

**QU'RANIC RECITATION IN PITTSBURGH, PA AND CAIRO, EGYPT:
SHAPING IDENTITY, NOSTALGIA, AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICE ACROSS THE
EGYPTIAN-AMERICAN DIASPORA**

by

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Submitted to the Undergraduate Faculty of
the University Honors College in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Philosophy

University of Pittsburgh
2018

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH
UNIVERSITY HONORS COLLEGE

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Mariam A. Shalaby, BPhil
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Over the past two years, I have worked extensively to investigate the opinions and attitudes of Egyptians in the cities of Pittsburgh and Cairo in regards to the recitation of the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam. The field study, ethnographic in nature, aimed to elucidate questions regarding the oral tradition of the Qur'an and its place in modern life for individuals across the Egyptian diaspora. Through interviews and participant-observation in both field sites, these questions were elucidated.

How do Egyptians feel about the role Qur'anic recitation plays in their lives? What value do Egyptian-Americans place on teaching their children to recite the Qur'an? What are Egyptians' attitudes towards associating Qur'anic recitation with music? And how do these attitudes differ across generations and across national borders? What do these attitudes indicate about these communities' identities and religious practice directions?

As Egyptians are relatively recent immigrants within the history of immigration to the United States, it is important to learn how this diasporic community has begun and is evolving to meet the demands of a rapidly changing American society.

The role of Qur'anic recitation in this evolution serves here as a point of reference. The tradition of reciting the Qur'an has become an integral part of Egyptian society since the beginning of Islamic influence in the country centuries ago. The tension or harmony between Qur'anic tradition and music in the eyes of Egyptians differs depending on social status,

religious conviction, and other cultural factors. Qur'anic recitation is a focused lens through which to study issues related to Egyptian diaspora and immigration as they relate to sound.

This thesis begins with an introduction to the research, its theoretical framework, methodology, and essential considerations. It then expands on the fieldwork and observations in Pittsburgh, followed by an account of the analogous ethnographic work performed in Cairo. Finally, the two sets of field data are analyzed comparatively, drawing conclusions and posing new questions.

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PREFACE

The journey I embarked on in search of knowledge about the nature and meaning of Qur'anic recitation in others' lives profoundly changed how I view the Qur'an. It added complexity to my perspective in a beautiful way, providing me with new insights and facets from which to approach the fascinating text and tradition. For this experience, I am truly grateful. To each and every person who extended their support to me, thank you.

I owe my thanks first and foremost to my dedicated mentor, Dr. Andrew Weintraub, who truly opened my mind to the world of ethnomusicological research, helped me to sharpen my work and challenged me to think about my project in new, exciting ways. I will always remember our discussions fondly, for I learned more in his office than I have in any classroom. I am also thankful for the kindness of Dr. Shalini Ayyagari. Her encouragement and advice not only nurtured the growth of my research but also my outlook on life. I am grateful to Dr. Abdesalam Souidi, for his confidence in my work and for teaching me to see the meaning in every interaction. Additionally, I am indebted to Dr. Kristina Nelson for her deeply valuable contributions to this work, for her arduous travel to assist me in the writing of this thesis, and for her wisdom. In her I have found a kindred spirit, and for that I am honored.

This research could not have been performed without support from the University Honors College at the University of Pittsburgh, to which I am grateful for its resources, financial, social and academic. I would like to thank Dr. Adriana Helbig and Dr. Anna Nisnevich, for believing in me and encouraging me to pursue this research in its very beginnings. I sincerely appreciate my

early mentorship by Steven Moon, who first introduced me to humanities research and the study of the Qur'an as a cultural phenomenon. I am thankful to Dr. Andrew Lotz, Dr. Peter Koehler, and Dr. Judith Yanowitz for their endless support of my research endeavors.

