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## The Shifting Genres of Middle Eastern Registers of Political Communication

**The ethical soundscape: cassette sermons and Islamic counterpublics.** *Hirschkind, Charles.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2006. xi + 270 pp.

**The moral resonance of Arab media: audiocassette poetry and culture in Yemen.** *Miller, Flagg.* Cambridge, MA: Center for Middle Eastern Studies of Harvard University, 2007. xxiv + 525 pp.

**Peripheral visions: publics, power, and performance in Yemen.** *Wedeen, Lisa.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. xv + 300 pp.

“The [Second World] War ended the period of European ascendancy, and opened the way to that of the United States and Russia, expressing itself not in direct political control but in a final military and economic power. The unrest generated by war, the spread of education, the growth of cities and industry, and the use of the new mass media brought about a change in the scale of political life: there was a broader field of political action, and a large public for ideas and rhetoric.”

Thus one of the great intellectual historians of the Middle East, Albert Hourani, re-appraised in his preface the period he had described as an epilogue in the first edition of *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939* (1983: vii; first edition 1961). Through and through an intellectual historian, Hourani’s famous book introduced the reader to Arab writers who responded to the challenges posed by the modernization processes associated with European ascendancy over the Middle East in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For Hourani, the ideas of these Arab writers had a specific form: he spent a great deal of time describing, for example, how Arabic terms came to articulate emergent political concepts (e.g., *watan* used by Rifa’a Tahtawi in the late 1860s for a territorial patriotism to Egypt, along the lines of French *patrie*, 1983:77–80). Hourani even included, as a prelude, those terms used by the earliest Islamic scholars in the Middle East as well as by the Ottoman state. In a sense, his book not only depicted how these terms came to be re-defined as part of the transformative periods in which the thinkers wrote, but also—to use our current vocabulary—how they came to be enregistered (cf. Agha 2007) as terms which signal political communication, and which can thus invoke the very genres of public interaction that have stimulated so much interest and insight in studies of modern polity (e.g., Habermas 1989 [1962], Anderson 1991, Warner 1990). Form for Hourani did not stop at the analysis of such terms, as he also questioned along the way how new media like newspapers and radio were giving form to ideas and making them pertinent for political action (like in the opening quote).<sup>1</sup> However much he had studied the form of ideas, in the preface to the second edition, Hourani looked back at his study and found that there was still much left to do in order to elucidate the impact of the emergent “ideas and rhetoric” on Middle Eastern polities: to answer questions about the influence of these ideas “would involve a fuller and more precise study of changes in the structure of society from one generation to another [. . .] and also some attempt to study the process of communication, both direct and indirect. The ideas I was concerned with did not spread only through the writings of those whose work I

1. The preceding was written prior to the uprisings of the Arab Spring, but clearly Hourani’s work as well as that of the authors under review take on a new meaning now.

studied, but were mediated to a larger public in writings of another kind, and above all in poetry" (1983:vii–viii).

Sixty years after the first edition of Hourani's influential book, the three books under review explore some of the terrain that Hourani felt missing from his own analysis of the way "ideas" had changed Middle Eastern societies. Two are written by anthropologists and one by a political scientist. Yet all are conversant to lesser or greater degrees with linguistic anthropological methods, agendas and theories, and they center on what Hourani termed "the process of communication" for a great deal of their analysis. Lisa Wedeen's book suggests a "performative" approach to the politics of public discourse in Yemen, as she considers whether and how a weak state and uncertain democratic process inter-relate. Charles Hirschkind describes listening to cassette sermons in Egypt as part of the larger Islamic Revival, with its own oppositional politics involving a sense for public space. Flagg Miller discusses the changing production of poetry in Yemen with the enormous expansion of cassette tape technology, and the subsequent circulation this enabled. As such, all three include rich descriptions of political communication, and how the practices of participating in political processes are shifting in Egypt and Yemen. They also correct the bias towards written communication, taking very seriously how the media involved impact communicative experience as well as semiotic form. This in itself makes all three, each sophisticated and riveting in its own method of analysis, interesting to linguistic anthropologists, for there is much to consider about the use of language and the shifting ground of oratory in these two countries.

Moreover, all three authors are engaging with recent questions of how effective publics and even counter-publics arise in post-colonial Middle Eastern countries, at a time when such analysis is increasing in importance (Starrett 2008). A key issue is how to understand the effects of the circulation of discourse on deliberative politics, and the emergence of stranger sociality, in societies which do not conform to implied assumptions about the West in the study of publics. Paul Manning (forthcoming) critiques such assumptions, arguing that social imaginaries like nations and publics maintain Occidental assumptions about the "we" who can speak, defined against an Oriental stranger of a different and inassimilable quality: "the narrative of publics was by definition unable to absorb the very alterity that it had created in order to define itself." How such cultures of circulation arise in places that are considered outside of or bordering the West, like Georgia in Manning's case, not only illuminates our paradigmatic examples but also elaborates how such geographies of the imagination are constitutive of publicity. The timely monographs under review thus complicate our understanding of the formation of modern polities around public culture in countries which are typically understood as non-West, and yet where there is an overdetermined comparison to a fully modernized West. At the same time, instead of using the intellectual historian's terms, like the "thinkers" and "ideas" about which Hourani wrote, these scholars now consider discursive practices where language form and function play an integral part.

