

Hajra Waheed: Abolitionist Modes of Listening

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Transcript

Hajra Waheed: It is no doubt that we are living in an unprecedented time – against the backdrop of racial capitalism and the increased militarisation of police and borders; in a world threatened by changes in climate that contribute to the most dangerous mass migrations of our era. All of this is now further complicated by a global pandemic that has further exposed the grave inequities of the most vulnerable. Despite all of this, I really do believe that the power of the arts as a rallying force for imagining and sustaining solidarities is crucial to hold on to now more than ever – especially alongside intersectional solidarity movements taking place right now.

Hum (2020) at Portikus is constructed as a 16-

channel sound experience with custom speakers, carpeting, and natural light. Although Portikus is typically a great improvisational acoustic space, this was the first time it had ever housed a multi-channel sound installation. Because it wasn't well equipped for sound projects of this sort, the technical challenge was to overcome the reverberation and echo in the space.

In the couple months leading up to the exhibition, at the height of the pandemic under global lockdown, we [Curator, Christina Lehnart and I] had to really think through how to address these issues and find solutions that would make Portikus acoustically compatible with the work. We considered installing sound panels along the walls but in the end, the simplest solution was also one that proved to be the most critical to the experience I wanted to attain. The carpet used in the space was employed quite intentionally as both a barrier to ensure that the sound could be absorbed properly, but also as an instrumental element of architecture, and by *architecture* – I mean the architecture of ritual in the experience of the work.

It was important to achieve a level of simplicity here, the work is after all about the very act of listening, I would say, abolitionist modes of listening to be more specific. I was drawn to this idea of taking off one's shoes, and what that might mean to someone entering a space. It is immediately disarming, we shed a layer, bringing us one small step closer to a sense of vulnerability – the feeling of connection.

The simple ritual of taking one's shoes off is deeply familiar, particularly in the global south, a ubiquitous yet profound gesture that tends to shape the ways we enter a space, how we might listen in a space that is not our own, how we might understand, commune, or participate... And it provokes questions around what participation looks like, how a community

can be formed and reformed in a way that maintains a certain sense of informality – which I think is also important.

Reece Cox: This is not the first time that *Hum* was exhibited and I'm curious what initiated this project. Where did it begin?

HW: *Hum* came about in the wake of Pakistan's student solidarity marches in November 2019 which took place during my site visit for Lahore Biennial 02. The marches were organised in over 50 locations across the country and came in the wake of a 37% cut in the country's higher education development budget, which is devastating for a country with over 60% of its population under the age of 30. But this story of the student movement can be traced much earlier, to 1984, when military dictator Zia-ul-Haq who at the time, unnerved by growing student resistance by youth, banned student unions across the country. In more than 30 years since that time, this ban has effectively prohibited political activity on campuses and created a deep culture of silence. Most movements start with young people and this culture of silence is, of course, not new, but it was important for me to understand and grapple with, to find a language of resistance that could cut through it. The protests were nonviolent, but the police in Lahore ended up filing criminal charges against many of the students including sedition charges, many of whom were just singing or reciting poetry in solidarity.

In light of these histories, both past and present, I think what they make clear, depending on who you are speaking to or which regime one is governed by (as the artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan also points out), any verbal expression can be construed as an indictable offense. Humming as a medium inhabits a certain sense of sonic agency, falling precisely between two basic rights and laws that govern our speech and expression in society: 1)

the freedom of speech, which can protect our agency and the ability for us to say what we want, but not necessarily protect the expression of the voice itself. And 2) the right to silence which can offer a mode of withdrawal from engaging in public speech but can also work against us in muting our political agency.

I was interested in finding ways to possibly circumvent this oppression, to find loopholes of sorts. I think humming lives somewhere in between. All of these songs of resistance after all are speaking to similar stories of struggle that had been happening both in a period of decolonisation in the 1960s through 1980s and which continue today. All of these songs are speaking to struggles against state oppression, the rise of authoritarianism, the plight and hope of working people, the dispossessed and the marginalised. I suppose this is how humming came to be the medium I chose for the work. It's often overlooked as a medium, as a meditation, as a phenomenon, and language. It's an utterance we're all capable of making when our lips have been sealed shut. It's incredibly legible, yet insidious, it's irrefutable and infectious. We do it when we want to first memorise a song, we do it when we want to later remember it. We do it both consciously and subconsciously. It's an utterance that actively lives in the cracks and between spaces – and this is what I was most interested in, more importantly, where I wanted the work to live.

