

# Denise Gill, *Melancholic Modalities: Affect, Islam and Turkish Classical Musicians*, New York 2017: Oxford University Press.

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*Melancholic Modalities: Affect, Islam and Turkish Classical Musicians* is the first and only truly ethnographic book on Turkish classical musicians in contemporary Turkey. An ethnomusicologist based in the US, Denise Gill is a *kanun* player who has been a student of master virtuoso on the ud, Necati Çelik, since 2004. The book is born of extensive firsthand archival research and ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Istanbul, Ankara, İzmir, and Konya in 2004–2005, 2006, 2007–2009, 2011, 2013, and 2014. The author opens the preface with several critical concerns regarding the methodology and theoretical lines of the book. These caveats serve to prepare readers for the subsequent analysis occasionally becoming dense and complex in its novelties related to methodology and theoretical argument. In her broad exploration of how “a particular artistic community sounds out, embodies, narrates, and experiences melancholies in their music making” (p. xiii), she deliberately avoids defining musical meaning by simply analyzing music itself, which is a common approach in the field. This tendency, which she deems the “sonicist approach”, is stated as having fallen short in the study of affect and excluding a considerable portion of ethnographic data gathered during fieldwork. Another methodological assumption emerges at this point that relates directly to Gill’s subjectivity and how she positions herself in the field. She declares that her insight does not necessarily come from being fluent in different musical traditions, (i.e., bi-musicality) but is rather attributed to

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a “shift in the way” she “listened to sound, musical structure, meaning and historicities in music making”, a concept she terms “bi-aurality” (p. xiv). As primarily a work in the anthropology of affect, the book is defined as a “a multilayered ethnography of sonic melancholities that result from loss on many levels (spiritual, cultural, social, political)” (p. xvii). The way in which the work defines multiple discourses of loss and explores how notions of loss are transcribed into music and the subjectivities of musicians is, I believe, the main strength of the book, to be explained in greater detail herein.

Gill frequently references the Deleuzian metaphor of *rhizome* to define her interpretation and conceptualization, which is a botanical root that resists linearity in its developing pattern that sprouts in multiple shoots in contrast to the tree that follows a vertical and unidirectional growing pattern. She celebrates this rhizomatic approach to interpretation that she claims “resists binaries and offers us a way to conceptualize knowledge production in multiple non-hierarchical lines” (p. 2). I think this novel analytical method applies well in the case of Turkish classical music, which is generally conceptualized in the context of a “cultural rupture” believed to have occurred in the aftermath of the establishment of Turkish Republic or in terms of the various dualities between East and West, Ottoman and Turkish, civility and incivility, etc. Moreover, such analysis allows the author to explore how suffering and loss, normally considered indicators of decadence, “rhizomatically create and organize communities of musicians, giving them senses of purpose and anchoring their philosophies of sound” (p. 4). Thus, as Gill states, the rhizome is not only a metaphor but also a method of investigating the ways in which multiple forms of melancholy play significant roles in the creation of musicians’ subjectivities and identities in a nonlinear fashion that resists binaries, thus providing insight into Turkish classical music today. In line with Gill’s methodological preferences, she employs the term “melancholic modalities” to describe “the collection of unique affective practices through which musicians understand and experience their lives, meaning, and social world” (p. 5). Although readers might instantly recognize the term’s association with the “mode” (*makam* in Turkish, denoting a musical mode or system of melody lines), I believe that given the nonlinearity immanent in the *makam* structure, the term “melancholic modalities” appears in various places as “social identity, as a method of memorialization, as spiritual labor, as pedagogy, as embodiment, and as a process of reparation and healing” (p. 5-6) throughout the book.

Gill identifies four layers of rhizome in the field (pp. 5–22), which are dynamic and innately interconnected in complicated ways. First is Turkish classical music itself, defined as an invented tradition constructed during the formation of the Turkish nation-state and contested and reinvented ever since. A rhizomatic understanding of the genre reveals that the category of Turkish classical music is a complex and mostly amorphous classification referring to “a unique splattering of diverse repertoires including instrumental and vocal works patronized by and heard in the Ottoman court, beginning in the fourteenth century, repertoires of Mevlevi and other Sufi orders, and late-nineteenth and twentieth century light art (*sa’nat* or *sanat*) pieces heard in urban and nightclub (*gazino*) settings” (p. 8) that “engages multiple ideologies of listening” (p. 9). The second rhizome refers to repertoires of melancholies. Gill explores the genealogies of the term “melancholy” in a Western context, including how its meaning shifted from referring to a subjective mood to reflecting the individualized pathology of clinical depression in the late nineteenth century. What is considered melancholy in a Turkish context, however, differs drastically from associated Western meanings and narratives. Classical musicians use different words that approximate “melancholy”, namely *hüzün*, *keder*, *melankoli*, and *kara sevda*. Gill states that for Turkish classical musicians in the field, melancholy “emerges from a nexus of Islamic philosophies; institutionalization practices of secular Turkish nation-state; Ottoman nostalgia; local understandings health, healing, and self-care; ideas of musical meaning and music making; and trajectories of memory established in the mater-apprentice relationship between music teacher and student” (p. 12). In the third rhizome, the practice of affect, Gill deals with affect theory and music studies of affect/emotion/feeling to legitimize her primary focus on affective practices in understanding present-day Turkish classical musicians. This section reveals to the reader how affect is expressed collectively. Gill counters perspectives that psychologize or individualize emotions; rather, she claims that emotions are not something we “have”; instead, they “differentiate the boundary between the I and other objects in our social worlds” (p. 16). In a similar vein, “melancholy-as-process is a lived sense experience, and that experience is itself dependent on and constructed by social contexts and the ways melancholies are learned, embodied, and *practiced*” (p. 17). The final, fourth rhizome deals with the Islamic roots of musicians’ melancholy. What is striking for me as a reader here is that Gill’s proposed rhizomatic understanding of melancholy allows

