The Aesthetics of the Invisible

Sacred Music in Secular (French) Places

Deborah Kapchan

What kind of soil welcomes Islamic devotion and faith?

Most would conjure scenes of medieval medinas, the sound of the call to prayer wafting over adobe rooftops and into courtyards. The mosque, with its green-tiled minaret, a home to nesting pelicans. And inside the mosque, the cool quiet of bodies sitting on oriental rugs, the light click of beads counting off the names of God, the palpable breath of bodies prostrating together in prayer.

Such evocations are common, Orientalist clichés, especially in regard to Morocco.

One thinks less however of a little stretch of land in the south of France where the flat marshy Camargue with its white horses, flocks of pink flamingos, and solitary egrets meets the dryer ground, the rolling hills and vineyards of the Gard. Or where, venturing just a bit deeper inland, the Cevennes mountains begin. In the ninth and tenth centuries, Arabs ruled here, before being

Figure 1. Listening deeply at the sanctuary, 2009. (Photo by Deborah Kapchan)

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pushed south by the Christians. But even now in the 21st century, between the sea and the mountains, the Sufis sing.

These contemporary Sufis are also robed, with scarves encircling their heads, but they wear their robes only inside their houses, donning tight jeans and loose shirts outside. These women live in little villages from the coast to the mountains, from the Petite Camargue to the Cevennes. They are mostly in their 20s and 30s, French citizens of North African descent, but there are also a considerable number of French converts to Islam. Only a minority speak Arabic, and almost none of them read it. Yet they chant the Qur'an, sing songs of praise to the prophet Mohammed and to their *shaykh* in a beautifully inflected Arabic, almost as if they were native speakers.

How does Sufism, a mystical branch of Islam with roots in Persia, come to play the role it does in the lives of these women? What do we have to learn from an examination of "transnational Sufism" in Europe, and its performance in France? Can the performance of religion in a secular state change both the religion and the state?

How does what I call the "aesthetics of the invisible"—in this case the performance of listening, and specifically "invisible" aesthetic practices like Sufi *sama*ʿ, or sacred listening—impact the public and secular spaces of contemporary France? In analyzing the aesthetics of the invisible, I bring attention to listening and tasting as performative events. Most accessible to me are my own sensate experiences as a symbolic member and acknowledged researcher of a Sufi order in France. In order to define Sufi aesthetics, I focus particularly on audition as both a mode of initiation and a form of perception, examining the performance contexts of audition—that is, the interior (home) and the exterior (stage) *spaces of listening*—to question the political viability and performativity of sacred listening in a secular nation.

Samaʿ

Listening with and to the Sufis

In 2005 I spent the summer in a house in a little village in the south of France (Kapchan 2007b). On Sundays there was and is a regional market in the village square, where merchants set up tents for cheese, olives, local wines, vegetables and fruit, bread, paella, clothing, jewelry, soap from Marseille, and other sundries. In 2005 there was also a tent of Moroccan goods—babouche slippers, little copper mirrors, skin-scrubbing gloves, and pottery. A North African couple stood behind these wares, and, knowing Arabic, I struck up a conversation with them.

"Salamu alay-kum," I said.

"Alay-kum salam," they both responded.

I asked if they were Moroccan, to which they replied that they were. "Where in Morocco are you from?" I continued.

"From the north, near Oujda," they said.

"Oh, that's where shaykh al-Hamza's sanctuary is," I noted. Not all Moroccans know Sidi Hamza, the aged shaykh of the Qadiriyya Boutshishiyya order in Morocco, but those in the north are more likely to recognize the name than others, since thousands upon thousands of

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pilgrims come to his sanctuary every year on the occasion of the Prophet's birthday (*al-milud*), and local businesses profit from this massive influx.

"You know Sidi Hamza?" the woman asked.

"Yes, I have been to the sanctuary twice," I answered, "I have been practicing *dhikr* [the Sufi "remembrance" ceremony] for many years."

"We are in the order!" the woman said, delighted at the kismet of our meeting.

"Do you live around here?" I asked. "Is there a group in the region?"

"Yes! You have to come and practice with us. We're meeting this afternoon."

The serendipity of this encounter is what Moroccans would call *al-maktub*, destiny. I had been doing work on Sufism in Morocco since 1994/95 when I had a Fulbright-Hayes fellowship and spent 14 months in Rabat, but my inquiries into Sufism had been a side project and I hadn't yet published on the subject. Indeed, as someone who has always been intrigued by extraordinary and festive display events, whether religious or secular, my interests in Sufism were as personal as they were professional. I sought out a Sufi group in Morocco because I was intrigued to learn about a Moroccan practice surrounded by notions of initiation and secrecy yet so clearly central to Moroccan cultural experience. (I do not deny the Orientalist tinge to my interest.) And while I knew that the Sufi order that I frequented had expanded to France and elsewhere in Europe and the United States, I did not know that I would encounter practitioners in the very same village in which I had my little house. Needless to say, I attended a ceremony and have continued to do so every summer since then, with the addition of 14 continuous months when I lived there during a sabbatical year in 2008/09.[1]

The ceremonies in France did not differ much from those I had attended in Morocco. The difference in France was the age range. Whereas in Morocco I had attended a *wadhifa*, or liturgy, with women my own age and older, in France most of the women in attendance were in their 20s and early 30s, many of them single, others with young children. They were all extremely warm, and we have developed deep bonds of friendship, despite our differences in age.