RC: I would certainly agree that humming has a universal quality to it, or at least to some degree it has a universal quality as a musical form or an expressive form. Are there ways in which that universality is challenged as *Hum* changes exhibition spaces? You've talked a bit about how it was presented at Portikus in Frankfurt, Germany, but I want to hear about its first presentation and the space in which it was initially produced for. Can you talk a bit about the conception and first installation of *Hum*?

HW: *Hum* was initially created upon invitation by guest curator Hoor Al Qasmi for Lahore Biennial 02 which opened this past January and was up for a 40-day period. The work was shown in Lahore Fort's historic Diwaan-i-Aam, which was built by Shah Jahan in 1628 and styled after Isfahan's Chehel Sotoun, a 40-pillar audience hall. In November 2019, I was able to enter Pakistan and travel to Lahore for a site visit. Diwan-i-Aam was initially conceived as a space for the public to air their grievances. I was immediately drawn to this open-air monument and in walking its length, the incredible acoustic environment built out of its archways.

When it was first built during the Mughal period, it is said that its floors were covered in carpets and cloaked in silks to keep it cool in the summer months. It had been repurposed several times due to the changing guard of empires throughout history. During Sikh rule, for example, much of it was burned down due to internal conflict. During British colonial rule, it was rebuilt with a new set of archways and rods inserted across them to hang curtains, transforming it into an open-air hospital. The site also lay witness to the 1947 Partition when it became a refugee camp for thousands upon thousands of Muslims fleeing India to Pakistan. Now, under Pakistan's heavy militarisation it's an entirely inert, silent space. What struck me immediately and stayed with me long after, was just how far away this monument stood from its original role and conception.

RC: A few moments ago you used a phrase that is really sticking with me now and I'm curious if you could unpack it. You said the words, 'abolitionist modes of listening,' and I want to know what that means to you.

HW: I suppose I can speak to that expression by speaking to the work itself, where the work came from and where the work sits. *Hum's* composition is bookended by two Kurdish folk

songs that were sung by Nûdem Durak who is an ethnic Kurdish singer that lived in Cizre, Turkey. She was well known throughout her community for teaching local folk songs in the Kurdish language to young children. Kurds are one of the most heavily persecuted minorities in Turkey with a long history of tensions between Kurds and the governments of this country, but also with Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere, where sizable minorities live. Today, Kurdish music remains closely monitored in many cities within Turkey and banned from being broadcast on radio or television. In April 2015, Durak was sentenced to prison for performing Kurdish folk songs in her native language and accused by the government of promoting Kurdish propaganda. She's scheduled to remain in prison until September 2034 (that's a 19-year sentence).

RC: I just want to take a second to repeat what Hajra just said because if you aren't familiar with Nûdem Durak's story, it's hard to wrap your head around it the first time you hear it. Nûdem Durak was about 27 years old when she was arrested and sentenced to 19 years in prison simply for singing in Kurdish, her native language. In Turkey where Nûdem lives, Kurdish was completely forbidden until 1991 despite being home to a sizable Kurdish population. These days, Turkish law tolerates Kurdish in some contexts but prohibits propaganda and the definition, as it's written in law, is intentionally vague. And although it might be enforced irregularly, oftentimes what is given as punishment is severe. Nûdem was originally sentenced to 10 years in prison but, without a second trial, an additional 9 years were added. She's now expected to be released in 2034. This is the sound of her voice:

Listen: [Nûdem Durak singing \(2013\)](#)

RC: Since Nûdem's incarceration, a movement calling for her release has gained quite a lot of momentum and numerous public figures have

spoken out against her arrest. Last May, Angela Davis posted this video on Facebook:

Listen: [Angela Davis supports Nûdem Durak](#) (2020)

HW: *Hum* also includes poems by Habib Jalib and Faiz Ahmed Faiz who were both Pakistani revolutionary poets and members of the Progressive Writers Association. Both Faiz and Jalib spoke out against military coups, repressive regimes and the stranglehold of capitalism in their country. They too were imprisoned several times for their support of leftist Marxist politics. Jalib wrote in colloquial Urdu, adopted a very simple style to address people and their concerns, and employed a very unique musicality to recite his poetry. Within *Hum*, there are melodies from Jalib's *Dastoor*, also known as *The Constitution*, *Mein Ne Uss Se Yeh Kaha*, which loosely translates to *This is what I said to him* as well as Faiz's *Hum Dekhenge*.

RC: I'd now like to play a recording of Habib Jalib reading *Dastoor*, which as Hajra just pointed out, translates into *Constitution* in English. The constitution Jalib it's referring to, comes from 1962 when a prominent military general named Ayub Khan, overtook the president of Pakistan and implemented Martial Law and installed his own constitution causing deep divisions and disparity. Jalib writes: 'The light which shines only in palaces / Burns up the joy of the people in the shadows / Derives its strength from others' weakness / That kind of system, / like dawn without light / I refuse to acknowledge, / I refuse to accept.' This is Habib Jalib reading *Dastoor*.

