussion. These practices include but are not limited to Iraqi *choubi*, Turkish *horon*, and Kurdish *govend* (also known in Turkish as *halay*). *Horon*, *govend*, and *halay* are tactics for political activism in the struggle for Kurdish political and cultural sovereignty (see chapter 5 for instances of this in relation to the Syrian conflict) as well as other protest movements in Turkey (Bayraktar 2019). What, then, distinguishes Syrian *dabke* as such? When I posed this question to those I met in Syria, most corrected me that there is no such thing as “Syrian” *dabke*, per se. They insisted that there was no single component or force that connected these disparate traditions into a unified sense of Syrianness. Rather, each village in Syria claims its own local tradition. While I recognize the power of disidentifying with nationalist and other supralocal framings of *dabke*, I complicate this popular perspective in chapter 2’s discussion of how state-sponsored cultural production elevated “Syrian *dabke*” into a marker of pluralism and diversity in Syrian nationalist discourses, as well as in chapter 5’s analysis of how fighters during the armed conflict strategically positioned “Syrian *dabke*” within ideological contestations as part of their struggle for secular and revolutionary principles. I also argue that embedded in “Syrian *dabke*” is a classist struggle between urban and rural classes that I trace in discourses on authenticity and modernity from the early twentieth century through the twenty-first century and that I situate in the state’s neglect of rural communities over the past two decades. I demonstrate that because traditions such as *dabke* are situated in specific political, economic, and historic circumstances experienced by those living in contemporary Syria, these shared experiences of the authoritarian nation-state generate a consensus of meaning around the term Syrian *dabke*. Across the chapters of this book, I take care to position my analyses of *dabke* in ways that account for the historic specificities of the Syrian Arab Republic while also demonstrating how embodied tactics in everyday life negotiate the politics of Syrianness.

## ON SYRIA

Though *dabke* is often authenticated as a pre-Islamic, Arab tradition that dates back to biblical times, this book begins in the “modern” era of Syria, which most historians set in the late nineteenth century (Watenpaugh 2006). To better understand experiences of modernity in “Syria,” itself an unfixed construct that has shifted over time and through borders, I offer here a concise overview of key historic events and political conditions that have shaped twentieth- and twenty-first-century Syria. In addition to these few pages, I provide more in-depth accounts of context in the “interludes” that precede each of the three main parts of this book.

Located on the Eastern Mediterranean coast of western Asia, Syria is the historic home of numerous communities who identify on the basis of class, kinship, locale, ethnicity, religion, occupation, and politics, among other categories. (Please consult the companion website for a map of Syria, located on the introduction webpage.) For over a century, it has also welcomed numerous groups fleeing persecution, genocide, and conflict from neighboring countries. Both the capital, Damascus, and the other major city to the north, Aleppo, are renowned for their food, architecture, religious landmarks, and history—with Damascus famously retaining its status as the “longest most continually inhabited city in the world.” Though a social history can be traced to the ancient civilization of Mesopotamia, the historic events that matter most to many Syrians (and tourists) are those that occurred during the biblical age and the time of the Prophet Muhammad in what is present-day Syria. Fundamentally, Syrians share a deep sense of history that binds them to the neighborhoods, villages, cities, and lands in which they live next to one another and that for some provides perspective on the immediate social, economic, and political issues that they negotiate in everyday life.

Syria is one of the most heterogeneous countries in the contemporary SWANA region. With a prewar population of approximately twenty-two million persons,<sup>18</sup> Syria is a Muslim-majority society with a recognized historic set of Christian communities (10–12 percent) who ascribe to the Syriac Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, and Catholic Churches, among others. Muslim communities are predominantly Sunni (75 percent);<sup>19</sup> highly visible religious minorities whose communities bear historic claims to the region include Druze (3 percent) and ‘Alawite (17 percent), both of whom consider themselves distinct from mainstream Islam.<sup>20</sup> A number of distinct ethnic and religious groups also inhabit

Syria or have migrated into Syria, including Ismaʿili, Muridian, Yazidi, Assyrian, and Chaldean communities to a lesser extent. Until emigration stemming from the Arab-Israeli conflict, historic urban Jewish communities resided primarily in Aleppo, Damascus, and Qamishli. Insofar as the dominant ethnic group is Arab, Arabic is the primary language spoken, and local dialects of colloquial Syrian Arabic are important measures of social distinction between local communities. Significant Kurdish communities have historically inhabited Syria; however, because Kurdish cultural expression was prohibited by the state from the 1960s until the formation of Rojava in 2014, Kurdish has not been widely spoken in public life.

