Disputes over sexual behavior often become the vehicles for displacing social anxieties, and discharging their attendant emotional intensity. Consequently, sexuality should be treated with special respect in times of great social stress.


In the fall of 1994 one of my Egyptian graduate students at the American University in Cairo (AUC) handed me a music cassette which she was sure I would want to hear given that, as she explained, it was all the rage among Cairene youth. The tape contained two numbers, sung in English, Arabic, and (I thought) Hebrew, by an Israeli artist whose name my student did not know. It was poorly recorded and the lyrics hard to make out, so I filed it away in a drawer after listening to it a few times. Over the next months I would hear it occasionally blaring from cars and from a cassette player at the AUC snack bar, and I eventually learned, through conversations and various lurid articles in the opposition press here and there, that the singer’s name was Danna International; she was also known in Egypt as Sā’īda Sultān; she was a Mizrahi, a Jew of Arab origin; and “she” was a transsexual.¹

In August 1995 my interest in Danna was reignited by the discovery of a sensationalistic exposé entitled A Scandal Whose Name Is Sā’īda Sultān: Dānnā the Israeli Sex Artist, penned by Muhammad al-Ghaytī and published by a reputable nationalist (Nasserite) press. The book’s cover features a photo of Madonna bending toward the camera in a metallic gold bustier and black net stockings, her cleavage and eyes blacked out, in the style of local scandal magazines. The upper left-hand corner announces, “For Adults Only”; the black cover informs us that although the Zionists failed...
in their efforts to conquer Egypt politically, they have now succeeded, through the agency of Danna International’s sexuality, in invading Egypt’s bedrooms. The book elaborates on many of the issues that both the Egyptian opposition and public-sector media started to raise about Danna/Sa’ida and her illicit cassette (known locally as Būsī Yā Sūsū, or “Kiss Me Susu”) in December 1994. We learn that Danna International’s given name is Yaron Cohen, that he was born to a Yemeni family that migrated to Israel after 1948, and that, while growing up, he learned traditional Arabic songs of Yemen and the Arabian Gulf from his mother (al-Ghayti 1995: 18–20). As a teenager, Yaron frequented the “perverts clubs” (nawāディ al-shawīd) of Tel Aviv, where his “deviant” tendencies were affirmed and developed. Eventually Yaron underwent hormone treatments and a sex change operation and launched a singing career under the stage name Danna International, with the encouragement of the prominent Israeli-Yemeni singer Ofra Haza and devoted fans in the “perverts’ clubs” of Tel Aviv (F, 21–22, 32–33, 35). Although she aroused controversy among extremist rabbis who considered her sex change contrary to Jewish law, Danna nonetheless enjoyed the backing of the Israeli leadership. It was only due to the support of Zionist power brokers, in fact, that her music was able to “penetrate” Egypt via the Sinai peninsula and “master” the ears of twenty million youths (F, 12–13).

The author goes on to inform us that Danna’s inspirations in the world of show business are Elvis, James Dean, Michael Jackson, and, especially, Madonna, all of whom are major stars in Egypt. Al-Ghayti describes all of these international icons of popular culture as “deviants” (F, 38) and proceeds to rehearse some of their perverted adventures. We discover that Elvis, late in his career, spent hours indulging in “disgusting” sex at an S & M club, where he died; that James Dean used to bugger young black men in his dressing room; that the “disfigured black pig” Michael Jackson favors the company of children; and the biggest “deviant” of them all, Madonna, is a prominent supporter of civil rights for “perverts” (F, 40). Moreover, we learn that, according to her gynecologist, Madonna is not a 100 percent biological woman. “Can you imagine,” the author asks, “Madonna, the global symbol of the naked woman, is not a complete female?” (F, 44). We are informed as well that both Michael Jackson and Madonna are closely tied to and enjoy the strong backing of the Zionist lobby in the United States (F, 42, 46–47). Moving beyond vilification by association, al-Ghayti proceeds to illustrate Danna’s depravity through an examination of her lyrics, sung in what he describes as a “devilish blend” of Arabic (in various regional dialects), English and Hebrew (F, 58). The themes of her songs, he claims, are all sexual adventures, and their words are so scandalous that the author on occasion feels compelled to leave blank spaces and simply describe what they mean. One of Danna’s songs is an “unambiguous call for prostitution...
and immorality”; another features a sordid encounter between a woman and a dog; others are composed chiefly of “scandalous [read: orgasmic] groans” (F, 62). The final number of the cassette, sung in Hebrew and English, is said to exemplify how Danna’s shameless voice and lyrics constitute a deviation from all morality and tradition and constitute an attack on all the monotheistic Semitic religions and their principles and laws (F, 64).

According to al-Ghayṭī, Danna is merely one element of a larger Zionist cultural torrent which includes other Israeli female pop singers, such as Ruthie, Nancy, and Suzanna Ma’ārīv, who have employed “sexual shouts” in order to win an Egyptian audience and to “penetrate . . . like a plague” the circles of innocent Arab youth. Several even used the devious tactic of making “corrupted” Hebrew recordings of tunes by revered neoclassicist Arab singers like Umm Kalthūm, ‘Ābd al-Halīm Hāfīz, and Fārīd al-Aṭrāsh and punctuating them with orgasmic moans (F, 66). It should be emphasized that the latter are nationally revered, canonical figures in Egypt for which there are no comparable examples in American popular culture. (To get a sense of the cultural capital of such singers in Egypt, imagine that Frank Sinatra passed away and millions of weeping fans showed up at his funeral, that he is a central figure in U.S. nationalist mythology, that his music is constantly played on radio, that his concerts and movies are endlessly aired on television, that video clips of Sinatra singing in concerts or movies are interspersed between television programs on a daily basis, and, finally, that all popular music is measured in relation to Frankie’s standard of excellence. Then imagine that an artist from a currently vilified country, say Iran, began to record “versions” of Sinatra’s songs and that they were embraced by American youth.) Although Danna has in fact “stolen” only from the lesser Egyptian pop star Hasan al-Asmar, a figure whom the nationalist intelligentsia consider “vulgar,” according to al-Ghayṭī, these corruptions of beloved Egyptian classics by Israeli singers manage at once to “penetrate” Arab youth and to destroy the Arabs’ deep-rooted musical heritage (F, 66). This sort of theft and perversion of Arab heritage, we are informed, dates back to the days of Jewish presence in Egypt. The author tells, for instance, of Rachel Qattāwī, the female scion of a poor branch of Egyptian Jewry’s leading family, the Qattāwī, known for its wealth and for its collaboration with British colonialists. During World War II, Rachel worked as a barmaid at Cairo’s Continental Hotel, where she befriended the great (and canonical) singer Ismāḥān as well as other Egyptian artists and mastered Ismāḥān’s repertoire, all the while working undercover for Jewish and British intelligence. When she immigrated to Israel, Rachel “stole” Ismāḥān’s legacy (Ismāḥān died in 1944), and she recorded an album of Ismāḥān’s songs in 1967 (F, 92–94).

Ultimately, for al-Ghayṭī, the entire Danna phenomenon boils down to a Masonic-Jewish conspiracy. Danna, who is accused of being a Freemason,
advocates the individual's right to happiness and sensual delight, both of these being prototypical Masonic principles, invented by Zionist Jews, whose aim was to destroy society (F, 50–52). This philosophy accords, as al-Ghayti argues with reference to such noted authorities as Wagner and Hitler, with the nature of the Jews, a parasitic and rootless people whose eternal aim is to destroy civilization (F, 106, 115–16). Therefore Danna's influence must be resisted vigorously in order to defend and protect Egypt's youth from her poison. Although by the time we reach his conclusion al-Ghayti's argument has come to resemble the rantings of a neo-Nazi rather than cultural criticism, with the trope of the Jewish-Masonic conspiracy stemming from the notorious Protocols of the Elders of Zion and Hitler's anti-Semitic propaganda, the Western reader should be aware that the notion of a Masonic-Zionist plot is commonplace in Egypt, particular in Islamist versions but also in Marxist and nationalist variants. Several books have been published on the theme and can be purchased in "respectable" bookstores: Freemasonry, moreover, is banned in much of the Middle East.

**Israeli “Penetration”**

Running throughout al-Ghayti's arguments, in fact, are a number of ideological threads that are frequently articulated by members of Egypt's nationalist intelligentsia. One theme is the danger posed by Israel. Although the Egyptian government signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1977, most of the intelligentsia has vigorously opposed normalization (tatbi') of Israeli-Egyptian relations. Egyptian universities, for instance, continue to boycott Israeli scholars, and although Israel established an academic center in Cairo in the early 1980s, it remains unthinkable for an Israeli scholar to deliver a public lecture at any Egyptian university. Indeed, numerous significant issues continue to animate anti-Israeli feelings and receive extensive coverage in the press. However, while there is considerable apprehension regarding Israeli policies and its interest in dominating Egypt, there is not much coverage of Israel's considerable economic activities in Egypt. It is hardly known, for instance, that Israeli investors are leasing land and growing commercial agricultural produce in the Egyptian Delta, and it may well be that the government tries to prevent such activities from being publicized. Instead, anxieties about Israel's aims and power are displaced onto the domain of culture, such that the press is constantly churning out inflammatory stories, many of them delusionary, about Israel's efforts to conquer Egypt and the Arab world culturally.

