

ROUND TABLE

Between Voice(lessness), Silence, and Noise: Sonic Reconstruction of the Asylum Seekers' Paradigm

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Abstract

This article is structured around snapshots of everyday life in reception centres for asylum seekers. These set the tone of the sonic and affective dimensions of the experience of the centre, as narrated by a resident, a music teacher, and through ethnographic reflections. The article devises 'voice' as a distinct category of the sonic spectrum, imbued with the significance of testifying to human existence, in a twofold way: first as a theoretical lens that offers new perspectives on the asylum seekers' paradigm, and second, as a methodological tool to gain insights into aspects of everyday life in a reception centre, and by extension gaining access into 'other' social worlds that would otherwise remain concealed.

Keywords: citizenship; soundscape; reception centre; voicing; listening

Introduction

'Invisible', 'silenced', 'speechless', 'fearful', and as lacking agency: these are properties that still largely pertain to representations of refugees in mainstream discourses.¹ The concept of 'refugee voices', on the other hand, while suggesting agency and potential, is still saturated with essentialism regarding what a refugee should be and thus how they should 'voice', conveying in turn certain reifications and homogenizing representations.² In both cases, the capacity to speak, to sound, to be audibly and visibly perceived and under what terms is foregrounded, tightly intertwining voice with subjectivity, and by extension reproducing the hierarchies embedded in (non-)citizenship. As Phillips-Hutton argues in her contribution to this round table, voice is liminal, being ingrained in subjectivity, and at the same time capable of entering and becoming part of other spheres.³ Murphy and Chatzipanagiotidou, in turn, further developing this line of thinking, depart from 'voice as narrative' and move into conceptualizing it

Preliminary work on the ethnographic material included in this contribution was presented at the BFE-RMA Research Students' Conference hosted by the University of Plymouth between 6 and 8 January 2022. The title of the paper was 'How Does a Silenced Place Sound? Resonances of Contested Relations in a Reception Centre of Asylum Seekers', and its argumentation fed into the development of the third chapter of my PhD thesis, titled 'Soundscapes of Everyday Life'. The current contribution, revolving around voice as a theoretical lens and methodological tool, was developed during an Irish Research Council Postdoctoral Researcher Fellowship, during which I was based at the School of Music, University College Dublin (2023–24). In developing this piece, I benefited particularly from the discussion that followed my talk titled 'Voice, Silence, and Noise: Sonic Accounts of Life in Reception Centres', which was hosted by the Research Seminar Series at UCD School of Music.

¹Peter Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees: Beyond States of Emergency* (Routledge, 2006).

²Heath Cabot, "'Refugee Voices': Tragedy, Ghosts, and the Anthropology of Not Knowing', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 45.6 (2016), pp. 645–72, doi:10.1177/0891241615625567.

³Ariana Phillips-Hutton, 'Finding, Having, Borrowing the Voice', *Royal Musical Association Research Chronicle*, 56 (2025), pp. 7–13, doi:10.1017/trc.2025.3.

as part of a constellation comprising sounding bodies and objects (and silences).⁴ Voice, however, by lingering in liminality and assembling constellations of fragmented trajectories, entangles with other voices, perpetually balancing between the one who speaks and the audience to whom they speak, the vocalizer and the hearer, gaining its meaningfulness through the properties attached to each edge, enabling us to trace their positionality and complicate their relationships and the narratives they produce.⁵ Springing from the ontologies enacted through voice, what constellations of existence does a focus on refugee ‘voice(lessness)’ bring? How can we understand (non-)citizenship and the socialities pertaining to refugeehood and asylum-seeking through voice?

Admittedly, citizenship persists as the prime indicator of legitimate political belonging within the nation state’s periphery, despite its contested and ‘territorialized’ nature, given that the organization of sociopolitical order is set by the state’s sovereignty.⁶ Khosravi characteristically argues that there is no legitimate acknowledgement of a human being’s existence without legal and political status within a ‘national order of things’.⁷ Refugees, having been forced to cross the international borders of their home nation to seek asylum in another, have lost any privilege they were endowed with, and have become subject to the immigration regulations and jurisdiction of another state. Furthermore, for as long as the outcome of their asylum request is pending, they live in legal and existential limbo, defined by precarity for their present and uncertainty for their future.⁸ Refugees are reduced to individual cases under examination, homogenized under the shadow of their homeland, their suffering, and their non-citizenship. Their socio-spatial marginality is traced in the locations and conditions of their accommodation. Political expressions such as migrants’ protests are seen as expressions of active citizenship, a means to reclaim political visibility and audibility — which they are otherwise deprived of — under the established norms of political being.⁹ Voice’s liminality contradicts the rigidity of the legal status of (non-)citizenship, orientating our thinking around the individual presence and agency in (un)making its attributed meaningfulness and thus releasing new possibilities for thinking and being. How does voice reinforce (political) being? If voices are collective and relational, then whom do we ‘hear’ in the interlocutors’ voices? How do refugees’ testimonies re-shape our understanding of the multiplicity and contestations entailed in the argument that ‘voice is property’?¹⁰

