‘Do Like You Did in Aleppo’: Negotiating Space and Place Among Syrian Musicians in Istanbul

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The experiences of displaced musicians and the socio-cultural practices connected to them are marginalized in the study of refugee movements—especially new ones like the Syrian refugee crisis—subordinated to explorations of economic and political structures affecting refugee mobility, structural integration into host communities and emergency settings like the refugee camp. Concurrently, explorations of identity, sentiments of belonging and the reimagining of homeland are common theoretical frameworks applied across the literature. I argue that studying the resettlement experience of refugee musicians can offer a fresh perspective on how identity, belonging and homemaking are renegotiated in displacement. I explore this argument through a particular case study of displaced Syrian musicians in Istanbul because of its transformation into a new cultural center for Syrians in Turkey. Through ethnographic fieldwork conducted with Syrian musicians in Istanbul during the summer of 2018, I reflect on how the unique experience of musicians can illuminate various conceptual frameworks related to agency, space and place.

Keywords: Syrian migration, agency, music, cultural identity

Introduction

Stepping off the airport shuttle to walk across Kadikoy pier to catch a ferry to Beşiktas on the other side of the Bosporus, the sonic convergence of rushing cars, the Islamic call to prayer and the mournful sound of a Turkish melody on the Kemence greeted me. So, this was Istanbul—or at least the sound of Istanbul. Pausing to take it all in, I unconsciously harmonized with the call to prayer emanating from the small mosque on the other side of the square. Then, the enchanting, sorrowful melody of the young Kemence player across the street caught my attention and my breath. These were just the first sounds that would follow me throughout my fieldwork in the city. On the 20-min ferry ride to Beşiktas and the small flat I would be staying in with a Turkish friend, I encountered more music as a cellist and percussionist were busking inside playing ‘Deniz
Üstü Köpürür’ by Cem Karaca, a tune I would later find myself humming unconsciously throughout my time in Istanbul as I heard it almost daily in the city. That evening, I eagerly made my way to Taksim Square in order to stroll down Istiklal Street where apparently many Syrian musicians have become known for playing along the long pedestrian road lined with shops, bookstores and cafes. I was overwhelmed by the number of bands performing side by side along the road, each with their respective crowds gathered around, listening and swaying to the music. Halfway down Istiklal, I heard a powerful male voice singing a muwashshah by the famous Syrian vocalist Sabah Fakhri accompanied by himself on the oud. The muwashshahat (sing. muwashshah) is a genre of Arabic music considered by many to be the epitome of Arab music. In Syria, they form an important element of Syrian musical and national identity and figure prominently in discourses of cultural authenticity, heritage preservation and attempts to define Syrian ‘tradition’ (Currey 2002; Shannon 2003). I made my way through the small crowd gathered around him and smiled at the familiar tune and the musician’s ability to carve a space for himself in the city. However, I would later learn of the personal and emotional cost this Syrian musician endured to become a street performer in Istanbul.

The plight of Syrian refugees emerged as a trending topic for policy reports and academic research in recent years as a result of the massive displacement of millions of Syrians since 2011 (UNHCR 2019). Most of these studies investigate integration and assimilation strategies, citizenship rights and the vulnerability of Syrian refugees in new host societies (Kaya and Kirac 2016; Baban et al. 2017; Simsek 2018). I attempted this pilot study with displaced Syrian musicians in Istanbul as a way of exploring forced migration and integration through the cultural practice of music-making rather than analysing their experiences through more normative theoretical models. My study draws on one month of ethnographic fieldwork in Istanbul during the summer of 2018. I chose Istanbul as my field site because it is now home to nearly 600,000 Syrians and has become recognized as a city where ‘Syrian culture is flourishing’ (Jilani 2016; Simsek 2018).

Drawing on diaspora studies, forced migration studies, Middle Eastern studies and ethnomusicology, this research relies primarily on anthropological methods and scholarship. Through semi-structured interviews, participant observation and daily informal conversations and encounters with Syrian musicians and their audiences in Istanbul, I sought to analyse how Syrian men and women maintain traditions and cultural practices in displacement. Fieldwork among this group was complemented with conversations and interviews with non-musicians and other Syrians living in the Fatih district where most of the major Arab music ‘academies’ have opened. Musicians interviewed possessed a range of skills from self-taught and amateur to semi-professional and professional. In fact, some were recognized artists within the Syrian musician community. The musicians I spoke with were male with the exception of two females from Damascus. Almost all informants were from urban centres in Syria such as Damascus, Aleppo and Homs; they all decided to leave Syria as a result of the war. As a Syrian-American researcher, I was welcomed by informants who saw me as a fellow Syrian trying to document
Syria’s cultural heritage in Turkey. To protect the privacy of interviewees, all names are anonymised in this article. All interviews were conducted in Arabic.