Typical of such incendiary sensationalism is the report which appeared in the Nasserite newspaper al-'Arabi in February 1996 discussing an Israeli
cigarette sold within the Palestine National Authority and said to be about to appear on the Egyptian market. The article, which reproduces the emblem on the cigarette pack depicting two men driving a chariot, tells us that the men are wearing distinctive American hats, that they are riding in an Egyptian chariot drawn by Arabian horses, and that one holds a whip whose lash hangs so as to form the Arabic word Misr (Egypt). In sum, Uncle Sam is deploying an Egyptian whip to control the Arabs, and the entire scenario is devised by the Israelis. One encounters the same Israeli arrogance and vision, the piece concludes, in the statements of the former Israeli foreign minister Ehud Barak and in the trademark on an Israeli cigarette packet. Although the notice is bizarre and the interpretation of the emblem fanciful, it is symptomatic of Egyptian fears (especially as articulated by the national intelligentsia) about official Israeli attitudes, policies, and designs. These must be kept in mind in order to understand both the appeal of and the resistance to Danna International in Egypt.

In a similar vein, al-Ghayti elaborates quite obsessively on another aspect of the perceived Israeli aggression: the sexual threat it poses to the Egyptian bedroom. One of the means he uses to convey this “danger” is to misrepresent the sexiness of Danna’s lyrics both through wild exaggeration and by means of strategic mistranslation. The song that al-Ghayti calls an “unambiguous call for prostitution and immorality,” for instance, is in fact a wedding song, sung from the position of a woman. This is made obvious not only by the lyrics—Danna sings in Arabic, “‘ânâ al-‘arûsa” (I’m the bride), and in English, “Going to a honeymoon”—but also by the music (which features the ululations typical of Arab wedding celebrations) and by the very name of the song, which—as I learned once I obtained the CD from Israel—is “‘Arûsa” [“Bride”]. If the song is in any way “deviant” it is perhaps because the singer is not “really” a woman, a fact al-Ghayti seems either to overlook or to ignore. Al-Ghayti’s notion that another song concerns an encounter between a woman and a dog is the product of the fertile imagination of the antipornographer. As for the number that is supposed to represent an attack on all Semitic religions, it is simply a remake of Queen’s inoffensive “The Show Must Go On”: the English lyrics Danna sings are “Show must go on / Inside my heart is breaking / My make-up may be flaking / But my smile still stays on.” This is not to say that the tape is devoid of sexiness (al-Ghayti is correct to interpret Danna’s screams as orgasmic, but these are much less ubiquitous than he claims) but to underscore the symptomatically hysterical and displaced character of al-Ghayti’s attack.

Curiously, al-Ghayti’s account of the classical homophobic topos of sexual penetration focuses on the aggressive and wanton Western-Israeli female who seduces the innocent young Egyptian male. Although the theme of the Egyptian man victimized by a predatory Western woman is to be
found in works of modern Egyptian fiction dating back at least to the 1940s, today's moral-sexual panic about the voracious and corrupting Western (and now, Israeli) woman is much more virulent and widespread. AIDS, for instance, is widely represented by the agencies of public meaning as a disease that Egyptians contract when male nationals are ensnared by loose Western women. A 1992 film called Love in Taba, which, despite its artistic wretchedness, airs frequently on state television, is typical of this official story. It recounts the tale of three naive Egyptian youths who are willingly seduced and entrapped by three young libertine Western women while on holiday in Taba, a small resort in the Sinai Peninsula that sits right on the border with Israel. When the foreign women depart for home, each leaves a note informing her lover that he is now infected with AIDS. It is significant that these events occur at Taba, for the Sinai Peninsula is often depicted in the media as a wild and dangerous frontier zone through which Israeli corruption enters the Nile Valley, and al-Ghaytî explicitly names it as the corridor through which Danna's cassettes have "penetrated." Meanwhile, the opposition press and word-of-mouth assert that AIDS is being broadcast in Egypt by prostitutes dispatched there for that purpose by the Israeli government. A public service announcement shown frequently on state television manages simultaneously to provide accurate information about HIV transmission and to suggest, through its visual imagery, that the main danger of infection occurs when Egyptian males go abroad and are stalked by prostitutes. The iconographic message is reinforced by an explicit statement that AIDS is a "foreign" phenomenon, that the Egyptian traveler should beware, and that "Abroad they use such things as condoms and other methods to help prevent AIDS, but here there is no fear of such things because the principles which our youth believe in protect them from such evil." The spot concludes with a verse from the Qur'ân.

The announcement's anxious tone, however, undercuts the confident assertions about Egyptian youth and their deep-seated moral principles. And for al-Ghaytî, the "evil" does not just lie in foreign lands or frontier regions but menaces the very heart of the nation. The focal point of the danger, however, is strictly heterosexual cross-cultural encounters. Al-Ghaytî does not suggest that "perverts" (homosexuals or transsexuals) constitute the true threat to Egypt, for he assumes that such people simply do not exist there. What Danna's transsexuality and deviance serve to underscore instead is simply the repulsive character of her sexual success in Egypt. In this regard the transgendered Danna is like her hero, the international sex symbol Madonna, who is also both very popular and highly controversial in Egypt and, although more or less legal, equally loathsome—not least, as al-Ghaytî notes, since Madonna herself is not "really" biologically female. Transsexuality and queerness serve here to underscore
the fact that the Western-Israeli sexual assault is not merely corrupting but that its very foundations are perverse and deviant. The challenge posed by Western mass culture, as exemplified by Elvis, Michael, James Dean, Madonna, and Danna, is essentially moral and sexual.

Youth as “Problem”

If al-Ghayt’s diatribe can be read as a catalog of interlinked themes that run through the discourse of Egypt’s nationalist intelligentsia concerning the threatening and corrupting influences posed by Israel, westernization, sexuality, and Western mass culture, another important and related motif in this nationalist discourse concerns precisely who is at risk. Those said to be most threatened by these dangers are youth, the shabab, and particularly the young men. On 21 August 1995, Rûţ al-Yûṣif, Egypt’s leading weekly magazine, a sensationalist but well-regarded nationalist public-sector vehicle, published an exposé about advertisements that had appeared in Egyptian magazines, promoting phone numbers that promised to connect callers with “new friends.” It turned out that such calls were quite expensive and that they connected the consumer to sex professionals in Israel.16 Under the banner “Normalization by Sex with Israel,” the issue’s seductive cover photo of Tina Turner wearing a miniskirt and exposing considerable cleavage is intended to convey the dangers of “phone sex.” In the predictably melodramatic account of the arrival of Israeli phone sex, we learn that once the peace treaty was signed with Egypt, Israeli intelligence agencies turned away from Egypt’s military secrets and began to study Egypt’s social ills with the aim of exploiting them. What they discovered is that Egyptian youth are afflicted by sexual problems that are traceable to the country’s economic difficulties and make it difficult for youth to marry and satisfy their sexual needs. Phone sex, along with AIDS, counterfeit money, and heroin, are all Israeli exports designed to take advantage of Egyptian youth’s difficulties.17

Despite its propagandistic exaggerations, the Rûţ al-Yûṣif article does nevertheless point to some of the concrete causes of the “youth crisis.” Youth in Egypt do indeed face a crisis of opportunity, which particularly affects those from the lower and lower-middle classes who manage to get university degrees. An advanced degree is supposed to guarantee a government job, but today the waiting period for actually getting such a position is about ten years. In any case, the pay for such sought-after jobs averages a pitiful 100 L.E. ($30) per month, and legions of state employees must moonlight to make ends meet. Opportunities for work in the private sector, especially respectable jobs that educated youth will accept, are also limited.18
Such economic obstacles in turn make getting married a laborious and much-delayed process. \(^{19}\) Marriage, however, is a requirement for any young person who wishes to become a social adult, to achieve independence within a nuclear family, to move out of his or her parental abode, and to gain sexual access. Because marriage requires considerable outlays of money and families of prospective brides demand the whole package (i.e., a furnished apartment, etc.) in order to ensure that their daughters are well settled, unless a youth comes from a wealthy family he will frequently not marry until he reaches his early thirties. Many young men migrate to work in the Gulf countries and toil there for as long as five to ten years in order to save up enough money for marriage. The Central Agency for Statistics estimates that four million Egyptians have “missed the train of marriage” because they are well into their thirties, beyond the accepted marrying age; and some have calculated that the number of marriages registered in the country has declined by nearly 1 percent, an astonishing fact for a country with such a young population. \(^{20}\) As a result, the social category of “youth” in Egypt includes large numbers of men (and some women) in their late twenties and early thirties. It is widely recognized that the crisis afflicting them is in part sexual due to the fact that sexual outlets outside of marriage are limited, proscribed, and usually prohibitively expensive, and because “dating” is generally unacceptable unless one is already engaged. \(^{21}\) Such factors contribute to making sex a major topic of discussion and controversy in Egypt today. \(^{22}\) 

