

A FUTURE NOW: IN CONVERSATION WITH LEYYA TAWIL

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by Mitsuko Verdery

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Curatorial Associate and Artist Coordinator Dani Cole visited 2019-2020 DiP Artist Leyya Tawil to talk about Lime Rickey International's *Noise & Nation*. Lime Rickey International is the superconsciousness of Tawil, an transdisciplinary artist working with dance, sound, and performance. Lime Rickey generates a future space in attentive presence and draws from Tawil's existence as a Palestinian, Syrian, and American. Tawil was in residency at Gibney through March 12, 2020 and *Noise & Nation* will premiere in 2021.



Leyya: Conjuring and creating... That's pretty much what I am doing. I'm at the beginning of this specific process, so I had many conceptual ideas articulated through words and images in my brain. I came in with all intangible ideas. I got into this space where I could really just lay out with all of my instruments, printed articles, and a slew of music to listen to. I do a lot of music research! The first step was to make the intangible sonic, which is also, ironically, intangible. However, the way I compose is very physical so I am making it tangible in the process.

I'm developing *Noise & Nation* for Lime Rickey International. I don't rehearse in costume or anything, but, as long as there is lime green in the room, I am happy. I call them "Lime triggers!" Lime's past work has been in chapters. The first long-form performance of hers was *Unstoppable* and it was a migration story. *Future Faith* from 2019 was her landing. She is untethered to place and unstuck in time. She is here in the present, while all of her reference points are in a future that does not yet exist. Now, as a spin off to my recent adventures in the world and diaspora research, I'm thinking, "What is it to be referring to this place in the future?"

"NOW THAT LIME HAS MIGRATED AND LANDED, WHAT IS THE CONJURING OF THE FUTURE SPACE? WHAT IS THIS FUTURE SPACE?"



Lime Rickey International in Future Faith, photo by Jussi Virkkumaa.

I am looking at borders. How do you research a borderless future in your body? How do you research borders in time? The best part about sound is that it is really borderless. Right now, you can hear music coming through this wall. The wall does not restrict sound, at least not totally. The only way that sound stops being sound is with distance. I'm looking at proximity and using stations of sound through my choreographic work. Each station has a very different sound and movement palate. I currently have three stations situated in the studio and I am asking what is being transmitted from each station. Do these three stations speak to each other? Are they totally isolated? Are they based in a memory of the future? Are they based in hope for the future?

This is totally the time for free association. One day the content is something. Another day it is something else. This is how my effects pedals are too. One day I'm like, woah, this is brilliant, let me lock that in! The next day I try to repeat it and...

Whatever is going on sonically affects the choreography I am creating. For example, I had a section that was extremely rigorous one day. When I returned to it the next day, it



I'm not attaching myself to anything. I am generating ideas and letting them pile up.

Dani: That really speaks to me. It aligns with your discussion about *Future Faith*—how you were talking about landing in the present versus landing in place. You articulated the two very differently. Landing in the present has a particular feeling. Each time you're with instruments or choreographing, that format, structure or material is going to be inevitably quite different.

Leyya: Yeah, if we're lucky!

Dani: That's true! It's such an activist framework!

Leyya: It is very much in line with improvisation as a practice of freedom, the willingness to afford change. Or, rather, creating situations for change is very activist and part of what I am hoping for in my lifetime future. However long that lasts. Knock on wood!

I had this agenda to do a full-on series of interviews during my DiP residency, but I feel like I do not have the right questions yet. Those will happen later in the process of making *Noise & Nation*. I'll definitely do two interviews during this residency time with other women living in diaspora. This is not for using interview recordings in the sonic score. It's rather to have that conversation about borders and nation. What does it mean to live in this nation, but be identified personally or by others as from another nation?

I'm thinking about my Syrian cousins who are in different countries now and having children. I have a Syrian cousin near Cologne, Germany. Her baby was the first person in my family that was born in Germany! So, we are wondering, is that a "German" baby? Because, my family and I are just like, "Another Syrian is born!" There is this whole idea that life goes on and Syrian families are still having life, work, and exchanges with society. But now, for my cousin, that is all displaced or replaced in Cologne. Having a baby in this new country really twists the concept of nation.



sing to me. I called my mom and told her that I remembered the rhythm and how it began. I didn't grow up speaking a lot of Arabic; I spoke "kitchen Arabic." I know the sounds of the words, but I needed her to tell me the lyrics and translate them. When she explained the lyrics, I knew exactly that's what we were always saying in my body. I've been playing with the lullaby lyrics during this residency process.