The notion of ‘voice’, occupying a unique position in the sonic spectrum that is tightly interconnected to (human) actors, interweaves the two vignettes structuring this article, which evolve around the two edges of the sonic spectrum, ‘silence’ and ‘noise’, exemplifying how refugee lifeworlds are imagined and actually sound. In doing so, the article contributes to the debates around refugeehood and asylum-seeking, challenging the representations of ‘reception centres for asylum seekers’ (from now on, ‘camps’) in Greece as ‘silent’, which resonate by extension with the deprivation of their residents’ political being.¹¹ Structuring the discussion around interviewees’ testimonies of their everyday (sonic) experiences in a

⁴Fiona Murphy and Evropi Chatzipanagiotidou, ‘Voices as Constellation: Listening to the Voices and Silences of Displacement in Three Acts’, *Royal Musical Association Research Chronicle*, 56 (2025), pp. 22–33, doi:10.1017/rmc.2025.2.

⁵Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 7; Phillips-Hutton, ‘Finding, Having, Borrowing’; Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre and Vocality in African American Music* (Duke University Press, 2019), pp. 1–38.

⁶See Étienne Balibar, *Citizenship*, trans. by Thomas Scott-Railton (Polity Press, 2015). Balibar contends that the territorialized nature of ‘citizenship’ is entangled with the bounded nature of a nation state and its power. Citizenship marks legitimate belonging to a state, and thus indicates a collective identity intertwined with an established set of rights and duties.

⁷Shahram Khosravi, *Illegal Traveller: An Autoethnography of Borders* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 122; Liisa Malkki, ‘Refugees and Exile: From “Refugee Studies” to the National Order of Things 1995’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24 (1995), pp. 495–523.

⁸Heath Cabot, *On the Doorstep of Europe: Asylum and Citizenship in Greece* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

⁹Imogen Tyler and Katarzyna Marciniak, ‘Immigrant Protest: An Introduction’, *Citizenship Studies*, 17.2 (2013), pp. 143–56, doi:10.1080/13621025.2013.780728.

¹⁰Also see the discussion by Phillips-Hutton, ‘Finding, Having, Borrowing’.

¹¹In Greece (in line with international practices of regulating migration), asylum seekers shelter in designated facilities, the so-called ‘reception centres for asylum seekers’, which are largely located outside and at a considerable distance from urban residential settings. Living on the margins of the host society involves the contested terms of their (non-)presence. The spatial

camp, the article contributes to the discussion around their (in)audibility and illustrates the multiplicity of their experiences. Resonating with Roy's argument about 'deliberate silencing', or conveniently not hearing, rather than someone's inherent 'voicelessness', the article contends that refugees and asylum seekers, rather than being 'voiceless', are made 'inaudible'.¹² It further shows that 'noise' rather than 'silence' should be the analytical term through which to perceive life in a camp. I use the notions of 'voice', 'silence', and 'noise' literally, as sonic phenomena, and metaphorically, as indicators of respective ontologies.

'Hearing' and 'listening' bridge the two layers of discussion. They suggest the aural perception of and connection between individuals and their environments, as embedded in the shifting modalities of power regarding the degree of active engagement with sonic events, and in turn, the re-enacting of all perceived qualities constituting them as such.¹³ Aurally perceiving reality suggests privileged understandings of the complexities and interconnections shaping it, due to sound's affectivity and its capacity to be felt bodily and to foster evocative experiences.¹⁴ Hearing and listening facilitate enhanced understandings of individuals, too. To 'hear' a person entails recognizing their subjectivity, their individual existence, and their experience as echoed and incarnated in their voice in the given instance of its expression, considering voice's malleability, and in that lies the potential of the interviewees' testimonies about the sonic aspects of their lifeworlds to invert established power relations.¹⁵