To my interlocutors in Pittsburgh and Cairo, who so graciously opened their homes and their hearts to me throughout the course of my fieldwork, I am extremely thankful. Your stories, insights, and opinions have impacted me in ways that transcend words. In Egypt, I am first obliged to thank my relatives who so kindly hosted me, and to each and every cousin, aunt, and uncle, who makes Egypt home. I am grateful to Nabila Shalaby and Ahmed Elkady, for their dedication to helping me learn Arabic in years prior allowed me to conduct fieldwork and interviews in Egypt with confidence. I am especially indebted to Noha and Doaa, who worked tirelessly to assist me in my search for interlocutors and opportunities for participant observation, and have always provided invaluable wisdom, laughs, and friendship. It is essential that I thank Dr. Nadia Shalaby whose excellent scholarship has inspired me, and whose guidance has been instrumental throughout my development as a writer and scholar.

I must thank two of my dearest and closest friends, Yusuf and Ramy, who have made me smile and laugh during many stressful nights of facing challenges in research. It is but a happy coincidence that they are my brothers, for they have proven to first be the best friends I could have. I am forever grateful to Mohammad, who first suggested that I pursue a Bachelor of Philosophy with my project. He has since listened attentively to all of my ideas and has been one of my greatest supporters in this endeavor. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to my parents, who raised me to ask questions about the world around me and chase the answers relentlessly. I will always be inspired by the example of my mother, whose fiery passion for research I inherited, and by my father, who continuously contemplates the beauty of this world.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

“Recite in the name of your Lord who created.”

One thousand four hundred years ago, this verse was revealed to Muhammed, a simple man reflecting alone, high on a mountain in an Arabian desert cave. It was the first verse of more than six thousand that would finally make up the Qur’an – “the recitation” – which would be learned by heart and recited by generations of people worldwide.

Today, Qur’anic recitation is a central element of Islamic experience. It frames the ways in which more than 1 billion people establish and maintain spirituality and cultivate their relationships with God. In live and recorded formats, Qur’anic recitation brings alive the words of the Qur’an and is a key part of the Muslim soundscape across the globe. Its sound is unique, distinctly guided by rules of rhythm, timing and pronunciation called *tajweed*, but its melodies are composed in performance (Nelson, 1985).

Egypt plays a central role in the world of Qur’anic recitation. Various prominent reciters emerged from the country, and their recordings are now downloaded and heard over the internet daily, all over the Muslim world¹. Egypt is where the recording and broadcasting of Qur’anic recitation first began and has since flourished. Broadcast through the radio, over mosque and

¹ The collective of those who practice Islam across the globe, estimated 1.8 billion worldwide (Lipka 2017). “Adherence to Islam is a global phenomenon: Muslims predominate in some 30 to 40 countries, from the Atlantic eastward to the Pacific and along a belt that stretches across northern Africa into Central Asia and south to the northern regions of the Indian subcontinent. Arabs account for fewer than one-fifth of all Muslims, more than half of whom live east of Karachi, Pak. Despite the absence of large-scale Islamic political entities, the Islamic faith continues to expand, by some estimates faster than any other major religion.” (Waldman 2017)

shopping mall loudspeakers, on the TV, in the car, and on the internet, the Qur'an's sound permeates the soundscape². "The Qur'an is central to Islam, and its immanence in Islamic society is essentially oral. The pervasive sound of recitation becomes basic to Muslims' sense of their culture and religion even before they can articulate that sense, and by listening to Qur'anic recitation they participate in an experience with meaning far beyond the immediate sound or occasion (Nelson 1985, 188)."

As a person of Egyptian descent who trained musically in America, I am interested in the ways Qur'anic recitation affects the lives and attitudes of those who live through its soundscape. Particularly, I have sought to explore how different Egyptian reciters affectively impact the listeners and their religious experience.

