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Listening to love:

Aural attention, vocal iconicity, and intimacy in Somaliland

ABSTRACT

Both music and love are conspicuously absent from the public soundscapes of Hargeysa, Somaliland. But behind closed doors, people listen to love songs. In doing so, these lonely love sufferers and love hopefuls make sense of various challenges. Using accounts from a cross section of Somalilanders, I show that these solitary listening practices open into uniquely intimate and transformative opportunities for *dareen-wadaag* (feeling sharing). These opportunities critically depend both on listeners' attention and intention, and on the culturally elaborated affective affordances of love songs' "voice"—a voice that is conceived as "love incarnate" and that models intimacy. In short, listeners do not just listen to love songs; they *listen to love*. Their listening practices call for anthropological models that more fully account for the relationship between culturally situated ears and voices, as well as for the complex interrelation of sound, affect, and subjectivity. [*listening, aurality, love and intimacy, voice, iconicity, sound and affect, music, Somaliland*]

One October evening in 2015, I came into the bedroom I shared with Amran to find her curled up on the floor, cradling her smartphone and listening to music. When I asked her what she was doing, she replied, as if the answer were obvious, "If you feel these things—if you *feel love*—then you must listen to music."¹ The voice of Nimcaan Hillaac sang from her phone, "The pain and problems I have, I wonder, is there another in the world who has them too?" Amran closed her eyes, lost in thought, barely registering my presence. As the refrain began, she sang along aching, "This passion that has me, it draws me to you, I can't turn away! . . . Hey! Does longing have you?"²

When the song ended, Amran put down her phone, but she did not seem ready to speak. She eventually looked up long enough to explain that these songs help her cope with being away from her beloved. A few weeks before I had come to stay with her, Amran had married a man from southern Somalia. A twice-divorced mother of six, Amran had previously wedded "for her family." This marriage, she said, was "for love." But to be with her new husband, she would need to leave Somaliland. For now, pining for him from afar, she found solace in these songs.

Over the coming weeks, variations on this scene were common: Amran curled up with her phone alone, listening to fellow love sufferers; Amran whispering to her husband over the phone, sending him songs or listening intently to the ones he had sent her. Sometimes these listenings were more social: in the evenings after their favorite Turkish soap opera finished, Amran, her children, and the other women of the household would flip to Horn Cable TV's music channel to watch and discuss music videos, chastising men for behaving badly, commiserating with scorned women, musing at what it would be like to have a man serenade you with such tender affection.

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But mostly when she listened, Amran disappeared into her own love ruminations, somehow soothed by the knowledge that she was not alone—that the answer to Nimcaan Hillaac’s lyrical query—“Is there another in the world who has [love problems] too?”—was a resounding *yes!* Others too had felt this longing, had known the pain and problems of love.

Amran was indeed not alone—both in her love suffering and in the solace she found in listening to love songs. During 18 months of fieldwork in 2015–16 on the lives of love songs in Hargeysa, the capital city of the self-declared though yet unrecognized Republic of Somaliland, I was often struck by the intensity with which my interlocutors *listened* to love songs, almost always in solitude, and the central nature of love songs to listeners’ negotiations of their own love lives. Despite the religiously and culturally contested nature of both music and speaking about love in Somaliland—or, perhaps, because of it—listening to love songs emerged as a critical means of preparing for romance, recovering from heartbreak, and fostering intimacy. Against Adorno’s (2000) view that listening to popular music is “effortless” and “passive,” I found that my interlocutors listened with a devotional-like attention and intention, and with a keen sense of the effect that songs could have on them. And the effect, listeners said, was bound up in love songs’ unique ability to “make you feel as [others] feel,” to “make you feel love.”

In this article, I seek to untangle what is at stake in this listening—for Somali listeners, and for anthropology—through exploring how listeners listen to love (songs), and to what effect. My argument is in my title. Listeners do not just listen to love songs, they *listen to love*. And here I mean *listen to love* in both grammatical possibilities. The first possibility is that “love” is a verb. Listeners listen *to love*—that is, *in order to love*. Listeners listen with the intention of learning about love, feeling love, coming to terms with love, opening their hearts to love, and actualizing love in their own lives. The second possibility is that *love* is a noun—that is, the thing that listeners are listening to. Listeners listen to love *songs*. Yet I will attempt to show that songs are not just *about love*, or representation *of love*. To borrow a phrase from a poet friend, songs are “love incarnate.” So what listeners are listening to is *love*.

This argument rests on two presuppositions. The first is that listening is an act in the Austinian speech-act sense (Kapchan 2017). Listening is far more than a mode of perceiving, or even a way of knowing—it is, rather, “a doing” (Hirschkind 2006, 34). There are, of course, echoes here of Hirschkind’s (2006) work on Islamic cassette-sermon audition, and similarities to the “listening literacies” (Kapchan 2009) that are central to various religious, ethical, and political self-making projects in diverse Muslim communities and beyond (Eisenlohr 2018; Salois 2014; Slotta 2017). In Somaliland, listening to love songs is “a doing,” an intentional

form of self-making embedded within Islamic approaches to the ear, sound, and voice. This listening may take different forms depending on a listener’s love situation. Yet this listening has at its center the cultivation of a *qalbi-furan* (open heart). Listening is “a doing” to be done “from the heart.” It is also the work of opening the heart to the pain and possibilities of love.

The second presupposition is that there is something about *songs* that affords or enables this listening to occur. There is something, listeners say, about the way that words, melody, and voice come together in a good love song that allows you to *feel love*—something that has come from “deep, deep within the soul” of another, something that is in you too. Love songs can do this, I suggest, because they work as multivalent indexical icons that do not just represent love but *model* it to listeners in their very sounding. Love songs, we might say, “suggest” intimacy.³ And they do so in such a way that they have become synonymous with the experience of love itself—that is, “love incarnate.”

Theoretically, this is an intervention that attempts to make sense of the relationship between ears and voices, sound, affect, subjectivity, and the fundamentally social nature of intimacy. This is a reflection on how and to what effect people *listen*, and the kinds of subjectivities and social relations that specific listening acts open into. Listening has attracted increasing attention in the last decade. Even still, Slotta’s (2017) recent tongue-in-cheek query, “Can the subaltern listen?,” underscores the need to more closely attend to the diverse subjectivities that shape and are enabled by different modes of listening. Yet I also want to take the affective power of songs, and of sound, seriously—a power consistently highlighted by listeners who insisted that songs could “make you feel love.” And we will see below that love songs’ power clearly depends on their material, voiced form. But this form is given affective purchase only through the specific ideas that people have about what the voice is and does (or what Weidman [2014, 45] calls an “ideolog[y] of voice”), and in the interaction between sound and culturally situated, affectively, and sonically attuned ears and bodies. Ultimately, this is a call for an anthropology of the voice attentive to the work of ears, and an anthropology of ears attentive to the material qualities and semiotic ideologies that give voices affective purchase.