Several studies in migration, development literature, and ethnomusicology have begun exploring connections among music, migration, politics and identity (Reyes 1999; Baily and Collyer 2006; Christensen 2010; Landau 2011; Toynbee and Dueck 2011; Karl 2014; Western, 2014; O’Toole 2014; Praeger 2015). In general, these studies show how ‘music is a significant medium not only for shaping a new understanding of a transnational cultural identity, but also for intervening creatively to shape public opinion about cultural, ethnic and religious diversity’ in the host society (O’Toole 2014: 1). In other words, music and music-making can create avenues for agency, resilience and resistance in diaspora and displacement by allowing migrants to have a political voice in their new societies. Therefore, I also wanted to investigate how Syrian musicians were using music as a mechanism for agency in Istanbul and whether Syrian music was utilised to sound communal memories and aspirations for the future.

During research, however, I discovered that the ‘agency’ I was looking for was difficult to categorize because I initially sought outward forms of resilience and resistance like rage and rebellion. Through Syrian musical practices in the city, I discovered another layer to the conceptualization of agency. Agency, resistance and resilience can also be an unspoken inward negotiation as cultural taboos are overcome. In other words, my informants had to overcome their cultural taboos in order to adapt to the new host context, a process that required great emotional cost. Therefore, my analysis extends Korac’s observation that ‘refugeehood implies simultaneously experiences of victimization and practices of overcoming it’ (2009: 8). I nuance the discussion by exploring this simultaneity through the negotiation of musical practices in displacement. Taking a particular case study of displaced Syrian musicians in Istanbul, I highlight the underlying difficulties of integrating into a new society where spatial, social, material and economic realities have changed significantly. Exploring these challenges through the lived experience of displaced musicians will shed light on the refugee journey and illuminate the various forces at play when cultures come into contact.

Music, Nostalgia, Space and Agency in Displacement

The role of music in connecting with an individual’s past was described decades ago by ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax:

The primary effect of music is to give the listener a feeling of security, for it symbolizes the place where he was born, his earliest childhood satisfactions, his religious experience, his pleasure in community doings, his courtship and his work—any or all of these personality shaping experiences (1959: 929).

In essence, Lomax argues that music creates a feeling of security by establishing for the listener a sense of belonging both geographically and temporally. The ‘tuning in’ (Schutz 1977) through music of these social alignments can provide a
powerful affective experience in which social identity is literally ‘embodied’ (Stokes 1994: 12). This embodiment transcends the personal in the service of the communal, symbolising an individual’s belonging to a particular cultural group (Thomas, 2014). Personal memories, while residing in the individual mind and subject to individualized experiences, are through musical expressions often made and experienced in social gatherings. An example of this among displaced Syrians in Istanbul is the musical gatherings of the Mosaic Oriental Choir. Composed of mainly Syrians, the group performs various ‘eastern’ folk songs from around the Arab world as well as many songs specific to Syria such as those performed by the Syrian national icon Sabah Fakhri. Many choir members remarked that performing these songs together reminded them of home and of specific memories in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and other towns across Syria (Tibet and Alhafez 2017).

According to social anthropologist Paul Connerton (1989), outbreaks of nostalgia occur after significant social change such as war, migration, displacement and even globalization. Given scholarship since Lomax recognizing the connection between music and yearnings for a closeness to the past (Baily 1994; Stokes 1994; Shelemay 1998; Baily and Collyer 2006; Landau 2011; Karl 2014; Prager 2015), I was expecting to find Syrian musicians playing as facilitators for what Amanda Lagerkvist (2013) refers to as ‘nostalgic dwelling’. She defines ‘nostalgic dwelling’ as ways of inhabiting and articulating lived experience in places and communities embedded with a heightened awareness of the past. I expected to uncover the ways Syrian music-making in the city was contributing to the creation of new senses of ‘place’ and belonging by drawing Syrians together through the evocation of cultural and collective memory.

Passing Syrian musicians on Istiklal street the first time, I mainly heard them performing traditional genres (i.e. *muwashshahat* and *qudiid*) and old classics by Um Kulthum and Abd Al-Wahab, household names in the Arab world. Because I was searching for ‘nostalgic dwelling’, I was excited to find Syrian musicians drawing on traditional repertoire in their performances, which I interpreted as an effort to evoke cultural and collective memory. However, a different reality surfaced when I interviewed the musicians and began conducting participant observation. Although there were some instances where musical performance drew Syrians together and provided moments of ‘refugee community’ that renewed collective memory (Lewis 2010: 571), these moments were rare because of various spatial, cultural, structural and economic forces affecting Syrian musicians along with the general displaced population in the city. Therefore, rather than proposing an argument framed around the contestation of cultural identity in diaspora through nostalgia, music and music-making (Landau 2011; Karl 2014; Prager 2015; Shannon 2015), I instead interrogate and illustrate the complexity of ‘displacement’ and ‘emplacement’ into a new society by examining the ways in which Syrian musicians are trying to ‘emplace’ themselves in Istanbul.