Youth are also considered a problem in the domain of culture. Nationalist, especially oppositional, intellectuals commonly assert that youth are the victims of a general moral decline in Egypt that is the by-product of \textit{infitāh}, the economic liberalization launched in the 1970s by the late President Anwar al-Sadat, and the consequent advance of materialism and decline of traditional values. \(^{23}\) The \textit{infitāh} is also regarded as indelibly linked to normalization with Israel and to the consequent Zionist penetration. Youth are seen as especially susceptible to the corruptions of both Western mass culture and “vulgar” indigenous culture (so called because it is regarded as rooted in “low” cultural values), both of which are said to be outcomes of the \textit{infitāh} and the attendant rise of a boorish nouveau riche and decline of noble cultural values. “Vulgar” or “fallen” Egyptian culture fails to meet the nationalist cultural idea of a synthesis of the high neoclassicist culture (which in addition to elite Arab traditions can also include elements of refined Western culture, such as ballet or Beethoven) and the best of folk cultural values (represented by the stereotypical “authentic Egyptian,” the son of the people or \textit{ibn al-balad}). With regard to music, the canonical figures who serve to epitomize ideal national values and to represent the musical high points of Egyptian culture’s “golden age” include the late Umm Kalthūm, ‘Abd al-Halīm Hāfīz, and Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wah-
Cheap Egyptian culture is both “low” (because there is no synthesis with “elevated” culture) and, frequently, contaminated by “cheap” Western mass culture. In their ideological combat against the tidal waves of base culture, the national intelligentsia’s cultural mandarins therefore frequently condemn contemporary musicians who do not conform to canonical values, asserting that they represent the “fall” of Egyptian music from its glory days and describing them as jīl al-ghinā’ al-hābit (the generation of the vulgar song). The frequent press attacks on “debased culture” and condemnations of “vulgar” musicians who threaten the authenticity of the Arabic song are responses to the fact that, although many Egyptian youth will publicly assert their admiration for Umm Kalthum and ‘Abd al-Halīm, they primarily listen to contemporary “vulgar” Egyptian pop music. Thus the makers of public meaning invoke the shining example of a figure like Umm Kalthum in order to articulate a critique of the effects of privatization, structural adjustment, and normalization with Israel, and at the same time, to put forward a blanket condemnation of contemporary youth culture, which can never equal but can only, at best, imitate past glories. As a result, many of the most popular musicians are consigned to the margins of public space, are never aired on television or radio, and are sometimes forced to resort to underground and illegal releases which are marketed in the same cassette kiosks that deal in Danna’s contraband cassettes. This marginalization of a significant component of contemporary musical life in Egypt is yet another symptom of the general absence of autonomous public spaces (whether youth clubs, media, or dance halls) where youth might publicly articulate their desires or demands. The popularity of “vulgar” music, the object of so much thundering from nationalist intellectuals straining to shore up neoclassicist cultural values, can in turn be understood as a sign of a general disaffection on the part of Egyptian youth, of their tremendous skepticism concerning the economic and social possibilities awaiting them, and of their lack of interest in the great modernist projects of nationalism and development that were hegemonic until the mid-1970s.

The nationalist intelligentsia, therefore, recognize Egypt’s social fragmentation and the alienation of youth from the once-revered projects of national liberation and development and cast themselves as youth’s savior. Although intellectuals condemn youth for their cultural predilections, they are occasionally empathetic and assert that young people cannot really be blamed for their cynicism, since the government and the economy offer them so little. Even such sympathetic analyses, however, deny Egyptian youth any agency and depict them as mere victims of government dereliction or dupes of foreign plots. Young people’s own cultural concerns have no role to play in this rescue operation, for it is the national tradition and culture, as understood and articulated by the intelligentsia, that is to be their salvation.
The final link between al-Ghaytî and nationalist discourse has to do with the place of Arab Jews, whether in the Arab countries or inside Israel. In al-Ghaytî's text, as in most nationalist discourse, this subject is essentially an absence. Although al-Ghaytî notes Danna International's Yemeni origins, he pays minimal attention to the question of the Mizrahim in Israel and basically assumes that Arabs and Jews are diametrically opposed categories. He does mention in passing that Jews of Arab background occupy the lower rungs of Israeli society and that the singer Ofra Haza faced many difficulties due to her Yemeni origins, but on the whole he manages to depict Israeli Jewish society as homogeneous and monolithic. The author assumes that Danna sings in Arabic simply because her "target" is Arab youth outside Israel and so never takes into account other possible audiences such as the roughly 16 percent of Israel's five million citizens who are Palestinian Arabs, the 54 percent of the population who are of non-European and mostly Arabic-speaking origin like Danna herself, or the many Israeli Ashkenazis (Jews of European origin) who are familiar with Arabic and Arabic culture.

Al-Ghaytî also treats the Egyptian Jews "within" as national traitors, collaborators with British colonialism, and agents of Zionism. He ignores the rich and varied nature of this now all-but-vanished community, which included rich and poor, Communists and Zionists, and a majority of apolitical non-Zionists. Out of a population of seventy-five thousand to eighty thousand, only about fourteen thousand immigrated to Israel between 1948 and 1951 after the new Jewish state was created. It was only in the wake of the June 1967 war that this community was finally decimated, but even then only about one-third to one-half of Egyptian Jews immigrated to Israel. Nor does al-Ghaytî discuss any of Egypt's major cultural figures who were Jewish, like the singer-actress Layla Murâd, a still revered icon of Egyptian film and music from the late 1930s to the early 1950s who was raised as a Jew and converted to Islam when she married the well-known actor Anwar Wagdî. Also conveniently absent from al-Ghaytî's account is any mention of other well-known Jewish cultural figures such as Layla Murâd's famous musician father, Zâkî Murâd, the pioneering cinema director and producer Togo Mizrahi (responsible for some of the early landmarks of Egyptian film), and the musician Dâ'ūd Husnî, remembered as one of the great artists who along with Sayyid Darwish revitalized Egyptian music in the early part of the century and who was responsible for Egypt's first full-length opera, Cleopatra's Night, in 1919. In al-Ghaytî's account, the Jews in Egypt (not of Egypt), as represented by Rachel Qattâwî, are simply thieves of Arab culture and Zionist undercover agents.
Danna's Egyptian Fans

Just who is actually listening to Danna in Egypt? How can one characterize the massive and heterogenous social category of “youth” whom nationalist intellectuals like al-Ghayt want to “protect” from the dangers of Danna International? The difficulty of such a task is compounded by the fact that since there is no public space for Egypt’s young people to articulate their perceptions of “vulgar” pop music, there exists no real vocabulary in which to voice favorable views.32 There are no magazines or broadcasts that represent alternative views of or by Egyptian youth; youth- and pop-culture-oriented magazines tend to be either of the gossip variety or public-sector vehicles through which “responsible” adults address youth. Almost nothing of real concern to youth percolates up the cultural hierarchy from the bottom. Moreover, open discussion is severely constrained by official condemnations that create a sense that listening to Danna signifies immorality, an absence of patriotism, and a lack of respectability. Many thus simply repeat what the press says about Danna: asked if he had ever heard of Danna International, a taxi driver bringing a friend into town from Cairo airport replied, “You mean the singer that brings AIDS from Israel?”

Although Danna’s tape is sold strictly on the black market and for high prices (four to eight times that of a regular prerecorded cassette), she appears to enjoy an extensive audience of youth and students, from among both the westernized upper and upper-middle classes and the lower-middle and working classes.33 One of Danna’s appeals is that she is “forbidden,” both as a “sex” artist and as an Israeli, and the uproar in the press has simply served to drive up both the price and the desirability of her cassette.34 High-priced versions of the cassette are sold under the counter in many of the numerous Cairo kiosks that specialize in prerecorded music tapes as well as contraband cassettes by “vulgar” Egyptian pop singers. In addition, enterprising kids have made lesser-quality versions that they hawk in the streets for lower prices, sometimes disguising them, to avoid police harassment, as Qur’anic recitation cassettes. (Police raids on cassette shops increased after it was learned that Danna’s tape had appeared on the market.) Although the buzz on the streets is that Bāṣīt Yā Sūṣtī is a “sex” tape, it is less well known that Danna is a transsexual, and this does not appear to be part of Danna’s attraction nor to matter much to consumers. Most of the Egyptian audience is familiar with the Western pop musical sources—such as Whitney Houston, Gloria Estefan, Donna Summer, Queen, and the Gypsy Kings—that Danna draws on and does “versions” of, since these are international pop stars known and consumed in both Israel and Egypt. Danna’s practice of blending Western dance beats and textures with oriental vocalisms and modes is equally familiar in Egypt and in fact is characteristic
of a great deal of contemporary Egyptian pop music (as discussed below). But many in this audience do not understand Danna’s English lyrics.