Each book, in its own way, seeks to document and describe how the sites of public interaction produce participation structures that can be replicated or partially transposed across several distinct events of interaction.<sup>2</sup> All three are further interested in connecting this description to a relation with the state, which takes center stage in Wedeen's study. Likewise, each places their description in a history of modern Middle Eastern countries that includes the friction-replete colonial period, British in each case, and then the politically unstable and ambivalent process of decolonization afterwards. In all three books there are also references to earlier periods, even to the moment of the conquest by the first Islamic powers. The historical references are generally connected by the authors to the current moment of re-constituting cultures of circulation through innovative forms of discourse—innovative in the complex ways that the illocutionary practices of several recognized sites are brought to bear on an emerging reality. Although post-colonialism is not necessarily the main focus of any of these monographs, each provides insight into the formation of mass-mediated political spheres after decolonization. Other questions taken up include: circulation through transnational migrant groups; the forging of

2. The emphasis here is on themes interesting to linguistic anthropology. The reader is directed to the many useful reviews that have appeared for areal or other disciplinary considerations. Reviews of Wedeen's book have appeared in *American Journal of Sociology*, *Choice*, *The Middle East Journal*, *Middle East Policy*, *Nations and Nationalism*, and *Perspectives on Politics* (this last one with a interesting response by Wedeen that *inter alia* takes up her critique of Foucauldian approaches to colonialism); reviews of Hirschkind are found in *Comparative Studies of Society and History* (as part of Starrett's review article), *Contemporary Islam* (by Flagg Miller), *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, *Journal of the Royal Institute of Anthropology*, *Political Theory*, and *Social Forces*; and reviews of Miller are in *Comparative Studies of Society and History* and *Middle East Journal*.

state and incomplete hegemonies without paradigmatic civil society institutions; and the emergence of new institutional sites through practices of engaging with and through media. Besides the clear ties to linguistic anthropology, these books also share ground with neighboring subdisciplines like the anthropology of the media, religion, democracy, and the state, all of which involve an analysis of the discursive aspects of collective social action.

In their explorations of publics, democracy, nationalism, and religious community, one problem that arises in explicit and implicit ways is the issue of participation. To get at the problem, we can usefully distinguish two meanings to participation: (a) how a subject with real political agency can form in some national-historical process or the like, and (b) how that subject formation is locatable to regular discursive interactional participation in concrete events of communication. The latter meaning, which I will dub “interactional,” arises in linguistic anthropology especially in light of Goffman’s work considering interactional roles in terms of footing, production format, and participation framework (e.g., 1976, 1979). The former meaning, which I will dub “political,” of course has multiple and lengthy traditions, including theories of politics and representation.<sup>3</sup> It is the mapping between interactional participation and narratives about political participation that seems to constitute much of the vexing detail in current debates.<sup>4</sup> Wedeen, to take one example, in her arguments in chapter 3 against minimalist definitions of democracy, takes the *qāt* chew as establishing a site for public discourse that can be counted as deliberative in line with Jürgen Habermas’ and Hannah Arendt’s ideas.<sup>5</sup> (*Qāt* is a mildly stimulating leaf that is chewed during discussions that can occur over several hours, and during which participants might also listen to or discuss poetry or newspaper articles. The event takes place in a specified room of the host’s house, the *mabraz*, “literally ‘a place of visible distinction,’ which is a long, upper-story room lined with floor mats and colorful cushions. The *mabraz* accommodates a household’s most public activities,” Miller, p. 89; see also Wedeen, pp. 120–124.) In a sense, the question suggested by Wedeen’s discussion, and in different ways by Hirschkind and Miller, is how participation in such concrete events on a regular basis can lead to an understanding of a collectivity of participation on a much larger scale, to underwrite the ideas of nationhood, religious community or a (counter)public.

The question is complicated by the position of the Middle East as a world region, and the issue of its modernization. As mentioned, all three authors relate discursive shifts to rapid or large-scale social change, especially due to colonial incursion and decolonization processes. Hirschkind describes in his second chapter the received historiographical sweep of Egypt, where the state (from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century on) led reform of social and economic life, including the eventual recruitment of preachers for disseminating a message about the need for national and individual progress (esp. pp. 40–50). Miller situates the emergence of the cassette recording industry starting in the 1940s alongside the British rule in Yemen, which brought about large-scale political economic changes as integration into new markets and the expansion of arms distribution shifted existing power structures and accentuated the disparity between Aden as a busy colonial port and its hinterlands (pp. 44–45, 148–149, 217–219, 230). Wedeen also considers at different points both the colonial and post-colonial situation of Yemen, its endemic poverty and high illiteracy rates and how this conditions solidarities; for example, low literacy rates and limited distribution of printed materials seem to have left radio as the fundamental technology of national unity in the fifties (pp. 39–49). At the same time, Wedeen and also Hirschkind stress that they do not grant deterministic causal force to international political-economic dynamics in explaining the emergence or strengthening of forms of interaction. Here, they are concerned to undermine strong assumptions in their respective literatures, as well as more broadly in public debates, that greater religiosity or piety is simply a response to uneven economic development or neoliberal restructuring. Likewise, all three authors consider their arguments to be battling descriptions that would present these Middle Eastern societies in the civilizationalist or Orientalist lights common to many public debates

3. One example of the narrative shift in the locus of political agency is analyzed by Partha Chatterjee (1992), when he compares an early 19<sup>th</sup> century Puranic history of India, written by a Brahmin scholar and focusing on kings and gods, and a late 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalist history, written by a generation educated by the English and centering on “the people” who can govern themselves. As Chatterjee describes, the nationalist historiography is based on a distinct notion of political participation.

