

Listening to Egyptian and Uyghur Soundscapes: A Review in Letters between Cambridge and Istanbul

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AND

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Rachel Harris, *Soundscapes in Uyghur Islam*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2020. xiv + 251 pp. ISBN 9780253050182 (hard cover); 9780253050205 (paperback); 9780253050199 (ebook).

Ziad Fahmy, Street Sounds: Listening to Everyday Life in Modern Egypt. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020. xxiv + 289 pp. ISBN 9781503612013 (hard cover); 9781503613034 (paperback); 9781503613041 (ebook).

This book review was written in the form of a letter correspondence, allowing us to explore a more dialogic approach to review writing. During the seven-month period of working on the review, we also met and discussed some of the ideas shared below. In writing these letters, we embraced the main theme of the books by being mindful of the soundscapes that surrounded us, and that have inevitably formed part of our final review.

November 2021

Dear Dunya,

I've been putting off sending you my thoughts on these two books because I wanted to find the right moment. Yet it has not come, so I'm sitting down with my coffee on a beautiful mid-November morning and wondering how we can piece together our correspondence into something that resembles an academic article or a book review – and then thinking that perhaps we should simply offer our conversation as a way to share reflections.

I want to start by saying how much I have enjoyed spending time with these books. I read them over the summer in various locations in Cambridge, and they intersected and overlapped

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with other texts I was reading, writing, and listening to at the time. I should also describe how the books now look in my hand: over-burdened with ugly fluorescent sticky notes, annotated in green pen with the locations and sounds I experienced while reading certain passages, with records of my enjoyment, and with expressions of affection at the citation of a beloved theorist or author appearing like a friend in the footnotes.

I had already encountered Ziad Fahmy's work through background reading for my thesis, and his call to study soundscapes in north Africa and southwest Asia has captivated my attention. So, when this book came out it was already on my to-read list and receiving a copy in the post to review felt so delightful. I connected with this text both because of my interest in the subject, and because growing up, I spent my summers in Cairo visiting my family. As a result, I have a kind of half-remembered intimacy with the city from my childhood experiences, and a half-understood familiarity with it as a place I've tried to read and learn about as an adult. And despite these complicated and half-formed connections, I felt as though I was able to really inhabit Fahmy's soundworlds, through the craft of his writing and his ability to take the reader on a walk – quite literally, following Michel de Certeau's ideas of mobilizing a multisensory and embodied understanding of space through the act of walking.

Street Sounds: Listening to Everyday Life in Modern Egypt is a meticulous history of Egypt in the first half of the twentieth century (pre-1952). The beauty of it is that Fahmy narrates this history through sounds and their economic, political, and class implications. He walks us through street sounds and their silencing, the sound of trams and cars, electricity and its effects on the Egyptian soundscape, sounds of weddings and funerals, and the state's use of cannons, loudspeakers, and broadcasting. The book made me so much more aware of how sounds are mobilized for different political ends in general, as well as encouraging me to reflect on my own construction of Egypt's soundscape and to ask fundamental questions about how we construct our identities and histories through sound.

Rachel Harris's *Soundscapes of Uyghur Islam* offered me different points of connection. On opening the book, I felt a little like an outsider – since I am not as familiar with Uyghur culture and history or (as a more historically inclined musicologist) with a more traditional ethnographic text. But as I went on with my reading, I found myself surprised by how much closer I felt to the subjects of the book, initially through our shared Islam and the presence and references to aspects of southwestern Asian and north African cultures in relation to Uyghur culture.

Harris's book charts some of the sounds – the music, chant, recitation – of Uyghur Muslims in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in northwest China and in the diaspora, and shows not only how these sonic practices have become part of their resistance, but also how they have been co-opted as oppressive tools of discipline against them. Of the more theoretical parts of Harris's book, one idea that really stuck with me was her notion of the acoustic/sonic palimpsest, as a way of explaining the process of reinscribing a sonic practice or event with a new meaning:

If we can read the Xinjiang soundscape as an acoustic palimpsest, composed of layers of sonic memories that can be reanimated and activated at any time, then arguably the task of the scholar is to listen through the layers, to perceive not only the dominant and immediately audible present of the soundscape but also the things that have been submerged and over-written but never erased (pp. 216–17).