Increasingly, studies about refugees, diasporas and transnational communities have been emphasizing that forced movement and refugeehood are not only about loss of place and disempowerment, but also about the processes of place making,
of regaining control post displacement (Turton 2005). Malkki (1995: 517) was one of the first to argue that ‘emplacement is the flipside of displacement’. The process of place making is closely connected to physical ‘space’, which is a fundamental dimension of all social processes (Brun 2001: 16). Social processes situated in spaces create place, and place is crucial to how we think, feel, act and relate to others, both as subjects and as communities. Musical practices are also closely connected to space and place. Settings of performance, listening, rehearsing and sharing are entangled with the histories and material and physical qualities of space and place. Therefore, ‘doing music is physical and inherently spatial and embodied’ (Papadopoulos and Duru 2018: 21). Consequently, what happens to a musician’s subjectivity when the physical and spatial norms of ‘doing music’ have changed as a result of moving to a new place where space and place differ? Expanding on Papadopoulos and Duru (2018) and the importance of place/space in relation to music could be key to understanding why I did not find ‘nostalgic dwelling’ among Syrian musicians and their audiences in Istanbul. My study reveals that change in performance settings, change in the physical embodiment of ‘doing music’ disrupts nostalgia and challenges subjectivities. Through the ethnographic study of Syrian musical practices in Istanbul, I explore how values and emotions are closely connected and are embodied and projected into public life and through interpersonal struggles (Biehl et al. 2007: 15), highlighting new connections between subjectivity—in inner affective states—and the physical environment where public life takes place.

Revealing these connections also problematizes the notion of agency as it is utilized in forced migration studies discourse. Researchers are increasingly emphasizing the importance of agency for studying the experiences of people fleeing their places of origin and their forced dislocation (Turton 2003; Korac 2009). According to anthropologist Saba Mahmood:

> Agency is understood as the capacity to realize one’s own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective). Thus, the humanist desire for autonomy and self-expression constitutes the substrate, the slumbering ember that can spark to flame in the form of an act of resistance when conditions permit (2005: 8).

Applied to refugeehood, agency becomes the capacity to realize one’s own interests against the consequences of war, migration, displacement and dispossession. This mainly translates as the ability of forced migrants to make decisions about their flight, despite coercion, and how they create opportunities within the limitations of their circumstances. According to Korac (2009), this amounts to acting with agency. Most of my informants indeed created opportunities for themselves as musicians in Istanbul. They found new places to work, took up a new cultural practice of street performance, opened their own studios and music schools and formed bands and ensembles with other Syrian musicians. However, a look at the inner worlds of these musicians as they emplace themselves in their new host society reveals that there is more to battle than structural
difficulties such as economic and social integration. Forced migrants must also fight their cultural taboos and adapt their worldviews in order to succeed in their new homes. I further explore these tensions in the analysis section of this study.

Context: Syrian Sound and Resettlement in Istanbul

Syrians fleeing into Turkey initially crossed the border between the two countries unhindered. They were greeted as guests and provided with sanctuary—largely along the southern border with Syria, but also in cities like Istanbul and Ankara (Chatty 2017b: 241). With nearly 3 million registered Syrians in Turkey by 2017, relationships with the host community and national policy have changed over time. For example, at times Turkey has maintained open borders and at other times closed them. The Turkish government enacted its own domestic asylum laws to provide Syrians with identification papers (as Syrians and not as ‘refugees’), basic health care, and access to education (Chatty 2017b: 243), establishing a domestic regime that provides Syrians with ‘temporary protection’. While registration with Turkish authorities was meant to provide protection, these measures have not been fully put into practice (Chatty 2017a: 38).