The Sufi liturgy in the Qadiriyya Boutshishiyya order begins with the recitation of the *Yassine sura*, a long Qur'anic verse that everyone reads in transliteration and intones aloud (a few women who have been practicing since childhood know it by heart). Yassine is followed by several iterations of the *Fatiha*, the first verse of the Qur'an. Prayers then give way to what is called the *dhikr*, or remembrance part of the ceremony — that is, chanting the names of God: *allah*, said 300 times, for example, or *al-qawi al-ʿaziz*, the Powerful and Dear One. The women chant loudly and rapidly, their breathing becoming measured. It is during the dhikr that women often go into ecstatic rapture (*al-hal*), characterized by moans, jerks and unanticipated movements of the body, swoons, even screams. The expression of such rapture is accepted, though it is neither desirable nor undesirable. It is simply an effect of the dhikr.

Recitation and chanting are both vocal practices, though the two are very different stylistically: recitation is more rhythmically steady and employs an intonation pattern that rises only slightly and falls at the end of a phrase; chanting often rises progressively in both speed and tone. The liturgy is recited; the dhikr is chanted. After the dhikr, the group returns to another recitation of the Yassine sura, before closing with a prayer. This ends the first section of the ceremony, after which the reading of a lesson follows. The lesson is on a theme — the rules of fasting during Ramadan, for example, or the theme of compassion, or one's responsibilities to the Sufi community. It is often written by the shaykh's eldest son, and is read (in French) by a senior (though still quite youthful) member of the group of women, sometimes loosely trans-

1. I am indebted to a Wenner-Gren Fellowship for Anthropological Research for this extended stay, as well as sabbatical funding from New York University.

lated into Arabic for one or two members whose first language is not French.

After the lesson, the sunset prayers are done, and then everyone reunites to sing. Singing differs from both recitation and chanting in its execution. It is of course melodic, many of the melodies drawn from a canon of Andalusian song in Morocco, shared by other Sufi orders. It is poetic, employing rhyme and parallelism. And there is ample opportunity for soloists to demonstrate their virtuosity in the singing of verses, which are then followed with the collective singing of the chorus. Indeed, these solo performances often evoke rapture in the listener. Samaʿ is, in fact, both a genre of music and a technique of listening.[2] It is object and process, material and immaterial. As a genre, samaʿ belongs to the "song" section of devotional practices that follows the liturgy and the dhikr. These songs are often in a call-and-response format, and the leader is one who has not only an artistic virtuosity, but a spiritual one as well. Yet while song is the most dramatic engagement with listening practices, all genres of the ceremony—recitation, chanting, and singing—employ the techniques of samaʿ, deep and attentive listening.

Figure 2. Al-hal*, embodied listening, 2009. (Photo by Deborah Kapchan)*

My initiation into samaʿ is what has taught me most about listening. For like many of the women in the order, I was unfamiliar with the prayers, with the chants, with the songs. In order to learn them, I had to listen attentively. Indeed, several women in the group have confided to me that they were drawn into the order not through any religious leaning, but through the compelling call of samaʿ. How does this call echo in the bodies of Sufi initiates and in the larger context of French secular society?

The Secular Stage

Much has been written on secularism, or *laicité*, in France and the challenge that growing Muslim religiosity poses to France's secular identity. Unlike secularism in the United States, which is informed by a deep Protestant ethic, France has been scarred by religious wars and the French Revolution, making many in the French state vehemently opposed to any expression of religious sentiment or symbolism in the public domain. In the same cultural context, John R. Bowen notes the tension between "translocal orientation[s] of Islam" which rely on networks outside the nation-state, and forms of religious expression that adapt to local, and often secular contexts (2002:1).[3] He finds that Sufism is one example of an adaptive and local Islam in France. In contradiction to this assertion, the Qadiriyya Boutshishiyya order has spread to France and beyond. Does the performance of Sufism in Europe change conceptions of secularism? If so,

2. In some parts of the Islamic world, samaʿ is used to refer to the ceremony that includes the liturgy, the remembrance ritual (dhikr), and the singing and ritual movements that accompany these.

3. Bowen employs the concept of translocality "to signal that the Muslim predicament in Europe is not only one of deciding about national culture and laws, but it is also a sociological and psychological predicament of locating oneself in multiple networks of movement, communication, and imagination. [These are] Muslim networks in and outside Europe" (2002:9).

how? How does the performance of religion enact shifts in the religious/secular divide? What is the role of aesthetic performance in this transformation? What are the transnational dimensions of these performances and what is their historical charge and political efficacy?

In a secular society such as France, religion is relegated to the private sphere, while secularism is associated with the public sphere. Thus all symbols of religion are banned in institutions like schools. But definitions of private and public are clearly shifting in France, as elsewhere. There are numerous examples we might cite where the private practice of religion expands into the public sphere in Europe: the head scarf debates, of course, but more recently the annulment of a marriage between two Muslims in France because the wife was not a virgin; or the scandal caused when a court trial was postponed because the defendant was fasting during Ramadan (see Bennhold 2008).[4] In all these cases we find proof that the definitions of laicité are changing in France. The historical and even legal boundaries between private and public have been eroding, as evidenced in the phrase "positive secularism"—*laicité positive*, the term former French President Sarkozy employed when, on the occasion of the Pope's visit to France in 2008, he announced his wish for a new and "positive" public orientation to religious expression in France.

