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Jennifer Solheim, *The Performance of Listening in Postcolonial Francophone Culture* Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017. xii + 181 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. £85.00 (hb). ISBN 978-1-78694-082-7.

Review by Claire Launchbury, University of Leeds.

In *The Performance of Listening in Postcolonial Francophone Culture*, Jennifer Solheim foregrounds an important and often overlooked aspect of cultural analysis: the call to listen. Attending to what is heard opens up the possibility of understanding postcolonial soundscapes and their constituting elements. What desires to be heard? What risks being silenced? Or, in the aftermath of decolonialization, what emerges into renewed aural prominence? What Solheim proposes and outlines is a project of substantial scope since within such an analytic field oppressed languages, dialects and accents can be heard again, hierarchies of written vs. oral transmission rebalanced, and music re-sounds and rebounds when new genres interact with it, sometimes ironising prior canonical impositions as the empire sings back.

Solheim's approach is not directly concerned with the composition of postcolonial soundscapes in francophone cultures; instead it offers an exploration of the textual acoustics of a selection of literature, cinema, theatre and digital media cultural production, with one chapter focusing on music performance, in this case, Kabyle music from Algeria. The project is rooted both in positioning and analysis to the metropolitan centre. This offers both opportunities and drawbacks. The Hexagon is a transnational hub, of course, but cities other than Paris are present here—Algiers, Beirut, Tehran—so the all-encompassing “postcolonial francophone culture” of the title risks homogenising the complicated cultural politics of what is a complex and heterodox “postcolonial” field. Algeria, Lebanon and Iran have very different relationships and histories with France and with “francophone” after all. One of the major analytical opportunities presented by focusing on listening is to examine how sound reaches beyond cartographies of difference and social division, how it can reach towards alternative acoustic imaginaries (both musical and linguistic), and how the elusive indeterminacy of sound might work to evade panoptical surveillance. For me, the way that discussion and analysis is drawn back so consistently to the metropolitan centre limits this potential and it is frustrating because it is when she pushes towards these issues that Solheim's book presents the most exciting applications of her theoretical “call to listen.”

It should be noted also that the major body of Solheim's research predates the Arab uprisings which began in December 2010 as does the secondary literature used to support her analysis (p. 3) which renders some of the future-looking considerations rather quirky in that yes, digital

media has democratised and made an infinite supply of stories accessible, but it has also permitted new means of activism and coordination, activating new calls to listen among transnational auditory communities of networked individuals which challenge and subvert hierarchies across established borders. Nevertheless, she offers a compelling framework which clearly delineates the necessity to address sound and offers a methodology to do so.

Solheim hangs her analysis on four modes of listening, cut sound, the citational hook, the construction of auditory communities and digital performance in the context of violence. The case studies, particularly in parts one and two, are new auditory readings of key and familiar texts: Assia Djébar, "Femmes d'Alger" (1978); Leila Sebbar, *Shérazade: 17 ans, brune, frisée, les yeux verts* (1982); Yasmina Khadra, *Les Sirènes de Bagdad* (2006), Marjane Satrapi *Persepolis* (2004); and Wajdi Mouawad, *Incendies* (2003). Analysis of sound in Djébar has considerable precedent, especially the focus on the cloudy or mutable communication between Anne and Sarah, the leading protagonists in "Femmes d'Alger." The "cut sound," however, is leading us to focus on the presentation of silence; the term itself is Djébar's from the afterword to the *Femmes d'Alger* collection, "Regard interdit, son coupé." Music and sound are ever present in the text: Sarah works as an ethnomusicologist, and the opening nightmare of the text is vitally sonic, notably in the confusion between the operating theatre and the noise of the *gégène*, the engines used both to generate the electricity for torture and to muffle its sound during the Algerian war. In a section analysing the complications of communication between Sarah and Anne, the Frenchwoman, there are some errors in the close reading of the opening suicide attempt of "Femmes d'Alger" (p. 33). Anne refers to her own "coup de cafard" and it is a stretch to suggest that Sarah's thoughts dismiss the suicide attempt at all; it is the story which she finds banal or trite, even though Solheim's analysis of the major point of disjunction between thought, action, the coming undone in sound or in silence, is a useful one. Solheim demonstrates how the tension between the postcolonial and feminism, especially in its white western iteration and Djébar's position in it is played out in the field of sound and silence. Taking us back to Delacroix's invasive gaze into the private space of the "appartement" to concentrate on the auditory here is to defy that visual transgression.