readers to relate even the most secular musicians' melancholy to an Islamic notion of melancholy in broader terms. Thus, understood in rhizomatically, Turkish classical musicians' affective practices "challenge defined categories of subject-centered national, modern, secular, and religious categories" (p. 19).

The book's chapters explore diverse aspects of Turkish classical music in which melancholy appears a natural and essential affective practice. The first chapter, "The Melancholic State of Turkish Classical Music", deals with institutional reforms, cultural policies, and performance practices relevant to Turkish classical music from the seventeenth-century Ottoman Empire to the present day with a particular focus on the early-Republic period. One of the most seminal arguments of the book, that a "loss narrative" which claims music is dead lies at the core of Turkish classical music, is brilliantly expressed in this chapter. Gill states that the loss narrative of death of Turkish classical music "functionally surfaces as the primary constitutive aspect defining the genre for the people playing it", and this "so-called death of music is significantly productive" (p. 30–31). Institutional reforms and the state's cultural policies that have influenced the genre are interpreted as losses by musicians, and this discursive element is today a "built-in and necessary element of Turkish classical music as a lived, performed genre" (p. 32). Gill traces how this loss narrative has been created by examining the issue historically from Ottoman modernization reforms of the seventeenth century to the reforms of the Turkish nation-state. Readers may be surprised to learn that some classical musicians in the Ottoman era, such as İsmail Dede Efendi (1778–1846), had also complained about the relative lack of respect and interest for classical music at the time (p. 38) and thus became part of this "music is dead" paradigm. Gill also mentions the contemporary neoliberal period in which the experience of religion was mediated by capitalism, which constructs another part of the loss narrative. Although losses cannot be attributed exclusively to institutional reforms in the Republic period, as many elements comprise this narrative, "the impossibility of return to an idyllic pre-republic world abounds in contemporary Turkish classical music narratives" (p. 58). Interestingly, this loss narrative—or the claim that the genre is dead—is itself the constitutive element of Turkish classical musicians' identities: "To play Turkish classical music today means claiming the music has died" (p. 60). The notion of separation within religion turns out to exemplify a loss of the music itself.

In the second chapter, “Separation, the Sound of the Rhizomatic *Ney*, and Sacred Embodiment”, Gill attempts to conduct a rhizomatic analysis of a single sound and word: *Hû*. The chapter opens with a spiritual secret or doctrine that it is necessary to feel pain and separation and funnel these emotions into sound. A musical instrument, the *ney*, is described as the main channel of transference with its historical significance and mystical place in the spiritual doctrine of Sufism. Turkish classical musicians regard particular feelings, such as loss, suffering, pain, and separation, “as correct modes of existing in their social worlds, as productive material for their music making, and ultimately as spiritually rewarding” (p. 63). Playing the *ney* is interpreted as a channel for musicians to translate sacred instrumental sound into subjectivity as a melancholic modality. Gill focuses on a single sound, *Hû*, to investigate the processes by which musicians render the sound experience sacred along with the formation of their subjectivity. Then she elaborates on multiple forms or appearances of *Hû*: *Hû* as sound, as a word, as an essence or quality, as *zikir* (divine remembrance), as a technique for playing the instrument *ney*, and finally as a sacred embodiment (p. 68). Contrary to previous studies on Turkish classical music that described the genre solely in secular terms, Gill focuses on how spirituality renders the sound world intelligible and how “spiritual ideology binds musical meanings and affect together for contemporary Turkish classical musicians” (p. 68). This case study of *Hû* allows her to demonstrate how Turkish classical musicians express melancholy through sound, the nature of spiritual discourse about sound, and how these musicians construct their identities and position themselves in their social and political worlds. Gill closes the chapter by stating that “*Hû* is an example of how a single, small sound can pack a constellation of meaning that makes its way into musicians’ repertoire, performance practice techniques, narrative utterances, stories, discourses, and political actions” (p. 93).