All these examples bear on French jurisprudence, but more importantly they put the boundary between the private practice of religion and the public domain of the secular state into question. What's more, questioning these divisions—the creation of which was intended to protect civil and individual liberties—also puts definitions of the very concept of freedom into question (Mahmood 2004), for at its base, the division between the private and public realms was created to protect freedom and civil liberties, whether in the United States or in Europe (Pateman 1988). Yet as Saba Mahmood so astutely demonstrates in her analysis of the mosque movement in Egypt, insofar as it is equated with the neoliberal and secular state, freedom is a culturally determined and variable concept. Indeed Mahmood asks us to deconstruct our notions of freedom, and to admit to the possibility that freedom may have other casts and colors, other tenors and resonances, than those we in the West imagine, assume, and so easily universalize and equate with the secular state. Why is it that Western intellectuals can embrace the notion that willing subjection to and play with the rules of gender (as in Judith Butler's analysis of drag, for example [1990]) may express the subject's free play with the technologies of the self, while at the same time rejecting the notion that willing subjection to religious rules expresses anything but misrecognition, oppression, and constraint?

In tracking the expansion of a form of Islam that aestheticizes worship in a particular way—namely Sufism—we understand that when the materiality of perception changes (Erlmann 2010), so do categories of private, public, religious, and secular. Perception is material insofar as it is mediated by a culturally determined body whose sensorium is shaped through the sounds, images, smells, tastes, and haptic orientations of its milieu. Certain configurations of the senses, for example, evoke "home," while others evoke strangeness (Bachelard [1958] 1994). But even the strange can become homely with practice. Artistic performances help to habituate the subject to new aesthetic orientations to self, other, and place.

(Sufi) Aesthetics

The subject of aesthetics has been with us since at least the Enlightenment. Terry Eagleton reminds us that the term was developed by Alexander Baumgarten, an 18th-century German philosopher, in order to have a place in which to discuss lived experience (the *Lebenswelt*), the body, and the senses at a time when Enlightenment philosophy might have done away with

4. As Katrin Bennhold asked in the *New York Times*, "How much should European countries adapt their moral and legal codes to their growing Muslim communities, and how much should those communities be expected to conform to Western norms?" (2008).

everything except the rational mind. The aesthetic was a place where the law became embodied, where bourgeois rules became internalized in concepts of style and taste. As Eagleton notes:

> The whole concept of the aesthetic was thus indissociable from an emergent project of bourgeois political hegemony, redefining the relations between law and freedom, mind and the senses, individual and the whole.
>
> What this meant, in effect, was that the aesthetic was the way power, or the Law, would be carried into the minutest crevices of lived experience, inscribing the very gestures and affections of the body with its decrees. (1989:54)

Of course the recognition that external structures of power are internalized in bodily practices is present in Foucault in his discussion of discipline (1977), and in Bourdieu in his delineation of habitus (Bourdieu 1977, 1984). What the concept of the *aesthetic* does, however, is to bring attention to the intersection at which ideas (and ideals) of beauty, the body, and self-construction meet social structures of power. Eagleton continues:

> To live out the law spontaneously, to introject it as the very source and essence of one's free identity, is what the work of art, above all, exemplifies; and this in turn can become the paradigm for a whole new conception of subjectivity, by which the human subject, in Althusserian phrase, will come to work "all by itself," without need of rebarbative constraint. To live one's necessity as freedom—to give, as Kant says, the law to oneself, to refuse all external determination for the pure movement of one's own self-production: all of this came to be summarised and epitomised by the aesthetic artefact itself. (54)

Analyzing the role of aesthetics in the spread of Sufism in France it becomes clear that Sufi music is indeed an art (albeit a religious one), with [...] the potential to blur the lines between life and art in interesting ways that challenge political categories of secularism.

"To live one's necessity as freedom," is another way of saying to live constraint as if it were freedom. The art object came to embody this subjunctive world, where personal creativity met socially determined ideals in a place that felt free. Eagleton brings attention to the fact that the category of the aesthetic was not originally, for Baumgarten, confined to the domain of artistic expression (but soon became so, especially with Kant who concerned himself with judgments of beauty). Indeed, the intersection of personal creativity and social constraint is also found in forms of self-making such as those described as "technologies of the self" (Foucault 1988; see also Butler 1990), and in contexts of everyday life.[5] Analyzing the role of aesthetics in the spread of Sufism in France it becomes clear that Sufi music is indeed an art (albeit a religious one), with its own discourse of evaluation, and that it also has the potential to blur the lines between life and art in interesting ways that challenge political categories of secularism.

How might this concept of the aesthetic as a category of both everyday life and framed performance apply to Sufism? And what are Sufi aesthetics?

Like all forms of religion, Sufism has a particular set of bodily disciplines. Sufism is the mystical branch of Islam (Schimmel 1975). As such, the laws of Islam apply: prayer five times a

5. Jacques Rancière has reiterated the impossibility of keeping artistic and aesthetic spheres separate from the social. For Rancière, the aesthetic is a discourse that permeates everyday life, and yet it is not everyday life. Indeed, he notes two things of interest to the study of "Sufi aesthetics": one is that insofar as ritual is simply an "accomplishment" of religious function, it is not art; and the second is that music, as an art that is not (or need not be) mimetic or mediated, takes us from what Rancière calls the "regime of representation" (a regime of hierarchies and law, the regime referred to by Eagleton) to the "esthetic regime of art" (where the line between everyday life and art is blurred, and thus is more egalitarian) ([2004] 2009:5).

day, fasting during Ramadan, charity, the profession of faith, and pilgrimage to Mecca, if possible. On top of those minimal laws of Islamic practice, however, Sufis add others: individual meditation with a particular litany of prayers in the morning and sometimes at night; congregating with other Sufis to perform the liturgy in common once or twice weekly; chanting the names of God together, both silently and aloud; and singing praise hymns to God, the Prophet Mohammed, and other saints. These are the practices that discipline the body of the Sufi — the way they live their necessity as freedom, so to speak — but they do not define Sufi aesthetics.