During the spring of 2016, I familiarized myself with the relatively small ethnomusicological literature on Qur'anic recitation through the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences Fellowship with the University Honors College. Through this experience, I gained a broad understanding of Qur'anic recitation's development and pedagogy through history. Upon learning the enormous role 20th century Egyptian reciters play in modern recitation's evolution, I began researching their sounds and styles, using sound visualizing technology and literary research. Throughout the summer of 2016, under the mentorship of Dr. Andrew Weintraub of the Music Department, I independently studied the biographies and recitation styles of Mohamed Siddiq Al-Minshawi (1920-1969) and Abdul-Basit Abdul-Sammad (1927-1988), two of the most well-known and prominent Egyptian reciters of the 20th and 21st centuries. And in the fall of 2016, I began an ethnographic field study of Pittsburgh Egyptian Muslims and their emotions, attitudes, and opinions in regards to Qur'anic recitation and the styles of these reciters,

² The totality of all sounds present in one's immediate environment makes up the soundscape (Hirschkind 2006).

particularly. The study has evolved from one focused on sonic differences and responses to the reciters themselves, to a study of many aspects that revolve around the Egyptian diaspora, identity formation, piety, and the immigrant experience, all in relation to practices of listening, reciting, or otherwise engaging with Qur'anic oral tradition.

Scholars have traditionally distinguished Qur'anic recitation as separate from both secular and religious music. Kristina Nelson, the author of a groundbreaking book entitled "The Art of Reciting the Qur'an," explains that the Qur'an is considered to be the direct word of God, and thus, it is regarded as divine and timeless rather than human and transient (Nelson 1985). The vocal performance of Qur'an elicits human, emotional response, varying by aspects of quality of the recitation, such as expression, tone, and melody. Differences in melody and performance aesthetics have been noted between reciters of the same era and nationality as well. The recited Qur'an sounds different on every occasion. This is due to the improvisational nature of Qur'anic recitation, which requires precise pronunciation of the words but individually inspired melody.

The text of the Qur'an has been extensively studied by many scholars from various countries for centuries. But part of what makes the Qur'an fascinating is that its breadth and depth go far beyond its text alone. It was first and foremost transmitted as oral tradition, in a culture of Arabs who treasured spoken word and poetry. The words' meanings, the verses' rhythms, and the mesmerizing sound of its recitation aloud all contributed to its rapid spread across the globe. As a part of human history that has shaped societies, cultures, and individual lives, the Qur'an – although considered divine – must be studied from the perspective of human interaction with it: recitation. Research on human response to the Qur'an as sound and tradition

is scant, and individuals' attitudes towards interaction with the tradition of Qur'anic recitation reveal a more thorough understanding of the Qur'an and its influence on human experience.

Throughout the course of my research, I have used my knowledge developed from previous research on the history, musical styles, and biographies of these two reciters to guide an ethnographic study involving Muslim Egyptians in the cities of Pittsburgh and Cairo in 2017. During the course of the study, I documented and analyzed responses to recorded recitations by prominent reciters, all of whom have distinct styles and hold prominence in the modern Egyptian soundscape. Mohamed Al-Minshawi, Abdul-Basit Abdul-Sammad and Mishary Rashid Al-Afasy, are the reciters whose *murattal* recordings of the first chapter of the Qur'an ("Al-Fatiha" – The opening) I played for each interlocutor. I chose this chapter due to its widespread familiarity amongst Muslims, since it is the chapter of the Qur'an essential to the five daily prayers. There are many prominent reciters from Egypt and outside of Egypt whom I could have included in the interview, however I chose the three I did due to my experience commonly hearing them as a member of the Egyptian Muslim community in Pittsburgh, and my desire to play recitations that would be familiar to both sets of interlocutors in Pittsburgh and Cairo. Consistent with how they are popularly referred, I refer to them as Al-Minshawi, Abdul-Basit, and Mishary Rashid for the rest of the thesis. Both Abdul-Basit and Al-Minshawi were Egyptian reciters who rose to prominence, among others, during the 20th century in Egypt. They, among others, and their recitation characteristics were studied by Kristina Nelson (Nelson 1985). On the other hand, Mishary Rashid is a Kuwaiti reciter who is still alive today, and whose recitations are commonly heard on cell-phone applications today. Mishary Rashid also has a notably more melodic and melismatic *murattal* style, using with jumps of large intervals and use of a wide vocal range. After I observed each interlocutor as they listened to recordings of *Surah al-Fatiha*,