Listen: Habib Jalib, *Dastoor* (1962)

RC: After Habib Jalib wrote *Dastoor*, Pakistan underwent a fairly dramatic series of political changes. In 1977, the country would again be overthrown and be put under Martial Law, this time under General Zia-Ul-Haq. This same

year, the Marxist poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz wrote a poem called *Hum Dekhenge*, wherein Faiz criticizes Zia by calling him a worshipper of power and not a believer. It's important to note that Faiz is not making so much of a spiritual criticism as a political one here, as Faiz himself was not particularly spiritual but was concerned with Zia's use of Islam as a political and dictatorial tool rather than a matter of faith. It should be noted that neither Faiz nor Jalib were making armchair criticisms and to make these statements under Martial Law had real consequences. For example, Faiz and Jalib experienced imprisonment as well as exile for their writings and political activism. As a poem, *Hum Dekhenge* became popular but it would reach iconic status when it was performed by Iqbal Bano in Lahore Stadium in Pakistan rumoured to be as large as 50,000 people. This was a very big deal considering gatherings were strictly forbidden under General Zia, especially ones in which anti-government songs would be sung such as *Hum Dekhenge*.

Bano's performance was met with immense cheering and when finished, the audience demanded an encore. It was then that the sound technicians threw a tape in the deck and hit record. The original recording is around 12 minutes long, so I'll only play an excerpt now. Keep in mind the circumstances of this performance as I just described, and I want you to pay particular attention not only to the music but also the sound of the audience. This is Faiz Ahmed Faiz's *Hum Dekhenge* performed by Iqbal Bano at Lahore Stadium, 1986.

Listen: Iqbal Bano, *Hum Dekhenge* (1986)

RC: In the nights and days following Iqbal Bano's concert, authorities raided the homes of many of the organizers and participants looking for the tapes of the performance. But inevitably, at least one of those tapes survived and was soon replicated and widely distributed across Pakistan, cementing it as an anthem

against Zia-Ul-Haq and its place in culture. In a conversation I had with Hajra after our interview, she made a very important point that I want to reiterate here: a point that is key for not only understanding *Hum* but also for understanding the nature and way that audio and song and sound can travel through time. That although songs like *Dastoor* and *Hum Dekhenge* might arise out of specific, political and cultural circumstances, what prevents sounds like these from being purely historical – like a sonic relic from a lost society – is that their circumstances and ability to rally people around particular types of struggle, resonate just as much today as in the time when they were first written. In other words, they continue in very real terms, to live through history and into the present. With that in mind, I now want to fast forward to India in 2019.

[*sound of student protesters*]

RC: The sound you're hearing now is a video from a student protest of fee hikes at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi. The student who's singing is named Shashi Bhushan Samadh who is visually impaired, pictured in sunglasses on a sunny afternoon surrounded by classmates. In case you didn't recognise the sound, Shashi is singing Habib Jalib's *Dastoor*. Once online, this video went viral, not because everyone in India was concerned about the new fee hikes being imposed on students but because it struck a chord on a much deeper issue facing India at the time and still today – and that being the recent passing of the Citizen's Amendment Act (or the CAA). CAA was designed to make a clear path to citizenship for select religious minorities living in India illegally but explicitly excluding Muslims from that list. As unrest over the CAA grew, Shashi – who you hear singing now – became the subject of another viral video, this time at an anti-CAA protest being beaten by police while trying to explain to them he was blind.

Listen: JNU Student Shashi Bhushan singing Habib Jalib's *Dastoor* (2019)

RC: *Dastoor* has become an important song in anti-CAA protests and Shashi would go on to perform *Dastoor* and *Hum Dekhenge* at multiple, much larger protests. There are now multiple viral videos of both songs being sung at various demonstrations. One that stands out to me is an observance of the unrest with a more hopeful tone – a group of just a few students high atop the Himalayas singing *Hum Dekhenge* in beautiful harmony.

Listen: iimc students sing *Hum Dekhenge* in the Himalayas (2020)

RC: So far, we've been to Turkey, Pakistan and India but *Hum* is not just limited to these locations and histories. Here's Hajra again.

HW: Just as in Pakistan and India, Egypt also had a hugely rich history and long tradition of using poetry and song as vehicles for political resistance both on and off the streets and in *Hum*, there is a work by Imam Mohammad Ahmad Eissa, also known as Sheikh Imam, who was a blind Egyptian composer and singer. He collaborated for most of his life with Egyptian poet Ahmed Fouad Negm. When they began working together, Negm was working at the Afro-Asiatic People's Solidarity Organization: a mass solidarity movement of the peoples of Africa and Asia, united in a common struggle for the elimination of injustices and in defence against colonialism and racist policies. Together, Negm and Sheikh Imam were known for their political songs which spoke in favour of the poor and working classes, for social justice, and against exploitation, corruption and dictatorship.