Ethnographically, I hope to provide a small glimpse (or listen) into the anxieties and aspirations that animate the love lives of a cross section of Hargeysans. I did not, however, set out to gather love stories. My ethnographic material comes from what I initially conceived as “listening sessions”: informal gatherings during which I asked friends to bring me their favorite songs and tell me about the *songs*. That these sessions nearly always evolved into conversations about individuals’ intimate experiences is a testament to the ability of songs to open space for *dareen-wadaag*,

or “feeling sharing.” Importantly, this is the term my poet friend suggested when I was trying to figure out a Somali equivalent to “intimacy.” He, like me, had a sense that the “intimacy” that love songs distill and enable is not simply sexual, but is rather something born of a desire to *feeling-share*, to *feel with* others. Figured thus, “intimacy” is, as Berlant (1998, 281) suggests, about “an aspiration for . . . something shared.” These songs, to be sure, document the vagaries of heterosexual attraction, and are heard by listeners as such.⁴ But, we will see, making sense of love, coming to terms with various love pains, and actualizing love in one’s own life ultimately rest on opening space for feeling sharing. It is also this kind of feeling-sharing intimacy that songs themselves suggest.

I begin below by laying out the contextual and theoretical features of my argument—first about listening, and the auditory culture in which this listening occurs, then about songs, and the ideologies of voice that give them affective purchase. I follow this with an account of listeners listening to love songs—or, more to the point, listeners listening to love.

Lonely listeners, attentive ears: Auditory attention in contested Islamic soundscapes

An urban center of about 1 million inhabitants, Hargeysa is permeated by a tangible precarity, a constant waiting for an uncertain political future. Yet it is also a city that pulses with possibility, rebuilt in the shadow of war with scant international assistance. And it is a noisy city, where political-religious contestations play out in sound. Car horns blare, livestock bleat, and the sirens of khat-delivery vehicles whirl on busy streets. The *aadaan* (call to prayer) echoes from hundreds of mosques five times a day. Music, however, is conspicuously absent from public spaces. This is partly the result of the near-complete wartime collapse of the artistic sphere—1988 aerial bombardments razed the national theater and forced many artists into exile. But it is also a feature of contemporary political-religious dynamics, which have stunted artists’ efforts to rebuild and have had an impact on popular attitudes toward music. Since the first decade of the 21st century, increasingly influential Salafist leaders, who categorically rejected music as *xaaraan* (prohibited), have preached the evils of music—instilling a kind of “listening guilt” in many younger Somalilanders and effectively silencing the city’s public music speakers. The government, for its part, has an ambiguous attitude toward music; artists are periodically enlisted to perform patriotic anthems, but at other times their concerts are canceled by conservative-minded ministers. As music is publicly curtailed, it is perhaps a godsend that music lovers now have ample opportunities for private, on-demand listening thanks to technological innovations (cheap cellphones, YouTube, decent internet infrastructure).

Owing to this political-religious context, music listening is almost always an activity consciously taken up, often against one’s own or others’ religious judgment. And it almost always occurs behind closed doors. Sometimes this listening does occur in groups: songs are a staple accompaniment to khat-chewing sessions and long car journeys; families and friends tune in to Horn Cable TV’s music channel at home; and since 2014 a handful of private venues have opened where music is performed to live audiences. Much as my own listening sessions opened space for my interlocutors to share personal love experiences, group listening often facilitates uniquely intimate socialities—sometimes to significant sociopolitical effect (Woolner 2018). Yet the most popular form of listening by far is listening undertaken *alone*. This distinct mode of listening, we will see, is most appropriate and amenable to *listening to love*.

Beyond religious concerns, listeners accounted for their solitary listening preference on two main fronts. The first has to do with the nature of love. Ideas about romantic love and marriage in Somaliland have significantly shifted in the last century, from a situation in which love as a motivating factor in marriage was considered antisocial, to one in which most men and women desire romance and aspire toward companionate marriage. Yet my interlocutors frequently complained of a persistent “love gap”—that is, a disjuncture between love aspirations and realities. Love unions are frequently thwarted by familial and financial pressures (“Money and clan draw a line around love,” said one friend); divorce rates are high; and married women constantly worry that their husbands might search out additional, younger brides. And despite desiring romance, gendered expectations still discourage the open sharing of affection, and speaking about love remains difficult. Men who openly express affection might be regarded as “too soft,” while women’s idealized *xishood* (modesty/demureness) means they should keep love desires to themselves. Frequently thwarted in their love quests, but unable to share or otherwise speak about desire, aspiring or recovering lovers usually endure their plight in private, alone. Listening, then, was described as an activity for otherwise “lonely lovers” who find direction, wisdom, and comfort in listening to the love experiences of others.

Listeners’ preference for solitary listening, however, is not only a feature of the private nature of love; it is also the best way to give songs the undivided attention they demand. “You need to deeply understand the meaning of the song,” one friend said, “so it’s better to listen alone, with no one to distract you.” Another mused, “I like to feel the music. I like to listen deeply and feel the words. So I go into hypnosis. I dream as I am awake. I dream, and I don’t like to talk. I don’t like any disturbances. That’s why I listen alone.” An especially popular time and place for music listening is thus late at night in the quiet of one’s own home, when

there is no one there to distract you. In short, listening to love (songs) is an activity for lonely lovers with particularly attentive ears, and their work is best accomplished in solitude.

While Salafism undoubtedly shapes attitudes about appropriate music-listening practices (or lack thereof), it is equally important to highlight that Islamic ideas about the ear, sound, and voice, coupled with Somalis' deep tradition of oral poetry, provide the listening scaffolding required of this lonely listening work. Islamic approaches to listening start by recognizing the unique power of sound, and especially the voice, to affect people's moods and inculcate different states of knowing God, oneself, or others. This recognition underlies the centrality of Qur'anic recitation for knowing God's will and guiding acts of devotion. It also undergirds centuries' worth of debate on music's permissibility. Those who view music as *xaaraan* argue that music bypasses rational faculties and directly affects the heart; music is best avoided lest it detract from one's spiritual discipline and stir listeners to sinful activities. On the other side are interpretive traditions that view music as a potential path to the divine, sound serving as a medium through which devotees can orient their hearts toward God. Yet *both* traditions share a belief in the unique capacity of the human voice and sound to move listeners, to stir bodies and hearts toward particular affective dispositions (Salois 2014).

The recognition of sound's unique affective potential seems to parallel arguments made by scholars of both affect and sound studies who privilege sound as a material phenomenon that precedes signification and that is thus agentive in its own right. Yet in recognizing the power of sound, Islamic approaches also highlight the incredible importance of the attention and intention that are brought to the work of listening. In any sonic-human interaction, it is the listener who is ultimately held accountable. In the (contested) *hadith* often cited by those who see music as *xaaraan*, for instance, it is listeners, not singers, who are chastised. As Hirschkind (2006, 35) notes, "The agency of music to either corrupt or edify, to distract from moral duty or incline the soul towards its performance lies not in the sound itself but in the moral disposition of the heart of the listener." Cultivating proper auditory discipline—learning to listen with attention and intention, with a "clean heart"—is fundamental to Muslim spiritual life across interpretive traditions.