My chief sources regarding Danna’s reception in Egypt are westernized upper-middle-class students at the American University of Cairo who are quite familiar with the Egyptian and Western pop musical traditions Danna draws on, patronize the nightclubs where Danna’s singles are played (going to discos is almost exclusively an upper- and upper-middle-class phenomenon), and—unlike most of the audience—are fluent in English. These students dismiss the attacks on Danna in the opposition press, saying that the nationalist opposition tends to describe everything as Israeli plots. But, reflecting the absence of public spaces for youth to assert positive views about sexuality and gender relations, they are rather defensive about claims thatBUSÌ Yà SUSÌ is a sex tape—it’s not really “bad,” at least most of the songs are not, they say. Their response also resembles the posture of youth interviewed in an expose published in the public-sector magazine al-Shabab [Youth] about the popularity of Western “sex” pop (Danna, Madonna) and “satanic” music (heavy metal). Most youth joined the chorus of condemnation; the few who defended their interest in such music claimed that they did not really pay attention to the lyrics and that it was ludicrous to suppose that merely listening to satanic rock would turn them into worshippers of Satan.36

**BUSÌ/Pussy**

A closer look at one of Danna’s songs will serve to suggest some of the pleasures her music might offer a young Egyptian consumer. I assume here a listener who understands English, but someone with even a smidgen of English knowledge would get some of the lyrics and suggestions. Of the four Arabic-language songs on the contraband cassette, the most popular is probably “SUSÚ Yà SUSÚ” [SUSÚ Oh SUSÚ], which was a favorite in the dance clubs of Cairo and Sharm al-Shaykh as well as on the street in 1995. As its “real” Israeli title, “Danna International,” is unknown in Egypt, the hit was known simply as “SUSÚ,” itself a pet name, a diminutive of YÚSÌF (Joseph), and a type of nickname employed mainly by the older, educated generation. While a friend of lower-class background insists that SUSÚ could not be a nickname for a male, my AUC students say it could be a term of endearment for a man, but one who is somewhat fÁFI (effeminate).

“SUSÚ Yà SUSÚ” opens with a vocal chorus chanting “wa abiba ay” (with no apparent meaning). An Arab drum beat from a tabÌ quickly backs up the chanting, which is then joined by a (Western) “house” bass dance beat until finally a “pure” house rhythm together with electronic keyboards overrides the “oriental” rhythms. As the Arabic name SUSÚ is chanted above the
house beat, the entire song modulates between Arabic, house, and Arabic-house blended rhythms, modes, and textures. The song is equally heterodox linguistically, constantly shifting between and combining English and Arabic, and occasionally using Mediterranean European languages, but, contrary to al-Ghaytī’s claims, not Hebrew. Many phrases combine two or more languages, some are nonsensical (but fit the rhythm), some are articulated in such heavily accented English that I did not understand them until I procured the CD and read the lyric sheet, and many words are ambiguous. In addition, there is considerable bilingual punning.

The opening verse (to house backing) contains the phrases (in Arabic and English): “Khudnī lil Monaco [Take me to Monaco] / Khudnī lil Mexico [Take me to Mexico] / Jublī bil taxi [Bring me in a taxi] / I’m feelin’ sexy / Danna International.” The subsequent verse includes the phrase “Kiss me, mon cheri.” The third verse also mixes English and Arabic: “Inta al-milyūnayr [You (masculine) are the millionaire] / And I have a golden hair [the grammatical error here seems deliberate] / I’m feelin’ [givin’?] bussy [būsī] / Come on and bussy.” This set of phrases is extremely polysemic, for būsī (long u and long i) means “kiss” in Egyptian Arabic (hence the origin of the name by which the song, and entire cassette, is known in Egypt, “Būsī Yā Sūsū” or “Kiss me Sūsū,” even though the line appears nowhere in the song). In addition, būsī is the form of command used to address a female, whereas the previous verse used the masculine form of address (inta). “Bussy” also suggests “pussy,” since the “p” sound is pronounced “b” in Arabic, as in Bībsī (Pepsi) Cola. The verse continues as follows: “Shtaraytu bil duty free [I bought it in duty free] / Shampoo Mai Givenchy / And expensive pantaloni [trousers, in Italian, here pronounced “bandaloonee”] / Compact disc and telefoni [telephone in pidgin Italian].”

Then, following the Arabic shout, “Ya lahwt!” (oh disaster), the rhythm shifts, and the rapid beat of the solo tabla backs up Danna as she chants in almost perfectly accented Egyptian Arabic and an enticing, charmingly feminine lilt punctuated by hiccups, a style that is stereotypical of the cute sexy female of Egyptian cinema: “Sūsū Yā Sūsū” and “Albī yā Sūsū” (my heart Sūsū). The next line, interestingly, Egyptian non-English speakers hear as “Gismt yā Sūsū” (my body Sūsū) but English speakers hear as “Kiss me.” The phrase therefore sounds “sexier” to the monolingual Arabic speaker. The rest of the song more or less repeats these moments, but adds “Yalla [come on] yā Sūsū” and “Touch me yā Sūsū” during the “Sūsū” sequence.

**Danna as “Local”**

Contrary to al-Ghaytī’s polemical claim that the Danna phenomenon is a case of foreign penetration and corruption, I want to argue that we should
view Danna's music (at least her Arabic songs) as an intervention within the local culture. For I think it is this very indigenousness—operating on a number of levels—that accounts for much of her appeal in Egypt. This is already manifest in the tone of Danna's singing. While the grain of the voice is clearly provocative, the seductiveness is not "foreign" but rather is recognizable on local terms, recalling as it does the prototypical coy, alluring, and usually blonde starlet of the Egyptian movie screen. What is simultaneously shocking and appealing is that this coquettish and "forward" female tone of voice is asserted more publicly and openly by Danna than it is in the cinema. The "dirty" lyrics of Danna's songs are not foreign to contemporary Egyptian pop either; salaciousness, in fact, is one of the chief charges that cultural mandarins level against Egypt's "vulgar" pop singers. At least in Arabic, Danna's lyrics suggest nothing more audacious than those of 'Adawiya's famous and extremely successful number, "Bint al-Sultân," or songs by other "unrefined" singers who are massively popular with lower- and middle-class Egyptian youth. Indeed, the sexiness of Danna's lyrics, I would suggest, works mainly by implication: along with the crucial role played by the tone of her voice, Danna's pronunciation and her use of multilingual combinations and nonsensical expressions render her meaning vague and open to multiple readings. In this regard "Sûû Yà Sûû" recalls "Louie, Louie," the famous Kingsmen hit of the early 1960s, which all adolescents at the time "knew" was a dirty song even though, or perhaps because, its lyrics were virtually indecipherable.

While there are elements in the lyrics that hint at Danna's transgendered status—"Sûû Yà Sûû" vacillates between bûšî (kiss!, feminine form) and intâ (you, masculine)—as far as I can determine, Sûû's possibly effeminate character is not a significant issue for fans, or at least not one that is openly voiced. Although, as in much of the Middle East, open discussion of homosexuality is quite circumscribed in Egypt, as a practice it is hardly rare. Nor is it entirely absent from the public arena, as evidenced, for example, by Yusri Nastrallah's wacky 1994 film Mercedes, which, directly inspired by the cinematic campiness of Pedro Almodovar, deals frankly and sympathetically (although not centrally) with homosexual characters. Although Danna's transsexuality does not seem to be a major issue for Egyptian fans, sex change operations are not unthinkable in Egypt. In fact there has been an ongoing controversy regarding a man named Sayyid 'Abdallah who had a sex change operation in 1988 and applied as Sâli (Sally) for admission to al-Azhar Islamic University. In November 1995 the Shaykh al-Azhar, Jâd al-Haqq (the country's leading religious authority), finally issued a fatwa (religious edict) stating that sex change operations were permissible, thereby regularizing the status of other transgendered individuals in Egypt. The sad footnote to the Sâli case, however, is that after her sex change operation was ruled permissible, she was denied admis-
tion to the women's section of al-Azhar for having performed as a belly dancer. Just as with Danna, it is Sâli's overt sexuality that is more offensive to the powers that be than her transgendered status. Thus, for Danna's Egyptian fans in any case, "Sûsû Yâ Sûsû" is principally a heterosexual "sex song" whose "transgressive" scenario is that of the cosmopolitan Western or westernized Arab woman who is traveling, feels sexy, has "a golden hair" (the quintessential sign of feminine beauty in Egypt), and makes advances toward Sûsû in a mixture of Western languages and impeccable Arabic. Although the singer's forwardness is rather shocking in the local context, it is appreciated by Egyptian youth, and this response no doubt in part reflects changing gender relations and the increasing role of women in Egyptian public life.