The third chapter, “Melancholic Genealogies: Rhizomatic Listening and Bi-Aurality in Practice”, deals with the pedagogical aspect of affective practice by looking at oral music transmission (*meşk*). *Meşk* is not only a way to teach music techniques and knowledge; it is also a significant process of embedding feeling practices and spiritual discourses into a system that “cultivates and circulates melancholy” (p. 102). Turkish classical musicians often blame the conservatory system for the loss of the Ottoman tradition and *meşk* system; Gill claims that “part of the mythology of *meşk* in the present day emerges in vocalizing a death narrative of *meşk* itself” (p. 105). She advances her

bi-aurality approach in this chapter, which is the “process of shifting and shaping one’s ears to different axes, geographies, and idioms of listening” (p. 114). This method is especially crucial for the Turkish case in which musical transmission is not only related to musical techniques and knowledge but also shapes students’ ears and ways of memorialization. In contemporary settings, students are also inculcated with the loss narrative: “Through this process students learn that this loss is a loss that is to be personally adopted and endured”; this loss constitutes “the foundation of students’ identities and senses of self” (p. 117). Moreover, Gill argues that studying musical genealogies in a Turkish context as well as in other non-Western contexts hardly works, as such history is mostly based on Western scholarship and operates on its own terms. Examining non-Western music in Western terms makes it difficult to develop the bi-aurality necessary to understand how music is transmitted and shared. Gill attempts to avoid Orientalist frameworks by warning readers that “vertical analysis and listening ends up replicating and imposing” her “own normative (western academic) ideologies of listening onto musical meanings and lineages embraced by contemporary Turkish classical musicians” (p. 121). She claims that musical lineage (*meşk silsilesi*) can only be examined horizontally or rhizomatically, a fact that has informed her ideologies of listening and helped her to develop bi-aurality (i.e., rhizomatic, polydirectional, or spectral listening).

In the fourth chapter, “Boundaries of Embodiment in Sounded Melancholy”, Gill attempts to link melancholic modalities with the notion of embodiment in the music making of Turkish classical musicians. She investigates how musicians express the sensations of bodily melancholy to describe sonic melancholy and how melancholic affective practices delineate various boundaries, such as gender differences or demarcations between the spiritual and mundane. Within this framework, “the materiality of the body is an active, not passive, process” (p. 128). In this chapter, Gill unfolds several melancholic embodied dispositions by analyzing four significant sites of embodiment. First, she focuses on musicians’ narratives of “how sonic melancholy mirrors bodily melancholy” (p. 132). Second, she explores how melancholy operates to identify and justify gender differences. Third, she gives the example of weeping to examine how Islamic narratives that praise weeping play significant roles in embodiment processes. Finally, she points out the Arabic concept of *sama*, to which musicians refer as an important historical Islamic term for “listening”. Gill concludes by noting that Western epistemological perspe-

ctives tend to represent bodies in universalizing terms, which are rooted in the notion of an individual conception of the body. However, she contends, “melancholic musicking and the embodied dispositions that melancholic musicking engender disrupt the notion of autonomous individuality and of potential universality” (p. 152).

In the final chapter, “Melancholic Modes, Healing, and Reparation”, Gill focuses on how melancholy is considered reparative by contemporary classical musicians by looking at the historical details of Ottoman scholarship on this issue. Melancholy had been regarded for centuries as a disease in the Ottoman context despite having served as a cure for patients suffering from melancholy. In healing melancholic patients, physicians selected “specific makam-s to stimulate a heightened melancholic response” (p. 162). Contemporary Turkish classical musicians have seemed to inherit the Ottoman tradition of attributing positive meanings to melancholy; they see melancholy as a lived state because it is indeed pleasurable and helps musicians connect to one another.

Denise Gill’s book is an elegant example of what can be called an anthropology of affect, which constitutes relatively recent scholarship. Given that the notion of affect is outside the realm of representation, she excels at certain points in understanding the affective practices of Turkish classical musicians. The strength of the book comes in part from Gill’s extensive fieldwork, her fluency in more than one musical tradition, and what she calls “bi-aurality”, a position that forces the researcher to listen in a new way that diverges from her own musical tradition. Moreover, she appears not to fall into the trap of Orientalist discourse, which is common in studies of non-Western cultural patterns written by Western scholars. Gill is also adept at explaining her rhizomatic research method. Although the chapters deal with diverse aspects of melancholic modalities and could be treated as separate pieces, they are nevertheless threaded together in complex ways and offer a unique perspective on the present-day Turkish classical music. Gill’s revelations are particularly noteworthy in their clarity and delineations of loss as an overarching construct. The notions of loss and melancholy, similar to other affective concepts, are inherently ambiguous—yet Gill manages to treat them as artfully as she does the Turkish classical music landscape. As the first and only ethnographic work on the subject, Gill’s book is a welcome contribution that may lead to new studies in the field.