Such auditory discipline is similarly demanded by Somali oral poetry—a tradition that conceives of speaking and listening as forms of action in the Austinian speech-act sense. Somalis are fondly known as a "nation of poets," and poetry plays a fundamental role in social and political life. The sociopolitical importance of poetry indexes a fundamental belief in speech as a form of action, and the power of the human voice to move people to action. This is also a tradition that fundamentally values the interpretive

responsibility of listeners, and the possibility that listeners may mishear a poem always provides the option for both listener and speaker to save face. Listening is thus an activity that demands attention, and listeners listen with a keen sensitivity to the metrical/alliterative features of a genre and the interpretive possibilities that poetry affords. As in Islam, listeners retain a great deal of agency in shaping the nature of a poetic event. As the late poet Gaarriye said, "whether a poem brings forth seeds/depends on how it's tended and by whom/the spot in which it's planted/who needs it and for what/its husk is hulled or boiled" (Dhamac, n.d.)

The auditory discipline cultivated by Islam and a deep tradition of oral poetry provide a starting point for understanding the attention and intention that listeners bring to the work of private love song listening. And indeed, there are resonances between how listeners describe listening to love songs and a range of different listening acts, such as the undivided attention required to make sense of a good *gabay* (poem), the intention one must bring to listening to recorded *duco* (religious supplications), and the kind of meditative state that might be achieved by listening to *qasaa'id* (religious songs). Yet listening to love songs is not the same as listening to a sermon or Sufi praise songs, and listeners most certainly would not put them in the same category: the "love" at the heart of love songs is a deeply personal experience (often of suffering), one that is distinct from the emotions and obligations elicited by political poetry or religious texts; moreover, this love is given "voice" in a distinct way (more on this below). Rather, as Salois (2014) observes in her work on Moroccan hip-hop fans, the auditory culture learned and cultivated in Islam carries over into other listening practices. Above all, this is an auditory culture that emphasizes listening with attention, listening with intention, and listening "from the heart"—listening as "a doing" that has ethical and transformational import for its practitioners. And a listening that makes it possible to *verbally* interpret "listening to love."

Vocal iconicity, models of intimacy

Ears that listen with attention and from the heart, of course, are only half the equation. These ears listen to voices that sing about love—voices that, critically, might be conceived and heard not only as representations of love but also as models of intimacy—or as "love incarnate." A full accounting of the history of this genre is beyond this article's scope. But since their emergence in the 1940s, Somali love songs have been by turns (and often simultaneously) revered and reviled, thanks to the intimate (and taboo) aspirations they voice, their mixed-gendered composition and performance, and their musical form. I would specifically like to highlight some significant features of the "voice" at the heart of the genre, and the ideas that people hold about the "voice" that give it affective power.

The “voice” of Somali love songs, first and foremost, is the deeply personal voice of someone who has experienced love. While love songs express a range of love emotions, including the beauty of love and marriage, the theme of love *suffering* is ubiquitous—whether this suffering is caused by the uncontrollable and overpowering force of love itself, or the various social, familial, and financial realities that thwart romance and marriage. The subject of love songs is thus an inward-looking subject, often at odds with the world, who seeks relief of sorts in song—or, at the least, recognition and release. Indeed, it is the overwhelming force of love that is often credited with “causing” love verse. The first person to “break the chain of silence” regarding love in Somali orature was the now-infamous 1930s poet Cilmi Boodhari, who is today revered as the “Kaaba” of Somali love verse (i.e., the building at the center of the Great Mosque in Mecca, toward which all Muslims pray). Against prevailing attitudes that mocked men who fell in love—and especially scorned those who dared voice such feelings—Cilmi reportedly fell so madly in love that love verse seemed to just pour out. In this rendering, it is *love* that causes verse, which, against all odds and social conventions, makes people “sing what cannot be spoken” (Agawu 2001, 4). One popular Somali saying puts it thus: *Ciil iyo caashaq ayaa loo gabyaa* (Poetry is made from oppression and love).

Because love songs are born of deeply personal experiences and are always voiced in the first person, a song’s effectiveness critically depends on what Middleton (2000) glosses as an “aesthetics of sincerity”—an aesthetic in which “the voice as musical instrument” and “the voice as instrument of self-expression” seamlessly align (Bicknell 2015, 49–50). This differs from the voice of other genres of orature. In political poetry, the poet speaks more generally on behalf of the community (or clan), and may or may not use the first person; the quality of the vocal delivery is also not central to a poem’s affective force. In the women’s religious genre *sitaad*, praise songs are performed in groups; rather than indexing a single individual, the “voice” in this case invokes a collective “daughterhood” (Kapteijns 1999, 71), one that unites singing participants with the first women of Islam. But for love songs, the best voices are always first-person voices sung “from the heart,” or, as one listener put it, voices that sound like they “come from deep, deep inside the soul.” I was often told that in the texture of a singer’s voice, you could “taste” whether they themselves had suffered from love. In Peircean terms, the voice indexes a real-life experience of love suffering and iconically conveys this in the “grain of the voice” (Barthes 1981)—in the warbles that sound like crying, the hesitations that sound timidity, the cracks that call out for desperate recognition, the color and timbre that are uniquely the product of a specific body that has felt love. Love songs thus find initial affective purchase through an ideology of voice (Weidman 2014, 45) that conceives of the voice as a

deeply personal medium of self-expression, an embodied phenomenon through which one’s most innermost feelings become manifest in the world—the vehicle through which *love* itself is made audible . . . or “love incarnate.”

While the best songs seemingly spring unmediated from the depths of a singer’s lovestruck soul, their affective purchase and aesthetic success also critically rest on their *multivocal* character. This is an equally important part of what can make songs “love incarnate.” Singer-songwriters are incredibly rare in this tradition. Songs are, rather, the product of a collaboration between multiple contributors who must each “feel” and temporarily inhabit the love positions of others, then imagine and represent these sentiments. This is a multivocal process of feeling sharing, one that materializes in word, sound, and voice, and that is central to songs’ affective success. Let me explain.