The refugee camp becomes the spatial canvas vibrating with lived experiences while simultaneously being (re)configured with them. Hearing and listening entangle space and proximity, shifting the focus to the modes of a certain sound's audibility and thus indicating ways of relating among the actors who constitute the specific ecology.¹⁶

Vignette 1: Bustling Silence

The wind blowing among the few trees and the occasional clanging of metal surfaces sonically framed my fifteen-minute walk from the subway station to the reception centre for asylum seekers (the camp) across the streets of a previous industrial area, now a location of empty buildings and massive warehouses. During daytime the truck engines and their tyres spinning on the asphalt interrupted, more or less often, the dull soundscape of the street. The only signs of life were dogs guarding some warehouses, bursting out in barking and pushing against the metallic gates and fences, inadvertently scaring off the unsuspecting passer-by.

The camp spread behind a gate no different than those for the warehouses, except for a police car permanently parked there and a few security officers. No detail in this soundscape testified human

practices of refugees' reception centres are thoroughly discussed in Michel Agier, *On the Margins of the World: The Refugee Experience Today*, trans. by David Fernbach (Polity Press, 2008).

¹²Arundhati Roy, *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* (Penguin, 2006), p. 330.

¹³Michael Gallagher, 'Listening, Meaning, and Power', in *On Listening*, ed. by Angus Carlyle and Cathy Lane (Uniformbooks, 2013), pp. 41–44; Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*.

¹⁴Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, 2nd edn (Cambridge University Press, 2004); Pirkko Moisala, Taru Leppänen, Milla Tiainen, and Hanna Väättäin, 'Introduction: Musical Encounters with Deleuze and Guattari', in *Musical Encounters with Deleuze and Guattari*, ed. by Pirkko Moisala, Taru Leppänen, Milla Tiainen, and Hanna Väättäin (Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 1–29 (p. 14); Veit Erlmann, 'But What of the Ethnographic Ear? Anthropology, Sound, and the Senses', in *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening and Modernity*, ed. by Veit Erlmann (Berg, 2004), pp. 1–20; Jonathan Sterne, 'Hearing', in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. by David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Duke University Press, 2015), pp. 65–77.

¹⁵David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny, 'Introduction', in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. by Novak and Sakakeeny, pp. 1–14 (p. 2); Mladen Dolar, 'The Linguistics of the Voice', in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. by Jonathan Sterne (Routledge, 2012), pp. 539–54; Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*; Tom Western, 'Listening with Displacement: Sound, Citizenship, and Disruptive Representations of Migration', *Migration and Society: Advances in Research*, 3 (2020), pp. 294–309, doi:10.3167/arms.2020.030128.

¹⁶See Mark Paterson, 'Intimate Listening', in *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Art*, ed. by Jane Grant, John Matthias, and David Prior, online edition (Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 437–529, doi:10.1093/oxfordhdb/9780190274054.013.29.

residence, although more than two thousand people were living there.¹⁷ The setting outside the camp, largely devoid of living human sounds, seemed to align with the mainstream understanding of it as ‘silent’, and starkly contrasted the soundscape once someone passed through its gates.

Sound entangles with movement across space due to the materiality of sound waves and their transmission through the air. Given that movement tends to be perceived metaphorically as action, and thus as a manifestation of life, sound is by extension conceptualized as action, and thus life.¹⁸ The walls surrounding the camp restricted physical access to it and prevented anyone from ‘sensing’ human life behind them, reinforcing the sociopolitical distinctions embedded in (non-)citizenship. The walls set barriers on the sound’s movement, ‘silencing’ refugee life, similar to how they visually demarcated the space allocated to a population whose positionality regarding the host society was ambiguous.

Being in limbo means being incapable to move: physical and existential stuckness.¹⁹ The rhythm(s) of the pulse manifest the organism’s living activity, its movement across space, changes and adaptations to ensure survival.²⁰ Mobility tightly intertwines with the capacity to move not only physically across space, but also in life, achieving existential fulfilment and avoiding what Hage calls ‘social death’.²¹ Accordingly, being in limbo is a condition that hampers development, hence the chances for a meaningful life. In this paradigm, silence, understood as lack of sound, reasonably stands as a sonic equivalent to death, as it suggests a lack of living activity.

