

Healing on the Margins: Rhythm and Repetition in *Gnawa* Music

Maisie Sum

University of Waterloo, Canada

The notion that music has the power to heal has ancient origins. Therapeutic use of music in clinical settings, however, only emerged in the mid-twentieth century, and until recently, has mostly been grounded in the social sciences. With recent technological advances, evidence of music-induced benefits on brain function has opened up new possibilities for the use of musical intervention in the domain of the health sciences. Musical rhythm in particular has been shown to be effective in physical and cognitive rehabilitation. This preliminary study explores Gnawa music's capacity to heal. Among the Gnawa, a sub-Saharan-Berber-Islamic group found throughout Morocco, music plays an integral role in rituals, some of which have therapeutic purposes. Their use of music in healing is not unique; however, research suggests that Gnawa music has the potential to transcend cultural boundaries and benefit listeners unfamiliar with the music, language, and meaning. Does Gnawa music have an inherent structure or attributes that contribute to its capacity to heal cross-culturally? How does Gnawa music function as a stimulus that influences brain activity? Informed by recent theoretical and applied studies in the areas of neuroscience and music; research on music, emotion and affect; and works of Gnawa and trance scholars; the music-centered approach sheds light on the centrality of rhythm and nuanced repetition of music on therapeutic effectiveness and extends Gnawa studies in which healing has been treated primarily as an outcome based on ritual phenomena. This paper contributes to scientific studies in music and healing in cultures worldwide, the growing research in medical and cognitive ethnomusicology, and more broadly, to interdisciplinary studies in music, health, and wellbeing.