Cemetery poetics

The sonic life of cemeteries in Muslim Europe

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In many respects, my life as an ethnographer of music and sound began in a cemetery. In June 2004, I travelled to Bijelo Polje, Montenegro, to meet members of the Međedović family. I was interested in the poetic career of Avdo Međedović (d. 1955), the so-called Yugoslav Homer whose epic songs rivalled the *Odyssey* in length (Lord, 1960). One of our first activities was to attend the funerary procession and burial (Bosnian: *dženaza*; Arabic: *janaza*) of a neighbour. Then after a morning of filming Avdo's son, Zaim, singing at the old family home in the village of Obrov, we made a quick stop at a single gravemarker, isolated from the municipal cemetery, on the village road. Zaim invited me to get out of the car and approach the grave with him. Without explanation, he then lifted his hands, palms towards his face, and began reciting from the Qur'an in near silence: his lips moved rapidly with slight hints of audible breath and sibilants. Only later, as we continued with our drive down from the foothills into town did Zaim explain that he had been reciting from Sura al-Fatiha and al-Ikhlās from the Qur'an and a prayer of supplication (Bosnian: *dova*, Arabic: *du'a*) as part of traditional Muslim practices of visiting the dead.

In the years since, my research has come to focus more specifically on sonic practices within Islam; cemeteries have continued to figure quite centrally in my work, precisely for their liminal auditory states. Cemeteries in Western contexts are often understood to be sites of solemn quiet and repose. Yet on further reflection, many cemeteries, especially Islamic cemeteries and burial sites both in Europe and elsewhere, are replete with sound, recitation and listening. In this chapter, I make three interconnected arguments about Islamic cemeteries, focusing on those in Europe in particular, though many if not all these claims may also apply to Islamic cemeteries elsewhere. First, these cemeteries have a distinctly social life, full of visits by the living to the dead (and for some, vice versa). Second, this social life is made strikingly manifest through (sometimes loosely) codified sonic practices that foster certain interactions while proscribing others – I call these practices and the norms that govern them *cemetery poetics*. And third, these cemetery poetics play an important role in forging a sense of shared heritage and cultural identity, and, as such, they give rise to potential contestation where sound – especially prayers and protests – yet again plays an important role in shaping what these cemeteries are and how they articulate the intertwining of past/present.

Figure 2.1 Zaim Međedović prays at the grave of his father outside Bijelo Polje, Montenegro, June 2004. Photograph by Peter McMurray.

Again, such cemetery poetics may well hold for Islamic cemeteries beyond Europe and for cemeteries that are not Islamic as well; but European Islam offers intriguing opportunities for thinking about how heritage and cultural memory emerge across geographies with very different histories relative to Islam. My ethnographic research here ranges from places like Turkey (Istanbul and Kars) and southeastern Europe (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro), where Islam has long been part of the social fabric, to Berlin, where migration in the mid-twentieth century brought Muslims in much larger numbers than had previously inhabited the city. Crucially, across most if not all of these locations, Islam's status has been a point of frequent contestation – and sometimes violence, as I explore below – in the past century, adding another layer of complexity to the question of heritage, memory and death, whether through sound or otherwise.

More broadly, these examples suggest a broader point about heritage sites and heritage studies: sound plays a crucial role in forming, transmitting and contesting cultural memory. Furthermore, the interplay between sonic practices and physical sites suggests a blurring between the frequent distinction of intangible/tangible heritage: less-tangible sound practices (speech, recitation, praying, listening and protest) arise in response to the emphatically tangible realm of cemeteries, with the two joining together and (sometimes rather literally) engaging in dialogue to co-constitute the very idea of an Islamic cemetery.

Sonic heritage in Muslim Europe: an itinerary

In tracing out an idea of cemetery poetics in this chapter, I chart an itinerary that is both geographical and conceptual. Beginning in Istanbul, I consider a longstanding debate among Muslims about whether the dead hear, and if so, what kind of hearing that may be and what kinds of sonic practices emerge there. In short, I argue that a cemetery functions as a kind of sonic medium or interface between the living and dead. Next, at Berlin's Şehitlik Mosque and cemetery, I explore concrete ways in which Muslims engage sonically with the dead in cemeteries, including through special recitations at the end of Ramadan. The notion of *şehitlik* means a 'martyrs' cemetery', and gestures towards a historical memory that predates the larger waves of migrants from Turkey in the mid/late-twentieth century. That memory has also become a point of contestation and protest, often through sound. More broadly, the idea of being a martyr (a *shahīd*, the Arabic root of the word *şehitlik*) relates closely to witnessing (being a *shāhid*), a thread that runs through many of these practices, intertwining sound, memory and death – including genocide and state-sanctioned violence.