Despite these interpretations, perceiving silence indicates its affectivity, further suggesting certain modalities of presence and action. Eventually, perceiving silence, similarly to any sort of sound, becomes possible through the sound waves across the space, in turn indicating movement and consequently action. Ochoa-Gautier contends that ‘the tension between the apparent acoustic impossibility of silence and the intensely contrasting experiences it provokes lies at the heart of the types of presence and affect invoked by the term’.²² The paradoxical effect that silence has on the listener resonates with the ontological dimensions of sound. Therefore it urges us to shift our focus from silence as an ‘objective’ sonic condition to the parameters that define the listener’s experience and their interpretation of it. Murphy and Chatzipanagiotidou, in their work in this volume, enhance conceptualizations of silence, discussing in depth its multifaceted expressions pertaining to the refugee experience and to working with refugees by foregrounding silence as an integral part of any constellation constituted through listening.²³ Here, I show that the soundscape of the camp reinforced the sense of a life vibrating behind walls, further challenging the ‘regime of silence’.

Heading for the container hosting the music lesson, I was overwhelmed by the children playing around, chasing each other, and riding bicycles. I sat along with music teachers and some volunteers taking a break

¹⁷R. Murray Schafer introduced the term ‘soundscape’ to outline the sonic qualities that give a specific space its remarkability; *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, 2nd edn (Destiny Books, 1997), p. 7. Here I consider the dense criticism of the term, i.e. as not reflecting the interconnections between sound and space adequately; Andrew Eisenberg, ‘Islam, Sound and Space: Acoustemology and Muslim Citizenship on the Kenyan Coast’, in *Music, Sound and Space: Transformations of Public and Private Experience*, ed. by Georgina Born (Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 186–202. I also consider the constantly shifting dynamics underpinning ‘soundscapes’, due to the affective ways in which sound and human movement across space interrelate; Marcel Cobussen, ‘Sound, Soundscapes and Sound Art’, in *Inter-Noise and Noise-Con Congress and Conference Proceedings* (InterNoise19, 2019), pp. 5352–58(7). I use the term as signalling specific sonic events unfolding within the space of the reception centre and thus defining it, while the distinct individual experiences it fosters produce the space in its multiplicity.

¹⁸See Angus Carlyle, ‘Introduction’, in *Autumn Leaves: Sound and Environment in Artistic Practice*, ed. by Angus Carlyle (Double Entendre, 2007), pp. 4–5.

¹⁹See Ghassan Hage, ‘Waiting Out the Crisis: On Stuckedness and Governmentality’, in *Waiting*, ed. by Ghassan Hage (Melbourne University Press, 2009), pp. 97–106.

²⁰Zeynep Bulut, ‘Last Breath, Sensing Life’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Art*, ed. by Grant, Matthias, and Prior, pp. 367–84, doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190274054.013.27.

²¹Ghassan Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society* (Pluto Press, 2003), pp. 133–34.

²²Ana-Maria Ochoa-Gautier, ‘Silence’, in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. by Novak and Sakakeeny, pp. 183–92 (p. 184).

²³Murphy and Chatzipanagiotidou, ‘Voices as Constellation’.

just outside the container. With his back towards us, a man was singing softly a *mawwāl*.²⁴ His words, weighing heavy with emotion, were submerged in the air, taken over by the young people's voices as they played football and argued over the score. Singing quietly and discreetly reinforced his individual presence. While the language of the lyrics determined the possible recipients of the lyrical content, their emotional weight could be felt in the fading of each verse, resembling a sigh, carving communicative channels across any language barriers. His singing, unstaged and unquestionably intimate, brought to mind Berberian's manifesto on New Vocality, interlaced with 'possibilities and musical attitudes' attuned to the incorporation of raw, embodied expressions, such as sobs, sighs, and so on.²⁵ His singing boldly questioned any presumed voicelessness; his public expression of emotion, apart from suggesting his very human existence, challenged the norms of what is deemed shareable across the public sphere and what should remain contained within the private one. Kunreuther has argued for the mutually constitutive intimate and political dimensions of voice, which are in turn ingrained in subjectivity.²⁶ In this sense, his singing voice, balancing intricately between being intimate and traversing into the public sphere, asserted his political being, by means of reinforcing his fully vibrating presence.

The man suddenly stopped singing, glanced at us — as if just noticing us — and left. Moments after, some women, in their colourful hijabs, sat on the short wall opposite us, availing themselves of the container's shadow, as well as being exposed to anyone passing by. They greeted us cheerfully and played pop songs with Farsi lyrics on YouTube loud enough to mask their voices while they chatted. Voice as the means for greeting each other facilitated the social interaction that suggested a relationship that was otherwise impossible across the refugee–citizen divide. Voice as the means of social interaction was set behind a musical fence that extended the required privacy of their conversations from us (non-Farsi speakers) to those speaking the same language as them. At the same time, music established their ambivalent presence in the public sphere of the camp.²⁷ While sonically broadcasting it, at the same time it maintained a desire to keep anything expressed among them as secret.