Solheim's reading of Satrapi's *Persepolis* concentrates on the film (2007) and Wajdi Mouawad's *Incendies* (2003) focuses on the original theatrical rendition of the text. It is a shame that the subtlety of the intergeneric translations of these texts is not pursued since both exist in different versions, iterations, and performances. Nevertheless, the focus is quite specific: the citational hook of "The Eye of the Tiger" in *Persepolis* and Supertramp's "The Logical Song" sung by Nihad, both lost son and torturer of his mother Nawal, in *Incendies*. Some of the analysis of cultural representations of Middle Eastern subjects falls back on Western stereotyping: men as inherently violent; women as oppressed. The sheer nihilistic pointlessness of Nihad's violence is what is central to the play and reading the presence of a gun through French media representation as a "symbol and embodiment of inherently violent tendencies of Middle Eastern men" (p. 93), even if his citational hook is there to challenge it, seems a rather banal observation. The irony at work in the citations is better rendered, though there is perpetual danger of over-reading alongside pulling the texts back to the metropole. She writes of the success of the French-language texts rooted in the Middle East in France, but it is unclear to me why this is relevant; still less convincing is the suggestion that performances of Anglophone songs as citational hooks "circumvent the dominance of the French language in these works" (p. 95). They are certainly doing something, which Solheim ultimately develops as performing incongruity, but the analysis would do well to think of the translingual aspects of

the texts fundamentally: Where is the presence of Arabic or Farsi within the French of the writing? What does the Anglophone music say about the dissemination of popular culture in the region? It is also frustrating to find the texts distilled to Western understanding of the Middle East as the masculine gun and feminine veil. Again and again the point of departure is one that reads violence as part and parcel of a particular ethnic identity however much it is challenged, so too the elision of Arab and Islamic. An important aspect of the Lebanese civil war, however ambiguous Mouawad is in the precise location of his play's action, that is occluded in this analysis is that large parts of the conservative Christian population refused to identify as Arab, finding their roots in their francophone identity, and as Ghassan Hage reflects on his own experience growing up in Lebanon, it was "far more common to idealize Israel and Israelis as people who have managed to create a bastion of western civilization and modernity despite being surrounded by fundamentally 'agro' and backward Muslim hordes." [1] Denis Villeneuve's depiction of the foundational scene of trauma, the bus massacre of 13 April 1975 which marks the start of the Lebanese conflict, in his film version of *Incendies* (2011), represents the guns of the militia, as they shoot, decorated with icons of the Virgin Mary.

The final chapters focus on the performance of music in concert, recording and through digital dissemination. An auto-ethnographical description of attending Kabyle performance at le Parc de la Villette leads into an interrogation of the concept of "covering" both in the paratextual covers of discs and books and in the sense of reworking established or canonical songs. Focusing on the keywords of "*identités*" and "*silence*," especially the "veil of silence," Solheim, usefully delineates the multiple contexts for the performance of Kabyle music in the French metropole. Her analysis is thrown into relief against republican conceptions of "universalism" and to an extent highlights the tensions that exist between the so-called "*égalité*" of French society and the "Anglo-Saxon" multiculturalism that antagonises it. Solheim here attends to a complex of auditory cultures very much in the plural, alert to the implications of patriarchal violence narrated by the artist, Djura, and the multiple imbrications of identities/identity in the recorded work of Idir. Moving back to Beirut for the concluding chapter, Solheim here focuses on the work of Mazen Kerbaj, a polyvalent artist and musician, a trumpeter and *bédéiste*, who curates and broadcasts his work digitally. Her focus is on the July 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah which destroyed much of the southern suburbs of Beirut and engendered multiple civilian casualties in the Lebanese south. Kerbaj's composition "Starry Night" (17 July 2006) is largely improvised over a background of sonic violence as bombs fall setting off the car alarms nearby, alerting dogs who bark which point to both an everyday and exceptional city soundscape.

The Performance of Listening in Postcolonial Francophone Culture is a fascinating and compelling project. It is a work that insists on re-reading familiar texts carefully and differently calling us as readers and critics to be alert to the sounds and silences embedded within them. It is firmly situated in metropolitan France and within that there is a danger of reproducing unhelpful stereotypes and this study is something that merits better than the reductive symbolism of the veil and the gun. The critical apparatus is, however, clearly explained and applied with a sound clarity. It will be of great use in teaching and in encouraging students to engage with texts differently, as well as addressing new and alternative texts and paratexts. In that respect, Solheim's endeavour is a vital and important contribution to the field.

NOTES

[1] Ghassan Hage, "Hating Israel in the Field: On Ethnography and Political Emotions," *Anthropological Theory* 9, no. 1(2009): 59-79, p. 64.

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