The next two cemeteries and their particular poetics raise questions about the diversity of practices within Islam beyond Sunnism. First, I discuss how Shi'a Muslims in Kars, Turkey, commemorate the death of the early Muslim martyr Husayn ibn 'Ali at Ashura by visiting cemeteries – including the Garnizon Şehitlik cemetery in Kars – as part of a processional route through the city. The procession is extraordinarily loud, as well, suggesting ways in which sonic power and affect figure into the poetics of encounter between living and dead. I then return to Berlin to an Alevi cemetery that opened in October 2016 in a ceremony featuring music performed on the *bağlama* lute and ritual prayers that differ markedly from Sunni practice. Alevi practices are often viewed as 'heterodox' or adjacent to Islam, yet Alevis play a crucial role in German public discourse in defining what it means to be a migrant from Turkey (or to be part of a second- or third-generation of earlier migrations) and by extension what Islam means – even if some Alevis would insist that they are not Muslim. Furthermore, a history of massacres of Alevis in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey has also engendered a complex sense of memory, death, and commemoration through sound and other practices.

My concluding example is the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial and Cemetery in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a site where literal and figurative silence hangs heavy in the face of the Srebrenica genocide. That trauma destabilises any simple notion of cultural heritage or collective memory in Europe, and by extension, raises the question of whether any kind of utterance – let alone a full-fledged, cemetery poetics – is possible in its wake. Srebrenica also calls attention to the ruptures in conceiving of a European Islam (or perhaps even of Europe itself).

I situate my work here within an emerging scholarly discussion about *sonic heritage*. This term has been used to describe a variety of practices and objects/locations, but I see three major strands emerging in its usage, all of which have some relevance here. The first and oldest strand relates to sound archives as key sites for constructing a notion of sonic heritage, as argued by Johannes Mücke (2010), or

reconstructing, deconstructing, re-performing and critically scrutinising forms of sonic heritage that have accumulated in archives already (Birdsall, 2016; Loble, 2018). We might consider a more precise term here, *audio heritage*, since the form of sound is bound up with audio recording in particular.¹ A second strand can be seen in Pinar Yelmi's Istanbul-based work on 'contemporary cultural soundscapes as intangible cultural heritage' (2016), which suggests that sounds produced in a city space more generally – that is, on a daily basis or in ostensibly mundane moments – might constitute cultural heritage, though Yelmi (like Müske) still seems to presume that such sound must be recorded to 'count' as sonic heritage. A third possible trajectory is exemplified by Paul Tourle (2017), who uses sound and practices of sonic heritage-making (albeit, again, mostly tied to audio recording) to theorise broader questions of heritage and cultural memory more generally.² My approach here hews most closely to Yelmi's work on Istanbul soundscapes in its focus on sound (as opposed to audio) and space; but like Tourle, in drawing on sound, and more precisely here a notion of 'poetics', I aim to conceptualise more clearly still how heritage is constructed in Muslim life in contemporary Europe.³ Such an approach suggests ways in which critical heritage studies might cultivate ethnographic listening – distinct from audio recording per se – as a research practice and a critical interpretive lens.

Listening to a cemetery: polyphonic deadness at Eyüp Sultan, Istanbul

On a warm summer morning in 2014, I met two friends at Eyüp Sultan Mosque in Istanbul to hear a theology lecture on *hadith* traditions (sayings about the life/deeds of the Prophet Muhammad) in the mosque later that day. I had arrived quite early and sat around, watching life at the mosque complex: shops opened, cleaning staff swept out the courtyards, and the families of young boys preparing for circumcision gathered to take photos in front of the mosque's fountain. When my friends arrived, we decided first to walk up to Pierre Loti, a café and city overlook, following a path that leads through a hillside cemetery. As we walked, our conversation turned to the condition of the deceased between death and resurrection, sometimes called *ölüm hayatı* (literally 'the life of death') or *berzah hayatı* ('the life of *barzakh*'); *barzakh* is the formal theological name for this interim period; see Hacıoğlu, 1996). Among other things, we discussed the rules of visiting the graves of the dead, including prohibitions on wailing that the Prophet Muhammad had instituted. During the course of our conversation, the sound of special recitations known as *sela* (or *salâ*) began emanating from the mosque down the hill, prompting me to ask directly – and for the first time in my research – whether the dead could hear. Both friends promptly agreed: the answer was 'yes'. They referenced *hadith* traditions and passages in the Qur'an, as well as some more recent, supernatural experiences they had heard from local religious leaders and friends.

We attended the lecture, after which I waited outside while they performed congregational prayers. From there, I observed dozens of visitors press up against the mausoleum of the mosque's namesake, Eyüp Sultan (or Abū Ayyūb al-Anṣārī).

There they adopted the same prayerful posture as Zaim Međedović had at the grave of his father: standing upright with hands raised about as high as their shoulders, palms facing the face. The courtyard was nearly full of people, many of whom were about to begin congregational prayers, making it possible only to see people's lips moving gently as they stood in front of the small window looking into the mausoleum.