4. An example of a description of this mapping comes from Michael Warner (2002:89), as he considers the attribution of agency to publics: “The attribution of agency to publics works, in most cases, because of the direct transposition from acts of private reading to the figuration of sovereign opinion.”

5. Wedeen explains the minimalist accounts, associated with the work of Joseph Schumpeter from the fifties, as measuring democracy worldwide according to the presence of uncertain election outcomes (pp. 70, 105–113).

in the North Atlantic (Hirschkind, pp. 4–5, 17, 205–207; Wedeen, pp. 103–120; Miller, pp. 1–2).<sup>6</sup> In essence, they seek to combat such ideas, and thus of course participate in the shaping of public discourse.

How then do these authors, or linguistic anthropology more generally, account for the shifting (if not “modernizing”) processes and regional specificity of the Middle East as aspects of the emergence of new forms of political communication? That is, how does one account for this relation without resorting to mechanistic explanations or civilizational discourses of the sort the authors are interested in overcoming? One phenomenon that seems to recur across these descriptions involves sites like the *mabraz* and the discussion which occurs during the *qāt* chew. That is, the possibility of the emergence of genres of interaction where the deliberation can take on a “public” nature,<sup>7</sup> in that the interactional texts achieved are typically considered to produce what Michael Warner (1992) has called “mass subjects”—a particular type of reflexivity about one’s consociates that generally is called “stranger sociality.” In modern polities, these genres are associated primarily with the consolidation of mass mediated communication, and can even be ideologically equated with the means to such communication. These authors, then, are describing a very complex process in the shift of political communication, as well as establishing the parameters along which these historical trajectories occurred in the Middle East.

With this in mind, the above question can be re-worded: how can these sites come to support and instantiate such interaction, and how do they change as a result? One part of the answer these works suggest involves the registers used and juxtaposed. Miller, with his background in linguistic anthropology, focuses on this explicitly, but both Wedeen and Hirschkind write extensively about this issue as well. In essence these books help to show how registers and genres come into relation, in ways that point to an opening for linguistic anthropologists interested in contributing to these debates.<sup>8</sup> Such considerations in Middle Eastern polities also gives us an empirically-grounded starting point to revisit some of the assumptions Manning criticizes in theories of public discourse. I will now go through the specific arguments of each author to consider how these relations are drawn out.

Lisa Wedeen has many goals for her book *Peripheral Visions*, which she organizes and juxtaposes as the interaction of “solidarities,” national, democratic, and pious. Each becomes the focus in one of the chapters, and, in line with the serious attention Wedeen pays to the scholarly literature on the discursive organization of modern polities, all examine language use. Here, I want to accentuate her arguments about democracy and deliberation in the Yemeni *qāt* chews, especially in light of what she writes about the inability of the Yemeni state to mete out order and deliver socio-economic stability and welfare in the ways strong states do.

Wedeen paints a fascinating picture of politics in Yemen, where ‘Alī ‘Abdallah Ṣaleḥ, who gained power in the North in 1978 after a military career, has remained president since the unification of North and South in 1990, despite a civil war in 1994. Yemen she classifies as a weak state, with a highly armed population that does not necessarily respond to the leadership of Ṣaleḥ (pp. 80–81). Thus, there is no possibility to meet the Weberian criterion of a state that can monopolize the legitimacy of physical force to enforce its political order. Further, Wedeen describes a state apparatus that relies heavily on foreign aid, with a long history of intervention by neighbors and great powers, and an economy that is bolstered through remittances from emigrants (pp. 58–59). In this light, she considers revealing examples where Ṣaleḥ’s government “acted like a state,” including foreclosing on a free election in 1999, despite facing only weak competition and the importance of international recognition, and spending an

6. Strictly speaking, Wedeen does not use the terms “civilizational” nor “Orientalist”; however her account and critique of formalist theories of democracy often makes reference to the assumptions involved in taking North Atlantic countries as paradigmatic (e.g., her critique of Adam Przeworski et al.’s *Democracy and Development*, pp. 106–111).

7. To be more exact, genres are always “of interaction.” I add the modification to avoid formalist definitions and thus to emphasize that genres should not be understood to arise only where one participant (collective or individual) is considered the single author, or at least held responsible for the text, but rather shape an interaction between the various participants, and can even emerge in context. Linguistic anthropological takes on genre, especially following the work of Bakhtin (e.g., 1984, 1986) can be found in Hanks (1987, 1996a, 1996b: 242–246, 259–265, 2005:75), Briggs and Bauman (1992), and Silverstein (2005).

8. Bakhtin (1986: 63–67) himself noted the “inseparable” relation between style and speech genres. Much of what he called style can now be understood in light of Agha’s work on register. I do not have space here to elaborate on what I term the “dialectics of genre and register,” which I have sketched out elsewhere (Paz 2010:7–19). Essentially, drawing on linguistic anthropological accounts, I argue that genre is a cross-cutting principle of textuality with register, focusing attention on how form-function regularities help institutionalize the achievement of interactional text, that is, achieving certain goals interactionally.

extravagant \$180 million on the decennial celebration of unification, despite the poverty of resources (pp. 69–88). Such displays are important, she argues, to maintain a compelling sense that a state exists.