Since the beginning of 2013, many Syrian refugees in Turkey settled in large cities, such as Istanbul and Ankara. According to migration statistics from Turkey’s Ministry of Interior, as of March 2019, Istanbul hosts the highest number of Syrians across the country, with 558,429 in residence alongside migrants from Somalia, Russia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Bangladesh, Uzbekistan, Moldova and others. The majority of Syrian refugees in Istanbul settled on the European side, in districts like Fatih, Esenler, Esenyurt, Okmeydani, Beyoglu and Basaksehir (Simsek 2018:15). Most of my informants live or work in these districts. As of December 2017, the International Crisis Group reported that 8000 Syrian businesses were registered in Turkey alongside 10,000 unregistered enterprises. The Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV) reported that 473 of these businesses are based in Istanbul as of the first half of 2018 (Karasapan 2017). Regardless of this economic activity, Syrians have limited formal access to the labour market. In fact, a majority of my informants, both musicians and non-musicians, were working informally for Syrian and Turkish businesses across the city. Struggling to enter the formal labour market has created difficulties in accessing affordable housing and education (Simsek 2018: 10).

Nevertheless, the city has become recognized as a place where ‘Syrian culture is flourishing’ (Jilani 2016). The Fatih district’s transformation since the influx of Syrians into the city is one manifestation of this ‘flourishing.’ Arabic is spoken on the streets alongside the numerous Syrian restaurants, cafes, small shops and enterprises currently operating, especially around Yusufpasa. In fact, several informants claimed that being in Fatih made them feel as though they were back in Damascus. Several Arabic music and art schools have opened in the district, owned and established by Syrian forced migrants. Syrians have also set up an Arabic radio station in Istanbul’s business district, broadcasting news, cultural programmes, and music around the clock (Hajj 2016). Several independent
newspapers written and produced by Syrians, such as Souriatna and Enab Baladi, have found a publishing home in Istanbul and are distributed in Syrian restaurants, cafes and bookshops around the city.

Istanbul, a modern ‘mega-city’ of more than 20 million inhabitants bridging Asia and Europe, the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, is also culturally rich and ethnically diverse. As mentioned earlier, the city is home to migrants from Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia (Papadopoulos and Duru 2018: 9). Many Syrian musicians are pleased with this diversity. For example, the former director of Istanbul Mosaic Oriental Choir, remarked that ‘our choir fit well in Istanbul’s [ethnically] colorful landscape’ when I asked about fitting in as a Syrian musician in Istanbul.

Given these business and cultural enterprises, Istanbul seems like a city rich in opportunity for Syrians. In reality, however, the transition was difficult and often times required a shift in cultural sensibilities. The next sections explore this shift as experienced by Syrian musicians who attempted to rebuild their lives in Istanbul post-displacement.

**Analysis**

*I Am Not a Beggar*

Towards the end of my fieldwork, I was able to interview Majd, the man with whom it all started my first day in the city. The Syrian musician whose powerful voice drew me in during my first stroll down Istiklal street was gentle and shy as he spoke to me about his musical background and his journey out of Aleppo in 2016. When I asked him about how he felt performing as a street musician, his tone became more solemn and intense while he explained the emotional struggle he endured every day in order to play ‘on the street’. I found that contrary to what I saw on the surface as acts of agency and resilience, cultural preservation and nostalgia, this Syrian musician was in fact performing out of economic necessity and against his sensibilities of what constitutes a proper setting in which to provide his musical services. He told me during our conversation:

> I would stop playing if I had other means of making money. There is no future in terms of music [for us Syrian refugees]. [I can’t stand] the hatred and ugliness from people in the streets, especially [from] other Arabs. They want to make you feel like a beggar. Taksim square [i.e. performing on Istiklal street] gave me a platform and even got me to the television but I want my freedom. I don’t have residency here... I didn’t play or touch my instrument the first two years after I moved to Istanbul because I was so depressed. I tried to learn other crafts like dessert making to pay the rent and take care of my family (August 2018).

Echoing Majd’s sentiments, the refrain, ‘I had no other choice but to play in the streets’ was something I heard constantly when speaking with Syrian musicians over the course of my fieldwork. Most of the Syrian musicians I interviewed were performing on the streets to make ends meet, both professionals and amateurs.
Although this is a normal practice in Istanbul and several bands and groups play across the city, especially in Taksim along Istiklal street, street performance is not as normal a musical practice in Syria. One Syrian musician, for example, played for about a month on Istiklal street but found it ‘too humiliating’ and decided to put away her instrument after she found work at a travel agency. Muna had been a professional musician in Damascus who trained at the High Institute of Art.

Ismail, a Kurdish keyboard artist from Aleppo who recently opened his own music studio in Istanbul also performs on Istiklal for extra income. He arrived in the city 4 years ago. After a day of wandering around showing me all the spaces and corners he performed in before settling on Istiklal street, he confessed how difficult the transition was for him as a musician to perform in the streets:

I felt like a beggar playing in the streets when I first arrived, especially since this is not a normal practice back in Syria. I was so afraid that musicians back home will see videos of me playing in the streets and think that now I really have become a refugee. I know that this is still a risk, and I try to ask people to stop taking videos when I am performing but it’s no use. I have accepted that this is what I have to do to survive in this city, especially since I don’t want to work in clubs and bars. Now, I mainly work as a street musician and in cafes whenever I can get a gig while also teaching at my studio (July 2018).