The congregational prayers spilled into the courtyard, creating an even more porous divide between the sensory space of the mosque interior and exterior, with loudspeakers conveying the imam's liturgical expressions during prayers. After the prayers, many in the congregation gathered in a space just outside the courtyard for the *cenaze* (funerary) prayers for several people. Once again, an elaborate set of sonic and kinetic rituals brought together the living and dead – or rather, were performed by the living on behalf of the dead, who were, at least to some degree, able to hear and understand such sacred rites.

My interest here is less to demonstrate just how widely Muslims believe that the dead can (and do) hear, and more to suggest a kind of polyphonic space of sonic and spatial interaction between the living and dead. In recent years, the Islamic *adhan*, or call to prayer, has become a key paradigm for scholars of Muslim sonic practices (e.g. Eisenberg, 2013; Tamimi Arab, 2017). But little distinction is generally made between the variety of recitations that might be broadcast from mosque minarets (e.g. *adhan* vs. *sela/salâ*) as well as those that might be broadcast just into the mosque courtyard itself (e.g. theological lectures, the imam's liturgical expressions during congregational prayers).⁴ Furthermore, the cluster of other rituals with carefully calibrated sonic registers (e.g. recitations that are near silent, partially aloud, or entirely aloud; as well as sounds like weeping or wailing that are generally discouraged) relate mosques specifically to the dead, whether recently deceased and awaiting burial or buried over 1,300 years ago. In collapsing the space between the living and the dead through sound, these rituals also collapse – at least partially – distinctions between the past and present, present and absent, and material and immaterial.

Cemetery poetics at Berlin Şehitlik Cemetery: contestations

Ramadan at Berlin Şehitlik Mosque is a time of important interactions between the living and the dead. While the month is better known for its month-long fast, it also entails other rituals, including the recitation of the entire Qur'an and certain special congregational prayers, that can cultivate an intermundane intimacy unique from other times of the year. For instance, congregational prayers on Laylat al-Qadr (the Night of Power, usually held on the 27th night of the month) and on the morning of Eid al-Fitr (marking the end of the month) draw such large crowds that the mosque fills to capacity and then beyond. Congregants then spread mats on the mosque balcony and around the courtyard to create more space for prostrations. Their ability to spread out is hindered by the presence of the dead: two small plots of land holding dozens of graves take up half the courtyard, with only a small

walkway running between the two plots across much of the length of the courtyard. This design is a feature, not a flaw: the cemetery precedes the mosque, and indeed, the name ‘Berlin Şehitlik’ indicates a cemetery of martyrs, or those who died in wars. In this case, the cemetery dates back indirectly to the late nineteenth century – in other words, predating both Germany and Turkey as political entities. As a consequence of the unusual spatial configuration and the large congregation size, the small walkway between the two cemetery plots is used for praying, meaning that many congregants are only inches away from graves.

Figure 2.2 View of Şehitlik Cemetery from main entrance of Şehitlik Mosque, Berlin, 2019. Photograph by Peter McMurray.

Another point of close contact comes on the final day of the month and relates to the traditional Ottoman/Turkish practice of *mukabele*, or reciting the Qur'an in pairs, with one person reciting while the other follows along to ensure accuracy. Members of the congregation sit and listen and (if inclined/able) follow along. The practice allows the congregation to perform a complete recitation/reading of the Qur'an. At Şehitlik (and at some mosques in Turkey), this complete recitation of the Qur'an, or *hatim* (*khatm*), culminates in a special set of prayers that are consecrated to the benefit of the dead. In both 2015 and 2019 when I participated in these concluding rituals, the congregation processed out of the mosque and mosque courtyard, continuing to the municipal cemetery behind the mosque that has served as the mosque's primary burial site for decades since the plots inside the mosque courtyard filled up. They found a suitable place in the Islamic section of the cemetery where they then recited Sura YāSīn. This practice of reciting the Qur'an in the cemetery simultaneously addresses God and the souls of the deceased, following the injunction found on so many gravestones, '*Ruhuna fatiha*' (also '*Ruhuna el-fatiha*'): recite Sura al-Fatiha to the deceased's soul (see Figure 2.3).

Figure 2.3 Headstone in Şehitlik Cemetery, Berlin: ‘Ayşe Aykoç, daughter of Hamdi Aykoç of Kayseri. Fatiha to her soul. B[orn] 5.8.1969, d[ied] 7.4.1970’. Photograph by Peter McMurray.