In terms of their musical style, Danna's Arabic numbers combine Western and Eastern rhythms, modes, and textures in a manner that is hardly foreign to Egypt, since many of the country's most interesting pop musicians engage in similarly innovative, syncretic, and hybridizing experiments and in the indigenization of foreign pop styles. Two examples, chosen somewhat at random, of similar attempts to articulate an alternative vision of cultural modernity are the 1995 cassette Râb mú[s]îk li-al-shabâb faqat [Rap Music—For Young People Only], produced by Ashraf 'Abduh (Al-Sharq), and Muhammad Munîr's 1996 hit "Al-layla dî" [Tonight]. Rap Music—For Young People Only garnered negative reviews from the mandarins, who saw it as another example of "vulgar" pop, but as usual youth ignored the literati's admonitions, and the tape was a hit all over Egypt in 1995, particularly in working-class neighborhoods. The songs on the cassette are not really rap music at all but instead a shameless and delightful blending of Egyptian pop vocalizations and melodies with well-known recent U.S. and U.K. house and dance beats and samples: the melody of one tune, "Sikkat al-salâma" [The Road of Peace], is in fact from a well-known Coca-Cola advertisement. Muhammad Munîr, on the other hand, is an Egyptian pop singer with a "respectable" reputation, whose music videos and concerts are broadcast on television, and whose lyrics are often penned by well-known national poets. Munîr has been syncretizing Western and Eastern music for years and has recorded with the German rock bands Embryo and Logic Animal. Munîr's latest hit, "Al-layla dî," features funk beats, electric keyboards and electric guitars, "oriental" rhythms from a drum machine and a tabla, and an oriental flute. The song's instrumental hook is played in a Western scale, while Munîr sings the vocals in an oriental mode. Such hybridizing of Eastern and Western musics, which works through the indigenization of Western pop styles, is entirely typical of much popular music heard throughout the Arab world. Because Munîr has a reputation as a serious artist, and since this song's lyrics are penned by one of Egypt's premier "folk" poets, 'Abd al-Rahmân al-'Abnûdî, this sort of musical syncretism is considered acceptable by the cultural establishment.
Indeed, some of Danna’s tunes function in such an acoustically indigenous manner that they have even been employed in an advertisement for an Egyptian shampoo called Luna 2. Stylistically, therefore, Danna’s music is far from foreign but rather, like much contemporary Egyptian pop, falls into the category of what mainstream nationalist intellectuals label “vulgar” (ḥabit) or “cheap” music. It combines lower-class or “popular” Egyptian and Arab musical traditions with Western pop motifs without concern for neoclassicist conventions of synthesizing the “best” in high and low culture.

Just as issues of homosexuality do not seem to be a significant factor in the reception of Danna on the part of Egyptian youth, the same can be said about another striking characteristic of her work and her cultural identity—her Arab Jewishness. Danna is by no means the first and only Israeli Mizrahi artist to enjoy underground success in Egypt. A tape by Ofra Haza entitled Yemenite Songs—later released in the United States under the title 50 Gates of Wisdom (Shanachie Records, 1987)—circulated widely in Egypt in the late 1980s. Ofra Haza had first established her reputation in Israel singing mainstream pop, and it was only after she was thoroughly confirmed as a respectable artist that it was safe for her to return to her Mizrahi roots and record this set of traditional Arab-Jewish Yemeni music. Because the Ofra Haza cassette was understood in Egypt as “folk” music, and not as “cheap” or “vulgar,” and because it had no sexual overtones, its circulation in Egypt did not provoke the controversies that Danna’s cassette has ignited. The point is that Danna’s music issues from a wider and extremely rich phenomenon of Mizrahi pop music in Israel that is Levantine and Middle Eastern (and as such is marginalized in Israel), and is therefore comprehensible and “local” to Arab audiences in the Eastern Arab world. Mizrahi pop music, for instance, is heavily consumed and appreciated by Palestinian youth in the West Bank and Gaza, a phenomenon little appreciated or noted by observers of Palestinian culture. Moreover, Zehava Benn, an Israeli Jewish singer of Turkish origin who sings the (canonical) repertoire of Umm Kalthūm to the backing of a Palestinian Arab orchestra from Haifa, was invited to give a concert in Gaza City, inside the Palestinian National Authority, in fall 1995. Although she was ultimately unable to perform because of security concerns, her popularity among Palestinians and the fact that the National Authority invited her once again suggests the existence of a lively but underground Levantine expressive culture that can be shared by Arabs and (oriental) Jews. Such a phenomenon is incomprehensible if one thinks of the region as starkly divided into the polarities Arab (East) and Jew (West).

It is only once one has grasped the elements of Danna’s sonic indigenousness sketched above that one can understand that what makes Danna’s cultural interventions in Egypt so effective is the fact that she works within
musical and cultural trends that are thoroughly familiar to Egyptian youth. She pushes at the edges from inside a vibrant and innovating tradition, and this makes her music lively and exciting for many Egyptian young people. This is also precisely what makes her seem so dangerous to many nationalist intellectuals, much more threatening in fact than a Madonna or a Michael Jackson, since she communicates with Egyptian youth in Arabic. Indeed, the title track from Danna's latest release, "Maganona" (ṣīnīḥ, "crazy" in Arabic), from the CD of the same name—a brilliantly wacky dance number sung aggressively in Egyptian dialect and the only Arabic number on the entire CD—can be read as a response to Danna's underground success in the Arab countries. Danna's liminality, the fact that she is at once Arab and Jew, is precisely what makes her dialogue with Egyptian youth possible and is also what is so offensive to mainstream nationalists of all stripes, for whom nationalist ideology presupposes an essential difference between Arab and Jew. A nationalism that conceives of Egyptian society as homogeneous, unitary, and self-identical has no room for a border figure like Danna.

"That Mutant . . ."

Danna's significance and positioning in Israel is rather different. She is popular and highly successful, at least among certain, but mainly marginalized, segments of the population, but she is also highly controversial and looked on with disfavor by the cultural elite. One sense of the associative baggage attached to her name is conveyed by Yigal Amir, who, just before he assassinated the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995, is said to have remarked to a nearby policeman, "Today, they give us the spectacle of Aviv Gefen; next time, they'll make us listen to that mutant, Diana [sic] International." Amir was stalking Rabin at a Peace Now rally, at which the Prime Minister spoke and during which he joined the featured singer, Aviv Gefen, for a singalong on stage. Gefen, a major new Israeli rock singer whose long, dyed-orange hair, heavy makeup, and androgynous clothing project a "radical" image, performs songs whose lyrics express "existential meaningless" and criticize the military establishment. But Gefen is also the offspring of elite circles, a close relative of Moshe Dayan, and his onstage gender ambiguity is entirely nonthreatening. His "rebelliousness," in short, is firmly located within the national tradition and represents the "respectable" face of dissent. It would have been simply unthinkable for Yitzhak Rabin to have appeared on stage for a singalong together with a "trashy" gender- and culture-subversive like Danna International. Yigal Amir's remark does, however, underscore one of the major issues in Israel with regard to Danna. When I asked an Israeli
correspondent whether her Arab-Jewish identity was of any concern in Israel, she replied that the media focuses almost exclusively on the issue of Danna's "sexuality, sexuality, and sexuality," and in particular, her transsexuality. After Danna was chosen as a contestant in the competition to represent Israel in the 1995 Eurovision pop song contest, Ya'ir Nitsani, one of Israel's leading comedians, proclaimed that Danna should not represent Israel in this major international event because her transsexuality was a "shame." This sentiment appears to be widely shared and to have played a role in Danna's failure to take first place in the competition (she placed second). When Danna appeared on one of Israel's major talk shows, hosted by Dudu Topaz (Israel's Phil Donahue cum Oprah Winfrey), Topaz interrogated her about her orgasms—they're my orgasms, she replied—and asked (with a look of horror on his face) if she had really had "it" cut off during the sex change operation. Recent Israeli media speculation is that Danna did not really undergo a sex change operation (although her breasts, an important part of her image, cannot be denied) and that rumors to this effect had inspired Danna to drop her lesbian girlfriend and take up with a boyfriend, an officer in the Israeli navy, in order to prove her femaleness. But, the story continued, this new relationship was a sham, really a gay relationship and not a heterosexual one.

Perhaps it is this sexual undecidability (does she have a lesbian girlfriend? a gay boyfriend? a heterosexual boyfriend? what kind of sex and what kind of anatomy does she have?) that makes Danna so wildly popular among gay Ashkenazi men, who see her as a "heroic" role model. Her rise to fame also coincided with the growing popularity of drag queen shows in Tel Aviv. But Danna's Arab identity remains more a matter of campy exoticism for the Ashkenazi gay community than one that poses critical questions about Israel's Eurocentric racial hierarchies. However, Danna does also enjoy a substantial audience among the Mizrahim. According to correspondents, it is mainly the "disco youth" who are Danna's fans, and the majority of Israelite-Jewish youth are Mizrahim.