This sentence left me floored; how do we listen through the layers, especially as scholars striving towards a justice-centred approach?

I was also struck by the contrast between Fahmy's focus on the sounds that arise unconsciously through everyday life – the sound of feet on pavements, jewellery on ankles

and fingers and collar bones, dice on *tawla* (backgammon) boards – and Harris's concern for more intentional sounds. It made me wonder what an intentional sound is, and how often we consider the boundaries between the unintended and intended. Right now for example, I can hear the sound of my fingers loudly clacking on my computer keyboard, because I never learned to type and the thick rubber of my superimposed Arabic keyboard creates a dull thud. Do I intend this sound? I don't know, but I weave my thoughts and thought processes and arguments around it, and it's now an inextricable part of my seemingly silent writing, it's part of this letter. In Fahmy's words, 'lest we forget, the physical act of writing is as much tactile as it is visual, and the information conveyed will inevitably be multisensory' (p. 15).

This is already longer than I intended, so I will close my letter here and look forward to hearing your initial thoughts on the books, and any responses to my ideas. I also thought you should know that as I wrote this I was sitting in a café with earphones in because the noise of talking and the till and chairs grating as they were pulled out was too much for me. They were playing a song I didn't recognize as I came in, and I overlaid it and all the other sounds of café life with Sanaa Moussa's voice through my slightly broken, leaky earphones. I think I remember you told me a while ago that you like her, too. Anyway, it got me thinking about acoustic palimpsests and how we are constantly operating at the intersections and layers of different sounds and sonic experiences, how difficult it is to listen through the layers and to understand the stories of the layering process, and whether we could recover those voices and sounds that have been buried under the rubble of heavy sonicities; whether our ears could retrieve them lovingly and hear them in their own right.

I look forward to reading your thoughts and hope you are well! Fatima

December 2021

Dear Fatima,

I started this letter to you on Christmas Day in Birmingham, Alabama, the city where I was born and raised, and where I have been visiting over the winter break. Although I am Muslim, and my family never really celebrated Christmas in the traditional way with presents and fairy lights, we do try to gather for a large meal as cooking at home is the only thing you can do in Alabama on Christmas Day. I am indulging in the warmth of the living room fireplace — although we do not need it in Alabama, it is part of the cosiness that must be created in the winter — along with the soft crackle of the burning wood. Considering the two books we are reviewing and their exploration of soundscapes and listening practices, I find myself listening more closely to my surroundings these days. Just as you question the dull thud of your typing and where this sound falls between the boundaries of the intended and unintended, I also wonder the same about the crackling noise of a fire in the winter. What does this sound tell us about the sound-worlds of suburban Alabama in 2021? What are the economic, political, and class implications of this sound?

These two books have travelled the world with me – literally. I received them in the post at my small flat in Kabataş, Istanbul, while I was still living there conducting fieldwork for my PhD studies. I spent the last academic year in this global metropolis at the intersection of East and West, working with Syrian musicians, artists, and entrepreneurs who moved there to escape the conflict that has devastated their country since 2011. As you know, I too have roots

in that part of the world: both my parents are from Damascus, Syria, and my great-grandmother was a Turk from Istanbul. I spent portions of my formative years in Syria and speak Arabic fluently as a result, especially the Shami dialect. Therefore, I also felt a similar instant connection with both texts.