Following Rancière, I define Sufi aesthetics as a discourse, a conscious way of evaluating not just religious practice but beauty. Indeed, the Sufi order that I know best and that I explore here — the Qadiriyya Boutshishiyya order — often defines itself as the "path of beauty" (*at-tariqa aj-jamaliyya*). While *practices* are imbued with aesthetic orientations, or attitudes toward the body, Sufi *aesthetics* are embodied in concepts such as *dhawq* (taste), and *sama*ʿ (audition) — terms that define realms both mundane and spiritual, quotidian and extraordinary.[6] Indeed, it is the capacity of "taste" and "listening" to broker these realms that make Sufi aesthetics so interesting and politically powerful.

Dhawq: The Taste of Sufism

A Sufi order is called a *tariqa* in Arabic, a "path." The initiate in Sufism ascends in levels of gnosis that are experiential. That is, they pass through stations (*maqamat*), levels of initiation, each with its own secret (*sirr*) to impart, whether it be clairvoyance, love, or other spiritual gifts. These stations are also referred to as "unveilings." As the initiate progresses on the path, more and more veils are dropped to reveal the Truth, *al-Haqq* (one name for God). On this path, "taste" is a metaphor for union with God insofar as the thing tasted and the taster become one. According to the *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, tasting

> refers to mystical intuition, that is, direct knowledge of invisible realities or of God. In a general sense, [it is] a synonym for *kashf* (unveiling) and *shuhud* (witnessing, contemplation). [It] connotes the incommunicability of unmediated knowledge. Often considered the initial stage of unveiling, to be followed by "drinking" (*shurb*) and "quenching" (*ri*). (2011)

The incorporation of divine knowledge — through drinking and eating — is a theme in Sufi hagiographies. Sufis in the Qadiriyya Boutshishiyya order tell the story of how a group of disciples went to see a respected shaykh in order to understand his "secret" — that is, the gift that he had to impart (in Sufism each shaykh has a different wisdom to transmit). The shaykh brought in a large platter of couscous but the disciples didn't eat it, preferring to be sated with knowledge. Finally one of the disciples decided to eat. He ate and ate until he could eat no more. His fellow disciples were appalled, judging him to be a glutton. When the shaykh returned he reproached the other disciples for not eating.

"We came for the secret," they said, "not to eat."

"But the secret was in the couscous," the shaykh answered.

This story illustrates not only that knowledge must be "ingested," taken into the physicality of the body, but that the mundane and the extraordinary are often found in the same locales and the same acts. Knowledge must be experienced to be known, and tasted to be appreciated.

Al-Ghazzali, the Sufi mystic of the 11th century, speaks of music in much the same way:

6. Sufi aesthetics also extend to the concept of *barzakh*, the in-between space, and the paradoxes to which it gives rise, but this falls out of the purview of this article.

> Even thus is the *tasting of music* and singing in the heart. After the sound has reached the ear it is perceived by an inward sense in the heart, and he who lacks that inevitably lacks the pleasure that goes with it. (Ghazzali 1901:230; emphasis added)

Al-Ghazzali here is talking about synesthesia, the translating or experiencing of one sense by another, such that music is not just heard with the ears but with the heart, it is tasted, known, incorporated. For the Sufis the heart is in fact a *sensory* organ. It is the seat of intuition. The heart is the conduit to the spirit in Sufism. As Ghazzali says, it is necessary not just to listen to music, but also to taste it with the heart. Taste is, according to the dictionary definition above, "mystical intuition," and—like music for Rancière—it is unmediated, bringing the experiencer into direct relation with her object.

Samaʿ: Listening

Listening, or what the Boutshishiyya's translate as "spiritual audition," is also a sense that straddles the mundane and the extraordinary. Like dhawq, the concept of samaʿ emerges from a philosophical and theological literature elaborated by Sufi scholars and poets.

To listen deeply involves an affective stance that, according to anthropologist Judith Becker (2004), is qualitatively different from other kinds of listening. For those who are able or trained to listen deeply, music evokes a profound emotional experience akin to trance, one that is often (though not necessarily) experienced in a group situation. According to composer Pauline Oliveros, who first coined the term, "deep listening" is a self-conscious and active listening that unlocks "layer after layer of imagination, memory and meaning down to the cellular level of human experience" (in Becker 2004:2; see also Oliveros 2005). For Oliveros, as for the Sufis who practice samaʿ, listening is not a passive perception, but is performative—that is, it does something in the world, engaging imagination, evoking memory but also creating meaning. Such active listening is in fact a performance that creates personal identity and social community (see Kapchan 2008). As there are styles of music that index certain identities (Feld 1982), so there are styles of listening that do the same.

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Samaʿ, or spiritual audition, has much in common with deep listening, though it necessarily entails the evocation of emotions specifically associated with the sacred. Indeed, as an explicit technique of initiation, the doctrine of samaʿ has been in the Sufi tradition for hundreds of years. According to ethnomusicologist Jean During (1993), samaʿ first appeared among the Sufis in Baghdad in the ninth century, and was elaborated in traditions and treatises that spread to the larger Islamic world. It is still employed today in places as different as Turkey, Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, Europe, and the United States.