Songs nearly always begin as poems, composed by a poet who has been compelled to write verse after experiencing love or witnessing another’s love pain. Often this results from the direct testimony of love sufferers who seek out poet-love doctors for word remedies, usually in the middle of the night. If a love sufferer’s testimony sufficiently moves a poet, he then “stands where [another] stands” to put otherwise-unsayable love sentiments into first-person verse, guided by “feeling” in his choice of meter and alliteration, and in the words he stitches together. Next the lyrics are given to a melody writer (*laxamiste*), who spends time with them to discern the *bad* (lit. “sea”; genre) of the love experience in question and to get a sense of how this experience might behave melodically. When he has sufficiently “tasted” their meaning, often by reflecting on his own experiences, the *laxamiste* chooses the appropriate *waddo* (lit. “road”; here referring to a pentatonic scale) for a song’s melody. Imagining himself in the position of the protagonist, he composes a melody to “match” how an emotional experience might sound: a song pining for a lover from afar might include phrases pitched high in a singer’s range to mimic calling from a distance, while text that confesses intimate secrets might use hesitating phrases lower in a singer’s register; repeated phrases emphasize certain points and allow sentiments to “breathe.”

A similar process ensues with a singer and instrumentalist, who must each reflect on and “taste” the love experience before performing. Here, too, “feeling” manifests in sound. A singer’s tone should “match” the song’s emotion, and she may employ a range of vocal techniques to convey sadness, hesitation, elation, or whatever a song demands—embellishing a melisma, sliding into a pitch, or allowing her voice to crack. The musician, similarly, adds *xawaash* (lit. “spice”; here referring to ornamentation) to further communicate sonic-emotional “taste”: playing a note vibrato evokes a sense of longing; a tremolo produces a sense of anticipation; well-timed hammered-on notes punctuate a singer’s phrases (Woolner 2021). At any one of

these stages, failing to sufficiently feel and convey another's love sentiments means a song might sound to listeners like the artists are "pretending," and it will therefore "flop"—or at least not taste as sweet. Yet when there is a seamless or natural alignment of feeling between the voices of each contributor, the result is a song that "translates the truth" and "tastes" of the original love-suffering experience.

This necessarily interdependent and multivocal collaboration rests on the assumption that it is possible to know something of another's love (pains), and that by a process of distributed authorship that brings together words, sound, and voice, others may know or feel this love (pain) too. Once shared, this "voice" is then there for others. One playwright put it to me thus: "If somebody loves someone and he puts his voice up there, then it belongs to everyone else." As songs circulate, they are continually (re)made and (re)voiced by the ears and voices of others—as we will see in the stories below. The "voice" of a love song thus iconically indexes not only an *individual* who has suffered from love, but also an interpersonal process of feeling sharing that is audible in the textual-musical-vocal substance of a song, and that is constantly refigured as songs travel. Love songs thus do not simply represent "an aspiration for . . . something shared" (Berlant 1998, 281). In their very sounding they *already are* this sharing.

Referring to songs as "love incarnate" might therefore be conceived as a rather more poetic rendering of Peirce's (1932, 157) notion of "diagrams"—that is, icons "which represent the relations . . . of the parts of one thing by analogous relations in their own parts." Love songs do not just express sentiments of love or sound experiences of love suffering. They model the very possibility of feeling sharing—the possibility of risking intimacy, of opening oneself to others, via the voices of others. Love songs, we might say, "suggest" intimacy. They provide a sonic-affective road map for attentive listeners to make sense of the force of love in their lives, cultivate an open heart, and enter into intimacy. The suggestions of intimacy incarnated in love songs are all the more powerful for the unique feeling opportunities they provide in a setting where voicing one's innermost love sentiments remains incredibly difficult—and where intentional, disciplined listeners are keenly aware of the affective power of the voice in song.

What happens, then, when voices that sound "from deep, deep inside the soul"—voices that sound "love incarnate"—meet attentive ears that listen "from the heart"? The best way to answer this question is to consider how love song listening enters into the intimate worlds of listeners. In what follows, I explore specific listening practices in the lives of five men and women, ranging in age from their 20s to their 50s, at distinct moments in their love lives. I have chosen these listeners to demonstrate the range of heterosexual love situations that love song listening typically enters into (dating, marriage, break-ups, and divorce), as

well as the types of love pains that are soothed by love song listening—whether such pains are caused by cultural expectations about love and its expression, by unattainable or ill-fated relationships, or by love itself.⁵ While we will meet listeners with varied love biographies, they all listen with an intentional and affectively attuned attention to make sense of love, to foster an open heart, and, ultimately, to realize intimacy in their own lives.

Preparing for and articulating love

"If you want to feel what love is like," Gahayr explained, "listen to a love song." There are not many places in Somaliland where you can learn about love, he said. Somalis have a culture that "rejects" love—it is this attitude that led to Cilmi Boodhari's death. And children don't see romance modeled between their parents, as he reckons they do in Western countries, where he suspects people understand romance better. So if you want to learn about love, if you want to *feel what love is like*, then your best bet is to listen to a love song.

Gahayr and I were sitting in a quiet corner of a restaurant flipping through songs on YouTube. I had asked Gahayr, a young teacher, to meet with me to tell me about his favorite songs. It became immediately clear that I was in for more than I had planned. The pages of notes spread between us were an early clue to the seriousness with which Gahayr takes his love song listening. So too was his insistence that *qaraami* (a 1950s-era genre) can help you make sense of just about any love problem—and might solve that very problem. So confident was he in love songs' powers that just that day he had advised a lovesick colleague to go home and listen to Axmed Gacayte. But his faith in the power of love songs took more coherent shape as he began to make his way through his notes and recount the story of his own first love.

Gahayr first fell in love during high school. The young woman who captured his heart was his classmate. As such, he explained, she had "become like a sister" to him, and for two years he dared not share his feelings. To make sense of the feeling growing in his heart, he took to listening to love songs, late in the evening. If you want the songs to "make the most sense," he said, then you should listen "when you are calm and clear your mind of other things." From 10 to midnight is the very best time to "let the meaning of the music really sink in." Alongside watching Bollywood films, this is how Gahayr made sense of the hurricane force of love that had entered his life—listening to give shape and sound to his feelings, to learn from others who had felt these feelings, and to imagine a future in which he, like the singers, might be able to share his love.

This worked for two years. But things came to a head when he took a trip to Ethiopia. Being apart from this woman was so painful that he cut the trip short and returned home. As a preliminary gesture of interest, he

bought the girl a phone card. On June 27 at 8 p.m. he worked up the courage to call her, but when he heard her voice, he was tongue-tied. He hung up to gather his thoughts and muster some courage, and in that moment a song he had listened to many times in the preceding months came into his head. The song was a duet sung by Aamina Cabdullaahi and Maxamed Kuluc about the difficult task of giving voice to love. These sentiments are expressed in the song's lyrics as well as in the melody, instrumentation, and vocal delivery. After an instrumental introduction that establishes the mood, the first stanza opens with a long melismatic phrase that lingers on the preposition *ii* (for me) in a slightly shaky voice that hints of pain, singing of a long-concealed secret that can no longer be kept silent:

Hadal ii daboolnaa
Dadka aan ka qarin jiray
Ooy daniid tidhi sheeg

My secret
 That I used to hide from the people
 I was forced to share⁶

This stanza is repeated—or, as one *laxamiste* explained, allowed to “breathe” so its force can sink in. Then, in a more declaratory mood, Aamina states twice “let me take off its skin/peel.” This declaration is emphasized rhythmically with an emphatic *diirka* (the skin/peel), echoed/reiterated by the instruments. But then Aamina hesitates again, ending in a phrase that trails off into silence:

Ma u tahay diyaar
Mise waaban daayaa?
Ha i dilo jacaylkuye

Are you ready
 Or should I let it be?
 And take it to my grave [lit. “May love kill me”]⁷

In the second stanza, a smooth-voiced Kuluc responds, encouraging Aamina to talk plainly so she “can be treated.” Finally, echoing the musical phrasing of her initial secret, she exclaims, “like heavy rain clouds that rain before the break of dawn,” love has occupied her heart, refusing to go away. Kuluc then shares that he has recently felt a similar ache and that he is ready, as they “have been matched by God.”