The Syrian Arab Republic is organized into governates, or administrative territories, which are each popularly associated with a distinct topography and with historically specific ethnoreligious groups. Beyond the two major cities, a number of smaller cities serve as centers for port trade, industry and manufacturing, and as administrative centers for their respective governate. Syria is primarily comprised of small towns and villages to which most inhabitants trace (or claim to) their origins. It was a middle-class country with strong literacy rates, but a decade of conflict and warfare has forced society into an economic decline that has severely weakened kinship ties, education and health-care systems, local industries, and intellectual and cultural life.

Since gaining independence as a sovereign nation in 1946, followed by a transition period of social unrest and political contestations, the Syrian Arab Republic has been dominated by authoritarian one-party rule that represses political liberties and human rights at the same time that it espouses the socialist, egalitarian ideology of the leading party, the Baʿth Party. The regime is dynastic in the sense that the Assad family has been in power for over five decades, from the 1970 coup by Hafiz al-Assad that mounted his rule to the transfer of power from father (Hafiz al-Assad) to son (Bashar al-Assad) in 2000 upon the former's death. Though the regime and the party are often collapsed together, they have arguably become distinct, with the Assad regime using the party system as a mechanism to perpetuate and legitimate its power. In addition to leveraging party ideology and infrastructure to preserve its power, the regime anchors its preservation through the following three mechanisms: first, an army and security apparatus that prohibits public assembly, encourages surveillance between and among civilians, and detains and tortures dissidents and others without due process of law, all while favoring those loyal to the regime (particularly those of the same ethnoreligious group as the Assad family, who are ʿAlawite, along

with many Druze communities); second, a state bureaucracy that expanded in the 1970s and 1980s to employ at least a quarter of working Syrians and has penetrated all facets of Syrian life; and third, corporatism, or the organization of different social forces, such as peasants, students, and artists, into state-controlled associations that receive financial support but lack political autonomy (Abboud 2015). These associations were slowly incorporated into the state apparatus in the latter half of the twentieth century and created a large constituency committed to the survival of the state and regime.

Related to corporatism was the social contract between the Syrian regime and its citizens, which was largely based on what some scholars refer to as the “patriarchal bargain” (Kandiyoti 1988). According to this unwritten yet implicit dynamic of state and society, the regime fulfills the role of the authoritative paternal figure who offers protection and national security to citizens and provides social welfare, including subsidies, nationalized industries, and products. In return for such protection and providence, the regime demands the loyalty and public support of all citizens, who fulfill this by performing obedience and complicity in praising the regime and its president, surveilling one another and informing authorities of acts of disloyalty, and (for men only) fulfilling their military service. This social contract began to unravel, however, in the mid-2000s when Bashar al-Assad ushered in wealth and private finance while neglecting rural communities and failing to provide sufficient job opportunities, especially for Syrian youth. These economic and social pressures were exacerbated by drought; forced migration into Syria that stemmed from the US-led invasion of Iraq; and former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri’s 2005 assassination, which led to the withdrawal of Syrian occupying forces from Lebanon and increased tensions with the US.

After years of domestic and regional pressures, an uprising against the regime erupted in March 2011. Local protests were inspired by the Arab revolutions that had begun earlier that year in Tunisia and Egypt. Following a brutal crackdown on nonviolent protesters, within a year the Syrian uprising escalated into armed conflict. Conflict actors splintered and proliferated in ways that turned the conflict into a spectacle that was widely documented and witnessed in networked digital spaces. In the absence of moral leadership by the international community, including the UN and the US, the regime (with the support of Russia) committed atrocious war crimes against its civilians, triggering one of the largest humanitarian crises and forced migrations in recent history.

In 2015 the conflict incorporated a significant number of external actors,

each of whom supported different factions and groups active within Syria in what became a proxy war of alliances between those conflict actors and external actors writ large. These alliances shifted again with the rise in late 2014 of the Islamic State, an extremist religious fundamentalist movement with aspirations to sovereignty, a weighty recruitment industry, and an intense drive for violence. The Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and Kurdish Women's Protection Unit (YPJ), both trained and highly effective military units, intervened against the Islamic State and won back crucial territory. Over several years of fighting, the autonomous Kurdish region of Rojava was established in what was previously northeastern Syria, and the Islamic State was defeated. Armed skirmishes continue throughout Syria, particularly focused on the province of Idlib, where antiregime militants congregated following the regime's gradual conquest of rebel territories in Dar'a and eastern Ghouta, among other locations.