Samaʿ is an aesthetic training and entrainment, one that moves easily across borders. Indeed learning to listen (deeply) in the context of Sufi initiation in France and elsewhere in Europe and the United States is a pedagogy that employs sound, prosody, memory, and emotion before passing on to anything resembling meaning or referential language. As Sufi aesthetics travel (from North Africa to France, for example), referential meaning is less important than the affective meaning embedded and embodied in the ritual form. This is not to say that this pedagogy is irrational, however. In fact, as a vehicle of affective communication, music and the emotion it evokes may be intricately involved with cognitive awareness and decision-making (Nussbaum 2001; Mithen 2006). Insofar as our affective states determine both our imaginations and our actions, listening (and the "tracks" it lays down in memory) has consequence in the world. Indeed, listening effects a restructuration of the phenomenological self not only in

the performance context but also subsequently, as the sounds continue to reverberate in memory and reorient motivations. Having experienced a corporeal (and, for Sufis, a spiritual) state of ecstasy, humans seek to repeat the experience. The music itself inhabits the initiate and the initiate inhabits the world having acquired a new "culture." Novice Sufis become literate in listening; that is they develop literacies in auditory practices (Kapchan 2009).

Sufis believe that the activity of spiritual audition polishes the heart, purifying the disciple and thereby making space for the love of God to inhabit the whole being. Moulay Mourad al-Qadiri Boudchich, leader of Tariqa Qadiriyya Boutshishiyya Samaʿ and Madih group, is quoted as saying:

> Samaʿ or spiritual audition is, with Dhikr (the invocation), a major pillar in Sufi education. The content of poems, the rhythm of singing and the whisper of melodies elevate the soul to the subtle presence of the divine Light. This saving Light purifies the soul from its imperfections which progressively transforms the vision we have of the world and the creation. The practice of samaʿ reveals the presence of God in any thing and by the same fact invites the aspirant to nobleness of the character. It is in this sense that the samaʿ is considered, in Sufism, a universal message of love and peace for all humanity. (tariqa.org 2009)

For this Sufi leader, samaʿ is a pedagogy whose practice benefits the individual and society at large. For the North African–identified Sunni Sufi in France, practicing the liturgy is a means of purification, a way of unveiling the secrets of the divine to the self and for the community. Part of this active cultivation of the ethical self is done through music. As one initiate told me, "every song contains its own secret [sirr]." While the place of music in orthodox Islam has always been debated, its place in Sufi ritual is codified. Indeed, the spiritual practice of samaʿ cultivates communion with God through (attentive) listening.[7]

The Aesthetics of the Invisible

Sound, Space, and Listening

Like developing a subtle and discerning palate, listening deeply is a technique that is learned, cultivated, and evaluated. While we talk about the material art of cooking and the physicality of making and producing music, the related senses of tasting and listening, though integral to cuisine and music, are less acknowledged. This is, in part, because listening and particularly tasting are lower in the hierarchy of the senses (Howes 2003). More aptly, however, tasting and listening are both *invisible* activities. They are perceptions, and as such, are experienced as deeply interior and private, despite the very intersubjective ground of sensory phenomena (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2005; see also Jackson 1995[8]).

Both dhawq and samaʿ are key metaphors on the Sufi path, for the invisible—what is impalpable and ephemeral—is often equated with the spiritual and with the faith necessary to understand it. We might proceed then to discuss the "aesthetics of the invisible" in Sufism, and how sound in particular becomes the (invisible) "ground" of personal and social transformation, as it permeates and defines space.

In *The Visible and the Invisible* (1969), Maurice Merleau-Ponty grapples with the notion of a perceiving subject with intentionality. Is it indeed intentionality that defines human Being and

7. William C. Chittick notes that invoking the names of God has practical effects: "Each of these words designates a mode of gaining direct knowledge of God and of the unseen worlds without the intermediary of study, teacher, or rational faculty. God 'opens up' the heart to the infusion of knowledge" (1989:xii).

8. Michael Jackson writes, "intersubjectivity is the interplay of subject and object, ego and alter. Singular selves are simultaneously part of a commonality, sole but also several, not only islands but part of the main [...] Intersubjectivity is steeped in paradox and ambiguity" (1995:6, 8).

consciousness? Merleau-Ponty refutes this. Where is the intentionality in the sense of touch, for example? He uses the illustration of one's left hand touching one's right to demonstrate that the subject is always both "touching and tangible" (133) a part of the perceiving world and a part of what is perceived. This is the same for vision. The subject is seer and seen, sensate and sensible. In other words, the invisible (an idea, for example) is inextricable from its incarnation, making it impossible to talk about a completely autonomous being defined by intentionality. Merleau-Ponty theorizes the inseparability of the visible and the invisible by talking about "flesh." Flesh (*chair* in French) is what Merleau-Ponty calls the intertwining and reversibility of the sensing and the sensed world. It is like connective tissue, the touching and the touched. While it is beyond the scope of this article to go into the nuance of Merleau-Ponty's thinking, these ideas bear upon Sufi aesthetics insofar as a listening subject is also part of the sounded environment and determined by it. When chanting vigorously for hours with others, who sings? Where is the intention in such communal voicing, or even in solo singing when the repertoire (what is sounded) is given and sacred? How does sound and sounding (or musicking, to use Christopher Small's term [1998]) create intersubjective social space, and what influence does the transformation of that aesthetic space have on the politics of religion and secularism in a place like France?