Dani: With everything you are thinking about in the nature of this work in a broader way, what feels the most important to you right now?

Leyya: I'm actually trying to allow all the things that I do inform each other. The Lime Rickey practice is not an isolated thing from the works that I do or that involve other people. However, Lime Rickey International is exclusively a solo practice in performance. I've tried thinking about it in relation to other people, but she is a solo figure that is not even really tangibly here. It distresses me to think about other people in the room with her. However, I still think about her in relation to my other work that involves more people, my sound practices, and my dance pedagogy. How does my philosophy for teaching relate to what I am reporting about onstage as Lime or as Leyya?



Photo by Jussi Virkkumaa.

On a really crass level, I'm trying to find the right sonic space that allows my body to do what I want it to do. I'm looking to hone in on what I am saying and what is legible about it.

That's the most important thing to me: dealing with legibility and the intent that crosses all of the borders of practice. I prioritize the question of legibility. When people ask me to be legible, I find it aggressive.

But, as I become more articulate—I've been dancing for forever, like 6,000 years or something...

(laughs) I feel like my body is legible as a dancer and dance in itself provides the obscureness of it. Dance is obscure I think...

Dani: Obscure as in...



Dani: Like abstraction!

Leyya: Exactly! There is not an agreement that we both understood the same thing just happened. I said something very clear and you understood what you needed to from it. It's an agreement, but not necessarily literally or uniformly legible.

I already understand my relationship to legibility in dance. Now, I am trying to think about legibility in the case of my lyrics and effects and how articulate I want to be with that side of the material. How can I be more crass with the sound and let it fall into being? *Future Faith* was really dialed in and meticulous. Maybe, the meticulousness is a border in itself. Perhaps, there is something a little more "fall-apart" that we can play with in *Noise & Nation*.

Dani: In general, how have you found the influences of movement, sonics, and space weaving together in Lime Rickey International's solo works?

Leyya: It's very transprocess, as in a transdisciplinary process. Dance and music transform each other and go beyond their titled definitions. There's a particular way that's playing out with Lime Rickey International. A lot of the sound sources are physically generated. Besides the voice, I work a lot in folk dance, specifically Palestinian dabke which is a rhythmic form. I start with dabke rhythmic structures and footwork to create new, fictional folk dances informed by my other concepts and movement practices.

I try to execute the rhythms and stompings sonically in a very specific way. If I am not hearing what I want to be hearing while I am dancing, then I have to change my dancing. It's not just about changing the rhythm. I may need to change the depth of the step, the positioning, or the space in the room because of the contact mics. By looking for something sonic from this dance, the sonic output actually ends up determining where I am standing, how I am stepping, how I am breathing, and how fast or slow I am moving. The dance and sound are consistently demanding of one another. There would be nothing coming through if I wasn't moving through space; you would hear silence until I am in action. They are very interdependent in this process.



It's an interesting premise. Though...you can't undermine everything. I am using the non-voice as an entry point. Derailing is a big part of my process; how do I undermine my intentions so my ego doesn't take over? It's been an ongoing theme for me for a decade. That's a big part of Leyya and, therefore, a big part of Lime Rickey's practice.

It's really fun to talk about two people at once! (laughs)

Dani: I was looking over your various websites and I love how they are all interconnected. Each thing—Dance Elixir, TAC, Lime Rickey International—are all separate on the interweb, but still looped into one another. In technology, I feel as though things can become disparate or more distanced from one another. But with you, the technological being of Leyya, who is also Lime Rickey International, who also does all of this amazing stuff, is one entity on the web too! That's really cool!

Leyya: (laughs) They definitely are all coming from the same intention: activating art and voices on behalf of many. That's it. Wow, I've never said it like that, but it is basically justice. Art is justice.

Temescal Arts Center (TAC) as a community center that serves community groups and awesome radical artists. Arab.AMP is a new platform that speaks to and of the international SWANA diaspora. We're all trying to find one another and contextualize our work with, for, and apart from one another.

Platforms like Arab.AMP and many others help us come together and ask, "What are you working on? How are you dealing with this level of diaspora in society, onstage, in self-care, or in family?" It becomes more and more important as migration becomes increasingly scattered; people are three, four, five times relocated. I'm specifically referring right now to the political migration of the Arab world, Syria, Palestine, Iraq, and Afghanistan, along with so many other places.

Then, you think about climate migration that is underway and going to be huge. You think about economic migration...I think about how people are forced to move and mobility in general. That plays a big role in *Noise & Nation* and in my work right now with mobility.