Casualties, infrastructural losses, a wartime economy, and the scarcity of basic food and medical care provisions, as well as the internal and external displacement of thirteen million persons throughout the conflict, have all fundamentally transformed the social structure of Syrian society. At the time of this writing, approximately one in ten Syrian refugees live in refugee camps, with the majority struggling to settle into unfamiliar urban communities or forced into rural environments. As of 2012, Syrians tended to flee first to neighboring countries (Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon), where they often encountered hostility and were not able to secure work visas and stable residency permits. Many continued on, some to a different neighboring country and others towards Europe by way of smugglers controlling a high-risk passage across the Mediterranean Sea. The rise in numbers of those seeking politically and economically motivated migration into Europe around 2015 challenged the European Union's (EU's) system for processing, supporting, and incorporating migrants. Political tensions intensified and polarized, resulting in, on the one hand, xenophobic attitudes and closed borders, and on the other hand, an increase in public support, including the opening of borders, distribution of resources, processing of asylum claims, and open dialogue. These tensions somewhat dispersed in the following years, in part due to the urgency of the global Covid-19 pandemic, which slowed the pace of migration due to closed borders and increased economic vulnerability.

As of the early 2020s, Syrians continue to reckon with a host of conflict-related social and political issues whether they live within the Syrian Arab Republic or elsewhere. International relations with the Assad-led regime are beginning to normalize despite the continuation of assaults on antiregime opposition forces in

Idlib and Dar'a. The agricultural sector has collapsed due to the effects of climate change, inflation, currency devaluation, Western sanctions, and the damage to crops inflicted during the conflict. Cultural production suffers from many of the same economic issues, forcing some to consider migration. The global remittance economy that has kept Syrian families afloat in recent years is shrinking due to global economic repression and regime policies that hinder and extract from remittance streams. These stacked social, political, and economic crises are predicted to remain unresolved for years to come.

## METHODS

What started out as a classic ethnographic study of performance culture conducted through in situ, immersive, and multisited fieldwork for an extended period of time (2004–8) was radically transformed by revolution, war, displacement, and a global health pandemic. The ethnographic methods that support this project are by necessity fluid modalities that together aim to address central research questions while pivoting in response to political conditions and global crises. Given these shifting circumstances, this project encompasses a wide range of methods that generally fall under the umbrella of ethnography while expanding what ethnography contains. I briefly introduce here the key ethnographic modalities that inform the book: immersive fieldwork, archival/text analysis, and digital ethnography. I revisit and elaborate on each of these modalities in the interlude essays that introduce each of the three main units of the book. I also describe here my positionality in the social spaces imbricated in this project and reflect on the ethics of conducting ethnography during the abovementioned crises.

The primary research method of in-situ fieldwork provided the overall structure and ethos for this project. Trained in ethnomusicology's techniques of participant observation, discourse analysis, bimusicality (studying and performing music as a form of research), interviews, and sociocultural immersion in specific communities and social spaces, I designed my initial research efforts around approximately two short-term and long-term periods of fieldwork in Syria (and Lebanon, to a limited extent) between 2004 and 2007, at which point I moved to Damascus for doctoral fieldwork. I prepared for fieldwork by studying Arabic (colloquial Syrian and Modern Standard Arabic) intensively and by performing with the University of Chicago's Middle East Music Ensemble (2003–12). From 2007 to 2008 I focused on mapping out cultural production and culture industries

related to folkloric dance, folk music, and popular music. This involved attending numerous festivals and shows across Syria that ranged from world music and folkloric dance to experimental multimedia productions and entertainment. I interviewed musicians, dancers, choreographers, composers, directors, teaching faculty, culture ministers and secretariat, record shop owners, and other persons formally and informally invested in cultural production. I attended rehearsals with dance companies and orchestras and studied music privately with *‘ūd* (Arab lute) and violin players. I also gathered archival and educational materials from personal contacts, private collections, libraries, bookstores, music shops, record stores, and cultural centers, all of which constituted a “shadow archive” (Simon 2022) outside of any official national archive. I also requested and was granted access to specific materials from the Ministries of Culture and Radio and Television.