It is in this context that Wedeen takes up the question of how to assess democracy generally, and in Yemen specifically, and turns to the work of Habermas and Arendt as a lens on the interactional practices involved. Dedicating an engaging chapter to the question, she espouses a substantivist position against the formalism of the minimalist account (see n. 4 above), and then describes the *qāt* chews as instantiating “minipublics.”<sup>9</sup> By substantivist, she means essentially that genres of interaction have been institutionalized where a democratic form of personhood can be inhabited, and where—following Habermas and Warner closely here—such regular interactions “promote citizen awareness and produce subjects who critically debate political issues, allow participants to build an agonistically inclined political world in which disagreements are entertained in common” (p. 120). Critical of Habermas for assuming that the urban, bourgeois family was the necessary condition for the mass subject, and noting that Yemen remains 75% rural and decidedly not bourgeois, she gives evidence for the growth in the occurrence in such discussions, apparently moving from a decidedly aristocratic forum to (as she puts it) an “everyday” habit of conversation. At the same time, she describes types and qualities of *qāt* chews: some are more formal, men generally meet separately from women, meetings are in principle open to anyone, and certain speakers control the agenda better or hold the floor with greater effect. She also notes that the discussions can refract through other sites, including newspapers and mosque sermons. Some *qāt* chews help to defer or even stave off violence in locales where state-centered mediation does not exist. Şaleḥ is known to monitor *qāt* chews of political elites, and even makes veiled references to them in speeches.

This gives evidence for the political nature of *qāt* chews, as Wedeen points out. Beyond that, she wants to show that this represents a site for some substantive democratic practice to develop. She cites examples where opposition to or critique of Şaleḥ’s regime arises from *qāt* chews. One involved an opposition figure who tried to drum up support for his party by visiting chews; another occurred when a political scientist wrote a series of newspaper articles after a *qāt* chew. Here is found the democratic effect of such genres of interaction: “The democratic nature of *qāt* chews stems from the kind of political subject formation that takes place through the practice of discussion and deliberation in public” (pp. 140–141). Regular participation in the interactional sense leads to democratic agency in the political sense. Further, when the circulatory effects of such repeated discussions is sufficiently broad, then, argues Wedeen, the possibility of national imagining arises (p. 142).

But Wedeen reports other kinds of interactions besides political speech at *qāt* chews, resulting in the question: how do participants recognize semiotically that a political deliberation is occurring? She herself notes that there are different footings available to interactants, and that there are hierarchies of speakers. Further, there are some informal *qāt* chews, especially for nonelite women or teenaged girls in rural environments, where Wedeen classifies the talk as “family business” or “neighborhood gossip,” that is, contradistinguished with that of actual political participation (pp. 120–121, 244 n. 26). For people that do not participate actively in a political *qāt* chew, or else do not have regular access to the masculine and elite genres of political speech, is it the case that their interactional participation does not map into any sort of political participation? Given that she also describes some elite women as engaging in political speech at their *qāt* chews, if not in the same structured way, it seems clear that participants recognize signs that an interaction is occurring with political stakes involved. From the description, the mapping between interactional and political participation turns on this point.

Wedeen draws attention to part of an answer about the semiotic means that enables this mapping in her review of Habermas, as well as her earlier chapters where she covers the history of the expansion of a Yemeni political public sphere. She in essence argues for attending to the enregistering of a political vocabulary within the emergent genres of mass political communication. For example, she notes in Habermas’ argument about the potential expansion of the bourgeois public sphere that he points to the generation of “a vocabulary for and practice of critical debate conducive to the “freedom of the individual in general” (56)” (p. 116, referring

9. As an aside, it bears mentioning that this term could be misleading. While Wedeen *is* careful to note that such events result in and derive from a historically-constituted reflexivity that other Yemenis are involved in such communicative events, and thus a public can be said to have formed, it seems preferable to choose terminology that represents the token-type relation implied, rather than suggest that each event incorporates all the qualities of what is projected by the achieved interdiscursivity. As Craig Calhoun (1992:37) put it, “It might be productive rather to think of the public sphere as involving a field of discursive connections.”

to Habermas 1989 [1962]). But where does the enregistering of that vocabulary occur, as part of what practices, in Wedeen's account? There are a number of relevant points. One excellent example comes in the section about the role of radio, where modern standard Arabic was used on the two major Egyptian-based stations in the fifties (pp. 42–3). Wedeen further notes some of the key terms: Radio Cairo fomented anti-colonial sentiment, and termed the anti-British notables of Yemen "*mujaḥidīn*" (anti-imperialist revolutionaries or insurgents, depending on one's perspective). Also indicative is Wedeen's section on the multiple meanings of the name of the territory, *Yaman*, which became enregistered as a national spacetime in written histories from the twenties (pp. 5, 39–42). No doubt the processes involved are complex, but the thrust here is that an analysis of form and interaction come together as an integral part of understanding, for instance, the anti-colonial moment.