RC: In this next clip I'd like to play, we'll hear Sheikh Imam and Fouad Negm singing together in Paris, in May 1984. But before I play this clip, I'd like to give a bit of context to the recording. France has been home to a large

Arab population for over a hundred years, but particularly after the first World War, tensions between this population and the rest of France grew increasingly tense and unstable. Fast forwarding many decades to 1983, these tensions came to a head when a march of French Arabs began in Marseille, in protest against racism as well as a call for solidarity amongst the increasingly fragmented Arab minority populations.

By march, I don't just mean a day of protest where one group walks from one end of the city to another. This was a weeks-long demonstration, now referred to as The March for Equality and Against Racism, or Marche des beurs. It was peaceful and began rather humbly, with only around 17 people in Marseille on the 15 October and continued all the way until it ended in Paris on 3 December where it had amassed around 100,000 demonstrators. In the beginning of this next clip, which again, is in the year following the protest, you'll hear words from Sheikh Imam saying: 'The change I wish for the Arab community in France is to forget this divergence in order to be united and in solidarity.' This is Sheikh Imam and Fouad Negm, live in Paris, 1984.

Listen: [Sheikh Imam and Fouad Negm performing live in Paris \(1984\)](#)

HW: Embedded in *Hum* is also a work by Mohammed Wardi, a Muslim Nubian Sudanese singer and songwriter, who sang in both Arabic and the Nubian languages and performed using a variety of instruments, including the Nubian tanbur. His songs addressed Nubian folklore, revolution and patriotism and he fought for decolonization, for the redistribution of wealth and pan-Africanism. His career spanned over 300 songs, with his first single achieving musical success after deploring CIA complicity in the assassination of Congolese politician Patrice Lumumba in 1960. Wardi's activism eventually resulted in detention and voluntary

exile. The melody of Wardi's I am referring to – embedded in *Hum* – is from *Hand Over the Keys to the Country*, penned by Sudanese poet Mohammed Al Makki Ibrahim; It was first performed by Wardi in 1997 during exile, following a military coup that had placed the national Islamic Front in control of Sudan, making Colonel Omar al Bashir president for over 30 years. This very song has found its revival many times over the years, most recently in the streets of Sudan's Green Revolution between 2017-2019.

Listen: Mohammed Wardi, [Hand Over the Keys to the Country \(1997\)](#)

RC: This is Mohammed Wardi, performing *Hand Over the Keys to the Country*. I'm sure you noticed the fairly low fidelity of the recording, and I'd like to point out that this is not typical of Mohammed Wardi's work. He was a popstar who would spend years composing music, but this piece was written in haste and urgency addressing the political discord in Sudan at the time, as he was (as mentioned earlier) in exile. As Hajra mentioned, this song has found new life through a Sudanese musician named Zoozita and has become the anthem of protest against Omar Al-Bashir who ruled over Sudan as a dictator for over 30 years. He was ousted in 2019 and is now awaiting trial in the international criminal court in the Hague. I'd like to now play Zoozita's 2019 version of Mohammed Wardi's *Hand Over the Keys to the Country*. Their version is re-titled *Surrender*.

Listen: Zoozita, [Surrender \(2019\)](#)

HW: We live in a time of deep crisis, hardened differences, deep divisions around ethnic, linguistic, national affiliations that will not shift if we are unable to begin by connecting these complex political histories across time and space.

I do find that western notions of universality often seem to leave out those very perspectives

that they were formed or informed by. I've never been interested in making work that must look like it should be from one place or another, or feeds into structures that may fetishize or tokenize my practice. I also don't shy away from making work that is fluid, that calls for collective belonging, commonalities, solidarities and transculturations, that lives outside of national or geographic rubrics, and refuses to be reduced, normalized, and assimilated.

What's really important for me and with regards to this work – wherever it's shown – is that it responds to the spaces in which it inhabits, that it confronts and also manages to engage it. One question that continually came up while thinking through the work was: what is freedom of expression truly, in a capitalist system that promises equity, yet withholds it at every turn? And how can we deconstruct – and even imagine or reimagine – sounds to challenge our vantage points towards creating a more just and equitable future? You asked me what an abolitionist mode of listening is...well, I suppose, amongst so much else, it is in pursuit of this.

Listen: Habib Jalib, *Mein Ne Uss Se Yeh Kaha* (1971)

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