Though based in Damascus, I conducted a significant amount of fieldwork in village communities across Syria. Motivated by popular claims that sited *dabke* in rural spaces and enabled by invitations from village residents who embraced an outsider’s interest in wedding traditions, I regularly made social visits to and developed research networks in the following villages, each in a different region: Jable (Latakia governate), Jaabat Khashab (Qunaytra governate), Saddad (Homs governate), and Qraya (Suwayda governate). During repeated visits, I conducted open-ended interviews with village residents and collected (with consent) video footage of weddings and other celebratory occasions. I documented how families constructed place and performed ethnic and local forms of belonging through ritual and heritage practices. My ethnographic engagement with rural areas provides a much needed yet often overlooked perspective on prewar rural Syria and state neglect of rural communities during this period, especially because most ethnographic studies of contemporary Syrian culture have tended to focus on Damascus and Aleppo.<sup>21</sup> My work also helps to account for the transformations that occurred among these communities as rural areas increasingly became the epicenters of opposition movements.

In addition to talking to people about performance, I learned technique from performers. “Technique,” insists Judith Hamera, “organizes socialities” and “facilitates interpersonal and social relations as it shapes bodies” (2007, 5). Though my prior training in ballet (ten years) and concert violin (more than fifteen years) disciplined my bodily disposition and aptitude, learning *dabke* technique disoriented and disrupted my sensibilities in ways that generated practical and theoretical outcomes. Professional and recreational *dabke* dancers and musicians

instructed me on the basics of their craft, sometimes directly through one-on-one sessions and at other times more indirectly through social events at which I “picked up” technique through observation and imitation. Perhaps one of the most important insights gained from these encounters is that the academic pursuit to identify lexicon, style, and genre is not the only epistemological relationship to the practice.<sup>22</sup> People maintain various relationships to the lexical aspects of performance practice; some converse at length about many styles in terms of their names and distinguishing features, while others practice skillfully without an expressed need to discuss aesthetics. Several professional artists stressed the improvisatory nature of the practice by performatively refusing to affix formal aesthetic markers, such as footwork sequences, to *dabke*. While the bulk of these issues is addressed in part II, I revisit issues of embodied pedagogy, representation, and technique at the end of chapter 6 when discussing my experience with leading and teaching *dabke* workshops in the US.

Despite the overwhelming generosity and warmth of innumerable Syrians towards my project and myself, the mid-2000s was a fraught period to conduct fieldwork and reside in Syria as an American citizen. As suggested in the historical background narrated earlier, there were general risks involved in conducting fieldwork in a state with a repressive security apparatus, entrenched intelligence service, and controlled access to limited information, such as national archives or communication media. People were eager to discuss the arts but wary of sharing political and personal information and viewpoints or interacting in spaces that might raise suspicion. Due to restrictions on movement and heightened surveillance of Kurdish-identified regions (historically perceived as a political threat to Syrian Arab nationhood), I was unable to conduct ethnographic research within Kurdish social spaces. Similarly, I did not gain access to Bedouin communities, who have both assimilated into Syrian society and largely been forced to abandon mobile pastoralism. Stemming from the US occupation of Iraq, diplomatic relations between the US and Syria had deteriorated in ways that impacted students, including myself. In September 2007, US-based educational and exchange programs were targeted by the Syrian state, including Amideast, the Damascus Community School (reopened in 2010), and the Fulbright program, forcing staff and Fulbright fellows to depart the country. Unable to stay in the country legally and banned from reentry due to the diplomatic tensions that implicated my Fulbright-IIIE fellowship, I bid friends and contacts farewell and hoped to find a way to return in the future.

In March 2011 Syrians protested the detention of minors by security forces as

well as corruption and economic insecurity. The regime responded with state violence, triggering a civil and international conflict with global repercussions and irreparable damage to Syrian lives and society. Unable to visit the region during the 2011 revolution and war, I turned to digital ethnography. In 2011, digital ethnography was perhaps comparable to the “remote” interactions popularized during the Covid-19 pandemic, in the sense that social activity depended more heavily on mobile communications technology (such as Skype and WhatsApp, as Zoom was not widely available at the time) due to warfare, war economies, and displacement. However, as opposed to being a means to work from home and communicate directly with one another, digital ethnography in the context of the Syrian conflict refers to my attempt to identify and interact with social spaces specific to digital media platforms, primarily Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. In 2017 and 2019 I conducted short-term fieldwork in Berlin, where many Syrians resettled during an intense period of mass displacement and migration to Europe. Extending the geography of the project into spaces of displacement enabled me to reconnect and meet old and new interlocutors through copresent and in situ exchanges after years of forced distance as well as to better account for the considerable social and cultural transformations that occurred in the 2010s.