But just as cemeteries have poetics, they also have politics, and Berlin Şehitlik is no exception. Or as one acquaintance put it to me during my research: ‘The problem with cemeteries is that the people buried there were once alive’ – and so did all kinds of things during their lives which might be commemorated on tombstones or other memorials. For instance, a large commemorative pillar stands in memory of Gıridî ‘Alî ‘Azîz Efendi, an Ottoman diplomat and writer whose death prompted Prussia to give a parcel of land to the Ottomans (Uysal, 2006). Less grandiose but no less compelling, many of the individual gravestones tell microbiographies, including several individuals in the mosque courtyard sites who died at very young ages, ranging from one day to a couple of years old. Most of these gravestones date back to the 1970s, giving some indication of the pains suffered by the community of ‘guestworkers’ (*Gastarbeiter*) who had arrived only a

few years earlier and now were grieving the loss of babies and young children who were born and died in Berlin.

The most politically contentious graves are those of Cemal Azmi and Bahâddin Şakir, two of the organisers of the Armenian Genocide who were killed in exile in Berlin in the 1920s. A third, Talaat Pasha, was also buried there but his remains were moved to Turkey during World War II (Kieser, 2018). The contestations over their graves have manifested most clearly in protests. These began after the two graves, now both including the phrase ‘Ruhuna el-fatiha’ and describing their deaths as *Şehadet*, or martyrdom (a variant of the cemetery’s name, Şehitlik) at the hands of ‘Armenian terrorists’, were renewed by the mosque community in 2011. German-Armenians held small-scale protests across the street from the mosque (Kalarickal and Bax, 2012). The protests escalated again in 2015 when the German government formally declared the massacre of Armenians to be genocide (‘Merkel nennt Massaker an Armeniern nun doch Völkermord’, 2015), to which German-Turkish groups responded with a large demonstration in May 2016, marching from Potsdamer Platz to Brandenburg Gate (Coşkun, 2016). While not deafening, this protest was loud, featuring group chants and amplified speeches from a sound truck (and later a temporary stage), as well as a kind of impromptu drum circle in front of Brandenburg Gate, featuring folk music and *halay* dancing. The event culminated in a musical concert on the temporary stage featuring artists such as Uğur Işılak, a German-born singer-turned-politician (‘Almanya’daki Türkler sokağa döküldü’, 2016).

To return full circle, these tensions then spilled into Ramadan, which began just a few days later, as Şehitlik Mosque cancelled an evening fast-breaking (*iftar*) with Norbert Lammert, then President of the Bundestag (German parliament) (Kather, 2016). These sonic interactions between living and dead, with special focus around the time of Ramadan, highlight the ways in which a cemetery functions as a medium, entangling the past with the present in emotionally charged ways. These sonic contestations about the deceased may seem unrelated to the *khatm* prayers, yet in both cases, the state of the dead becomes an urgent concern for the living, whether for political/historical reasons or more personal ones, like remembering relatives who have passed away.

Cemetery poetics at Kars Şehitlik Cemetery: (loud) commemoration

If Islamic cemeteries generally give rise to a particular poetics, perhaps it is not unreasonable to think of *Şehitlik* or martyrs’ cemeteries as cultivating their own distinctive poetic genres, often tied to heritage-making that explicitly invokes national military histories. Much as the congregation at Berlin’s Şehitlik processed through the cemetery to mark sacred moments in the liturgical calendar, so too at the *Garnizon Şehitliği* (Military Martyrs) Cemetery in Kars, Turkey, on the day of Ashura. Kars, located in the northeastern corner of the country, is home to a sizeable community of Caferi, or Twelver Shi’a, Muslims, and on Ashura, the 10th day of the Islamic month of Muharram, the congregations in the city join together for

a procession through the city to commemorate the Battle of Karbala (680 CE) and the martyrdom of Husayn, the son of ‘Ali ibn ‘Abi Talib and the third Imam according to Shi‘i belief.⁵ The procession, in which participants beat their chests or whip their backs with chains, is accompanied by sung poetry; in 2017, when I attended the procession, poetry was broadcast – primarily played back from recordings – at extremely loud levels from a construction truck piled high with loudspeakers. I do not think I have ever heard anything as loud as this soundtrack in the 10 years of research I have been conducting on Islamic sonic practices in Germany and Turkey. The procession stretched out over several city blocks at any given time and the sonic intensity allowed thousands of people to coordinate their actions. After wending throughout the city, the procession stopped at the Kars Şehitlik Cemetery for a short programme, then continued a few more blocks to the entrance of the Asri Cemetery, where it concluded with an extended gathering. These two cemetery stops and their respective sonic performances – the cemetery poetics that emerged at each – suggest a common repertoire of commemorative practices as well as certain particularities unique to martyrs’ cemeteries.