Although Ismail managed to avoid working in clubs and bars for the most part—sometimes he joins one of his bands for a bar gig when money is tight—many other Syrian musicians have not. When I asked Ismail and other musicians why they found it offensive to perform in a bar, they explained that a bar is not a ‘respectable’ venue for a professional Syrian musician. According to Shannon’s ethnography of musical traditions and attitudes in Syria before the 2011 conflict, examples of ‘respectable’ venues around Aleppo in particular included ‘the Citadel’s amphitheater, Aleppo’s few public theaters and concert halls, the ancient caravansaries that [were] being renovated as performance spaces, and the private homes of ‘respectable people’ (2006: 43). Shannon further explains that these very ‘respectable people’ and most Syrian musicians at the time saw Aleppo’s night-clubs as disreputable venues because they serve alcohol and cater to listeners’ carnal rather than spiritual interests (2006: 36). This cultural sentiment—that performing in bars and night clubs is vulgar—carried by Syrian musicians to their new home in Istanbul is affecting not only their choices about where and when to offer their services, but also their subjectivities as professional Syrian musicians. In order to survive economically as musicians and to avoid the cultural discomfort of working in bars or nightclubs, Ismail, Majd and others perceived little option other than to perform in the streets, even if doing so made them feel ‘like a beggar’.

However, even those Syrian musicians who have succumbed to working in bars and night clubs told me that they do it out of necessity. ‘I don’t drink [because I am Muslim] but I now play in bars with my band because this is how bands make money in this city,’ explained Wael, a professional Syrian violinist from Aleppo.
Wael is the head of a band he formed with his two sons, both percussionists, and a guitarist and singer, also Syrian forced migrants. I attended one of their concerts at a hip bar just off Istiklal street. They mainly performed Arab classics by Fairuz and Sabah Fakhri while patrons sipped on beers and occasionally got up to dance in the small space in front of the band. When I later interviewed Wael and asked him about the concert, highlighting to him how relaxed and enjoyable it seemed, how impressive it was that through Arabic music the band was able to engage a mixed audience of Turks and international students and tourists, he thanked me but also reassured me that in Syria, he never would have been seen performing in such a venue:

My career has completely changed since I moved to Istanbul with my family. See how in this video I am soloing with a full orchestra behind me in this beautiful concert hall in Aleppo [he plays a video on his phone]? I did this concert in 2011 just before things got really bad and we had to leave Syria. Imagine, now I am performing as a street musician and in bars and cafes [with my band]... I am not used to the bar setting so I am trying to change my style of playing... you know, we need to be more colorful and fun to grab people's attention. You can't play symphonic music in a bar.

Anthropological writings on space and place can help elucidate the inner subjectivities of these Syrian musicians and why performing in these new settings has been such a challenge to their identities and senses of self. The responses from my informants reveal how our identities and self-worth are inherently tied not only to the social processes that come about in spaces, but also to the physical spaces themselves. This explains why Syrian musicians feel 'humiliated' performing in the streets or in bars and night clubs because their normative performance practice is linked to performing at 'a respectable place' like a concert hall, public theatre, or music institute. This shift in space has led Wael to conclude that his musical career has 'completely changed' since moving to Istanbul. In their essay collection *Siting Culture*, Olwig and Hastrup (1997) claim that place, as a social experience, imprints like a 'spatial grid' on our unconscious and shapes our memories, aspirations, and interpretation of social reality, thereby shaping the conceptualization of culture. However, I think this case study of the emplacement of Syrian musicians in Istanbul reveals that culture and enculturation can also affect the experience of physical space and social place, especially in displacement, whereby a Syrian musician feels a sense of shame for performing in a new physical space like 'the street' or 'the bar' because of the cultural sentiment carried with her that performing in such spaces is vulgar.