### *Positionality*

Recognizing the role that gender, ethnicity, and nationality play in forging relationships with my interlocutors, I identified myself as a cisgender, nonwhite, female American researcher. Many welcomed me as an American; whatever their political opinion about American foreign policy during the War on Terror (2001–21), people tended to distinguish between state policies and individuals. I was often racialized as nonwhite; people asked “but where are you really from” when they learned my nationality, likely because they imagined America as a hegemonic white space. To my surprise, they frequently and accurately identified my ethnic background as Chinese, occasionally with additional warmth due to imaginaries of China as a model for postsocialist economic development that circulated in the 2000s. At the same time, some individuals racialized my phenotypic features as Asian, suggesting that I add cat eyes to my makeup to enhance my Chineseness and making light jokes about my Chinese American background.<sup>23</sup> Though I also identify as a secular Ashkenazi Jew, close Syrian friends whom I met during fieldwork advised me to avoid disclosing my Jewish background out of concern about the risk posed by decades of anti-Jewish

rhetoric stemming from long-standing political and military hostilities between Syria and Israel. I navigated this aspect of my background cautiously, especially during brief interactions with acquaintances, and relied on close friends' advice for specific situations.

Being a young, unaccompanied, single, cisgender *hapa* woman affected how I negotiated public spaces and built networks of trust and support. Though my nonwhite appearance helped me to blend in with others passing through public spaces, I experienced sexual harassment as a young woman in urban public spaces. This harassment was at times racialized when I was assumed to be Iraqi. Well-meaning men occasionally sought to protect me from their anticipation of harassment by offering to accompany me to my destination. Sexualized encounters were also an issue when conducting some interviews, especially with male interlocutors for whom the boundaries between work and desire were malleable (Appert and Lawrence 2020). At times I was integrated into kinship networks (e.g., being more like someone's "daughter" or "sister" than a "guest"), which afforded some privileges of social intimacy but also meant that I was expected to conform to local gender roles and expectations that differed from my own progressive American viewpoint. At other times I was excluded from male-dominated sites of research in ways that required me to pivot away from those and identify spaces more welcoming of female participation, observation, and socialization. My experiences reinforce the fact that gender-based exclusion from musical performance and production remains a salient but buried issue for artists, producers, and scholars in musical spaces worldwide, including Syria.

Intersecting with the social construction of gender and ethnicity that emerged during ethnographic encounters were the privileges of class and mobility attached to my status as a Western "foreigner" (*ajnabi*). My academic work and personal background as a postmigrant subject are entangled with a noncontiguous history of colonialism, empire, and modernity that makes available material resources such as fellowships, residencies, and other institutionalized forms of support.<sup>24</sup> Intellectual authority, legitimacy, and visibility are ascribed to my efforts because of my institutional affiliations and nationality.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the category of the foreigner is a racialized construct that "embodies proximity to white power and delimits the boundaries of such power" (Silverstein and Sprengel 2021). Responses to this project, my subject position, and the overarching politics of Western scholarship in the SWANA region were varied. Many embraced the attention that this project illuminated on their work and culture heritage, likely because of the power of Western modernity, while others were indifferent. How-

ever, Syrian attitudes towards Western interest in their lives shifted significantly when I engaged in fieldwork in Germany in 2017. Whereas people had extended incredible generosity in Syria before the war, it was more difficult to gain trust in 2017. I explore this shift more deeply in the interlude in part III, but suffice it to say that the failure of the international community to respond to the Syrian revolution and humanitarian crisis, the politics of border crossings as Syrians sought refuge, and the fetishization of Syrian asylum seekers once they arrived in Europe fundamentally transformed the politics of foreignness.