A school-aged girl rushed towards us, jumping on one of the teachers, hugging her and asking her to play. The teacher willingly sang to her a well-known Greek children's song, repeating the verse each time in a different mode, while the girl sang along with her. Their musicking balanced learning and fun.²⁸ Sharing this song intertwined with familiarizing the different modes while enjoying themselves. Voice was the medium to facilitate this knowledge exchange and merged the different goals of musicking that fostered this intimate interaction. Their vocal game mediated any inequalities regarding their positionality related to age, status, or knowledge; the student requested and the teacher 'obeyed', serving her educational role.

²⁴A *mawwāl* is a composition in an improvisatory and melismatic style. Its lyrical content is considered to bear an 'important' meaning, according to the entry in Grove Music Online; 'Mawwāl', *Grove Music Online* (2001), doi:10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.52129. The *mawwāl* form is particularly popular in Syria; it comprises sets of poetic units, each of which consists of seven lines in colloquial Arabic, as spoken and understood across Syria, Iraq, Palestine, and Jordan; Scheherazade Qassim Hassan, 'Syria', *Grove Music Online* (2001), doi:10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.44677.

²⁵Cathy Berberian, 'La nuova vocalità nell'opera contemporanea', *Discoteca*, 62 (1966), pp. 34–35; reprinted as 'The New Vocality in Contemporary Music' (trans. by Francesca Placanica) in *Cathy Berberian: Pioneer of Contemporary Vocality*, ed. by Pamela Karantonis, Francesca Placanica, Anna Sivuoja-Kauppalaa, and Pieter Verstraete (Ashgate, 2014), pp. 47–50 (p. 47).

²⁶Laura Kunreuther, *Voicing Subjects: Public Intimacy and Mediation in Kathmandu* (University of California Press, 2014), p. 18.

²⁷Angela Reyes distinguishes between music as public and as private act, largely drawing on the spatial arrangements, the diffusion of sound, and the arrangement of the repertory performed on the basis of the presumed listeners; *Songs of the Caged, Songs of the Free: Music and the Vietnamese Refugee Experience* (Temple University Press, 1999). Here, the public/private divide appears more intricate, as it unfolds across spatial and emotional layers, interweaved through a person's intimate singing in the public space.

²⁸Christopher Small coined the term 'musicking' to categorize any active engagement with music, ranging from informal and ordinary contexts to formal and extraordinary (or professional) ones; *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Wesleyan University Press, 1998). Musicking stands for 'tak[ing] part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing' (p. 9).

This vibrant soundscape culminated with a concert by the Yale Alumni Choir, which visited the camp to perform for the residents. The repertory of primarily western European art music was followed by the South African song ‘Shosholoz’²⁹, sung in canon along with the refugee children’s choir. While the choirs’ voices ‘aired’ the meanings of the song, the canon’s semiotics enhanced its meaningfulness. Introducing and repeating the musical phrase at a temporal distance, though (usually) at a different tonal pitch, determines the equal value of each voice in the canon performance, thus enabling us to see their performance as questioning any established asymmetries related to age, status, or knowledge among the members of the Yale Alumni Choir and the refugee children’s choir, and envisaging equality more broadly.

Weidman conceptualizes voice as a phenomenon merging what are intimate, affective, and material (here: embodied) dimensions of cultural life with their sociopolitical contexts and how they constitute individual subjectivities.³⁰ Voice is exemplified here as the medium to make individual presence audible in public, express intimate emotions, musick, and facilitate interactions, encounters, and relationships. It is showcased as incorporating the uniqueness of the human being bearing it, as forged in the given moment of their (im)mobility trajectory, and simultaneously communicating, transcending any borders, in a manner that brings to mind Meizel’s ‘multivocality’, unfolded in vernacular contexts;³¹ consciously or not, each vocalizer embodies and transcends multiple borders determining their existence through their voice. Assuming Georgina Born’s line of thought of sound as a means to project the ‘auditory self’ in public, the snapshots exemplifying voice here, further enriched with music (performed and streamed online), enhanced individuals’ physical presence in public.³² The convergence of these virtually incompatible auditory selves formed a temporal plateau of co-existence, an ‘audiotopia’, on the basis of shareability among those present in the moment, regardless of our — each vocalizer’s and listener’s, including me as the researcher — positionality across the (non-)citizenship divide.³³

Vignette 2: (In)escapable Noise

Every night [it’s] the same. Every night [there are] fights [...] The other night there was such a big fight, and they were knocking on our containers [...] You should have stayed just one night here, to see what it’s like. We don’t sleep well. My children are scared. I’m scared. We are always in stress. And it’s become worse now. One year ago, it was not like this. These things happen in Afghanistan. In the last months, it’s [the camp’s] become Afghanistan [...] There are fights and burglars, and people behave like this [...] After the change [of site managers], things got worse. We’ve left Afghanistan, and now we live in Afghanistan again.