Seeing as we are both PhD students in the final throes of our writing, I likewise read various other texts at the same time. For example, I read Harris's book alongside my re-reading of Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco by Paul Rabinow. Attempting to refresh my theoretical understanding of fieldwork and the construction of knowledge through the ethnographic process, I read Rabinow and Harris's texts in light of a methodological crisis in my own work. As I began working through fieldnotes, transcripts, and other materials to begin writing my thesis, I realized the weight of 'representation', done remotely, away from the field, away from the people who shared with me the narratives that eventually became my 'data'. Harris's Soundscapes of Uyghur Islam eased my nerves seeing how she masterfully presents similar types of data: excerpts from fieldnotes, descriptive scenes from participant observation, music analysis of various recitations and rituals she heard in the field, and text from group chats and other forms of digital media, which I thought was a creative and new way to engage with digital sources. The persuasiveness of Harris's presentation, combined with Rabinow's reminder that 'fieldwork is a dialectic between reflection and immediacy. Both are cultural constructs', helped me to overcome the burden of representation in ethnographic scholarship. The point is that ethnographic writings are fictions in the sense that they are 'something made or fashioned'. They are not meant to be objective depictions of cultural reality: they are meant to be situated and contextualized from the scholar's position as observer and participant. I think Harris does this tactfully throughout the text by explaining her personal connection to the region and her sustained engagement over a decade of contact.

Yet, in reading Harris's critically lucid and expertly researched analysis of a culture on the brink of erasure, I have found the notion of the acoustic/sonic palimpsest – already theorized by, for example, J. Martin Daughtry and Ruth Hellier-Tinoco³ – perhaps a little prickly in the context of *Soundscapes of Uyghur Islam*. The sentence that floored you – 'if we can read the Xinjiang soundscape as an acoustic palimpsest … then arguably the task of the scholar is to listen through the layers …' – left me questioning how we might listen through the layers as scholars instead. Although the image of the palimpsest offers a vivid metaphor for the sounds Harris uncovers in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and the Uyghur diaspora, the palimpsest's promise of the things that have been submerged and overwritten but never erased can feel as if it counterintuitively downplays the censorship and suppression experienced by the Uyghur people today. There is still active erasure taking place, even if the overwritten may never be truly erased. Reflecting on this cautioned me in my own writing on post-2011 Syrian culture. We must recognize the power of our voices as scholars – as

Paul Rabinow, Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco: Thirtieth Anniversary Edition (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), p. 38.

James Clifford, 'Introduction: Partial Truths', in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, 25th Anniversary Edition, ed. by James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), pp. 1–26 (p. 6).

J. Martin Daughtry, 'Acoustic Palimpsests', in *Theorizing Sound Writing*, ed. by Deborah A. Kapchan (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2017), pp. 46–85 (p. 48); Ruth Hellier-Tinoco, *Performing Palimpsest Bodies: Postmemory Theatre Experiments in Mexico* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

ethnographers – in representing a culture in a contested historical and political context. Beyond the important tasks of describing and documenting, how to theorize and situate the phenomenon we study is a burden. Harris takes this burden seriously and takes it on skilfully, but the current political climate can still make me feel cynical and pessimistic at times

In many ways, we had opposite reactions to the two texts. I felt more like an outsider opening Fahmy's text, while feeling more at ease with Harris's ethnographic methods and layout of data. Although I have encountered Harris's work before - in particular her monograph Singing the Village: Music, Memory, and Ritual amongst the Sibe of Xinjiang (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) – through my reading of various music ethnographies in preparation for fieldwork, I had never read a text by Fahmy. He explores Egypt's history through sound by 'listening to the sources', and the result is an important and necessary Middle Eastern addition to a line of influential studies of urban soundscapes. 4 I nevertheless confess that the ethnographer in me has been uneasy about historical ethnomusicology's and historical musicology's exploration of history through written and reported evidence of sound. Reading through the first few pages, I pondered the type of 'auditory data' drawn from archives and diaries. I also questioned whether focusing on everyday sounds - the passing of electric trams, calling of street peddlers, chatting of friends at sidewalk cafés, bubbling of shisha pipes, buzzing of new electrical appliances like refrigerators and washing machines, wailing of professional funeral mourners – would be too nuanced an approach. How can you describe the political and economic realities of a place by examining, secondhand, such commonplace sounds?