## BOOK NARRATIVE

In poetic homage to the predominant choreosonic patterns of *dabke* practice, *Fraught Balance* is organized into three units, each of which comprises two chapters. The book is designed to be read through in its entirety; alternatively, individual parts can be selected for specific reading and teaching aims. Interludes serve as brief essays that introduce each of the three parts, offer background on relevant historical and political contexts, and discuss the methodologies that support the work of a given unit. I offer here a broad overview of each part of the book, followed by a chapter-by-chapter summary for those interested in more details about this book's claims and narrative arc.

The first part, "Folkloric Dance," looks at the gendered, ethnocentric, and classed discourses entangled in cultural heritage practices as part of the formation of secular, territorial nationalism and the political ideologies of the authoritarian state. I ask what "Syria" means, and for whom, through a history of how social *dabke* became a national folkloric dance that projected specific visions of cultural citizenship in the newly independent Syrian nation-state (chapter 1) and in the Assadist regime (chapter 2). "Everyday Performance," the second part, examines gender and class dynamics in everyday practices and social spaces. I unpack the embodied and affective dynamics of *dabke* practice by focusing on the sonic and kinesic interactions that animate the social space of the live performance event, the *hafla* (literally: party). Based on fieldwork conducted in prewar Syria (2004–8), this part portrays the dancing body as a listening body (chapter 3) and details how musicians craft a digital sonic aesthetic attuned to listeners' desire for loud and distorted forms of live sound (chapter 4) that energize dancing. The third part, "Conflict and Displacement," extends the analyses of gender, class, and cultural difference from the earlier essays to the polarized politics of revolution, war, and forced displacement. I consider the role of *dabke* during these

cataclysmic conditions, insisting on the tension between the affective capacity of performance to both forge and fragment social bonds. These final chapters employ digital ethnography (chapter 5) and in situ ethnography (chapter 6) to identify gendered spaces of power and reckon with the power of representation in precarious conditions of migration.

The first chapter, “Virtuous Figures,” draws on archival documents, extant manuscripts, and images to demonstrate how nation-building efforts in the mid-twentieth century invented *raqs sha‘biyya* (folkloric dance) as a staged art shaped by the political and aesthetic ideologies of postcolonial modernity, Arab nationalism, and state feminism. It analyzes the gendered and classed transformations that occurred in the process of making *dabke* folkloric, namely the construction of the *fellaha* (peasant woman) as the archetypal *dabke* dancer, in order to articulate the formative role of nation-building elite in developing models of cultural citizenship that valorized nonelite, rural, and feminine subjects.

Chapter 2, “Staging Difference,” continues examining folkloric dance as a site for the pedagogical performance of nationhood but shifts the focus from the homogenizing approach to cultural nationalism elaborated in the first chapter to late twentieth-century projects that envisioned nationhood through a “unity in diversity” framework. Looking at live performances, scholarly publications, and television media produced in the 2000s, I situate contrasting usages of the “mosaic” as a rhetorical figure for this framework in relation to different audiences and cultural projects. The representational politics of the mosaic reveal, I argue, strategies of statecraft that are foundational for the Assad regime: the exclusion of specific ethnic groups from the Syrian polity, the failure of nationalist pedagogy to offer deep cross-cultural engagement between social groups, and the exacerbation of class tensions due to the privileging of neoliberal spaces in state cultural policy. Together, these chapters address the shifting role of the state in controlling and managing subnational cultural difference across the twentieth century.

“Floating Rhythms,” chapter 3, discusses the sensory and spatial dynamics between dancers and musicians that yield “flow states.” In contrast to Western understandings of flow as a phenomenon predicated on an autonomous sense of self enveloped in solitude (Csikszentmihalyi 1990), I identify flow states in this project as an intercorporeal, immersive, and participatory experience suffused with pleasure. Flow states, I argue, are not immune from but rather indicative of relationships of power that circulate between bodies playing in the event space. Drawing on theorizations of corporeality from dance studies and performance

studies, alongside vibrational affect from sound studies, I examine how the “flow states” specific to *dabke* construct hegemonic and nonhegemonic masculinities—or “relational masculinities,” as I suggest—through the mechanics of bodywork and sociality.