Leyya: It's actually really huge! I've been living nomadically for seven years. I have a deep base in NYC and Oakland, a family base in Detroit, and deep relationships to communities in Germany and Finland. Then, I have ancestral, professional and community homes in Palestine, Cairo and Beirut. I haven't spent nearly enough time in Syria, but I feel home there too.

The nomadic life that I committed to has completely informed what I do. It helps me to contextualize myself and my work.

"ANYWHERE I GO, THE LOCATION CHANGES THE MEANING OF WHAT I AM DOING."

Even though I can have all of the articulations dialed in, if I take it out of this room and into one other place, especially a culturally different place, it completely changes the meaning of what I'm doing. It is out of my control. That practice is beautiful. I love it! That means I don't even have to improvise for the meaning to change. I can do the same exact thing and the meaning will change just by location. That is a magical thing!

Also, it allows me to learn about people. The last project that I did in the city of Turku in Finland was called Turku Future Folk Dance.

Dani: How fitting!

Leyya: It's perfect, right?! I was commissioned to make a future folk dance. The director of New Performance Turku festival, Leena Kela, knows the work of Lime and how I am fixated on future folk dances. The festival invited me to make a folk dance for the city of Turku and its inhabitants. It was a research platform for asking the residents of Turku, new and old, what they see and want for the future. We did that through a series of dance workshops. Then, we synthesized the information and made a folk dance that everyone in the city could perform together. It was a beautiful process.



Participants in Leyya's future folk dance at New Performance Turku, photo by Jussi Virkkumaa.

The city of Turku has a significant population of Syrian and Iraqi immigrants. Because of war and forced expulsion, I was able to work with Syrians in Finland, coming to the process as an American born Syrian. That triangulation offers something in the way of conceiving a borderless future or, rather, post-national world.

Borderless is a little bit tricky, especially as a Palestinian. I don't actually like that term, even though I've been using "borderless" in my head. Borders are excruciatingly important for safety and, as a Palestinian, we are fighting for defined and autonomous borders. So, in a sense, I want a bordered future.

On the other hand, post-national is the nationhood that lives conceptually inside of you versus being identified with a nation of location.

Dani: Would you say that Limey Rickey International is post-nation Leyya?

Leyya: Yes. Damn. Nicely done.



That's really what I'm referring to when I say post-nation. It's not necessarily borderless. I like the research of borderlessness for the sake of process, but in relation to nation as being a living culture, for the individual and the collective, something that changes in time and in diaspora. It morphs. It's a breathing thing, not a tangible space-place.

Dani: I'm curious about your experiences at Issue Project Room as a Suzanne Fiol Curatorial Fellow. What conversations between the artists you have curated struck you? What things have you found informative to your process?

Leyya: As the fellow for 2020, I was able to propose a series of programs under the title NOMADIC SIGNALS. NOMADIC SIGNALS looks at how sound changes through migratory practices and in diaspora. It's allowed me to associate the discourse of SWANA diaspora to experimental music from other diasporas. I am thinking bigger about what is important to me to say and what is curious and exciting happening in the sonic realm that has to do with nomadic practices and all of the things we are talking about, including post-national activity.

I'm able to place artists from different diasporas in context with one another. That's been really exciting and is absolutely informing *Noise & Nation*. In developing my program for the ISSUE fellowship, I reached out to artists like Las Sucias (Oakland-based duo from Puerto Rico and Venezuela). Hearing their work, and finding myself responding very intimately to their decisions around sound, I can feel their reference points. I frame their work as a nomadic practice and we enter that conversation together.

They performed on a program with POREST. POREST is an Iraqi-American originally from Oakland. He now lives in London, and has lived in Syria, Malaysia, and Vietnam. Is there a resonance or signal that criss-crosses in their practices even though their reference points exist in a multitude of places? It's opened up the question entirely; what is context? What is nomadic practice outside of my own reality? How can I expand the definition for myself, and what is the legibility of the idea?



say-hopeful.

Dani: Dare I say...

Leyya: Dare I say hopeful! I'm not one for optimism, but I'll go with dare I say hopeful.
(laughs)

Dani: Is there anything else you would like to share about the context of your work?

Leyya: I just looked over at the microphone and am reflecting on a song I've been working on. The lyrics are, "Where are your voices? Where are your forces?" The DiP residency has allowed me the space to gather my voice; a timeless space where I gather all these voices and all these forces. And when I leave the room, how do I continue to enact them? It's an opening... They spill out into the world.



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