Buoyed by the memory of this song—and perhaps its outcome of voiced and *reciprocated* love—Gahayr phoned the girl back, and without saying anything else, simply began to sing the words first voiced by Aamina Cabdullaahi, first describing a painful secret, then outrightly declaring his love. When Gahayr finished, the girl told him she needed time to think, then hung up. After an agonizing night of

waiting, she phoned to say that she would accept his invitation to begin a relationship.

When I asked Gahayr to explain why his initial listening, and then his own voicing of this song, worked so effectively, he explained that songs are the ideal way to make sense of your own emotions and the best way to convey emotions to others. As another listener explained, when love first hits you, it is often hard to articulate or understand what you are feeling, but in songs “someone else is saying it for you.” Songs work here as a “container for feeling” that gives “shape and quality” to otherwise hard-to-articulate sentiments (DeNora 2000, 74)—taking you out of yourself and your inarticulacies for a moment and allowing you to sonically inhabit another’s love experience. Listening, Gahayr said, thus helps you to “learn what love is”—as it has been felt and expressed by others. In turn, this helps you make sense of your own feelings and prepares you to share these feelings with others.

Yet songs do more than give sound to individual feeling. They also sound the possibility of feeling sharing—a sharing that requires a kind of social collaboration to make intimacy happen. As multivocal works whose authorship is distributed, but that are nevertheless sincere, love songs model the possibility that one’s difficult-to-articulate feelings might be made audible *through the voices of others*—yet still heard as sincerely one’s own. Because songs are multivocal, and because the voice “belongs to everyone,” songs can be animated by any number of voicing-listening arrangements to meet the needs of their listener-animators (cf. Fisher 2019; Orwin 2021). This makes songs an ideal way to “pass love messages” between (potential) lovers and gives songs what one listener described to me as exceptional “say-it-for-me” abilities. When one’s own words fail, songs quite literally offer love aspirants the word, melody, and “voice” to break into intimacy.

There is, of course, always the possibility that the listener may not want to receive a song’s message, may choose to interpret songs otherwise. As one proverb puts it, *Qofba meeshii bugtaa isagay belbeshaa* (Each person takes it where the wound burns). In the final instance, what a song does depends on the listener’s willingness to listen in to its message. Luckily for Gahayr, like Maxamed Kuluc, the recipient of his revoicing also had her own aching love wound and was willing to listen in to the intimacy proposed in the song.

Healing the wounds of love

“Music heals me,” Huda said optimistically. “It helps me keep going, day by day.” While echoing a common sentiment that love songs are the best kind of “therapy” around, Huda’s comments seemed starkly out of place in the context of the *calaacal* (lit. “wailing”) we had been discussing—a subgenre that documents the pain and regret of failed

relationships. Yet in a conversation that unfolded over months and took us deep into a painful series of love misfortunes, Huda began to show me how the difficult work of listening to the love pains of others provides not only a sense of comfort but also a road map of sorts to the continued possibility of keeping hearts open to love.

A divorcée in her mid-20s, Huda credits love song listening with saving her from a period of deep love-induced depression. Her love crisis was multilayered, yet familiar to women of Huda's generation who find themselves torn between the pull of the heart, familial expectations, and financial realities. During university, Huda fell in love and developed a (mostly secret) relationship with a classmate. By the end of Huda's studies, her mother's incessant questioning about when she would marry took its toll and she gave her partner an ultimatum: either they marry or separate. Sadly, he lacked the finances for marriage—a predicament of “waithood” observed across the continent (Honwana 2012)—so they broke up. Shortly thereafter, her father came to her with a proposition. A cousin from London was returning to Hargeysa intending to marry; Huda was an ideal bride. While wary of this arrangement, Huda consented. The pair were married and spent a few weeks together before her husband returned to London. While a spouse with a European passport is highly desirable to many locals, Huda explained that she immediately knew this union was a mistake. Discovering that her new husband had failed to disclose a number of previous marriages further weakened the possibility of trust. She described this period as one when she “could not find [her]self.” This feeling became so unbearable that she asked for a divorce.

While released from a difficult marriage, this ordeal threw Huda into a deep depression, defined by multiple layers of grief: heartache for a relationship that had not led to marriage, despair at being a divorcée before her 25th birthday, and anxiety about finding a partner who would accept this history. In her despair, Huda turned to what she calls “crash” songs, or *calaacal*. For three months, she undertook a self-prescribed listening treatment regimen: she did nothing but go to work, bathe, eat, greet her parents, then return to her room to lie alone on her bed and listen to the love pain of others.

How did this listening facilitate Huda's healing? In the first instance, listening to “crash” songs opened her up to a great deal of pain. When you listen to *calaacal*, she said, the *sound* of a song can “touch you deeply.” Take, for instance, one of Huda's favorites during this grieving period, Maandeeq's wistful “Ma jin baa ma jaan baa?” This song queries the direction that Maandeeq's “love boat” has taken, laments the loss of a love she was willing to die for, expresses confusion over a man who has deceived her, and finds comfort in the promise that God will help her—all sentiments that certainly resonated with Huda. The song features just an oud, which periodically embellishes the vocal

line, but at other times leaves Maandeeq's voice bare. Maandeeq also does what Huda says all the best singers do—she “puts her voice on the words in a way that makes you feel like it happened to her.” She begins, for instance, with a plaintive query low in her range, giving the effect of an uncertain whisper:

Ma jin baa ma jaan baa
Mise jahawareer bey
Arrintaydu joogtaa?

Is he/it a jinn or an angel?
 Or is my life confused
 Perhaps it is so?

As the song moves into the climactic phrasing of the refrain, the melody rises in pitch and Maandeeq's vocal delivery mimics the desperate, searching plea of the lyrics:

Allahayow janniyo naar
Adaa u kala jiheeyee
Aniga jooge iga maqan
Qalbigaygii lama jiro

God, paradise or hell,
 You direct people to each
 I don't know if my love is with me or not
 My heart searches⁸

By the end, Maandeeq returns to a more contemplative delivery, leaving her fate to time. The effect overall, Huda says, is a song that doesn't just “touch you deeply” but causes you to “feel her.” The sorrow audible in Maandeeq's voice, the love suffering tasted in the words of the poem, and the melody to which the words are set—all these work together to “take you to the highest place,” a place outside yourself, yet also somehow deeply inside.