Chapter 4, “Sonic Spectacularity,” addresses the question of how digital audio technology mediates listening experiences by extending the previous chapter’s attention to dancing as a form of listening to a focus on musicians and the production of sound. Based on ethnographic exchanges with studio producers and performers who play the digital synthesizer (*org*), I define a digital sonic aesthetic specific to *dabkāt* and characterized by the primacy of sonic vibrations and “live” (Kim 2017; Auslander 1999) performances of spectacular excess. I situate this spectacularity in the making of “*communitas*” (Turner 1977) at ritual wedding events in kinship-based communities. I conclude by analyzing a satirical television show, *Spotlight*, that places the male dancing body at the heart of the social contradictions of gentrification in neoliberal Damascus. In so doing, I demonstrate how this digital sonic aesthetic of *dabkāt*, indicative of a growing wealth divide in urban spaces in prewar Syria, simultaneously brings guests together at live parties while also alienating those who consider *dabkāt* excessive.

“Conflicting Movements,” chapter 5, locates *dabke* in the protest events, media worlds, and ideological contestations of the decade-long armed conflict. I unpack contradictory political claims articulated through and as *dabke* practice across three different sites of digital research, including popular political songs, videos of dancing soldiers on the front lines of war, and Kurdish women’s dance circles at the geopolitical edges of the conflict. Applying chapter 3’s concept of relational masculinity to the complex gender dynamics of the war as these emerge in situ and online, I identify the role of play and pleasure in perpetuating power across the spaces, institutions, and bodies enmeshed in conflict.

Following pathways of displaced artists, chapter 6 reorients the geographical focus from contested conflict zones to Europe, where contemporary Syrian dance has flourished since 2015. “Translating Syrianness” considers the performance of Syrian difference on European stages through two projects: a choreography imagined for European audiences that adapts social *dabke* into a postmodern critique of masculinity and institutional power, and community *dabke* workshops led by Syrian dancers that bridge cross-cultural difference in Berlin through *dabke* pedagogy, as well as workshops led by myself in the US. This chapter frames these projects as political and social interventions in which *dabke* performers disidentify with state-sponsored nationalist projects by translating Syrianness

on their own terms. In this chapter I recognize the radical directions and risky movements of Syrian dancers by grounding their work in the historical, political, and social structures in which Syrian *dabke* is ensconced.

## ETHICS OF ETHNOGRAPHY

This project has emerged in contiguity with the reality of political and social conditions in Syria. As an ethnographer, I privilege immersion and lived experience as fertile grounds for building long-term relationships and investing in collaborative networks of exchange. However, my aspirations have been confounded by political realities and militarized conflict, which dissolved social stability and foreclosed opportunities for in-person, copresent exchanges. With the turn to armed conflict in 2012, the ethnographic spaces represented in this book became murkily dark. Syrians suffered from chemical attacks, while parents clutched their young children taking their final breaths. World leaders fumbled to respond. I have remained betwixt and between conditions of witness, empathy, solidarity, and helplessness. I cannot save children or provide solace to grieving parents whose tragedy is consumed by strangers, such as myself, engaging with the conflict on social media. What does it mean to write in the temporal presence of violence, yet be privileged to be distant from its spatial and physical proximity? What salvages a writing imperative, if anything can be salvaged, in the face of the impossible tragedy that is “Syria”?

Ethnographic writing, for me, is a representational strategy that questions colonial and imperial relations of power by unpacking how bodies are rendered (in)visible, (in)audible, and (il)legible through performance and research on performance. There is a history of scholarship in the region that colludes in the erasure of minority status and ethnic difference (Shami and Nagiub 2013). This ethnography is not immune to such collusion, as I have narrated with respect to my difficulties gaining access and proximity to Kurdish and Bedouin communities. To the extent that nationhood is produced by exclusions and inclusions, this ethnography reflects a historically contingent reading of who is most visible and accessible within the modern state. This ethnography is therefore situated between imperialisms of the past and hegemonies of the present. I hope that as readers encounter the subjects of this book, including myself, they attend to how processes of representation constitute power relations and how their own performativity is enmeshed and constituted through shifting fields of power. I approach writing about Syrian *dabke* as its own performance, one that strives to

speaking with and for the millions living through this moment and that negotiates my own positionality as a contemporary American researcher.

This book aims to portray the grace and vitality of performance in Syrian lifeworlds. While I do not romanticize music, dance, and performance as cultural acts that resolve conflict and inspire unity (indeed, I argue that performance is instrumental to the hegemonic forces that have fragmented Syrian society), I do focus on subjects and spaces that are often flattened by media narratives or overlooked by studies that focus on political power and foreign policy. The power of writing hinges on what acts of writing make legible. In these pages, I hope to make legible the affective attachments that root Syrians to a place where they belong.