My interlocutor spoke fast and tensely, her voice embodying and resonating with the sonic effect of the events before, framed within the range of her migratory trajectory. Her account outlined a radically different soundscape of the camp compared to that described in the previous vignette. Read through sonic analytical categories, our attention shifts to the opposite of the ‘silence’ edge of the sonic spectrum, that of ‘noise’. While noise is acknowledged as a specific sonic condition, hence of certain qualities, its

²⁹‘Shosholoz’ is a South African song of Zimbabwean origin with lyrics in Zulu, sung by migrant Zimbabwean iron workers in South Africa, who imitated in the song the sound of a moving train; Ato Quayson, ‘Pre-Texts and Intermedia: African Theater and the Question of History’, in *African Drama and Performance*, ed. by John Conteh-Morgan and Tejumola Olaniyan (Indiana University Press, 2004), pp. 46–52 (p. 50). Singing it while working served the purpose of increasing awareness of each other’s movements and ensuring their safety while at work; Tayo Jolaosho, ‘Anti-Apartheid Freedom Songs Then and Now’, *Smithsonian Folkways Magazine* (2014) <https://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/docs/folkways/magazine/2014_spring/Anti_Apartheid_Freedom_Songs_Jolaosho.pdf> [accessed 27 August 2023].

³⁰Amanda Weidman, ‘Anthropology and Voice’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 43 (2014), pp. 37–51 (p. 38).

³¹Katherine Meizel, *Multivocality: Singing on the Borders of Identity* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

³²Georgina Born, ‘Introduction. Music, Sound and Space: Transformations of Public and Private Experience’, in *Music, Sound and Space*, ed. by Born, pp. 1–70 (p. 3).

³³On ‘audiotopia’, see Josh D. Kun, ‘The Aural Border’, *Theatre Journal*, 52.1 (2000), pp. 1–21.

definition invokes dissonance regarding individual and collective sociocultural and aesthetic standards, making a rigid definition of the term impossible. Novak suggests that noise constitutes ‘a context of sensory experience, but also a moving subject of circulation, of sound and listening, that emerges in the process of navigating the world and its differences’, associating the meaning of the word with its Latin etymology for ‘nausea’.³⁴ Other scholars have conceptualized noise as an indicator of turbulence, an interplay of power, and thus embedded in violence.³⁵ My interlocutor’s account of the nocturnal soundscape in the camp resonates with these conceptualizations of ‘noise’, as per the violence involved and the turbulence signified. The upsetting effect of these events indicated the embodiment of noise and the inextricable link between the external order and the internal state of being. The diffusion of sound amplified violence, engaging forcefully whomever was within auditory vicinity. Being unable to shield themselves reinforced the power hierarchies and my interlocutor’s vulnerability. Vocal malleability, resulting in my interlocutor’s altered tone, testified to the change in her living environment.³⁶ Her frustration and fear were sensed, and urged her to speak up. Voicing her resentment against these events became the only means to distinguish herself from the environment she was forced to be in, and was a method to assert her presence.³⁷ Claiming her individual audibility further suggested the non-homogeneity of the population of asylum seekers sheltering in the camp, while testifying to a collective experience otherwise ‘inaudible’. Her voice challenged mainstream representations and crossed the (non-)citizenship divide, and by confessing it to me, she reinforced her political agency, by ‘finding ways of being heard’.³⁸