Merleau-Ponty is relevant for another reason as well, for although he never finished writing *The Visible and the Invisible*, he uses the example of music (particularly a musical phrase in Proust's oeuvre) to illustrate that meaning or ideas—themselves invisible—can be carried in sensate forms like music, which are also invisible yet remain material. In other words, music and language are both habitations of sorts, a "diaphanous body, but body nonetheless, which is capable of sedimentation, of forming a world which [...] houses the speaker" (Flynn 2004). Music may be invisible, but insofar as it is vibration (which must move something), it is material as well (Connor 2004; Erlmann 2010).

If listening is part of the aesthetics of the invisible—the other half of sound wherein the self is both itself and part of the world, an inter-corporeity[9]—then we have an interest in understanding how both listening and sound structure the shared environment. Music vibrates in space. It echoes, reverberates, resonates in a particular context. Phenomenologist Don Ihde calls this the "auditory field," that is, the bounded space in which sound both penetrates and surrounds the listener (2007:76). In any given auditory field sound may be both directional and omnipresent, that is we may locate it to the left or right of us, for example, we may experience it as emitting from our bodies, or surrounding and inhabiting us. This is a phenomenological view of sound in space. Acoustics play a part. The sound of a cello in an anechoic concert hall will be much different than the sound of the same cello in a living room. Likewise the effects of the sound, and the affect it produces, will be different according to the space in which it resounds. How might the auditory field of Sufi music in France determine its effects and affects?

The answer to this question is phenomenological (experiential) and sociological. As Steven Connor notes, "the most important distinguishing feature of auditory experience [...is] its capacity to disintegrate and reconfigure space" (1996:206). How sound affects the body is in part a subject for further studies in cognitive acoustics. However, examining the context of performance—its situation and active figuration of space—elucidates a lot about how a performance is perceived, experienced, and interpreted (Briggs and Bauman 1992). Sufi *rituals* occur in homes—domestic spaces; Sufi *performances* occur onstage, in public venues. Both are artistic and judged by similar if not the same criteria, yet what they enact or perform is quite different.

9. For Michael Jackson, "abstract ways of framing inquiry into the dialectic between local and global worlds, or between the particular and the universal, require existential-phenomenological deconstruction. This implies recovering what Milan Kundera has called the 'terra incognita of the everyday' (1980:5), where relationships are nothing if not social" (1995:3). See note 8.

At Home with the Sufis, and the Scandal of Sacred Public Performance in France

I return here to the scenario I started with: southern France, the Camargue, a small town dating from the 17th century. The houses are connected in town, and stand alone in the newer developments on the outskirts. And that's where a Sufi ceremony takes place. Samaʿ, spiritual audition, is one part of that ceremony.

A barrage of shoes sits just inside the entrance to the free-standing house. As in all North African households, shoes are taken off when entering the home and slippers put on so that the floor where people sit, eat, and ultimately pray (though this is done on prayer rugs), remains clean. To the right and up a few stairs is a living room. Usually there are several children there—the three children who live in the house, and the children of the women who come to worship. They are between the ages of five and twelve and entertain themselves and each other with a Wii on a large television screen while their mothers are together.

Across the hall is the room where the ritual takes place. It is long and lined with banquettes—North African sponge mattresses draped in material and low to the ground. On the floor is a large woolen rug, and on top of that, several smaller quilts where most of the women sit, their backs propped up against the banquettes. A fireplace that no longer works is on the far wall, a clock on its mantel. And a picture of the shaykh is above it.

The ceremony is supposed to start at 2:30, but because it is a long ceremony, and because life is busy and schedules complicated, women arrive over the course of an hour, joining those who have already arrived in silent prayer. The women enter the room quietly, put *djellabas* (Moroccan robes) on top of their jeans, tie up their hair in scarves, and sit down, often draping another large scarf over their crossed legs. If they haven't done their noon prayers yet, because of family obligations or work, they pray on the sides of the room before taking their place with the others. When the silent prayer is over, often comprised of thousands of repetitions of *la ilaha ila allah*, "there is no god but God," the latecomers greet the others with kisses on each cheek. When everyone is assembled (from 10 to 25 women, depending on the day), the voiced liturgy begins.

The word "liturgy" in English comes from the Latin, meaning "work." In Arabic, the roots are the same: *wadhifa*, liturgy, comes from the trilateral root *wa dh fa*, "to work." In his meditation on the subject, Emmanuel Levinas considers liturgy to be a work in common for the group, a sacrifice of sorts that builds community (1982). Furthermore, it enacts an ethical relation between social actors.[10] Voicing prayers in common joins individuals together in a work that creates a third thing—not one, not the other, but a third space of intersubjective and intersensorial commonality. What's more, this work is done through the evocation of the aesthetics of the invisible, that is, listening together while inhabiting the same acoustic field.

When the prayers are over, the repetitions of the names of God begin (the dhikr, or remembrance section of the ritual). After that, the women return to close with the prayers. Immediately following the closure, there is a "lesson," and then the songs begin. As mentioned earlier, at all stages of the ceremony, deep listening is practiced. Listening in common is an initiation that creates a "performative community" that goes on to live a life of its own outside the performance context.

That the ceremony begins with the liturgy is important, as it distinguishes the religious ritual practiced in the home from the public performances. The ritual, that is, has a liturgical frame, while the public performances extract the song component of the ritual and put it

10. Levinas defines liturgy as "the putting out of funds at a loss" and, "The work of the Same inasmuch as movement without return of the Same toward the Other. [...] Furthermore, as an absolutely patient action, liturgy is not to be ranked as a cult besides work and ethics. It is ethics itself" (1982:192; my translation).

on acoustic display. Public performances of Sufi song take place in venues such as community and civic centers, and educational settings. They are sponsored by "associations"—or not-for-profit organizations—that are, by definition, secular (because they are subsidized by the French state), but that perform "Sufi music"—a recognized genre of world music—for popular audiences. Sufi music attracts a diverse audience, from French neo-hippie yuppies (*bobos*, in French), to world music aficionados and second and third generation North Africans interested in their roots.