As a preliminary note, the Kars Şehitlik Cemetery belongs to what we might think of as the same generation of military or martyrs’ cemetery as Berlin Şehitlik. Although Berlin has some graves predating World War I, the first cluster of Ottoman ‘martyrs’ are those from World War I who died while in Prussia, often for medical treatment. It is worth noting that the neighbouring Columbiadamm Cemetery, where the *khatm* prayers were recited at the end of Ramadan, also has close connections to fallen Prussian/German soldiers in World War I, as evidenced by its monuments. The Kars Şehitlik Cemetery was founded in 1920, creating a designated burial site for nearly 100 soldiers who died in the 1877–78 Russo-Turkish War and the War of Independence (1919–1923) (Durmuş, 2019). The coincidence of the founding of the cemetery and the struggle for independence is suggestive of the ways in which remembering the dead connects to national identity.

The 20-minute program at Kars Şehitlik on the day of Ashura in 2017 strung together a series of performative sonic genres, with the whole congregation pressed closely together at the cemetery’s entrance. Some key moments included:

- military (bugle) taps, played back over the loudspeakers
- the Turkish national anthem, ‘İstiklal Marşı’, played back over loudspeakers, with most of the procession joining in singing
- recitation of the Qur’an by a local reciter
- a series of speeches by local religious and civic leaders, culminating in *dua* prayers

While the non-spoken portions were, in many respects, more sonically engaging, the speeches – also amplified over the truck’s loudspeakers – articulated a more explicit connection between the commemorations of the martyrs of Karbala and the martyrs of more recent armed conflict. The main speech was given by Seyit Ahmet Erdem, the head of Işıklı Mosque, one of the major Shi‘i mosques in Kars. His speech mostly recounted for the audience *about* the martyrs of Karbala, but he

concluded with the following comments, addressed to Imam Husayn, the central martyr of the Battle of Karbala:

We came to support you against this falsehood. We came to say *labbayk* [i.e., we stand ready]. We are at your side and have given our hearts to your cause. [...] Here with our dear people, with our respected governor, and with our representatives who have travelled from afar, we stand with you with our minds, our souls, and our hearts and we will continue on your path. You who are the lord of all martyrs [*bütün şehitlerin efendisi*] who undergo martyrdom, o Husayn, in the presence of our martyrs, we make known to you and the martyrs of Karbala, those who were thirsty at Karbala, and those who suffered at Karbala, our love, our reverence and our commitment. I offer my reverence and respect to these dear devotees of the prophet's household. Peace be upon you, as well as God's mercy and blessings.

(30 September 2017)

As Seyit Ahmet finished his remarks, the congregation gathered there called out '*Labbayk*, o Husayn!' three times, signalling that they too stood ready to assist Imam Husayn. His commentary explicitly ties Husayn and his companions to the martyrs buried there at the Kars cemetery. The conversation becomes multidirectional. At this culminating moment, Seyit Ahmet is primarily addressing Husayn (and those who were with him at Karbala), already a striking exchange between living and dead. Yet his remarks are clearly meant to be heard by the congregation gathered there and to be heard clearly, as evidenced by the microphone/loudspeaker as well as his use of the first-person plural ('we came...' or 'we stand...'). The congregation reciprocates by echoing his comments with the cry '*Labbayk*, o Husayn!', simultaneously responding to Seyit Ahmet and yet addressing Husayn explicitly; and again, the martyrs buried in Kars are then invoked (if not necessarily addressed) as *de facto* witnesses – again, already implicit in the word *şehit*. The particular poetics of this moment are poignant and multidirectional, entangling the living and the dead in a call and response.

This kind of interaction contrasts in striking ways with the final destination of the whole procession, Asri Cemetery. At Asri, the entire procession again came to a halt, but in this case, the participants did not stop or grow quiet, but rather intensified their self-flagellations (or *sinezen*). An open field and a large intersection provided an open area to stage the climax of the procession rituals. At the same time, smaller groups from individual congregations headed into the cemetery itself to visit graves and pay respects to family and friends. Many of the groups went to visit the grave of Axund Gökmen Kankılıç, the former head of the Kamer Kesemenli Mosque, another of the Shi'i mosques in the city. Kankılıç had died almost exactly 40 days earlier, an important interval for mourning and visitation to graves. Some groups recited prayers on his behalf or even recited poetry he had written, and several participated in *sinezen* mourning. He, not unlike the deceased soldiers at the Kars Şehitlik Cemetery, took on a role that bore certain similarities to Imam Husayn as an object of lamentation and as a kind of posthumous poetic

interlocutor. Yet the process at Asri Cemetery was much less formal and made few (if any) gestures towards a broader national identity or history. The cemetery was still a site of heritage-making, but the poetics were much more intimate and personalised, rather than the kind of macro-level narratives being asserted by and in response to the Şehitlik Cemetery.

Beyond Şehitlik: Alevi cemetery poetics in Berlin

The October 2016 opening of an Alevi cemetery in Berlin offers yet another illustration of the complex poetics that emerge from cemeteries, again including forms of contestation through sound. The cemetery suggests both how heritage-making is currently taking place as migrant communities – now well into their third generation – put down increasingly deep roots in Berlin and Germany and how the very notion of an ‘Islamic cemetery’ (or even ‘Islam’ for that matter) is already an unstable concept.