As I continued reading, however, I was inspired by how Fahmy crafts a sophisticated narrative of modern Egypt by following such sounds in major cities like Cairo, Alexandria, and Port Said. By considering the changing sounds of the past, he asserts that 'we can provide valuable texture and context to historical examinations of everyday life and be brought closer to a more embodied microlevel analysis of street life' (p. 6) – this assertation certainly proves true by the end of the book. Mundane sounds like the honking of a car horn offer insights into related issues such as technology, censorship, nightlife, and much more. Such as Emily Thompson and Karin Bijsterveld have written about noise control in the contexts of Europe and North America,⁵ Fahmy considers the following excerpt from the Annual Report of the Cairo City Police for the Year 1937:

Every effort has been made to reduce noise to a minimum. The number of contraventions for excessive use of electric horn or klaxon drawn up during the year show an increase of approximately 1,000 in figures for 1936, while thousands of warning letters have been sent to owners in the cases of first offense (p. 103).

We are introduced to the way tramways, trains, and motor vehicles dramatically transformed the soundscape and decibel levels of Egyptian cities and towns. We also get a sense of how the authorities attempted to control the increase in traffic noise through warning

Thompson, The Soundscape of Modernity; Karin Bijsterveld, Mechanical Sound: Technology, Culture, and Public Problems of Noise in the Twentieth Century (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

⁴ For examples of such studies, see Ana Maria Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900–1933* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004); and Thomas Irvine, *Listening to China: Sound and the Sino-Western Encounter, 1770–1839* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

letters. This is just one way Fahmy 'listens to the sources' and perceptively reconstructs a history of modern Egypt through sound by focusing on how it is produced, contested, controlled, and experienced in various areas of public and social life during the early twentieth century.

I'll end by bringing us back to Birmingham, a city remembered for its dark struggle with civil rights and the classist structures that accompany such tensions. Although you reminded me of Sanaa Moussa, by far my favourite contemporary Palestinian vocalist, I must confess I have not listened to her in a while. Perhaps I'll add her enchanting voice to my current soundscape of crackling wood, the flowing of tap water from the adjacent open-plan kitchen, and the occasional churning of ice cubes from my American refrigerator (you cannot drink anything without ice in this country). Can I just say that I love the idea of two Arab-heritage women academics in the UK writing to each other about books related to our part of the world? Looking forward to your response.

Take care,

Dunya

May 2022

Dear Dunya,

I cannot believe how long it has been since I wrote! Time has gone so fast, and I find myself revisiting and rethinking these books in light of the submission of my PhD thesis, the passing of Ramadan and Eid, and so much more that has taken place in each of our lives. Returning to these books after the past five months, I found myself reflecting more on the links between them, specifically around ideas of authenticity.

In Harris's discussion of the idea of authenticity within Uyghur expressions of Islam, she writes that the Qur'an recitation of the famous Egyptian reciter, Abdul Basit, was imitated by Uyghur reciters to improve their 'reputation' (pp. 117–18). She cites an interview with an imam appointed to a town mosque in southern Xinjiang, who says:

We are all following Abdul Basit: Muslims in China, and across the whole world. It's fashionable to copy his qira'at, his tajwid, his voice [awaz]. [...] When I recite in his style, and I make my voice sound like his, people value it more; it strengthens my reputation (p. 118).

In another passage on the *maqam* (Arabic musical mode) called *bayati*, Harris similarly describes listening to the Qur'an recitation of a woman called Aynisa at a *zikr* gathering as '... recognisably following the classical twentieth-century Egyptian style and reciting in the Arab mode of bayati' (p. 121), noting in particular the quarter tones of *bayati*, which are not a feature of Uyghur music (p. 125). In the latter context, however, Harris considers Aynisa's recitation a 'mimetic performance' in an Egyptian style, one that is recognized by and elicits a strong emotional response from the other participants (p. 127).