The performance of religious music on the secular stage in France creates an interesting and sometimes paradoxical social tension. I attended two such performances when I lived in France in 2008/09—one at a civic center in Nimes, a provincial capital in southern France and another, which I curated, at New York University in Paris. Both performances were given by members of the Boutshishiyya order—one the all-male group, the other, the all-female group. An analysis of these performances elucidates the political import of the "aesthetics of the invisible," in this case, Sufi aesthetics.

The performance at the Civic Center was attended by about 30 to 40 people. The Sufi women brought food for a reception after the concert. The men sang continuously (that is, without pauses between songs, and without an intermission) and the audience was respectful and, by all appearances, appreciative of the music. After the hour-long performance, several audience members lingered, ate, and talked with the musicians, but for the most part it was a concert just like any other, with the audience members listening respectfully and the singers fulfilling their role as musicians. There was no palpable co-performance between audience members and singers.

The concert at New York University–Paris was more eventful. I had arranged for the group Silsila to perform at the campus in the 16th arrondissement in Paris, housed in an old mansion with a beautiful courtyard off Rue de Passy. NYU was interested in "outreach" to the community, and the Sufis, it turned out, were interested in gaining a foothold in American educational institutions both in order to increase their visibility as Sufi entertainers who were available to do concerts, and to share their "path" with those who, after exposure to the music, might be drawn to the more devotional side of things.

The assistant director for academics at NYU–Paris facilitated the organization of the concert. She asked if there would be a fee, but the Sufis were adamant about performing for free. She told me that there were not a lot of students in the summer, and that the concert would probably be sparsely attended. This turned out not to be the case, although she was right that not many students were there.

I arrived early to meet with a filmmaker who wanted to interview me about my previous research on the Gnawa. Jacques Willemont and his assistant set up their camera in a side-room and I sat on a couch and answered questions. Later I asked Jacques to stay and record the Sufi concert and he did.

About 30 minutes before the show the young women in the group arrived. They were all wearing long pink djellebas with matching headscarves. While this did not present a problem for me, I realized later that it might have been offensive to some audience members who were sympathetic to the French policy of not displaying any sartorial signs of religiosity in public institutions. The chairs were set up in the front of a lovely room with high ceilings and the young women assembled, without microphones. In the next room, soft drinks and snacks were on the table.

Meanwhile the audience members were arriving. Most of them were members of the Sufi order. First- and second-generation North African men in casual pants and jackets entered the mansion, greeted each other, and mingled. There were some French women converts in Western dress talking with the singers and helping to set up. The grandson of the shaykh himself, Sidi Mounir, arrived in a formal blue suit. The room had about 40 chairs for audience

members. There was standing room only by the time the concert began. Only four members of the audience were NYU students, and three were NYU-affiliated faculty and administrators.

I stepped up to the front of the room. Originally I thought I would be speaking to a largely Western audience of American summer-school students and thus I had planned to introduce the group in English and to say a bit about the Sufi order and the basic beliefs that Sufis hold about music and its power to create an experience of unity with God. Given the large majority of Sufi Muslims in the audience, however, I was a bit perplexed. Without thinking, I switched to French, and began speaking not as a scholar, but as a symbolic member of the order—that is, as the Sufis know me, a researcher who participates in the ceremonies. It was a moment of ethnographic schizophrenia for me, but I was used to such moments. I still talked about the meaning of samaʿ and about unity with the divine, but somehow my use of French brought me closer to the subject, most likely because I don't master it as well as I do English. The public affect I share with the Sufis by dint of chanting and singing with them was seeping out into my public and professional persona.

The Sufis sang, the soloist employing a high nasal vibrato, the chorus answering in smooth harmonies. The Sufis in the audience began closing their eyes and swaying. As is often the case in the Middle East and North Africa, the audience expressed their appreciation of particular virtuosic turns of phrase by exclaiming "allah!" (God!).

After the concert, the shaykh's grandson, who is also responsible for the largest branch of the order in Paris, spoke at length with the assistant director. He was interested, he said, in doing more concerts with NYU-Paris and in deepening the ties between the order and the institution, including the home campus in New York City. He was in networking mode. She listened politely, as did I. I hadn't expected this to happen, but I went with it. What else could I do? To my left, however, I was over-hearing another, very different conversation. Apparently one of the NYU administrators—and the wife of a prominent scholar in Paris—was outraged that what she thought was going to be a musical performance had turned into a sacred ritual. Indeed, I had noticed her unease during the concert, as the Sufis in the audience became more and more transported by the music. Clearly a border had been transgressed between the secular and the sacred as performed in a public space. But listening practices were also at play. It was the ability to listen deeply—to taste the music, in Ghazzali's words—that contributed to the ambiance in the room. Whereas the first Sufi music concert was "heard" in conventional ways (that is, by people untrained in the "literacy of listening" employed in Sufi samaʿ ceremonies), the second exhibited the effects of listening as an active performance—namely the creation of a sacred and public affect that was palpable. Given music's ability to inhere (in-hear) in bodies and space, the intersubjective act of listening together (a kind of commensality of tasting the music) actually sacralized the space, much to the chagrin of the secular audience members present.