Describing the precise poetics of Islamic cemeteries in Europe requires, as mentioned above, defining Islam. Alevis, a minority group in Turkey with a strong presence among diasporic communities in Germany and Western Europe, have a complex relationship with Islam, with many ritual practices invoking God (Allah), Muhammad and ‘Ali in ways that bear close resemblances to Sufism and Shi‘i Islam, yet with key differences as well. Just as cemeteries created points of contestation through sound between Muslims and non-Muslims in the case of Berlin Şehitlik Mosque, they can also reveal tensions within groups that are often lumped together as ‘migrant’, ‘Turkish’ or ‘Muslim’ communities. Many Alevis I interact with regularly would disagree with all three of those labels: their families have often lived in Germany for multiple generations already, they identify ethnically as Kurdish or Zaza rather than Turkish, and their devotional practices (for those who see Alevism as a form of religious or spiritual practice) unsettle clear boundaries of Islam.⁶ Other Alevis I have spoken with reject any connection to Islam at all, or even any connection to religion, embracing instead an identity of ‘Alevism without ‘Ali’ that focuses on longstanding connections to Alevi culture that predate Islam (Bulut, 1997). In other words, the way Alevism cuts across these multiple, seemingly stable categories of identity – religion, ethnicity, language – highlights just how inadequate, if not downright artificial, such theoretical classifications are in practice.

The first two Alevi cemeteries in Germany – and in Europe more generally – were opened in 2016, with one opening in Hamburg in April and another in Berlin in October. Indeed, these cemeteries could be seen as the first purpose-built Alevi cemeteries anywhere (Gürler, 2016). I attended the opening of the Berlin cemetery on 1 October 2016, a chilly, grey Saturday afternoon. The cemetery consists of 3,000 square meters within the St. Thomas Cemetery in the district of Neukölln, and can accommodate 400 burial sites. The opening ceremony was held in a small chapel near the entrance of the cemetery. It opened with two distinctively Alevi sonic practices: a *deyiş*, or sacred poem, sung by Erdal Kaya, who accompanied himself on the *bağlama* (or *saz*), a long-necked lute; and a ritual invocation known as *gülbak* pronounced by Ercan Yıldız, one of the *dede* elders that lead the

Religious Council (*toplum*) of the Berlin Alevi Community. The *deyiş* which Kaya sang features the common Alevi refrain ‘*Hû hû hû*, help us, o ‘Ali!’’. That orientation towards ‘Ali rather than (or as a means to) God (Allah) offers some insight into Alevi thought and practice, both in cemeteries and beyond. While often described as a form of ‘heterodoxy’ relative to state-sanctioned forms of Sunni Islam in Turkey, these kinds of poetic utterances in Alevism suggest theologies that have commonalities with longstanding traditions in Shi’a Islam (e.g. the focus on and veneration of ‘Ali) and Sufism (e.g. the recitation of the word *hû*, meaning ‘he’ as a shortened form of *Allahu*, as discussed in Gill, 2017). At the same time, Alevis’ articulation of these ideas, through the pairing of *saz* (instrumental music) and *söz* (sung poetry), points to a performance register that expands considerably on the cemetery poetics I have been discussing here, at least in this moment of celebrating the opening of the cemetery.

Ercan Dede began his portion of the programme with a similar theological invocation: *Bismişah Allah Allah*: ‘in the name of the Shah [‘Ali], Allah Allah’, rather than the ubiquitous Islamic phrase, *bismillah*, ‘in the name of Allah’. He then lit candles, with an accompanying invocation that they may burn and give light, before beginning the *gülbânk* itself. He opened with the same invocation again (*bismişah Allah Allah*) and then proceeded with a series of supplications about and on behalf of the congregation as well as a variety of intercessory figures (God, Muhammad, ‘Ali, Fatima, and so on). While the programme continued with a series of speeches, these two opening gestures set the tone – both literally and figuratively – for making these burial plots a kind of sacred ground.

In one of the subsequent speeches, the District Mayor of Neukölln, Franziska Giffey, quoted a popular aphorism: ‘People come into our lives and accompany us for a while. Some remain forever because they leave behind traces of themselves’.⁷ She then continued: ‘People leave behind traces of themselves when there is a place where their loved ones can grieve for them’. Kadir Şahin, the General Secretary of the Berlin Alevi Community at the time, underscored similar concerns: ‘With this cemetery plot we’ve signalled: Alevis have arrived in Germany. They’ll be staying here for good. They want their descendants to be able to mourn here’ (Gürler, 2016).