Her account confirmed the previously suggested condition of perceiving the reality within a camp: unless listening closely, no one could grasp it. Angry shouts, screams, threats, sounds of bodies fighting each other and being hurt infiltrated the frail walls of her container, exposing her to the animosity of the fight and instilling fear. Bangs on the surfaces that shook the containers reinforced insecurity and the perception of other residents as possible threats. Her words showed that the soundscape interlinked the setting from which she and her family had fled and the one in which they found themselves. This was due to the capacity of the sonic effect to enable the resonance of current events unfolding in the given spatio-temporal conditions with experiences that occurred in another space and time, thus fostering a meaningfulness that merged memories and emotions.³⁹ In our case, the sonic effect sustained feelings of estrangement and exacerbated feelings of exclusion from the society within which she wished to be included. Her voice became the vessel carrying the sonic effect of overlapping experiences of violence and transferring it beyond their spatio-temporal circumstances, reinforcing it upon the researcher of and listener to her testimony. It expressed her discontent with what was supposed to be a sanctuary from violence but rather turned out to be similarly hostile to the home from which she had fled. In this sense her voice posed ‘noise’ to the normative discourses of the ‘reception’ of asylum seekers, contending that their paradigm fostered the continuation of violence. ‘Noise’ suggested non-conformity with the established, silencing norm and reinforced a political presence, otherwise not prescribed in the asylum-seeking paradigm. In this sense, and reflecting Novak’s take on noise, she became noise.

As we saw previously, the critical role in defining a sonic condition as noise remains the listener’s positionality and their consequent perspective. A music teacher gave a different account of ‘noise’ based on her experience of fights in the camp:

³⁴David Novak, ‘Noise’, in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. by Novak and Sakakeeny, pp. 125–38 (p. 125).

³⁵Schafer, *The Soundscape*, pp. 74–75; see also Karin Bijsterveld, ‘Listening to Machines: Industrial Noise, Hearing Loss and the Cultural Meanings of Sound’, in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. by Sterne, pp. 152–67 (p. 153); Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. by Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

³⁶Cf. Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*.

³⁷Tom Western, ‘Covered Mouths Still Have Voices’, *Journal of Sonic Studies*, 24 (2023), pp. 1–20 <<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1915964/1915963>> [accessed 15 June 2024].

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁹Jean-François Augoyard and Henry Torgue, *Sonic Experience: A Guide to Everyday Sounds*, trans. by Andra McCartney and David Paquette (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008), p. 89; see also Steven Feld, ‘Communication, Music, and Speech about Music’, in *Music Grooves*, ed. by Charles Keil and Steven Feld (Fenestra Books), pp. 77–95.

No fights have ever taken place in my class, despite some tensions among students, which were resolved. However, I remember a very bad fight outside the class. We could hear the mess. I don't know what was going on. My students were scared. They stood by the window trying to figure out what was going on. So we closed the shutters, went back to our seats, and tried to continue our lesson. However, within minutes it was clear to me that this is not possible, because this fight affected my students directly; it was happening in the camp. So I stopped the lesson and told them that such incidents happen everywhere. I told them that people have fights in Spain, in Germany, and in Greece. Bad behaviours are a common pattern. And I felt that we were somewhat more calm, and we continued our music lesson. It seemed to me that it worked well with them: we are all together doing music, while it is the others outside that fight [...]. To me, it was clear that fights are common. Outside my school in Spain, there were fights almost every week. Of course, for people living in the camp, a fight probably has a bigger impact, because they do not have the option to leave, or to go home, to get away from it.

Her calm voice, peacefully articulating the phrases, sharply contrasted with the previous interlocutor's manner of narrating and the fierceness of her experience. If 'through listening we enact, we activate', listening to the events outside her class activated different registers of her experience, further entangled with the degree of her engagement with the social life of the camp.⁴⁰ The 'mess' and the 'noise' produced by a fight suggested turbulent interactions and frictions among fellow residents resulting in violence, and thus posing an imminent threat to the hearers and interrupting their music session. The disruptive and upsetting effect of fights, though directly sensed, was experienced differently, subject to the interlocutors' relations with the site of the fight and hence their capacity to move out of it, as well as their broader social experiences with which the specific event resonated. The music teacher visited the camp to teach; once her lesson was over, she exited the camp and its lifeworld. Furthermore, she was aware of the commonness of fights. Her testimony palpably illustrated the differently experienced sonic effect and her active role in ameliorating it as an act of care for her students. Her voice interrupted the turbulence, counterpointing it with its own affectivity. As a tool of communication and an expression of care, it became political by reinforcing the paradigm of music lessons, contrary to any 'mess' and 'noise'. 'Escaping' was not an option; what mattered was to set a different paradigm to disrupt the imposed noise. Amid this fight and 'turbulence', musicking was showcased as a harmonious collaboration among the lesson participants, as it involved their active engagement towards achieving a collective goal.⁴¹