But there is another key issue which Wedeen's account begins to problematize. Even as she responds to the formalist definitions of democracy by expounding a substantivist formulation, she raises the issue of the substance of deliberation. What counts as true deliberation? Ultimately the answer introduces further questions of how to connect speaker agency and Bakhtinian questions of interaction and textuality. Among the list of sites where *qāt* chew discourse is re-entextualized, Wedeen mentions mosque sermons; these are not vetted by state officials, and yet, for Wedeen, they are not necessarily deliberative because they tend to be "monologic," that is, spoken by only one participant (pp. 110–111, 242n.10). That is, for the form of deliberation which Wedeen counts as democratic, there need be an obvious and active interactional participation by several distinct speakers. Explicitly or implicitly animating the political positions of others (like in Bakhtin's "hidden polemic," 1984:196) does not fully count. In another passage—resonating with a tradition of critique dating back to the Frankfurt School through Habermas and Warner—Wedeen notes that "Technological innovations such as the introduction and widespread accessibility of cell phones may end up unsettling the structure of *qāt* chews, making them less sustained and coherently deliberative than they have typically been" (p. 147). Television is another medium which Wedeen sees as disrupting the deliberative form. These examples reveal assumptions about the kind of speakers that she considers truly agentive and responsible for their words, and thus what allows for their interactional participation to count as political participation. Here, her position follows Habermas' (1989 [1962]) and Warner's (1990) accounts, where the public sphere loses its political efficaciousness as it is apparently transformed into an arena for the consumption of cultural commodities. Further, in this account, if political vocabulary occurs without the possibility of a fully agentive speaker replying, the genre will have shifted out of the realm of the political public sphere. Clearly, from the point of view of a linguistic anthropologist, these assumptions suggest further analysis is necessary into the language ideologies and interactional practice in producing a Yemeni political subject.

Charles Hirschkind seeks to alter many misconceptions about the Islamic Revival in *The Ethical Soundscape*, while re-evaluating what he considers to be the Enlightenment hierarchy of faculties built into much social theory. According to this hierarchy, as he puts it, sight is privileged over hearing not only as a matter of reliable epistemology but thereby also a means to true ratiocination. In the introduction, Hirschkind covers an instantiation of this hierarchy in the Orientalist travel literature and colonialism of the nineteenth century, when many observers of Egypt, both foreign and indigenous, judged the local religious practice as overly attuned to superficial sounds, rules and rote rather than reason—a judgment that was at times ideologically cast over Arabic as a whole (pp. 13–18, 216n.14). Hirschkind finds such an attitude maintained by observers today, and believes that it still animates debates about whether the Islamic Revival is compatible with modern practices, like democracy. He seeks to not only question some of these Enlightenment assumptions, but also the starting point of many such debates.

In critiquing the Enlightenment hierarchy, he also explains how the Islamic Revival in Egypt advances listening as part of a general ethical imperative that orients those committed to *da'wa*—an Islamic public subjecthood that is meant to shift the public spacetime constituted historically by state-centered Egyptian nationalism.<sup>10</sup> For committed practitioners of *da'wa* there are many bodily habits involved in cultivating such a virtuous subject, and Hirschkind recovers Marcel Jousse's theories about the senses as part of an in-depth description of the Islamic "moral psychology" whereby such activity is considered to prepare believers' sensorium. This is not only a description of the semiotic ideologies propounded in certain Islamic theological traditions, as recuperated through the twentieth-century revival. Hirschkind also locates the effect of these practices in terms of such a psychology. As he puts it in one passage, regarding cassettes, "Quran and sermon tapes don't simply frame space discursively but also shape it sensorially by

10. Note that this movement is not necessarily associated with Islamist political parties in Egypt, which can have a hostile relation with the *da'wa* movement (see p. 141).

animating, below the threshold of consciousness, the substrate of visceral, kinesthetic, and affective experience that is integral to the tapes' ethical reception" (p. 124).

Hirschkind takes as his analytical starting point the ubiquitous sermons circulating on cassette tapes, to which thousands listen in Cairo during their daily commutes, at cafés, and at home. These sermons, in a sense, are a genre associated with the mosque, and especially the Friday ritual (which we unfortunately do not hear about in any ethnographic depth). However, they have been transformed in various interesting ways as they were transposed onto the cassette medium. Hirschkind explains that most communicative technologies, and especially the capital-intensive varieties, are heavily censored by the state. Preachers affiliated to *da'wa* have availed themselves of the cheap cassette technology to circumvent this—apparently as a technology left exposed by the state as neither sufficiently important nor sufficiently centralized to enforce censorship. At the same time, he describes how a mass mediated public sphere came to be structured in Egypt during the fifties and sixties especially around a publicity of sound, with the speeches of the charismatic president Gamal Abd al-Nasser and the singing of the beloved vocalist Umm Kulthum. He regards the public in Egypt to be a state-centered one, modeled on nationalist secular ones based on (according to him) rationalist forms of knowledge and on the liberal desire to maintain religious sentiment as a passion reserved for the private sphere (pp. 32–33, 43, 55). Hirschkind is thus also critical of scholarly treatments of religion and mass media which take deliberation to be opposed to discipline, and considers the *da'wa* movement to be advancing a set of dispositions to public discourse which together comprise a counterpublic.