For many migrants from Turkey, whether Sunni, Alevi, or otherwise, the act of ‘staying here [in Germany] for good’ and creating physical sites to commemorate the dead marks an important cultural shift; but it also offers Alevis further possibilities for distinguishing themselves from Sunni Muslims. For instance, the cemetery plot will have its own Alevi symbols (e.g. a gate and four pillars symbolising the divine path Alevis seek to follow). It will also use different spatial arrangements for burials, as Şahin explains:

For us Alevis, we don’t orient ourselves toward the Ka’aba [in Mecca] during prayers, but rather people sit in a circle and prostrate toward one another.... So to begin – and unfortunately we can only do this at the front of the cemetery plot or we would lose too much space – the graves will be arranged in a circle, the same way we pray.

(Hür, 2016)

Burial practices can offer Alevis other, more explicit (that is, verbal) ways of differentiating themselves from Sunni Muslims. Ercan Dede explained: 'It was only about ten years ago that Islamic terms were being used for our burial ceremonies. Now of course we use the proper Alevi terms. When you look at history, remember that all rulers have tried to assimilate Alevis to be Muslims. We're working here to ensure that we return to our own rites and practices and revitalise them' (Hür, 2016). That question of assimilation points towards a longer history of political violence against Alevis, including a long list of massacres in Dersim/Tunceli, Sivas, Maraş, Çorum, Sivas again and so on. In short, cemetery poetics allow for expressions of identity and cultural difference through sound, ritual, and physical space, but they also fuse death in the present with the commemoration of longer histories of dying and being killed. In other words, cemetery poetics are never divorced from the political.

Speechless at Srebrenica: the limits of cemetery poetics

These experiences and cemeteries represent only a part of the Islamic cemeteries and related sonic rituals that have figured in my research. I have barely touched on funerary prayers, visitation practices at the graves of major 'saints', or more esoteric teachings I have heard discussed about how the dead not only hear but also speak back or even join with the living in forms of recitation.⁸ But by way of conclusion, I want to point to the limits of my argument here: yes, there is a rich variety of sonic poetics that emerges in and around Islamic cemeteries and funerary practices. But there are limits to what those poetics can express. One cemetery stands out in particular as eliciting a kind of anti-poetics, a shutting-down of some of these sonic activities: the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial and Cemetery (or Memorial Complex) in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The website *Remembering Srebrenica* describes the complex as follows: 'The Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial Complex was founded in May 2001 as a non-profit organisation that aims to build and maintain the complex in memory of the victims of the Srebrenica genocide'. It then continues: 'The Srebrenica genocide saw the systematic murder of 8,372 Bosnian Muslim men and boys by Bosnian Serb forces'.⁹ Sarah Wagner (2010) has suggested that the memorial complex has a two-fold function of 'tabulating loss' and 'entombing memory', that is, imposing a framework on the horrific violence of Srebrenica to allow survivors, families and visitors to start to make some sense of it. Her focus lies primarily with the formal organisation of the complex. My interest lies more so with the practices of individual visitors as they come to the cemetery and the ways they then respond to its traumas and calls for remembering.

I visited the site in 2015 with a small group of Bosnian Muslim men, organised by a close friend of mine. At the time, my friend and I were considering making an audiovisual project about the complex. But even more so, it became clear as we drove that my fellow travellers were going primarily to pay their respects. So it was no surprise when, upon our arrival at the cemetery portion of the complex, they got out and all held their hands up in front of them, palms facing towards

them – much like Zaim Međedović had when we visited his father's grave together a decade earlier – and silently recited passages from the Qur'an and other prayers. The morning was generally very still, the only sound in the cemetery being the regular rhythm of two men digging a new grave off to one side. The process of finding and identifying remains is still not complete.

For the better part of an hour, however, we simply stood there quietly, each of us reading to ourselves the names of the deceased – the *šehid* martyrs/victims of Srebrenica. There was nothing to say. There was nothing that *could* be said.

Eventually, without hardly saying a word to each other, we headed to the car. It was time to go. We drove into the town of Srebrenica for lunch, but mostly just ate in silence. On the drive back, it took us probably an hour to start talking again, despite having enjoyed a lively, fluid conversation on the drive down earlier that morning. On some level, this is (and was) hardly a surprise. Yet I remember distinctly how heavy that quiet was. Later, one of my travel companions brought up this issue of silence with me indirectly, shaking his head and asking: 'What is there to say? There's nothing'.

Conclusion

It's tempting to simply stop this chapter there – to let this call to silence be the last word. But in closing, I want to make two broader points related to Srebrenica. First, a more general observation on Islamic heritage in Europe: this heritage is not simply a question of locating certain sites or practices within the territory of Europe; it is also a question of recognising that when genocide takes place in Europe, that trauma is inseparable from some abstract notion of Europe or its recent history. There is no Europe without Bosnian Muslims, nor can there be a Europe today without some acknowledgement of this brutal violence. And indeed, several of the cemeteries I discuss here – not to mention the Holocaust and its memorials – are bound up in histories of genocide and massacre, raising the question as to whether these intense forms of state violence are the exception or the norm in European modernity.