The most disheartening case of a musician confronting the reality of displacement and the challenge of emplacement is the case of Muna, the professional musician who put aside her instrument because she found street performance 'too strange and humiliating, especially as a woman.' I interviewed Muna in a café on an Istiklal side street, a café set in a cobble-stoned courtyard crammed with tables and people. 'This café makes me feel like I am in the old city of Damascus. Every time I feel nostalgic for Damascus, I come here,' proclaimed Muna. She
explained the difficulty for Syrian musicians in Istanbul to perform at a ‘respectable’ venue and why as a result she decided to stop performing:

If [you] are going to perform [here in Istanbul] it will be just for [yourself] not for an audience. And for you to put together a concert here is very difficult. Not because it’s expensive or that Turkish people won’t enjoy the music. Turkish and Arabic culture are a little similar so that is not a problem. But the problem is that you need to know a lot of people and have a really strong network in order for you to put together a performance at a respectable place. Back in Syria, we used to perform a lot in theaters like Masrah al-Hamra, Dar al-Opera, at my music institute. Like, in a real place, a real venue. When we arrived in Istanbul we came immediately to working on the street and it became very difficult.

It is true that however coerced they might be, refugees do indeed make choices in their predicament. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise how powerful the coercion actually is in many displacement settings. Although these Syrian musicians made the choice to take up a new practice in Istanbul and perform in the streets or in bars and nightclubs, many of them would have chosen another path had they seen other means for financial security. Muna did just that. As Ismail pointed out that he has ‘accepted that [street performance] is what [he has] to do to survive in this city’, he indeed overcame conventions in displacement and even the weight of his own cultural sensibilities concerning performance in ‘disreputable’ places. He displays his agency and resilience. Yet, in doing so, he renegotiated his own sense of self as a musician in an effort to maintain his integrity and professionalism. The next section explores how this renegotiation occurs among Syrian music instructors and their students, the next generation of Syrian musicians.

‘Do Like You Did in Aleppo’: Teaching the Next Generation in Displacement

It was my first day at an Arabic music institute, a small school on the second floor of an old building in Aksaray, a neighbourhood in the Fatih district of Istanbul. I was nervous, especially since I was the only female in a room full of about twenty young men from Syria, students at the institute who had come for their group jam session on a hot Saturday afternoon. I was introduced by my contact, a violin student at the school, to Mr Tamer, the instructor for the session and director of the institute. Mr Tamer is a well-known music instructor from Aleppo who taught at the Sabah Fakhri Music Institute, a renowned music academy in Aleppo before the conflict in Syria broke out (see Shannon 2006). Before I had a chance to explain my research, he asked me to take a seat at the front of the room next to Omar, the violin instructor, grabbed his oud and led the students through ‘Malaktoum Fuadi,’ a famous muwashshah composed in Aleppo by Omar al-Batch. A few minutes into the session, Omar leaned toward me and yelled over the music into my ear, ‘I feel like I’ve been transported back to Aleppo.’

The session went on for about an hour. The students would take turns soloing with every repeat of the chorus, each showing off his varying abilities with embellishments, long notes and range. The other musicians in training provided the rhythm, banging their darbukas with their bare hands at a constant pace. When
the session was over, Mr Tamer threw out a few tips to help improve the performance as a whole and then dismissed the group. At that point, one of the students addressed the director:

Mr. Tamer, we love you and respect you deeply, but some of us are a little upset at the way you are teaching the lessons. Some of us feel you are favouring students, only helping and focusing your teaching on the ones who are better. We feel this is unfair and that we are not learning enough during the lessons.

Mr Tamer tried to respond calmly but became passionate as he spoke, raising his voice several times:

I don’t favour anyone. I respond to students who are taking the time to practice and come prepared for the lessons. We are now in ghurba [out of place, i.e. displaced]. What am I supposed to do if you guys have to work during the week to help [your families] and can’t find the time to practice? I can’t just kick those students out. I am happy they are even showing up and still interested in studying music... I am dying on Saturdays and Sundays to get through all your lessons because none of you boys can take lessons during the week. And even then, some of you don’t show up consistently... How am I supposed to teach you boys if you don’t practice and barely show up for class?

Another student from the group spoke up:

Just do like you did in Aleppo, Mr. Tamer. You have to punish the students who don’t come prepared to class. We are all suffering because you are too relaxed with us. Take charge again. Be strict like you were in Aleppo.

Mr Tamer got riled up again and said firmly, ‘you have to practice daily. You cannot become a musician without hard work and daily practice’ (fieldnotes, 22 July 2018).

Unfortunately, the frustration experienced by both the students and the teachers at Mr Tamer’s school was not resolved, as I discovered over the course of my subsequent visits to the school, as well as through interviews with the teachers and students. Every time I sat in on Mr Tamer’s ‘private’ lessons with students, he would teach several students at the same time in one classroom in order to accommodate their tight schedules. Later, he admitted that he felt sorry for the young men because he knew how difficult life had become for them in Istanbul, which is why he had become relaxed with his teaching:

Life in Istanbul is expensive and a lot of families rely on the extra income from their sons just to pay rent. So, I know they don’t have much time to practice during the week because most of them are working crazy hours... We are in ghurba now. I cannot teach as I did back in Aleppo because then students will stop coming if I put too much pressure on them. And, Istanbul is so big, students come when they can.