Dance music in Israel, however, has a rather low position in the cultural ranking system. As in Egypt, the Israeli cultural elite promotes "quality" music (in Hebrew, eikhoot), which is what the educated Ashkenazim (like the Egyptian elite) listen to. The fact that Danna sings in Arabic doubly disqualifies her music from the category of "quality," for Arabic music is severely ghettoized in Israel, consigned to the lowest rungs of the country's Eurocentric cultural hierarchy, much lower than dance music. This is compounded by Danna's Mizrahiness, which further positions her at the bottom of the prestige system. A review in the daily Ma' ariv of Danna's 1995 release, E.P. Tampa, exemplifies the entirely commonplace stigma attached to Israeli Jews of Arab background. The reviewer labeled her music frehiyoot-bivim, from frehiyoot, a derogatory
term that Ashkenazim frequently use to denote a young Mizrahi woman, meaning slut, and bivim, meaning gutter. The Mizrahi community, however, is relatively unaffected by such Ashkenazi Eurosnobbism, and Danna has a somewhat mainstream appeal among Mizrahim as a successful ethnic insider. For instance, a friend of mine took her son to see Danna perform a concert of children's songs for kids in Holon, a poor Mizrahi town near Tel Aviv.

Among Danna's songs sung in Hebrew, which are more responsible for her fame in Israel than her Arabic numbers, are heterosexual love ballads that function as parodies in light of her sexuality. She has also recorded covers that, from a queer and Mizrahi position, poke fun at canonical Israeli popular music from the 1950s and 1960s, including "songs of the beautiful Israel" and "military songs." According to Smadar Lavie, when you hear a macho Israeli soldier song like "Yeshnan Banot" coming from the mouth of a "black" Mizrahi woman rather than from a muscular, blonde, square-jawed Ashkenazi, the effect is hilarious. Moreover, the fact that such songs emanate from a "trashy"-looking Mizrahi who appears hyperfeminine but whose very femininity is ambiguous adds another dimension to their uproariousness. There is also an Israeli dimension to Danna's song "Sûsû Yâ Sûsû" that highlights the country's disavowed but complicated and intimate connections to Arab culture. When Israel started broadcast television in the early 1960s, it had more programming in Arabic than in Hebrew, and one of the programs developed in the Arabic section was a children's show called "Sami and Susu," a kind of Arabic "Mr. Rogers" mixed with "Sesame Street." There were no good children's shows at the time in Hebrew, so in the late 1960s "Sami and Susu" was given Hebrew subtitles and rapidly gained great favor with Israeli Jewish kids. According to one of my correspondents, the name Sûsû therefore "evokes cuddly memories" among a certain generation of Israelis. The Sami character was played by the young actor George Ibrahim, a Palestinian leftist who eventually lost his job during the intifada when he started to express his political views openly. Sami used to tell Susu, "khudnî yâ Sûsû" (take me Susu), a phrase that reappears in the lyrics of Danna's song, and the two characters were then transported to a new site as an "airport/spaceship" soundtrack played, a theme also evoked in Danna's "Sûsû Yâ Sûsû."

Local Transnational

Commenting on Danna's "sexual invasion" of Egypt, one Egyptian newspaper article described the stakes as follows: "Thus Israel tries to destroy us by any means. Will she succeed or will our youth establish that they are really Egyptian?" Such alarmism on the part of the intellectual elite, as well as police raids on cassette vendors, indicate the presence of some sort
of resistance. But not the overt resistance characteristic of a social movement—rather, resistance that is underground, inchoate, indirect, and often not even conscious of itself as resistance. Nonetheless, it is critical to attend to such apparently marginal cultural phenomena, for as Melucci suggests, it is here, in the realm of submerged and everyday cultural practices, that alternative frameworks of meaning are produced. Melucci terms this the domain of “movement networks,” and he goes on to claim that the submerged, daily practices characteristic of such networks constitute the normal state of affairs for contemporary social movements. Overt social movements as such, he claims, only emerge episodically and for limited durations. When we examine the sorts of alternative meanings that are being forged through the consumption of Danna, we are examining potential spaces for the emergence of movements and autonomous activity.

It would be a mistake, I would argue, to read these phenomena solely through the theoretical lens of postmodernism. The popularity of Danna in Egypt is indicative of widespread skepticism on the part of many Egyptian youth regarding the version of modernity being offered up by the state and nationalist ideologues, a skepticism that Walter Arnbust has labeled antimodernist. But Danna’s circulation in Egypt also suggests youth’s desires for an alternative modernity, one that would expand the accepted limits regarding gender behaviors and roles and the articulation of pleasure. Danna-in-Egypt also indicates visions of a modernity that is able to participate, without a sense of inferiority, in global popular cultural trends, not by the passive consumption of the likes of Madonna and Michael Jackson, but by the active reworking and rearticulating of transnational cultural forms, by assimilating or domesticating such forms within indigenous culture. It should be noted that such resistance, as currently articulated, does not seem especially focused on female or queer desires and demands, but it does portend an openness on the part of Egyptian youth with regard to these issues.

What is also significant about Danna-in-Egypt is that this is not merely an instance of transnational cultural flows from West to East, the subject of much of the academic work on global cultural movements. Although this is certainly one dimension of the dynamics at work here, this is principally a case of what I want to call local transnationalism. The cultural transactions between Israel and Egypt at work here are not, in the main, vertical flows (North-South or dominant-subordinate) or the products of the workings of global capitalist forces, but lateral flows, products of underground exchanges and affinities that traverse the borders of neighboring but hostile countries. Danna is not (yet) a world music artist with substantial audiences in the West. Unlike Madonna or the rai star Khaled, she does not arrive in Egypt via established circuits of advanced capitalism. She is a local star, whose product is recorded and distributed by a local Israeli company (IMP Dance),
not the branch of a multinational firm. Moreover, it is not Danna and her record company who have reaped financial gain from the sale of a half million Danna cassettes sold in Egypt; instead, the profit has been shared by Egyptian bootleggers, black marketeers, and street peddlers. Contrary to the claims of the nationalist intelligentsia, Egyptian young people who identify with or relate to Danna are neither identifying with Israel nor being captured by Zionist ideology. My AUC students, who come from elite backgrounds, enjoy Danna and are angered by Israeli actions against the Palestinians and the Lebanese and feel ashamed at their government's kowtowing to the American and Israeli governments (a phenomenon known in the United States as "moderation"). Likewise, many Egyptian youth are simultaneously fans of Madonna and Michael Jackson and strong critics of the U.S. government's unwavering support for Israel and its policies toward Iraq. Egyptian youth "identification" with Danna instead is an inchoate and perhaps unwitting identification with the Mizrahim, the Israeli Jews who originate from the Arab countries. Mizrahi culture, as scholars like Ella Shohat, Smadar Lavie, Shlomo Swirski, and Ammiel Alcalay have demonstrated so well, is a lively, vital, complex cultural reality inside Israel, despite its marginalization by Israel's Ashkenazi elite. It is encouraging, therefore, to find echoes of Mizrahi culture in Egypt, where the Jewish strains of national culture have been so heavily suppressed and officially forgotten. I therefore regard the phenomenon of Danna International in Egypt as a hopeful sign, not the pathological effect of Israeli and Western cultural imperialism and the resultant corruption of Arab culture. But this potential will probably remain merely latent, underground, and proscribed, in the absence of other political and social developments in Egypt and Israel that might be congenial to the complicated and open identity and sexual politics that Danna International portends.  

Notes

Thanks are due, first of all, to Saba Mahmood for urging me to take up this project. Mona Mauani first alerted me to Danna International and gave me a tape with two of her songs. Nirvana Said and Dina Girgis provided complete versions of "Bāsrī Ya Sūsū" and information about Danna's reception in Egypt. Bob Vitalis brought me Danna's CDs from Israel and continues to be a source of inspiration and timely anecdotes. I am grateful to Joel Beinin, Clarissa Bencomo, Sandra Campbell, Elliott Colla, Smadar Lavie, Don Moore, and Muhammad El-Roubi for their comments on earlier versions of the paper; to Elliott Colla and Hosam Aboul-Ela for their help on the theme of the predatory Western woman in Egyptian literature; to David McMurray for calling my attention to the Yigal Amir connection; to Motti Regev for sending his articles; and to Tom Levin for his encouragement and sparkling editorial suggestions. Yael Ben-Zvi and Smadar Lavie served as invaluable resources on Danna's place in Israel. Special thanks are due to Clarissa Bencomo and Gam'al 'Abd al-'Ariz for assistance in tracking down articles, help in transcribing and translating lyrics, and helping me contextualize Danna in Egypt.
1. A wealth of information on Danna International—including pictures and samples of her music—was available at the unofficial Danna homepage (http://www.netvision.net.il/~optic/Danna.htm), which, unfortunately, was no longer operating at press time, ostensibly due to lack of funds. Danna's CD discography includes *Danna International* (IMP Dance, Tel Aviv, 1993), *Umpatamba* (IMP Dance, Tel Aviv, 1994), and the E.P. *E.P. Tampa* (IMP Dance, Tel Aviv, 1995). Danna's latest CD is entitled *Maganona* (Helicon/Big Foot Records, Tel Aviv, 1996). While difficult to find in the United States, they are available from Hataklit, an Israeli import company in Los Angeles (800/428-2554).