The testimonies of those who aurally experienced fights showcased the variability of the fights' sonic effect regarding the positionality of each individual and their capacity to escape them. Each individual's vocalicity emerged as having a potential to interrupt or counterpoint the imposed noise, tracing the underlying possibilities for them to manifest their positionality within the given circumstances. The first interviewee, by voicing her resentment towards the failed promise of shelter from violence in a camp, asserted her (political) presence and agency. By voicing her bitterness towards the conditions of her residence she overrode the silencing regime pertaining to asylum seekers, establishing her individuality and reclaiming her political being. The second interviewee suggested her capacity to counterpoint the imposed noise by projecting her calmness, managing to alleviate her students' concerns and resuming their music lesson, setting an alternative sonic and social paradigm to that of the fight. The vocal examples discussed here palpably illustrate the materiality and affectivity of voice, 'insofar as it is the result of vibrations that propagate as waves through physical matter' that in turn affect listeners' condition of being and thinking.⁴² My interviewees' voices embodied and conveyed the experience of

⁴⁰Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, p. 24.

⁴¹Cf. Étienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 1998); Ailbhe Kenny, *Communities of Musical Practice* (Routledge, 2016).

⁴²Marlene Schäfers, 'Voice', in *Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. by Felix Stein, facsimile of the first edition in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (2023 [2017]), doi:10.29164/17voice.

certain events framed within their distinct life and migratory trajectories. It asserted their political presence by manifesting their non-compliance with their given circumstances, objectives, and desires.

Conclusion

Voices, in the cases discussed above, challenge the mainstream paradigm about asylum seekers, deeply rooted in their (non-)citizenship and the rigid nation-state (b)order, by foregrounding individuals' dense entanglements with and contestations of their everyday (sonic) experiences, rather than letting legal predicaments smother it. Focusing on 'voice' interrupts any homogenizing representations of life in the camps by elaborating the multiple expressions of individuals' experiences across their (im)mobile life trajectories. It shows the multitude of ways through which individuals assert their political presence and endeavour to contrast, challenge, and shape their circumstances, communicating intimate emotions publicly, musicking, and facilitating border-transcending encounters and relationships. Individuals' multiple vocalities contest 'silence' and defy 'noise', embodying their agentive creativity and decisiveness to be 'heard' and 'seen' within the spectrum of their own actual experiences and desires, and sharply rejecting any presumptions of 'voicelessness'. They 'have' their voices and they agentively 'use them'. To that end, this article further contributes to the debates around the potential of art and creative practices in 'rehumanizing' migrants, reconstituting them as agentive and creative human actors, by grounding this potential in the human body itself, whose experiences, encompassing and superseding the given spatio-temporal contexts, weigh on the liminality of its voice and the versatility of its vocality.⁴³ In that lies the potential of voice to reconstitute the political dimensions of refugees' and asylum seekers' being and acting — by outlining explicitly the superficiality and limitations entailed in the reductions to surviving life pertaining to mainstream representations of refugees and asylum seekers, through a close focus on their 'vibrant' existence. 'Listening', integral to the actualization of the vocal phenomenon and, as shown here, in 'unmuting' the multiple and contested realities in camps, further contributes to assembling the disarticulated predicaments of refugeehood, a dimension which Murphy and Chatzipanagiotidou discuss in detail next.⁴⁴

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⁴³Marco Martiniello, 'Researching Arts, Culture, Migration and Change: A Multi (Trans)Disciplinary Challenge for International Migration Studies', *Comparative Migration Studies*, 10 (2022), doi:10.1186/s40878-022-00281-85; Evropi Chatzipanagiotidou and Fiona Murphy, "'Devious Silence": Refugee Art, Memory Activism, and the Unspeakability of Loss among Syrians in Turkey', *History and Anthropology*, 32.4 (2021), pp. 462–80, doi:10.1080/02757206.2020.1830383.

⁴⁴Chrysi Kyratsou, 'Unmuting Migration, Part 1. Lessons from Studying Music and Migration: An Interview with Assoc. Prof. Dr Eckehard Pistrick', *IMISCOE PhD Blog* (2022) <<https://www.imiscoe.org/news-and-blog/phd-blog/1457-chrysi-kyratsou>>; Chrysi Kyratsou, 'Unmuting Migration, Part 2. Lessons in Practice: An Interview with Assoc. Prof. Dr Eckehard Pistrick', *IMISCOE PhD Blog* (2022), <<https://www.imiscoe.org/news-and-blog/phd-blog/1469-unmuting-migration-part-2-lessons-in-practice-an-interview-with-assoc-prof-dr-eckehard-pistrick>> [both accessed 27 August 2023].