As we listened together, Huda seemed to restrain herself, not wanting to give herself over fully to Maandeeq's voice, to the love suffering entailed therein—at least not in my presence. These are not songs “for listening for fun.” You must be ready to confront your pain. Yet she explained that in the months after her divorce, this is precisely what she did. In the first instance, this listening worked to turn her own suffering inside out—a process that is not unlike the way a song itself sonically indexes the very turning inside out of deeply felt internal sentiments, made possible by the voice as a medium that exists both inside and outside the voicing subject. Yet eventually opening herself up to her own pain by listening to songs conceived to provide unmediated access to another's lovestruck soul became a source of comfort, reassuring her that she was not alone. These songs, after all, distill the intimate experiences of multiple others. Listening to the love pains of others provided Huda with a powerful source of comfort, a sense of

suffering *with others*. As another friend put it, listening to *calaacal* reminds you that “sad days meet a lot of people [and] you are one of [those] people. So you just feel at home.”

Beyond assuring Huda that she was not alone in the love-suffering universe, she ultimately credits these songs with helping her move on. In between laments of love suffering, she said, these songs also teach you that you can overcome pain. Love may be a matter of fate, as Maandeeq suggests. But rather than leading to resignation, these songs helped her “accept that things happen for a reason,” and that she could *choose* how to respond. By risking bearing their love pains to the world, singers were, in a way, singing a way past their pain, singing a way forward—singing the possibility of action, of moving on. As another middle-aged friend explained, describing what he called his own set of “heartbreak and recovery songs”: “Although the moment is painful and you are heartbroken, you look for people who are in a similar situation, and you look for answers. Some songs give you answers [in their words]. But others, *in their singing*, say ‘I will pass this stage.’” We might say that in their very sounding—and the sharing of love suffering that this entails—love songs enable listeners to first listen in and then listen past their own love suffering, providing a sonic-affective road map of sorts for cultivating an open heart amid heartbreak. And in orienting themselves to others’ love pains, listeners gain perspective on their own love problems, comfort in knowing that they do not suffer alone, and, ultimately, strength to continue on without closing off their hearts.

While our early conversations about this situation were very difficult, by the end of my stay there was a new lightness in Huda’s voice. The songs’ lessons had begun to sink in, the work of attuning herself to others’ love pain was paying off. With only a slight suggestion, she explained that she had finally decided it was time to date again. A specific suitor, alongside her favorite *calaacal*, had convinced her to “reopen [her] heart.” So for now she has traded in her “crash” songs for a more optimistic playlist.

Remembering love (pain), cultivating mercy

“Do you know this song,” Cabdi asked, as the familiar voice of Xasan Aadan Samatar sang from his iPhone. “I think you’ve heard it before. Listen here. He is calling her *Beerlula*. It means ‘the one who catches him,’ who makes him feel. *Beer* means ‘liver.’ She shook his liver.” As strange as the liver shaker or, literally, the “liver quiverer” may sound, I was well-acquainted with this song and the famous encounter of the poet Hadraawi memorialized in its lyrics. While touring with a theater troupe in the 1970s to the town Beledweyn, Hadraawi encountered a beautiful woman and was immediately smitten. He arranged to meet her the following day, but his troupe was called away early, dash-

ing his romantic aspirations. He later transformed this encounter into a poem that alliterates in *b* (eliciting the nickname *Beerlula*). The poem begins by invoking love itself—love that killed Boodhari (another *b*)—then explains that his skepticism about love has melted away, as love (pain) overtakes his body:

*Bi'i waa jacaylow!
Boog aan la dhayinoo
Cidi baanan karinoo
Beerkiyo wadnaa iyo
Bogga kaaga taalliyo
Inuu yahay bir caashaqu
Been baan u haystee*

O love, may you live forever!
An ulcerous wound that hasn't been salved and
That no one can nurse and
That is in the liver and the heart and
The side; [this wound] is present in you
That love is [also] a weapon
I took it for an untruth (adapted from Orwin, forthcoming)

The song goes on to describe the beauty of Beledweyn and Beerlula, before narrating Hadraawi’s encounter and his reaction to being called away (including praying for the gas tank to spring a leak), and, despite his love tragedy, finishes with a series of supplications and well-wishes to Beledweyn and Beerlula. In contrast to most songs, this one moves through a number of distinct sections: the melody (written by Cabdikariin Jiir), instrumentation, and vocal delivery notably shift to demarcate different parts of the story, each with their own feeling. The overall effect, like the encounter Hadraawi recounts, is one of taking an unpredictable journey: from the extensive use of the conjunction *oo* to set up anticipation in the listener (Orwin, forthcoming); to the instrumental interludes and pauses and shifts of pace; to Samatar’s varied vocalization, which includes everything from spoken passages to phrases belted at the top of his range.

While this song often prompts lively debate about Hadraawi, Cabdi played this song for more personal reasons. As the final supplication to the “liver quiverer” rang out, his demeanor took on a new seriousness as he began to narrate how this song became entangled in his love journey. He first encountered this song when he started dating a young woman. The first time she invited him for lunch, she put this song on before they ate. He was immediately captivated by its melody and the encounter it describes. As with all his “best songs,” this one’s words, melody, and voice “go well together, up and down,” he said, and leave you feeling “in a spiritual mood.” The song first indexed a happy encounter. Yet its story of anticipated happiness, followed by thwarted love, soon came to take on new meaning.

When the couple told her parents they wanted to wed, they refused, because Cabdi is from a different clan. While exogamous marriages were once the norm, a trend toward endogamy in urban centers has become especially pronounced since the onset of war in the 1980s.⁹ She proposed eloping. This left Cabdi with a “dead decision”—choose the girl, and she is cut off from her family; leave the girl and abandon dreams of a life together. In the end the pull of family won, and they separated.

Cabdi eventually met another woman whose family accepted him, and they are happily married with children. Curiously, “Beledweyn” is still part of his regular listening repertoire. “Every time I’m out of the city for work, in the field, I have this song,” he said, “and then I listen. When I listen I remember that time”—the woman who made his liver quiver and whom, like Hadraawi, he had to leave behind. He feels an especially strong sense of regret for the other woman, whose life has not been easy—she was married then quickly divorced, and is now a single mother. Sometimes the painful feelings are so strong that he can’t listen for two or three months. “But then after a while,” he said, “I *have* to listen again.”