the short opening chapter of the Qur'an, I interviewed each interlocutor about their experience listening to the recordings. During individual meetings with participants of the study, responses to recorded recitations by prominent reciters Al-Minshawi, Abdul-Basit and Mishary Rashid were documented, then studied. Each interlocutor was then interviewed about their experiences and opinions on Qur'anic recitation as a practice, art, skill, and other relevant topics. Guided conversations with participants were recorded and later analyzed for common trends and themes. Similarities and differences between participants of the same and different generations, gender, and locations of upbringing were especially analyzed. Interestingly, the conversations that were spurred during these interviews consistently ventured into questions of identity, religious practice, and the roles of Qur'anic recitation and music in individuals' lives.

The Muslim Egyptian diaspora as it exists in the United States today has not been studied extensively, if at all. The study of this diasporic community through the lens of Qur'anic recitation is useful and warranted. The uses and purposes of the term "diaspora" are not well-defined and encompass a large range of ideas about culture, movement, community, and consciousness (Slobin 2012). Additionally, anthropologists may assume that "What ethnomusicologists deal with in the societies they study is [...] either the diversionary or the arcane. By definition they cannot be dealing with the kinds of events and processes that make up the predominantly verbal and visual 'real life' of which social reality is assumed to consist (Stokes 1994, 1)." This statement by ethnomusicologist Martin Stokes is bitter, but it clearly makes the point that while it is not ethnomusicologists' focus, concepts such as diaspora are relevant to ethnomusicological study because society and art do not occur in a vacuum. Rather, art, and here – the art of Qur'anic recitation is one of many Islamic practices that make up Egyptian Muslim society. And because this study focuses on the diasporic nature of the ever-

expanding Egyptian society across the globe, it is only logical to study diaspora and the musical traditions associated with Egyptian Muslim life. As ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin wrote in the opening remarks of his article “Music in Diaspora,” “[m]usic offers a richness of methodological possibilities and points of view, opening new windows on diasporic neighborhoods” (Slobin 2012, 98).

Slobin mentions Su Zheng’s work, “Claiming Diaspora (2010),” about how Chinese Americans define their “diasporic sensibilities” through “musical sound and words,” and that there exists a triangular dynamic in the analysis of music’s role in diasporic sensibility formation (Ibid.). This triangulated dynamic is relevant to my study. It exists between the participant observer (in my case, myself, an Egyptian American raised in Pittsburgh, studying other Egyptian Americans in Pittsburgh), the other diasporic insiders (my interlocutors, in this case), and the outside power structure (the overarching power structure generated by the mainstream American culture, Muslim American culture, and Egyptian Muslim culture).

In this study, participation in Qur’anic recitation is studied to elucidate how Egyptians in Pittsburgh perceive themselves as part of a larger structure of movement across borders and cultural lines. As Stokes states, “Music is socially meaningful not entirely but largely because it provides means by which people recognise identities and places, and the boundaries which separate them” (Stokes 1994, 5) It is for this reason that I use Qur’anic recitation as a lens through which to study diaspora, identity, and culture of Egyptians in Cairo and Pittsburgh.