Secondly, Srebrenica raises the question of the limits of the very possibility of cemetery poetics. The problem here is not necessarily the absence of sound; indeed, any notion of poetics (or poetry or music) seems predicated on the possibility of silence as a way to punctuate other audible utterances. Neither trauma nor political violence is an insurmountable challenge per se, as evidenced by the way Shi'a Muslims have responded and continue to respond sonically, poetically and ritually to the Battle of Karbala. Rather, the question is one of a poetics of the future: can an anti-poetics of speechlessness coexist with the need to speak out, as it were, in order to ensure that these acts of violence are not forgotten? Strikingly, almost all of the examples I have dealt with here touch on histories of traumatic political violence, at least obliquely: Berlin Şehitlik and the Armenian Genocide; Kars Şehitlik and Karbala; and the Alevis Cemetery in Berlin and the long history of violence against Alevis that lies in the background of their relationship with the Turkish state. Many of those groups have long since established rituals to grapple

with mass killings and trauma, often using sound as a central aspect of their rituals. Only time will tell precisely what kind of cemetery poetics might emerge from Srebrenica.

In turn, the same might be said of any and all of these cemeteries: while sound plays a crucial role in defining their existence at present, and they in turn play important roles in defining contemporary understandings of the past, that poetics can and does shift quickly. While some of the sites discussed here have existed for centuries, others have been constructed in the past 5 years. The power and limitation of ethnography, whether sonic or otherwise, lie in its particularity; these cemeteries and their sonic poetics, taken altogether, suggest a broader phenomenon, but one with ongoing granularity and change. The establishment and ongoing expansion of Sunni Muslim and Alevi cemeteries in recent years in Berlin foreshadow a deepening of these sonic practices across Europe. And while the future remains uncertain, these varieties of cemetery poetics are shaping collective and individual memories of the dead and of a broader cultural history spanning from Karbala to Srebrenica, from the death of a poet to the deaths of soldiers, and so on. Yet at the same time, the ongoing 'refugee crisis' (among other recent political and cultural developments) and the shifting demographics of cities like Istanbul and Berlin (especially with the increase of Syrians) suggest that existing sonic and sensory processes will also continue to shift and evolve.

I am reminded of Jacques Derrida's comments about the archive and its futures, which seem applicable to heritage sites like cemeteries and their poetics as well. With regards to the cemetery (in lieu of 'the archive'): 'if we want to know what this will have meant, we will only know in the times to come. Perhaps. Not tomorrow but in the times to come, later on or perhaps never' (Derrida, 1995, p. 27).

For the time being, as my Bosnian colleague might ask: what (more) is there to say? There's nothing.

Notes

- 1 Tim Brooks uses this term in an article on sound recordings and US copyright law (Brooks, 2009), but does not draw any clear distinction between 'audio heritage' and any other form of sonic heritage.
- 2 Although not framed expressly as a discussion of heritage, the essays in Michael Frishkopf and Federico Spinetti's recent volume, *Music, Sound, and Architecture in Islam* (2018), suggest the possibilities of a broader, interdisciplinary conversation about sound and Islamic heritage sites more generally.
- 3 In delineating Europe, I include here by design both areas that have had Muslim majorities for centuries, as in regions of southeastern Europe, and areas like Berlin that have seen a notable rise in the numbers of Muslims living there in the past century due to various forms of migration. I also include Turkey as a whole, including both Istanbul – an important part of Europe in a literal, geographical sense and in the European imaginary dating back to Constantinople – and also Kars, a city in eastern Turkey that has shifted between Turkish and Russian holding over the past two centuries. Even without that Russian connection, it has a long history as part of a larger Black Sea region that is closely intertwined with European history.
- 4 Although not solely about the distinctions between *adhan* and *sela*, Erol Koymen (2017) does explore the meaning of *sela* during the 2016 failed coup in Turkey.

- 5 For a general overview of Caferi in Turkey, see Güngör (2017). For a discussion of Caferi poetry during Muharram, see Williamson Fa (2018).
- 6 For discussions on how to define Alevism, see Yaman (1998) and Doğan (2013), among many others.
- 7 In the original German: 'Menschen treten in unser Leben und begleiten uns eine Weile. Einige bleiben für immer, denn sie hinterlassen ihre Spuren'.
- 8 I address many of these issues in my forthcoming book, *Pathways to God: The Islamic Acoustics of Turkish Berlin* (forthcoming, 2022).
- 9 <https://www.srebrenica.org.uk/lessons-from-srebrenica/srebrenica-potocari-memorial/>

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