

Barzakh: The Sound Body as Ontology

Delineated by twelfth-century Sufi mystic and philosopher Ibn al-'Arabi, the realm of the barzakh is where material worlds are spiritualized and immaterial worlds are made corporeal. It is a realm of vibration, sometimes taking color and shape, sometimes sounded, sometimes ineffable but felt. We can think of a barzakh as a "change in ontological register" (Crapanzano 2004: 14), a way of superseding the merely human. Rocks vibrate at a different frequency than mountains or humans or symphonies, words or paintings (see Whitehead 1929). All sentient beings experience only the world their senses reveal. The difference in these worlds lies as much in the instruments or technologies of perception (in this case bodies), as in the things themselves. A barzakh itself is an isthmus, a passage between, in which divine knowledge is apprehended in the only way humans can understand—through symbols. These symbols—whether sonic, imagistic, or embodied—are not simulacra, but materializations of divine knowledge in the realm of human perception. In other words, a barzakh is not a representation but a material reality: "there are only barzakhs," says Ibn al-'Arabi (Chittick 1989). What exists is a function of our ability to perceive it. For the Sufi, this means acceding to levels of gnosis that consequently open onto other, more subtle worlds. Listening is a port of entry as well as a method for the realization of the sound body. Indeed, while sonic religious practices are often thought to be conservative, Sufi listening may be said to "queer" conventional listening practices in order to exceed the limits of human experience (Brett and Wood 1994).

As one Sufi soloist said to me recently, "I am going to stop singing sama' soon." "Why?" I asked, surprised. "I listen differently now than I did before," she answered. "Before I used to hear the songs. I heard their tempo, their rhythm. I liked some songs a lot. But now," she continued, "I hear vibration. It may be selfish to want to just listen, but you have to be selfish sometimes. If a plate of food passes before you and you don't take anything from it, you'll be hungry." For this Sufi, listening is more important than singing. Despite the fact that she is a respected, renowned, and recorded singer of Sufi song, she would rather listen to vibrations.

Such sonic rapture through listening is not unique to Sufis of course. Indeed, listening as a mode or method of gnosis exists in many traditions. Tanya Luhrmann discusses how Pentecostal Christians in the United

States hear what they describe as the voice of God through “learning to listen” (Luhrmann 2012; also see Kapchan 2009; Henriques 2011: 88–122). Drawing on the theories of Donald Winnicott, Luhrmann attributes this to the ability of humans to develop a “theory of mind” that is porous to its social environment. But this listening is also a deep identification with the sound body, a body attuned to and transformed by the vibrations of its environment—in this case, one in which the presence of an invisible intelligence (God) is felt. Psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu would say that the ego skin of the sonorous body is thin and thus available to other influences (Anzieu 1995 [1987]). There are many examples of artists, mystics, and others possessed by spirits who develop, either willfully or accidentally, a porosity between material and imaginal realms of sound (Friedson 1996; Masquelier 2001; Becker 2004; Oliveros 2005; Trower 2012). Such sublime experiences with sound are not confined to sacred traditions but can be found in popular forms such as Jamaican dancehall (Henriques 2011) or the genre of Noise in Japan (Novak 2013). In these contexts, participants create and submit themselves to experiences of such sensory intensity that the body’s boundaries dissipate in the “ever-present now” (Bergson 2007). Sublimity is corporeal: sound knowledge circulates in the “feedback” between body and body, body and environment, body and machine (Racy 2003; Novak 2013).

Where Sufi practices differ from some of these practices is not necessarily in Sufis’ faith or deism but in their belief that the human body itself contains technologies that remain hidden to the self, which are revealed at different *maqam*, or stations of initiation. *Maqam* is also the word for a musical scale, with each note as a progressive step, each stage holding its own secrets and methods. These are the technologies that take the Sufi into other worlds of perception in the same way the stethoscope takes us into rhythms not usually heard (Sterne 2003) or the telephone into spaces the physical body cannot transverse (Mills 2012). This is the sound body: a resonant body that is porous, that transforms according to the vibrations of its environment, and correspondingly transforms that environment.

Despite its cultural ubiquity, however, the sound body—a body able to transform by resonating at different frequencies—is the marked status of human beings, that is, a state socially designated as standing apart from the norm. Why is this the case?