3. Hereafter, the book is referred to in the text as F.

4. The author uses terms like “perversion” and “deviance” throughout to describe gays and lesbians.

5. The upscale McDonald's in my neighborhood in Cairo featured posters of Madonna, James Dean, and Marilyn Monroe. According to al-Ghaytī, Marilyn Monroe was both an inspiration for Danna as well as a “deviant” (F, 40) (see below).

6. Al-Ghaytī’s claim is that Madonna is not “complete” because she is unable to bear children. As the entire world knows, Madonna has recently given birth to a child.

7. The year 1967 is clearly meant to resonate as the year of the Six-Day War and Israel's overwhelming defeat of the Syrian, Jordanian, and Egyptian armies. But given the very low status of Arabic music in Israel, especially as recorded by Mizrahim, Rachel Qattāwī’s recording must have been a very marginal phenomenon and not, as al-Ghaytī implies, an Israeli theft of a valuable treasure.

8. These include the nature of the Israeli-Palestinian "peace," which many regard as tantamount to Palestinian surrender and as a complete sham, Israel’s refusal to dismantle its nuclear arsenal and make the Middle East a nuclear-free zone, and the Israeli government’s failure to bring to trial the military officers responsible for carrying out the massacres of forty-nine Egyptian prisoners of war near al-'Arish during the war of 1956 and of over one thousand Egyptian POWs during the 1967 war. More recently, public anger in Egypt was aroused by Israel's attacks on Lebanon in April 1996, the IDF's targeting of the U.N. Qana base and resulting death of over one hundred civilians, and what is seen as the successful U.S. pressure to torpedo any censuring of Israeli actions. Needless to say, Israel's policies and actions appear very different from the vantage point of Egypt than they do from inside the United States. A sense of that quite different perspective can be gained in the United States from the various writings of Edward Said and Noam Chomsky. On the Qana affair, see the reporting in the *Independent*, especially Robert Fisk, “Massacre Film Puts Israel in Dock," *Independent*, 6 May 1996; for my own views on the question of Palestine, see Ted Swedenburg, *Memories of Revolt: The 1936–1939 Rebellion and the Palestinian National Past* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), especially chapters 1 and 2.

9. For instance, see recent articles in *Rūz al-Yūsif* exposing Israel’s efforts to steal and destroy Egyptian music and cinema: Khalīd Abū Jālālā, “Sarqat al-mūsīqa al-Miṣrīya” [The theft of Egyptian music], *Rūz al-Yūsif*, 28 Mar. 1995, 62; and ‘Amrū Khafājī,

10. "Wiqahat Isra'ilt fawq 'albat sija'ir: 'al-khayl 'arabi' . . . wa 'al-kurbâj masri' . . . wa 'al-qâ'id 'Amriki' . . . !" [Israel's Impudence on a Cigarette Packet: "Arab Horses" and "Egyptian Whip" and "American Commander"!], Al-'Arabi, 19 Feb. 1996. The claim, of course, is rather ludicrous, since virtually no Israeli products are sold on the Egyptian market, and there is no compelling economic reason for Egyptians to desire more expensive Israeli cigarettes. Indeed, as of press time, the cigarette had yet to appear in Egypt.


12. The press reports frequently on army campaigns against heroin and hashish production in the Sinai, whose Aqaba Gulf beaches are known as freewheeling resort areas: Sharm al-Shaykh (site of the recent antiterror summit) caters to upscale Western tourists and the westernized Egyptian bourgeoisie, while Dahab and Nuwayba' are the mecca for scantily clad, drug-seeking Euro-hippies and Israelis. For a description of South Sinai's even wilder days under Israeli occupation, see Smadar Lavie, The Poetics of Military Occupation: Mzeina Allegories of Bedouin Identity under Israeli and Egyptian Rule (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).


14. One could read the closing scene of this TV announcement—the opening of the Pan African Games held in Cairo in 1991—as an implication that the AIDS threat also emanates from Sub-Saharan Africa.

15. See the books on Madonna that are sold at Cairo newsstands, like Madonna's Diet Book and Confessions of Madonna.


18. Since the mid-1980s, Egypt's most prestigious professional syndicates (doctors, engineers, lawyers) have been lobbying for limits on the numbers accepted into their professions' university programs in an effort to combat increasing unemployment. The engineers' syndicate has even attempted to block the government from opening new university programs and technical institutes. Thanks to Clarissa Bencomo for this point.

19. Before a young man can marry, he must, at the minimum, own an apartment, furnish it, purchase an acceptable amount of gold jewelry for his fiancée as an engagement gift (the shabka, which is the bride's property and serves as a form of insurance for her), and be able to finance a decent wedding party. A significant wedding party expense is the firqa or music group, and wedding gigs constitute one of the major sources of income for Egyptian popular musicians and are often much more lucrative than recording. Thus, paradoxically, the same weddings that are a major source of support for the music that youth love also function—by virtue of their great expense—to oppress that same generation.


21. Still, young people's sexual adventures outside of marriage are more frequent than one would imagine from official representations. One survey of one hundred high-school
and college girls in Cairo reported that 8 percent had had full sexual intercourse, 20 percent had held their lovers' hands, 23 percent had kissed, and 37 percent had experienced sex without intercourse. See Ayman M. Khalifa, “The Withering Youth of Egypt,” Ru'ya 7 [Spring 1995]: 7.

22. It is also often claimed that the crisis of youth is a significant factor in the rise of Islamist movements. Government-style propaganda, such as the famous 1994 film al-Irhabi [The Terrorist], which stars Egypt's leading comedian, 'Adil Imâm, asserts that innocent youths are attracted to Islamic militant groups because their perfidious leaders provide women to marry, at no cost. See Walter Armbrust, “How the Egyptian Establishment Declared Victory in the War against Islamicists,” paper presented at the American Anthropological Association Annual Meetings, Washington, D.C., 17 Nov. 1995. Although such propaganda is simplistic, it is the case that youth, so heavily affected by the crisis of opportunities, constitute the main adherents of Islamist movements. Whereas in the late 1970s and early 1980s the militant Islamist groups that employed violent means mainly attracted university-educated youth (see Saad Eddin Ibrahim, “Egypt's Islamic Militants,” MERIP Reports 103 [1982] 5-14), today such groups are also gaining lower-class youth adherents. The Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's main Islamist organization and a mass movement that, although technically illegal, attempts to mobilize through legal channels and aboveground, successfully recruits university-educated youth. Although the Muslim Brotherhood has not found a "solution" to the wedding crisis, it does enjoin simple wedding ceremonies, where music groups and dancing are not permitted, and thus ensures that what Muslim Brothers call "Islamic weddings" are much cheaper than those that are the norm for the rest of the population.

23. This paragraph draws heavily on Walter Armbrust, Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).


25. See Armbrust, Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt, and Khalifa, “The Withering Youth of Egypt,” 9. The censorship and banning from radio of songs by "respectable" artists is also routine; see Fâtima Hasan, “Jadal fl Misr hawla hazr 199 ughniya li-54 mutriban wa mutribat” [Controversy in Egypt about the Banning of 199 Songs by 54 Male and Female Artists], Al-Hayat, 1 July 1993, 23.

26. Although class divisions within Egyptian society are gaping and getting wider, and although the upper-class youth who are the direct beneficiaries of infatâh do not face the same problems as lower-middle- and lower-class ones regarding employment and marriage, the former are also alienated from the classical nationalist project and are negatively affected by the absence of public spaces for youth. One should, of course, make some distinctions. Some middle- and lower-class youth want to bring back the "golden age" of culture and politics represented by the Nasser era, while others wish for the return of the public-sector safety net through the halting or slowing down of the pace of privatization and structural adjustment and for an expansion of the possibilities of working in the Gulf. Upper-class youth meanwhile are somewhat more focused on cultural liberalization.


30. Murad’s films are regularly aired on Egyptian television, her music is played on the radio and readily available on cassette, and her death in November 1995 brought forth a wave of laudatory obituaries and tributes in the Egyptian press. The exclusion of Egyptian Jews from nationalist discourse was also noticeable in the favorable tributes to Layla Murad that appeared following her death in the Egyptian press during November and December 1995: almost all of them failed to mention her Jewishness.


32. Ironically, much of the coverage of Danna in the press is written by badly paid young stringers who have no real “voice” but merely ventriloquize official discourse.


34. While one of my students who purchased *Bus’ni Yd Susu* before the media offensive against Danna paid only 8 L.E. (just slightly above the average price of a prerecorded cassette), her friends who bought it after the onset of “moral panic” had to pay 50 L.E.

35. The Algerian rai star Khaled’s 1992 hit, “Didi,” also reached the top of the charts in both Israel and Egypt.


37. Whereas house music in the West normally uses major keys, Danna’s dance music deploys oriental modes; thanks to Smadar Lavie for comments on comparative musical modes.

38. I am told that Danna is parodying the parodies of Mizrahi- and Palestinian-accented English by Israeli Ashkenazi comedians like Shaike Ofir.

39. Such polylingual linguistic play is a long-standing tradition for Levantine Jews, going back at least to Andalusian Spain; see Ammiel Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

40. The lyric sheet of the CD Danna International, available only to the Israeli consumer, is more explicit, transcribing the phrase as “I’m giving pussy.” For the Arabic-speaking listener, however, the meaning remains more ambiguous.