Mr Tamer’s explanation reveals a conflict between teaching the boys discipline, both as students and as musicians, and the reality of being in ghurba [i.e. displaced]. The socio-economic realities of displacement in Istanbul are affecting the
ways the next generation of Syrians study music as well as the subjectivity of Syrian music instructors as they struggle to accommodate their students’ new circumstances.

According to a 2016 report by Support to Life (STL) regarding the vulnerability assessment of Syrian refugees in Istanbul, the metropolis has the highest cost of living in comparison to other provinces across Turkey. Therefore, although Syrian refugees receive more regular paid salaries and higher levels of income in Istanbul, it remains difficult to improve their living conditions because of the high cost of living. To make up for these high costs, at least one child works in almost every third Syrian household in Istanbul (Kaya and Kirac 2016). Therefore, their priorities are ‘surviving in Turkey rather than being culturally engaged’ (Simsek 2018: 14). In fact, one of my informants, a Syrian man in his mid-thirties living alone and working in Istanbul, told me that ‘back in Syria, there was the security that if nothing worked out, you could stay at home with your parents for a few months and then find a new job. Here, you have to calculate every move because if you are not working and making money then you are not paying rent’ (Fieldnotes, 6 Aug 2018).

This indeed contextualizes Mr Tamer’s comment about feeling sorry for his students for not having time to practice during the week let alone show up for class. When I asked the students themselves about why it was difficult for them to attend class regularly, many explained that sometimes they are asked to work on the weekends or that ‘life is busy in Istanbul.’ Some complained that travel time around the city was a deterrence from doing things outside of work; one student spends an hour traveling from his home to the school. When I reconnected with Ismail, the keyboard instructor, months later, he confirmed that the problem continues: many students only show up for lessons once a month and pay the minimum. Perhaps this is why Mr Tamer confessed ‘[I] can’t keep the school open if I didn’t also have my restaurant job.’ Every evening after closing the school, Mr Tamer plays the oud at a Syrian café about a 10-min walk from the school.

With students finding it difficult to commit to serious study, teachers at the school are forced to change the curriculum and their lesson plans. Instructors are struggling to enforce the same content from the curriculum in Syria because students cannot keep up. This frustration was expressed by all the instructors at the institute. Consequently, even if teachers wanted to be stricter, as some of their students were demanding in the opening anecdote, they cannot because as Mr Tamer explained, ‘they will stop showing up if we put too much pressure on them.’ As a result, teachers are becoming more relaxed, which not only affects the pace at which the students learn, but also the curriculum. For example, Mr Tamer did not add to the repertoire over the course of several jam sessions because students were not prepared to move on. By the third session, he told me that ‘back in Syria, we would finish learning and memorizing an entire wasla in a month. Here they can barely finish three muwashshahât in the same time.’

Mr Tamer’s statement provides a perfect example of Reyes Schramm’ (1986) assertion that ‘the disruption and loss of control, the traumas of escape, and the trying circumstances surrounding survival in a new and possibly hostile
environment impede the usual channels through which traditions pass from one
generation to the next’ (1986: 91). The music school illustrates this disruption
because supposedly students would be learning the repertoire more efficiently,
more competently, and more assuredly if they were not displaced. This case study
demonstrates that passing traditions to the next generation requires stability, the
ability of young people in the society to have the time and resources for study as
well as the dedication to do so. Tradition becomes a luxury when there are a new
set of demands to be dealt with. Perhaps, contrary to my assumption at the start of
fieldwork, Connerton’s (1989) assertion that outbreaks of nostalgia occur after
significant social change like war, migration and displacement is only true after
displaced communities have structurally and economically integrated into their
new host societies. Whether formal education or the teaching of aesthetic and
cultural traditions such as music, this case study reveals the specific challenges that
interrupt the schooling and education of displaced youth.