In using the term counterpublic, he acknowledges his debt to Nancy Fraser's seminal paper (1992). Yet like Warner's (2002:85–87) critique, Hirschkind distinguishes his use on the grounds that she considers the *contents* of nonhegemonic claims, as articulated by subaltern groups, rather than considering "fundamental difference in ideas of what a public is and what it does" (p. 232n.3). Much of the persuasive force of Hirschkind's argument on this point rests on how compelling the reader finds such a distinction: does he demonstrate a "set of discursive practices" that undermines descriptions of similar counterpublic practices (and not just ideologies) in the paradigmatic liberal publics and rationalities that are used as the foil throughout the book?<sup>11</sup> This reviewer was not completely convinced, in part because at times the foil tended towards a unitary, Occidentalized representation of North Atlantic polities, one which also colored his description of the Egyptian state.

Yet, Hirschkind's claims about the potential restructuring of practices that produce publics are thought-provoking, opening up a fascinating set of questions about the phenomenology and scope of publicity. Hirschkind argues that the *da'wa* rhetoric is in some regard shaped by a nationalist-secular public and yet breaks from it both in the form of deliberation as well as in ultimately addressing a global *umma* (moral community) rather than the nation. Further, he notes that the movement is informed by a language ideology that focuses on the effect of language on the sensory mechanisms (pp. 91, 123–124, 130), and in a later section even does a transcript analysis of the practice, using musical terminology to draw out some of the poetic effects (pp. 157–158). This points up the importance of sermons. Hirschkind hears the *da'wa* preachers as providing guidance on how to cultivate a virtuous disposition, even as the ubiquitous playing of their tapes in public space(times), like stores and buses, comes to delimit what is appropriate to say and do in those contexts (p. 124). It is this disposition, towards virtues, which provides the basic analysis of public in Hirschkind's work.

That is, there is a keen and instructive distinction between how Hirschkind positions his description of the public and Wedeen's analysis described above, and which helps to explain how the former conceives of the relation between discourse and counterpublic. Wedeen centers on a site for the elaboration of deliberative genres, where interactional participation can count

11. As an aside, Warner's and Hirschkind's characterization of Nancy Fraser's use of the term as focused on "content" seems inaccurate. In fact, her use of counterpublic seems to be entirely germane to their own objectives, especially given her critique of liberal claims of the autonomy of political practice and her attention to discursive "style" as the very substance of deliberation. For example, in the following passage, where Fraser is writing of historical work on gender and class exclusions to the bourgeois public sphere in Europe, she writes "Virtually from the beginning [i.e., coeval to Habermas' periodization of the bourgeois public sphere], counterpublics contested the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech" (1992:116). At the same time, what might be motivating the critique of her conception as "content" is Fraser's distinction between "informal" exclusion from the public sphere, meaning according to some discursive style, and "structural" exclusions, meaning relations like the ownership of media (e.g., *Ibid.*:120). Hirschkind's own description of the dispositions involved is more comprehensive and involves a different take on the private and public.

as political participation in part due to the interdiscursivity achieved with other public sites, and where the use of particular registers can help signal this correspondence. It is the existence of focused political deliberation across many social groupings that enables a discussion of the need to challenge formalist definitions of democracy. On the other hand, in line with the phenomenological critique of the twentieth century, Hirschkind orients towards the backgrounded dispositions for inhabiting public space(time), and which the revival's leading exponents seek to imbricate in the everyday activities of their listeners.<sup>12</sup> This is a depiction of public that is far more oriented to the commodity-consuming moment described by Warner (e.g., 1992:385–387). Critical of Habermas' (and others') notion that mass media leads to the breakdown to the democratic dimension of public deliberation, Hirschkind eschews the question of democracy as an unproductive starting point in "postcolonial contexts like Egypt" (pp. 5, 31, 139–142). He positions the deliberative examples and the theology involved instead as evidence of disposition, on the threshold of consciousness. For example, when he analyzes a conversation in a taxi between strangers regarding the appropriateness of listening to music, rather than a sermon, this counts for him as political participation in the Islamic counterpublic because it displays such a disposition (pp. 108–110).

Sermons play an important role in this account because they involve a re-socialization of believers for participation in public spacetimes. From Hirschkind's description, that process involves simultaneous socialization into the register of the Islamic Revival, which, he notes, draws on the work of Islamic scholars of the past. Much of chapter 3, "The Ethics of Listening," involves a description of all the distinctions made in *da'wa* practice, like the contrast between *yasma'* 'to listen' and *yunsit* 'to listen carefully (lit. incline one's head forward),' where the latter is what a practitioner does (p. 70). This program of socialization is not only sited in cassette sermons and accompanying books. The revival has taken hold in disadvantaged neighborhoods of Cairo, where Hirschkind did most of his work, and where mosques, according to Hirschkind, have become renewed centers for community life (in part in light of liberalization policies undertaken by President Anwar Sadat in the seventies, pp. 67, 128–129, 192, 206). Presumably participation at mosques is important to give adherents a sense for the genre in all its ritual grandeur, which can then be re-animated in part through cassette versions, albeit with differing participation structures. Although a description of participation in mosques is lacking, Hirschkind describes some of the generic conventions which change as the sermons come to circulate through cassette technology, even in cases where sermons are simply recorded at mosques. In some of the most intriguing description, he also explains how some established preachers draw on cinematography and other modern narrative techniques in their teachings, including realist voicings (pp. 54–60, 153–172). Thus we get a picture of the complex interdiscursivity involved in the elaboration of practices for producing and using this form of publicity: from recuperated Islamic scholarship to nationalist genres of political oratory and singing to unacknowledged employment of devices drawn from widespread twentieth century communicative forms, like cinema.