When I pressed him as to why he would intentionally elicit these memories, he explained, first, that remembering love difficulties helps you keep perspective on your present love situation. “We live in a hardship country,” he said, where it’s hard for people to trust each other. Not everyone can succeed in love. In happy times remembering past love pains helps you more deeply appreciate where you are. In difficult times it can help you remember that this too will past. As DeNora (2000, 66) suggests, this kind of musical retrospection, which is facilitated by the fact that music is an art form that moves through time, can be a critical “part of the work of producing one’s self as a coherent being over time.” Significantly, the “self” here is one modeled in “Beledweyn”—a self that, like Hadraawi (and Cilmi, and countless others) has known love, lived through love pain, made sense of that love pain by giving it voice. And a self who, knowing this pain firsthand, ultimately wishes others well in their own love journeys.

Indeed, in addition to helping you keep your own love journey in perspective, Cabdi explained, revisiting the feeling of love *pain* also helps him to keep a sense of mercy in his heart. “Whenever you see a woman, you remember your girlfriend [and the difficulties she faced . . .]. So you respect every woman. It gives you a kind of mercy. So every week I *have* to listen, and remember her.” While he is now happily married, this listening makes him think of the suffering that others might be going through. And remembering one’s own love pain by listening to the love pain of others is a kind of listening act that many listeners said has the unique ability to “soften the heart.” Listening, Cabdi explained, is an excellent “inner feeling equipment method”—and the mercy this listening cultivates ultimately makes him a bet-

ter husband. This might be why he obliged when his wife asked him to pick a song to mark *their* relationship (rather than just listening to one that reminded him of an old girlfriend . . . but this is a story for another day). In any case, what we have here is a form of listening in which a song works first as a “container for feeling,” but also the unfolding and replaying of feeling across time, and a model of a feeling self that is attentive to the love pain of others, wherever they may be in their own love journeys.

Keeping the romance alive

While the cases presented thus far may suggest that experiences of love are always difficult—and, indeed, the preponderance of love suffering in song is undeniable—listening may also be undertaken as an activity geared toward imagining what intimacy *could* be, what successful love might feel and sound like. The final case I will explore is one such case of listening to give form to romantic aspirations.

Aamina and Farxiya are sisters, in their late 30s and mid-50s, respectively. Born and raised in Hargeysa, they were displaced to Oslo in the late 1980s by the war between the Somali National Movement and Siyaad Barre’s regime. After more than 20 years abroad, they have recently relocated to Hargeysa. Weaned on the “Somali greats” by their mother, they sometimes listen to old songs, but like many diaspora returnees are more open to songs produced by younger artists. Both prefer to listen to music alone, though Aamina’s listening is often distracted by her six children who know where to find her phone and look up their favorite songs. Her private listening comes while she is driving to work. While she tells me that music is “probably *xaaraan*,” and she has recently tried to start listening to *duco* (religious prayers), she admits that halfway through her commute she usually switches to music, since it helps her “relax” and “unwind”—and, sometimes, “get her in the mood.”

Compared to most, Aamina and Farxiya have been luckier in love. Both were courted by well-to-do admirers in their late teens, and happily married soon after. Both have been blessed with many children, as well as husbands who have not shown interest in taking second wives, though their financial circumstances and aging first wives may allow them to do so. Neither listens to music with her husband: Aamina because her husband prefers poetry, and Farxiya because her husband prefers listening to songs by himself. Farxiya in fact explained that she teases her husband relentlessly when she finds him listening to *qaraami*, chiding him for being “too soft,” for having a *qalbi-xabxab* (watermelon heart). When I asked Farxiya why she would not want her husband to be so romantically inclined, she said she fears he may start fantasizing about romance with a younger woman. But, she mused, as long as his watermelon heart is focused on her, this listening might be OK, perhaps even beneficial to their marriage.

Like other lovers of new music, Farxiya and Aamina enjoy listening to whatever is popular and resonates with their mood and experiences at a particular time. They are especially fond of “romance” songs, performed or played at weddings, in which couples sing each other’s praises. While Farxiya may find her husband’s music-induced watermelon heart problematic, both sisters usually listen to foster this romantic softness in themselves. As we sipped sweet tea and nibbled cake one afternoon when Aamina had managed to get away from her kids, smartphones armed and ready, they each flipped through a series of songs, pausing to explain what each is about. “I like this one,” Farxiya said, playing snippets of a new Maxamed BK song, “because I love BK’s voice, it’s nice. This song is called ‘Laba baal,’ which means ‘Two wings.’” The song describes a man awakening at night, so overcome by longing that he asks himself if he should let his soul go (even reciprocated love causes pain). But he is so pulled by his beloved that he instead wishes for two wings, so that he can fly to be with her tomorrow.

Like other fans of BK, a popular local singer, the sisters explained that they like his songs because of his sweet and gentle voice, the way he “praises . . . and says nice words to women,” and his reputation as a softhearted performer even known to invite his wife onstage to serenade her. BK, we might say, practices what he sings. And what he practices is tender affection toward his wife, precisely what women often dream their lovers would bestow on them, the kind of romantic words they wish they themselves might hear—yet most men rarely express. And in the absence of husbands or lovers who might sing these sweet words themselves, BK’s voice—one known to be sincere and available to and for others—provides his listeners with what Agawu (2001, 7) calls a “hollow space,” a space in which “active listeners and interpreters are invited to play, to invent, to dream, and inevitably, to lie.”

Indeed, as BK’s voice sang through Farxiya’s phone, she explained, “sometimes, when the guy sings, I feel like he’s saying it to me.” Similarly, describing a duet she likes, Aamina said she “likes how the lady is speaking to the man, and the man to the woman, how they speak to each other.” She continued, “You know, sometimes when I listen to the songs that I like, I get into a mood, and I think about, you know, last time. . . . It’s hard to explain. You get into a mood.” When I pressed her about this “mood,” she revealed that the mood she gets into is one of nostalgic reminiscing about her days of courtship and early marriage, days when her husband, like BK, “was still so romantic,” days before children when “we still had time for each other”—when they could walk the streets of Oslo holding hands, and go out for a nice dinner, unlike their current married life in Hargeysa, where public displays of affection are taboo.

On hearing her sister speak this way, Farxiya pulled up a picture of her before her wedding, exclaiming, “You see,

I was very beautiful then!” While these songs do not intersect with specific moments like they did for Cabdi, the sentiments they express and the “romance” they sound allow Aamina and Farxiya to relive or reimagine their younger, more beautiful prechildren selves, as well as their more romantic and attentive younger husbands. And, they tell me somewhat conspiratorially, the romantically inclined subjectivity these songs allow them to inhabit can indeed spill over into their personal lives. Aamina recently returned from a romantic child-free getaway weekend to the coast—or what Farxiya teasingly described as her “second honeymoon”—after pressing her husband for months to rekindle the romance of their early marriage. Farxiya, for her part, recently bought a new set of bedroom furniture—much to the amusement and teasing of her agetates, who told her this was the behavior of newlyweds—in part to keep her husband’s watermelon heart focused squarely on her.