Fahmy similarly interrogates the idea of authenticity, probing the notion of an 'authentic' Egyptian sound in reference to how he perceives the middle and upper classes to simultaneously marginalize and claim soundscapes of working class and rural populations. In his conclusion, Fahmy writes that the 'vulgarization of Egypt's working class and the "noises" they produce continues until this day' (p. 218), with street beggars and hawkers in particular experiencing

oppression and marginalization. However, he continues, these discourses of marginalization are conveniently forgotten under the rubric of Egyptian nationalism, when all of a sudden:

... Egyptians of all classes are supposed to be 'equal', and at these moments especially, the middle classes and the cultural elite seek the opposite of differentiation and distinction as they attempt to validate and authenticate their own Egyptianness to some idealised national type. [...] Egyptian peasants and working-class men and women are no longer considered loud, ignorant, tasteless, dirty, and superstitious; overnight they become symbols of resilience, resourcefulness, patience, moderation, and loyalty, representing salt-of-the-earth national authenticity (p. 219).

Under such a rubric of nationalism, Fahmy suggests, at these moments of national anxiety the lives and sounds of Egypt's rural and working-class populations are invoked as the 'authentic' sound of all Egyptians, despite the ongoing oppression and sensorial marginalization of those people in everyday life.

Although Harris's and Fahmy's examples of the construction of Egyptian 'authenticity' are completely different (and it is important to note that Uyghur invocations of Egyptian sound do not come with any simultaneous marginalization of Egyptian people), I was struck by how sound is used as a measure of truth, validity, and reputation in these contexts, and I was prompted to reflect on the nature of co-opting someone else's sounds for yourself. What does it mean for your own sonic identity to share or even appropriate a sound(scape)? What is the difference between sharing and appropriating? And if we think of sounds and sound production in a more embodied manner, what does it mean to partake in someone else's sounds? How do our own bodies shape and change these sounds? How do they become part of us, and how do we change as a result?

Thinking of sounds in this embodied way, and reflecting on the ideological and spiritual implications of sonic experiences, brings me to the political. Both books explore forms of state and social oppression through sonic processes of both silencing and sounding, and both books make an important statement about the significance and potential of sound for historical, social, and political research. Foregrounding the role of sounds in this way has also made me even more hyper-aware of the sounds I'm making, sharing, and hearing as I read these books, write these letters and form this review over the long months that have passed. If these books teach us anything, it's that sounds are always mediated through our ears, through our own understandings and perceptions of what they mean. How can we listen as a means to undoing harm — to locating and resisting oppression?

At the very end of her book, Harris writes of one of her interlocutors, who preserves a book of banned *hikmat* ('wisdom' or 'philosophy') both through her memory of their performance and by hiding away her copy after her mother's is taken by local government officials: 'Coercive political campaigns may temporarily silence her practice and overwrite the Islamic soundscape with new layers of sound, but they cannot fully erase it' (p. 220). Here, sound is not simply how we understand coercive political suppression and overwriting. It is also how we understand resistance. It is how we learn about the cultural erasure of the Uyghur people, and perhaps also how we can form solidarity with their struggle, whatever our own political, social, and sonic vantage points may be.

As I have been writing this letter, the news has come that Palestinian journalist Shireen Abu Aqleh was shot dead by Israeli soldiers while she covered a raid in Jenin. Her assassination is such a blatant example of silencing, and the horror of watching this violence has accompanied my writing about sounds and sounding today. It makes me think that we have a duty not only to listen to the voices that endanger their existence by speaking, but also a responsibility to

sound in ways that centre justice. As a discipline, how could sound studies further this? I think these two books offer valuable suggestions in this direction.

I cannot wait to read your final instalment in this correspondence. Fatima

June 2022

Dear Fatima,

Congratulations on submitting your PhD! It must be a massive relief, and I look forward to doing the same soon. I too have not opened these texts since my last letter to you months ago. Similarly, the demands of thesis writing have made it impossible to read anything not directly related to my study of Syrian musical practices in Turkey. But your final thoughts have pushed me to consider both texts in a light that is aligned to my own writing on 'aesthetic agency', a concept coined by Philip Bohlman which I expand to include contexts of displacement and forced migration in my forthcoming thesis.⁶