One of Flagg Miller's major goals in *The Moral Resonance of Arab Media* is to tell the story of the emergence of recorded media, or really "regimes of inscription," in Yemen while complicating some tenacious scholarly assumptions found in the study of the Arab Middle East, like tribal versus urban and oral versus literate. His focus is on the aesthetics of cassette poetry, and how genres of poetry are invested with authority due to the link with a specific, locatable person—Miller calls this the aesthetics of resonance—can maintain some of that authority when it is (to use Walter Benjamin's term) mechanically reproduced, that is, what Miller calls the aesthetics of circulation. Miller spends a great deal of time considering the historical and contemporary processes where poetry is inscribed into cassettes, including documenting generic changes and the sites of production and reception. With a sustained ethnographic eye, he also charts their distribution and circulation through the small cassette shops that emerged. In essence, Miller gives us a carefully wrought history of the coming together of poetry, political oratory, and new regimes of inscription and circulation in Yemen, along with the socio-economic changes of different governing dynasties.<sup>13</sup> Unlike Wedeen and Hirschkind,

12. The concept of "background" in this account seems to come from Jousse, that is, it is often used to describe sensory or perceptual qualities that are not focused upon, and not from Charles Taylor, who uses the term to similar purposes (albeit with a different phenomenology) in describing modern social imaginaries (2002).

13. Most of the book is based on contemporary ethnography, but Miller does introduce his themes at several points with rich historical narrative. One important example is a look at the early regimes of inscription and public culture in Yemen, which arose for different reasons of government (pp. 36–50; other examples are found at pp. 143–144, 220–256, 283–289).

Miller abandons at the outset any attempt at considering a public sphere in Yemen, on the somewhat formulaic grounds that the socio-economic conditions outlined by Habermas are not fulfilled (p. 31). This is not to say that he does not see himself as portraying Yemeni political public culture, a term he uses much more comfortably. Within this term, he includes the shifting genres of poetry, which (as Wedeen notes as well) is an important form of political discourse, often animating *qāt* chews. All of this brings Miller to an account of the new ways that tribalism and nationalism are signaled in contemporary poetry, as well as of the subtle modifications of voicing and register as singers adapt poems to cassettes that circulate in transformed Yemeni spacetimes.

The *qaṣīdah* is the general form of poetry that Miller studies, and he collects and analyzes one particular variety, the *bid' wajiwāb*, or "initiation and response," where poets respond to each other, in a battle of wits and words. Miller views these clashes from the perspective of the tribalist highlands region of Yāfi', with its troubled historical relation to capitals of pre-unification Aden and then Sana'a. The *qaṣīdah* is a genre with a very long tradition in Arabic-language literature. Miller generally explains that its "brilliance" for poets and critics "lies in its capacity to invoke a historical reservoir of rigid poetic forms that can be used to meditate on life's many cycles of transformations" (p. 16; also p. 153). The quality of invoking not only the poetic forms but indeed the historical context(s) of their use makes their re-entextualization and their renvois particularly poignant as poets comment on current political happenings. Many of the examples that Miller goes through of *bid' wajiwāb* arose during the period of tension between North and South Yemen, and poets targeted each other along political as well as poetic lines (in one case, the two sides of a famous duel were actually redacted by the same poet). There is a good deal of material for a traditional analysis of parallelisms, as poets' responses are considered more effective if they preserve and enrich aspects of the meter, rhyme scheme, and other tropic structures of the initiation (p. 179). When the challenge and response poems are recorded onto cassette, they are placed one after the other, and further ripostes are placed into the same series. Part of the charisma and business of the cassette shop owners is to maintain a good knowledge of these series, both older and newer, and their shops are important for discussions between aficionados.

The substantial and fascinating poetic analysis done by Miller is accompanied by consideration of how the genres of Yafi'i regional identity and Yemeni national identity are played out in the history of the spread of the cassette and cassette-listening. This kind of contextualization is not incidental, as Miller states on various occasions that he is interested in how texts shift "as people address social conflict" and not just as a result of trends internal to the aesthetics of poetry (e.g., pp. 17, 147). To explain how changes in communication technology and practice affect poetry, in light of the political-economic history of Yemen in the last sixty years, Miller charts the rise of a style of *qaṣīdah* he calls "metropolitan tribalism." By this he refers to the subtle ways that literacy and orality, metropolitan center and regional tribalism are blended together stylistically. In a context where many Yafi'is remain loyal to their regional and tribal identity, and prefer varieties that emblemize the region. To show how this blend works, he breaks down an initiation and response sequence from the fifties, when Yafi'is were affected by disruptions to their economic basis, in part instigated by British colonial authorities (pp. 143–191). Miller discusses several features that together index writing (lack of verbal formulae, compositional unity, length, thematic sequence, dense intertextuality between initiation and response), and then analyzes seven sections in the first poem in a regular alternation between more markedly written and more markedly oral styles. Noting the tradition of distrust in written communication, Miller also shows how crucial sections (like the messenger's journey) can mention a messenger figure to "accompany the written word with an embodied presence" (p. 170). While writing figures metropolitan elites, orality continues to be understood as a sign of rural tribalism, as well as a greater resonance with a moral subject. The emergence of the metropolitan tribalist form, essentially by integrating written and oral genres of communication in a complex genre (and so diagramming part of a complex interdiscursivity of related sites), is thus tied by Miller to concerns and anxieties over historically changing access to resources and authority.