“Love without song is like tea without sugar”: Thoughts toward a conclusion

After one of my listening sessions, I ran into a group of male friends. We chatted briefly about my research, and I casually asked them why they like to listen to love songs. At first they deflected my question, suggesting I instead talk to their friend who is known among his peers as the “love expert.” (His claim to fame? Falling so in love as a teenager that he branded his beloved’s name on his forearm using a knife and hot charcoal.) But after sitting quietly for a moment, one friend, Bilaal, said love songs teach you everything you need to know about love. When I asked him to be more specific, he effortlessly recited (and translated) a version of the lyrics of a song by Saalax Qaasim, which itself quotes a poem by Cilmi Boodhari:

*Marna waa macaan
Marna waa qadhaadh
Hadba waa siduu
Kugu soo maree*

Sometimes it’s sweet
Sometimes it’s bitter
It depends on how
It touches you

What love songs do, he continued, is “make love tangible,” and “give it shape.” Songs show you, he said, that “sometimes love has this shape”—it is like poison or a terrible disease. Other times it “tastes delicious,” like honey or camel’s milk. Because a Somali poet has “traced love with his pen,” others too can feel and understand love. Songs start in love, he said, and in turn songs guide love. “Love without song,” he concluded, “is like tea without sugar.”

At first, I heard Bilaal's comments as confirming the indispensable role that love songs play in listeners' love lives. Tea without sugar is, for most Somalis, a nonoption. As Amran put it at the outset of this chapter, "If you feel love [. . .] you *must* listen to music!" In a setting where speaking about intimate matters is taboo, love songs are often people's first port of call to learn about love. And songs can help you through all manner of love challenges—whether this be making sense of the dizzying force of new love, learning to articulate love sentiments, healing from heartbreak, evoking memories and imagining love futures, or fostering intimacy in existing relationships. And so deeply entangled in listeners' love lives are songs that, like sugarless tea, love without song is nearly unthinkable.

The more I have thought about Bilaal's comments, however, the more I have come to understand that they not only help explain the centrality of love song listening to listeners' own love journeys, but also *how* it is that love songs "sweeten" love experiences. Their "sweetness" has something to do with the dialogic relationship between ears and voices that I have documented in this article—and, in fact, it is the nature of the "voice" in relation to attentive ears that implicates songs so deeply in listeners' lives. Let me explain.

Love songs, as Bilaal noted, give "shape" to love. Songs start in love experiences that are "traced" by the pen of a poet and are eventually given "voice" in a particular way. Bilaal elsewhere told me that it is the words, the rhythm of a song, and the unique voice of a singer that together make a song special. This "voice" *affords* listeners certain feeling opportunities. In the first instance, because a poet has already "traced love with his pen," songs give shape to listeners' own feelings, helping them process and articulate their experiences. It is a voice that takes listeners deep into themselves, yet ultimately one that assures lonely listeners that they are not alone. Songs, in a way, work to cut the sometimes lonely or bitter taste of love (as sugar does for tea).

Yet the "voice" of love also opens outward to sweeten love experiences in other ways. As I described above, songs are the product of a collaborative feeling-sharing process that listeners can "taste" in the voice, which then enters the world to be taken up by others, reinhabited, revoiced, belonging to (and made by) everyone. This voice, rendered by my poet friend as "love incarnate," affords listeners the opportunity to feel with others *and* simultaneously suggests to listeners that this feeling with others is what makes love taste sweet. The "voice" of love, after all, becomes "sweeter" when shared. Now love does not need songs to exist, but intimacy does need *dareen-wadaag* (feeling sharing) to be realized. For listeners like those we have met in this article, it is songs that encourage this feeling sharing. Just as sugar makes the taste of tea bloom, songs open into feeling opportunities that deepen how listeners experience the pain and promise of love, and in turn help listeners realize intimacy in their own lives.

All this, of course, depends on the work of listeners. Sugar does not add itself to tea; someone must intentionally scoop it in and stir it to dissolve just right. Similarly, we might say that the voice is not just "*for* the ear" (Cavarero 2005, 169); it *needs* the ear. As various listeners explained, songs only "make sense" under certain conditions, like quiet and solitude that give listeners space to really pay attention—and, I would add, technological, political-religious conditions that temper how people listen, and the "listening literacies" that they bring to the work of listening. The intimate possibilities afforded by the voice are ultimately realized by the attention and intention that listeners bring to the work of listening, listeners who approach listening as an "act," and who are deeply attuned to the affective possibilities of sound, poetry, and song. It is by aurally attending to the "pain and praise of others" (Kapchan 2017) that attentive and affectively attuned listeners can make sense of their own inexpressible love feelings, feel these feelings more deeply *with others*, and in turn cultivate the kind of open heart that allows them to actualize intimacy in their own lives. In short, listeners do not just listen to love songs; they listen *to love*. That is, they listen with attention and intention *to* voices that sing and model love, and they do so *in order to* love: to feel love, make sense of love, and actualize love in their own lives.

This is, of course, not an exhaustive account of how people listen, or how people love. But it is, I hope, an opening into thinking about how we might better account for the relationship between ears and voices, affect and subjectivity, and the inherently social and relational work of getting intimacy done—the implications of which are theoretical as well as methodological. Ethnography, after all, is nothing if not a discipline of audition.

Notes

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1. This article uses pseudonyms throughout, with the exception of named poets, singers, and musicians. Names are spelled in Somali; pronunciation is largely phonetic to English readers, with the exception of *x* (a throaty "h"), and *c*, which is the Somali rendering of the Arabic 'ayn ('). Readers unfamiliar with the latter sound should silence the *c* (e.g., read "Cabdi" as "Abdi").

2. From the song "Jamasho" (Passion), translated with input from Abdihakim Abdilahi Omer and Kenedid Ali Hassan. All songs

referenced in this article may be easily found on YouTube by searching the singer's name and song title.

3. This formulation builds on Eisenlohr's (2018) work on Muslim devotional poetry, which argues that the vibrating voice "suggests movement" in the felt bodies of listeners.

4. During times of political repression and censorship (especially during Siyaad Barre's rule [1969–91]), there is a tradition of veiling political critique in love songs—or hearing critique whether intended or not. During my fieldwork, however, open political critique was largely tolerated, and love songs were thus heard as love songs.

5. The listening I describe in this article exclusively concerns heterosexual love, as these are the types of relationships that concerned my interlocutors. There are a limited number of songs about other types of love, like filial love (see Xudeydi's "Uur hooyo" [Mother's womb]) or the love of mothers (there are multiple songs titled "Hooyo" [Mother]), though such songs did not feature in any of my listening sessions.

6. More literally, this translates as "Speech that was covered for me/That I used to hide from the people/And about which self-interest has said 'Tell it'" (translation by Martin Orwin).

7. Translated with input from Kenedid Ali Hassan and Martin Orwin.

8. Translated with input from Kenedid Ali Hassan and Martin Orwin.

9. Warsame (2002) links this trend to changing notions of property rights that accompanied urbanization from the late colonial period onward.

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