Sound Does Not Stay Put

New Sensoriums in New Places

If, as Erlmann notes, "twentieth-century mass-culture is fundamentally a culture of distraction" and if "attentive listening and distracted hearing [... have been] fundamentally [...] determined by capitalist social relations and the rise of mass cultural consumption" (2010:20–21), then the Sufi movement in Europe is, in part, a response and alternate mode of being-in-the-world. It is a world that speaks back bodily (and not just discursively) to what one khalifa referred to as the "radical secularism" of French society. To be sure, both attentive listening and distracted hearing are woven into capitalist production. Despite the fact that the Sufis did *not* get any money for either public performance, they do make use of the popularity of world music and the category of "Sufi Music" to get gigs and, perhaps, converts. However, this is not to diminish the importance of deep listening in processes of self-formation. Samaʿ, spiritual audition, is what Foucault has called a "technology of the self," that is, a way individuals "effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls,

thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (1988:18). Although it is usually learned in ritual contexts (in this case, in homes), it is not exclusive to these. In other words, deep listening can happen anywhere (Kapchan 2007a). What is certain is that listening as well as musical production transform the auditory field and imbue it with shared affect. This becomes clear when we compare Sufi music reception in different contexts. It is not (only) the place that determines public affect (though architecture certainly produces affect as well), but it is also a matter of listening practices. This is where the political import of the "aesthetics of the invisible" becomes relevant. The restructuration of the self through listening transforms not just the self, but community and place.

Sacred music in secular places does not constitute a threat to the French state and its policies. It does, however, subtly change the relation of aesthetic comportment to public affect, and, in the process, restructures not just subjectivity, but communal space. In so doing, practices of secularism also change incrementally, so that Sarkozy himself called for a "laicité positive," a positive secularism, one that accepts the presence of religion in the public sphere rather than making it anathema. The aesthetics of the invisible work to stretch and remold practice in small but traceable ways.

The aesthetics of the invisible—listening and tasting as performative events—transform the very way we define walls, and the spaces between them.

Ironically the introduction of the invisible aesthetics of "private" religion into the public sphere is accompanied by an inversion; namely the transformation of the home into a public sanctuary. When I visited the Sufis in the south of France in 2010, I had a surprise. I went to the house where the ceremonies take place, but when I opened the door to the living room, I found myself not in the living room (or salon) but in an alcove. Like Alice falling down the rabbit hole, I was in front of doors. Opening the door before me, I discovered a bathroom, with a shower and a sink for ablutions. On my left was another door that led to the room where the ceremonies usually took place. Entering that door, I found the living room transformed, the banquettes and table gone, the floor covered with thick woolen rugs, as in a mosque. The home—or at least this room in it—had been transformed into a sanctuary, a *zawiya*.

The aesthetics of the invisible—listening and tasting as performative events—transform the very way we define walls, and the spaces between them. Homes become sanctuaries and institutions become "homes" for formerly private rituals.[11] Sufi practice exemplifies what Lauren Berlant calls the creation of "public intimacy," that is, "modes of attachment that make persons public and collective and that make collective scenes intimate spaces" (1998:2).[12] It was the intimacy of sacred affect that so disturbed the French attendee at the NYU concert. The performance of the aesthetics of the invisible creates new forms of being and new forms of home that

11. As Bachelard notes, both "room and house are psychological diagrams that guide writers and poets in their analysis of intimacy" ([1958] 1994:38).

12. See also Herzfeld (2003); Stokes (2010); and Bachelard ([1958] 1994). For Herzfeld, "cultural intimacy" is "a fascinating paradox that exists when some citizens reject state-sanctioned cultural and legal norms, yet in times of crisis become the most loyal of citizens. [...] Structural nostalgia is a longing for a past characterized by mutual respect and reciprocity, or by other forms of harmony and balance, and is also structural in the sense that it remains as an institutionalized ache from generation to generation" (2003:227 n12). Bachelard notes: "My research is devoted to the domain of intimacy, to the domain in which psychic weight is dominant. [...] I shall therefore put my trust in the power of attraction of all the domains of intimacy. There does not exist a real intimacy that is repellent. All the spaces of intimacy are designated by an attraction. Their being is well-being" ([1958] 1994:12).

are palpable, transforming the thresholds of private and public religious performance in Europe in the process (Hirschkind 2006; Stokes 2010).[13] While opinions differ about the changing parameters of secularism in France, there is little doubt that change is afoot, or rather, in the (invisible) air.

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13. Speaking of the Enlightenment's concern with the aesthetic, Eagleton notes, "The aesthetic, then, marks the way in which structures of power became gradually transmuted into structures of feeling, ethical doctrine dissolved into the spontaneous texture of subjective life. Custom, virtue, habit took over from direct and naked authority, so that the laws which govern subjects were to be felt as directly pleasurable, intuitively enjoyable, aesthetically appropriate. The aesthetic signals the birth of a new kind of spontaneous consensus among social subjects, one whose locus is neither the state (ultimately a coercive force) nor civil society (a place of atomised, competitive individuals) but the realm of 'culture' itself. An intimately interpersonal *Gemeinschaft* (community) is mapped on to a brutally appetitive *Gesellschaft* (society). If bourgeois society, by a tragic historical irony, tends continually to undermine in its fragmenting social and economic activities the very solidarity it requires for its own political reproduction, then a realm beyond both state and civil society can be discovered in which that spontaneous consensus can be nurtured and perpetuated" (1990:54–55).

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