Although less invested in critiquing and describing the hierarchy of faculties than Hirschkind, Miller is also interested in sensory qualities, not only in the immediate environment but also how these "aesthetics" are captured textually. He reports from a renowned poet some of the local psychology regarding the formation of a poem: starting from a reaction to an event, which are understood as whisperings unformed by language and which can cause bitterness in the heart and liver, poets must use their reason and cleverness to "translate that raw prearticulated energy into poetic form" (p. 297). Similar reactions, with shakes and the like, are reported by those who hear the poem from the fifties mentioned above (pp. 154–159). That is,

the various semiotic strata along which the poem unfolds are understood to resonate for a listener in this fashion, which itself can stimulate a reply. The re-animation of the text is thus geared to provoke its own partial re-entextualization as a response, providing a diagram of public (often political) interaction. The link between initiation and response display the importance of the aesthetics of resonance in Miller's account, which can fill an addressee with a sense for the locality of events of the past as part of shaping the current ones. Given phenomenological approaches to media, Miller's felicitous term "language-laden cargo of media" (p. 5) reminds us of the intricate correspondence between discursively-achieved textuality and situated practice involving text artifacts.

Which brings us to the aesthetics of circulation. For poets, it is dangerous to be perceived as pandering to the cassette market, an accusation that can stain their character (chapter 5). Miller thus describes a complex calculus by poets and singers to produce a seemingly local song that can nevertheless circulate transnationally. First, Miller reminds his reader that when a poem reaches a cassette tape it actually undergoes a secondary inscription (p. 300). The first was to a written form of some kind—Miller dismisses the myth that rural poets are illiterate and compose orally (pp. 70–72). If there is a complex blending of styles in poems produced in metropolitan tribalism, the entextualizing processes becomes more intricate in their re-inscription. Not all poems are easily transformed to a recorded version: well-produced cassettes that comment on current events, sung to catchy tunes, and that achieve fame quickly are more likely to continue circulating, and to circulate more widely, than those that include only recitations or cannot be sung due to prosodic or other limitations (e.g., 87–89, 161). Further, the animating singers, with their own reputations, enter into the calculus. Singers not only affect the circulatory behavior in terms of receiving acclaim for musical abilities that meet the expectations of regional identity, whether Yemeni or Yafi'i. They also modify poems—without being understood as authors—in several ways: using more widely-known registers, including words stereotyped as rustic; moving to a more oral stylistics, with words and phrasings that are more easily sung to a given meter; and recalling violent events more often (pp. 317–325). Miller also notes that singers who have travelled abroad for work can have a better sense for pan-Arab phrasing, while other techniques can mitigate the sense that they are straying from local Yafi'i style. In light of the calculi of poet and singer, re-inscription involves a complex re-entextualization to fan the desired circulation, a process that intercalates with pan-Arab, Yemeni, and Yafi'i register formations and notions of personhood.

As noted, Miller is less concerned to direct his account to arguments about the constitution of a public or a public sphere. Throughout, the reader is told of the relation between poets and politicians, and the effects of poetry on political processes, but this is not theoretically thematized in light of about democratic practice and the norms of deliberation. He does refer in passing to cassette media as a "democratic" form, precisely because it does not require enormous capital and (as Hirschkind also notes) it can circumvent censorship; likewise, he sees cassette poetry to contribute to forging "public opinion" (pp. 31, 84, 100, 291–292, 405). Yet, he prefers the term discursive community, in part drawing on Blommaert's (2005) critique of "speech community," which seeks to consider the different levels of society around which discourse is organized. By discursive community, Miller hopes to address the question of deliberating on politically-defining events and of using different genres in ways that diagram (or model) the community thus instantiated (pp. 51, 74, 84, 98–123). Where it can be shown that the poetry was effective as part of determining the outcome of political events, Miller takes this as proof of the instantiation of discursive community.

I am not certain that Miller's recourse to a distinct term, discursive community, precludes the very lively debate about how to successfully apply scholarly concepts of publics and public spheres outside of North Atlantic polities. However these three works give us rich materials and thought-provoking theoretical discussions with which to engage in the debate. If Wedeen provides us with a more Habermasian account of the shifting genres of Yemeni political communication, and Hirschkind depicts a phenomenological counterpublic of disposition more in line with Warner, and if both seek to flesh out how interactional participation in deliberative genres maps into politics, Miller's account focuses on the socio-semiotic amassing of *authority* to speak politically. This is in line with linguistic anthropological traditions of studying oratory, with one strand picked up a decade ago in a volume that presented linguistic anthropological approaches to publics (Gal and Woolard 2001).

In this light, there are a couple of points these three accounts together show that give many an opening to linguistic anthropological interventions. First their descriptions of the dense interdiscursivity between different sites of public communication points to the complex relations between registers and genres. Second, in light of political-economic transformations, all

three together argue that we can get around facile equations of modernization and emergent forms of political communication by carefully tracing out this interdiscursivity. Given that the issue of modernization is still one of the founding questions in Middle East studies—and one irritant that provoked all three authors in their writing—these works contribute a great deal to studying the “process of communication” and historical transformation that bothered Hourani so many years ago.

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