41. Telephone in Italian is telefonare, but telefonì rhymes nicely here with pantalonì.

42. Consider, for example, the following quite representative lines from ‘Adawiyah’s “Bint al-Sultán”: “The water’s in your hand / And Adawiyah is thirsty . . . / Why don’t you look at me / My little fruit, my pineapple /Water me, water me more / The water in your hand is sugar.” Quoted in Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt*, 132.

43. The song’s supposedly lewd lyrics, in fact, got it banned from sales and airplay in Indiana and elsewhere and inaugurated an FBI investigation. But the controversy only
spurred greater sales, and the record hit number two on the Billboard and number one on the Cashbox charts (http://www.eskimo.com/~raigb/kingsmen.html).

44. On the peculiar contradictions of Egypt's homosexual community, see, for example, Neil Miller, Out in the World: Gay and Lesbian Life from Buenos Aires to Bangkok (New York: Vintage, 1993), 68–69. Miller describes the complex situation of Egyptian gay life as follows: “Making contact with a gay or lesbian community in Egypt was difficult. There was essentially no such thing. Egypt was the place I visited where there was the strongest social sanction against an openly gay or lesbian life, where a sense of homosexual identity was weakest, where there was the least degree of AIDS awareness. Paradoxically, in a society where the sexes remain strictly segregated, same-sex relations were commonplace, at least among men. But you didn’t talk about the subject, except to your very closest friends, and perhaps not even then. In Egypt, sex had to be kept secret, and homosexual sex in particular was haram—taboo. Categories of sexual identity and orientation were slippery, elusive in Egypt and in the Arab world in general. Once you crossed the Mediterranean, the terms ‘gay’ and ‘straight’ revealed themselves to be Western cultural concepts that confused more than they elucidated. In modern-day Cairo, male homosexual sex was everywhere and nowhere.”

45. This is also true of some of the work of Egypt’s most celebrated director, Youssef Chahine. See in particular his film 'Iskandariya Layh? [Alexandria Why?).

46. The Mufti of Egypt, Dr. Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, opposed sex change operations on the basis that what God has created should not be changed (see Hamdi Rizq, “Shaykh al-’Azhar yufti bi-jiwāż tawwīl al-jins” [The Shaykh al-Azhār Gives a Formal Legal Opinion Permitting Sex Change], Al-Hayāt, 10 Nov. 1995, 24). Tantawi replaced al-Haqq as Shaykh al-Azhār after the latter’s death.

47. See Rizq, “Shaykh al-’Azhar yufti bi-jiwāż tawwīl al-jins,” 24, and Middle East Times, 31 Dec. 1995. Incidentally, sex change operations are also performed in Saudi Arabia (the cases I have read about are female-to-male), again with fatwas from religious leaders.


49. The track is from a cassette by Muntr entitled Mumkin?! (Di-gitec Records, Cairo, 1995).

50. I have seen the ad on the video monitors that run a nonstop mix of music vids, adverts, movie trailers, cartoons, snippets of soccer matches, and bits of “America’s Favorite Home Videos” for passengers waiting to board the metro at downtown Cairo stations. The promotion of Luna 2 opens to the strains of Danna’s song “Sa’ida Sultan” (a remake of Whitney Houston’s “My Name Is Not Susan”) and shows ordinary-looking (somewhat chubby by U.S. standards) Egyptian women dancing around and mouthing Danna’s opening words, “Wa t’ulu ay, wa t’ulu ah” (And you [plural] say what, and you say yeah). Danna’s tune rumbles in the background as the ad promotes the shampoo’s virtues, and then the volume of the music comes up again as the spot closes with another chorus of “Ba t’ulu ay, wa t’ulu ah.” I am unaware of any press attacks on Luna 2 for its use of Israeli sex and corruption in the marketing of its product.

51. See Armbrust, Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt, 181–82.

52. Al-Ghayyī, however, claims that Ofra Haza’s tape was “licentious” (F, 34–35).

53. On Israeli “Oriental” music, see Morit Regev, “Music Cultures and National Culture: The Israeli Case,” Popular Music (forthcoming); Alcalay, After Jews and Arabs, 253–255.

54. Here are just two of the many amusing lines from this single: “Who do you think my husband is? / I’m a respectable woman [sitt muhtarma],” and, “You all think I’m crazy / I’m not
crazy [ana mish magúna]." The last line of the song goes, "ana mish magúna / ana magúna" [I'm not crazy / I'm crazy].

55. I depend in this section primarily on the Israeli correspondents Yael Ben-Zvi and Smadar Lavie.


57. Regev, "Music Cultures and National Culture"; Yael Ben-Zvi, personal communication; Smadar Lavie, personal communication.

58. Note that it would be unthinkable for an Arab country to participate in the Eurovision contest, while Israel's "European" identity simply goes without saying.

59. Yael Ben-Zvi, personal communication; Smadar Lavie, personal communication. Perhaps in an effort to put rumor to rest, Danna recently revealed in a published interview that she does indeed have a penis and has no plans to have it "cut" in an operation. She has, however, had hormone injections for breast development and will soon have silicone implants. In response to the question of her sexual preference, Danna—who calls herself a "woman and a man"—divulged that she has a boyfriend and is not and has never been physically attracted to women. When asked about her politics, Danna asserted that while she does not consider herself to be political, she is in favor of "peace"; see Yoav Birenberg, "What Can I Tell You, Yoav, We Have a Wonderful State and a Wonderful People" [in Hebrew], Yediot Aharonot, weekly supplement (7 Nights), 23 Aug. 1996, 6-7.

60. But according to Smadar Lavie, Ashkenazi gays' real role models are the same as those of straight Israelis, because they are so mainstream.

61. It should be noted, although the point cannot be developed here, that Mizrahi youth, due to their place in the economic-racial hierarchy in Israel, are not benefiting from the country's current economic boom in the wake of recent peace deals with Arab countries, and that their hopelessness and alienation resembles that of lower- and lower-middle-class Egyptian youth.

62. The extreme importance accorded to Western classical music in Israel, for instance, should be understood as part of Israeli Ashkenazis' unceasing efforts to project a Western identity. It is also noteworthy that the Israeli national leadership also occasionally warns against U.S. cultural imperialism, with reference to precisely the same icons of "trashy" cultural domination invoked by Egyptian nationalists. For instance, Israeli President Ezer Weizman in August 1995: "The Israeli people are infected with Americanization. We must be wary of McDonald's; we must be wary of Michael Jackson; we must be wary of Madonna" (Mid-East Realities, MIDDLEEAST@aol.com, 11 Aug. 1995).


65. Although the word literally means "chick" (the related word farkha has the same meaning in Arabic), it is more derogatory than the term "chick" (for young woman) in English. Freha can also be used to refer to an Ashkenazi woman, usually working class, but is usually used to

66. The administration of Palestinian-Arab citizens in Israel is essentially apartheid, with separate (and unequal) Arab sections in the Education Ministry, the Histadrut (Israeli Trade Union Federation), and other institutions.

67. There is even an “Airport Version” of the song on the Israeli CD, which is not found on the contraband cassette sold in Egypt. It opens with the following spoken announcement:

   This is Saudi Arabian airport / May I have your attention please / All passengers on flight no. six o sex / To Monaco please approach to / Gate No. four two / Shukran [thank you, Arabic]

The version then closes with another spoken announcement as follows:

   Ladies and Gentlemen / Attention please / Five minutes before landing / In Ben Gurion airport / No kiss kiss no mit mit [fondling, Hebrew; snacking, Arabic] / And no business allowed / Shukran


70. See Armbrust, Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt, 217-18.

71. This may well be changing, however; in December 1996 Danna made what I believe was her U.S. debut with concerts at the Palladium in New York City and in Miami and Los Angeles.

72. The continued threat posed by Danna was again emphasized as this article was going to press in the fall of 1996 by the journalistic response to Danna’s visit to Egypt for a fashion shoot where she modeled a new line of dresses from the mainstream Israeli department store Hamashbir. The Egyptian weekly Rūz al-Yūsift described the trip as a propaganda coup for Israel, reporting that Israeli press accounts of Danna’s visit revealed Egyptians to be bribe-takers (Danna’s party pays off a policeman so that they can continue shooting at the pyramids) and pervert lovers (Egyptian men profess that Danna is pretty and that they like her music). The article featured several fashion photos of Danna posing alluringly in slinky outfits: with Egyptian policemen, in the Khān al-Khalīlī bazaar, and together with a boatman beside the Nile. The captions—such as “This Pervert Exploits Us”—attempt to ensure that the Egyptian reader will not be fooled, for the alluring Israeli women is, so one learns, really a pervert, a man! See “Al-Misriyyūn murtishūn yabī’tūn ayya shay’ wa yu’ashiqūn al-shadhūdhi” [Bribe-Taking Egyptians Will Sell Anything and Love Perverts], Rūz al-Yūsif, 5 Aug. 1996, (unnumbered pages).