Although my analysis is mainly grounded in participant observation conducted
at Mr Tamer’s music school, I also visited other schools and cultural organizations
set up by Syrians in the city with the purpose of bringing Syrians together through
music, dance and the arts. These groups and organizations, too, are struggling to
sustain their mission because participation is transient. Like the students at Mr
Tamer’s school, participants in these groups find it difficult to attend regularly
because of similar socio-economic pressures and further migration to Europe. For
example, the co-founder of a Syrian social club in Taksim Square, told me that
most Syrians have tried to leave Istanbul as soon as possible. Many continued on
into Europe and even Canada. As a result, by the time I interviewed him—2 years
after setting up the club—he explained that almost all the original members had
left the city. Moreover, in a video titled Sounds Beyond the Border (2019) produced
by ethnomusicologist Evrim Hikmet Öğüt about Syrian musicians in Istanbul,
one of the musicians interviewed complained that it is ‘hard to play together [with
other Syrian musicians] because everyone is trying to leave to Europe’. When I
asked the former director of the Istanbul Mosaic Oriental Choir via an online
interview what happened to the choir after she migrated to the Netherlands, she
confessed that the choir fell apart (28 Oct 2018). Therefore, through a particular
look at how Syrian musicians—teachers, students, professionals and amateurs—
and their social circles are attempting to rebuild their lives, it becomes clear that
displacement is changing the way in which aesthetic and cultural traditions are
collectively experienced and transmitted. Reconstructing ‘place’ in a sustainable
way becomes difficult when dealing with issues of liminality and survival.

In this regard, agency almost becomes irrelevant as a theoretical concept. Mr
Tamer can be seen as an actor with a strong display of agency for he managed to
open his own school in a new place and society after being forcibly displaced from
his country. However, we must also recognize that what he has produced is a
diminished version of the original because of the new demands on his students as
well as his own economic situation—he has to work a second job in order to keep
his finances in check. His students are unable to keep up with his curriculum,
which he brought with him from his experience teaching music for several decades
in Aleppo. He is unable to teach like he did in Aleppo. The founders of the social club tackled many hurdles to create a space for young Syrians to socialize and experience cultural events together in the heart of the city; however, the group has lost its momentum since most of its original members have left. Are these real examples of agency if the acts of resilience are unsustainable?

Though many refugees and migrants feel that ‘they authentically live, or want to live, their lives elsewhere, they have a present life, where they need to survive, to make a livelihood’ (Brun 2001: 19). The constraints of this ‘present life’ affects not only the ways in which aesthetic and cultural traditions are preserved and transmitted to the next generation, as in the case of Mr Tamer’s school, but also the ways in which Syrian musicians and their audiences come together in their new host society. The following conversation between two young Syrian musicians from Aleppo during a private jam session illustrates this complexity. When I asked both musicians if they consciously choose to perform Syrian or Arab repertoire for their shows as a way of remaining connected to their home culture, they responded differently:

Oudist: I don’t really care about Syrian music. I just want to become a better musician, which means I need to learn Turkish technique because it is better [i.e. more advanced].

Violinist: But there is still something very important about our roots and our music. It’s important to remember where we come from, and our music, especially classical music from Aleppo, can connect us [to our past] (fieldnotes, 24 Jul 2018).

This tension reflects the challenges of resettlement through cultures in contact. My case study reveals that many of these decisions depend on the socio-economic realities on the ground, how much time and resources people can manage in the resettlement process, how many other Syrians are around and staying around. Cultural identity is important, but not so much until the immediate realities are dealt with first. For the students at the music school, the challenge is not preserving cultural traditions, it is simply learning them.

**Conclusion**

Tracing the process of emplacement through Syrian musicians and their attempts to embed themselves in Istanbul’s cultural and musical landscape reveals several complexities often overlooked in normative studies about refugee resettlement and integration. By theorizing subjectivity in this context, by unearthing the inner worlds of these musicians as they push cultural taboos and endure changes in performance practices, curriculum and study habits, I problematize the notion of refugee agency. In forced migration studies, agency is understood as the capacity for refugees to make decisions while fleeing their countries of origin, however coerced they might be, and how they act within the conditions that prevent them from living out their lives post-displacement. I am not arguing against the idea that forced migrants act with agency in their new host societies, for indeed they do as my case study reveals: Syrian musicians took up new performance
practices like street performance, managed to open music schools and carry on working in their professions as music teachers, created bands and found new opportunities to perform in bars and nightclubs around the city, and, for some, adopted Turkish technique.

Nonetheless, these outward forms of resilience and resistance mask the inner struggles of displacement and emplacement; they mask what it feels like to adopt a new cultural practice that goes against one’s cultural taboos. This explains why some Syrian musicians feel like ‘beggars’ while performing on Istiklal street, why performing in bars and nightclubs, places considered ‘vulgar’ in Syrian culture, challenges their identities as professional musicians. As Korac (2009) points out, displacement does often open up new social places and opportunities for migrants, but we cannot ignore the changes to subjectivity this process entails. Therefore, we cannot claim that Syrian culture is ‘flourishing’ because Syrian musicians have opened their own music schools and continue the tradition of Syrian music in the streets without also recognising what this process is doing emotionally, internally, and subjectively to the very musicians who are trying to maintain their musical identity.

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