You state so powerfully that 'sound is not simply how we understand coercive political suppression and overwriting. It is also how we understand resistance.' In addition to agreeing with you that analysing sound can shed light on resistance and broader concepts of human agency, your insight also reminded me of emerging scholarship on forced migration by ethnomusicologists such as Tom Western and Karen Boswall. Paving the way for what I call 'listening as resistance' (because it is reminiscent of Jennifer Ladkani's focus on political resistance reflected in aesthetic forms),⁷ this research puts the political struggles of refugee communities at the heart of its analysis. These struggles come to life through sound and listening practices. For example, in a public seminar at the Refugee Studies Centre at the University of Oxford, Tom Western delivered a paper in which he laid out an analytical approach he terms 'listening to migrant activisms'. By focusing on sound (rather than just music *per se*) as a way of understanding citizenship, Western argues that we can hear inclusion and exclusion in the city because migrants use sound – through protest chants, music, and amplification – to make claims on belonging at the street level.

Similarly, Ruba al Akash and Karen Boswall write about resistance through sound in their study of listening practices among Syrian refugee women in northern Jordan. They claim that listening to Syrian revolutionary songs in a ritualized manner (usually in the evenings) reinforced their identity as Syrian women in exile and helped them to process emotions triggered by forced displacement. The women they interviewed 'privately performed their

Jennifer Ladkani, 'Dabke Music and Dance and the Palestinian Refugee Experience: On the Outside Looking In' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Florida State University, 2001).

Ounya Habash, 'From Maqām to Makam: In Search of Syria's Post-Revolution Cultural Imaginary in Turkey' (forthcoming doctoral thesis, University of Cambridge).

⁸ Tom Western, *Sonopolis: Sound, Citizenship, and Migrant Activisms in Athens*, online audio recording, 29 May 2019 https://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/news/sonopolis-sound-citizenship-and-migrant-activisms-in-athens-dr-tom-western [accessed 13 January 2023].

Ruba al Akash and Karen Boswall, 'Listening to the Voices of Syrian Women Refugees in Jordan: Ethnographies of Displacement and Emplacement', in 'Guests and Aliens': Re-Configuring New Mobilities in the Eastern Mediterranean After 2011 – With a Special Focus on Syrian Refugees (Istanbul: Institut français d'études anatoliennes, 2016) http://books.openedition.org/ifeagd/1884> [accessed 29 June 2022].

resistance' by listening to revolutionary protest songs on their mobile phones, thereby connecting them to the public sphere through conversation and song. ¹⁰ This links back to your question about how we can listen as a means to undoing harm and locating oppression via the sonic and resisting it. In many ways, the women in Harris's study also privately perform their resistance to the erasure of Uyghur culture in China by hiding banned books and remembering performances. This reminds me of my father's childhood in Syria where he buried books banned by the Assad regime in the family courtyard; people will always find a way to overcome suppression even if in small ways.

They will always find ways to express themselves through sound, too. Sometimes this expression is intentional: indeed, Bohlman's idea of 'aesthetic agency' theorizes such intentional sonic expressions through his study of Spanish anthems in the American public sphere. ¹¹ In other cases, however, such sonic expression is unintentional, which links back to Fahmy's exploration of street sounds in early modern Egypt. The 'noises' produced by Egypt's working class are one such instance where unintentional sounds can become the 'authentic' voice of a marginalized segment of Egyptian society. As such, I think Fahmy and Harris's texts are the first step in locating oppression via the sonic – we must first learn to read sounds in this way by reading similar texts and teaching others about them. Only then can we turn to advocacy.

I agree that sound studies possesses great potential to centre justice – by finding ways to listen to, and therefore amplifying, muffled sounds in history and society. To unearth voices and sounds that are constantly silenced, such as in the disheartening example of the assassination of Shireen Abu Aqleh, must become one of the cornerstones of the discipline. Because both Fahmy's *Street Sounds* and Harris's *Soundscapes of Uyghur Islam* demonstrate that potential so well, both should be immediately added to reading lists concerned with sound, silence, and resistance.

With best wishes for a new beginning, Dunya

¹⁰ Ibid. 29

Philip Vilas Bohlman, 'When Migration Ends, When Music Ceases', *Music and Arts in Action*, 3/3 (2011), 148–66.