While I began my research with the expectation of paying more attention to sonic and stylistic differences between reciters, I found that this would not be the most valuable addition I could contribute to the body of literature. Kristina Nelson has extensively studied and analyzed the rules of *tajwid* and the musical technicalities and stylistic characteristics of Qur’anic

recitation, in addition to the human aspect of Qur'anic recitation as an oral tradition (Nelson 1985). Her work emphasizes the network of individuals who created the Qur'anic recitation sphere in 20th century Egypt. Michael Frishkopf extended Nelson's work, writing "[i]n the postscript to the new edition of her book, *The Art of Reciting the Qur'an* (2001), Nelson comments on the rise of a Saudi style since the first edition appeared in 1985. This is precisely the period I am attempting, in part, to document here" (Frishkopf 2009). Frishkopf's work discusses how the styles of Qur'anic recitation in Egypt have changed throughout modern history as a reflection of political, commercial, and social influences. His work extensively illustrates how this music has changed over time, and what influenced this change. But my research has a new, different focus: the people who listen to commercial Qur'anic recitation recordings, and are inspired to practice Qur'anic recitation at home and in their communities. Much can be learned from ethnographic study of how everyday individuals interact and engage with this religious practice in the privacy of their own homes, and the attitudes they hold that are associated with the practice.

Additionally, the transnational nature of this project is unique and new. Anne Rasmussen studied Qur'anic recitation in Indonesia, and refers to differences and influences of Egyptian recitation on Indonesian recitation (Rasmussen 2010). However, Rasmussen's focus is not on the direct relationships between one community and its diasporic community. I focus on the personal convictions and attitudes individuals hold about their homeland, Egypt, and their religion, through the lens of Qur'anic recitation.

Presently, many questions are being asked about the nature of American Muslims' attitudes, religiosity, and the connections between their Islamic practice and their daily lives. This study aims to shed some light on a demographic that is rarely understood in its richness and

complexity. The work I conducted in Pittsburgh laid the groundwork for a similar study I performed the following summer on Egyptians in Cairo, Egypt. This comparative study of domestic Egyptian Muslims and American Egyptian Muslims and their relationships with the recited Qur'an seeks to reveal similarities and differences between two communities which share elements of tradition and culture, but for whom many questions remain about how and why they live as they do, with Qur'anic recitation in their midst.

1.1 METHODOLOGY

The framework for this study is that of the field of ethnomusicology, the study of music or sound in cultural context, and in particular, the study of those who engage with musical or sonic art forms. Discussions and literature in ethnomusicology often engage with anthropological, cultural, sociopolitical, and historical influences on engaging with music. And focus is granted to the ethnographic narrative and individual accounts of personal experiences. Ethnomusicological studies are often characterized by data collection using two primary methods: interviews and participant observation. The data collected through these methods is utilized to construct a dynamic, accurate written representation of the culture of those studied, specifically in regards to the role of music or sound in the culture and in their lives.

I chose to pursue a comparative study, including both Pittsburgh and Cairo as the two sites of fieldwork rather than one field site alone. This choice was primarily made to inform the data collected in Pittsburgh, because as the diasporic community of Egyptian Muslims in Pittsburgh is relatively new, an analysis of the community's cultural practices and habits may seem lacking without reference to the same practices in the community's country of origin.

After studying the history of Qur'anic recitation and its presence in Egypt's popular culture³, I began inviting Egyptian Muslims in Pittsburgh to participate in a field study on the subject. I involved both Egyptian immigrants to the United States and first generation Egyptian Americans⁴ in hopes of unearthing similarities and differences between them. I was most interested in the role Qur'anic recitation played in their childhoods and adult lives, as well as their attitudes towards Qur'anic recitation as a tradition, as a text, and as a sonic experience. Those I reached out to gladly agreed, and I began to conduct interviews with each one individually. When in Cairo, I conducted analogous interviews with interlocutors I was introduced to through word of mouth. Early in the interview, I observed each interlocutor as they listened to different recordings of a *surah* (chapter) of the Qur'an, recited by three different reciters. Then, I interviewed each interlocutor about their listening experience and their opinions on Qur'anic recitation in relation to music as an art, skill, and practice (see Appendix). The responses I heard throughout these interviews make up Chapters II-IV, and aim to elucidate questions about Islamic experience across the Muslim Egyptian-American diaspora. However, I did not arrive at my methodology nor my research attitudes right away.

In summer 2015, upon returning to Pittsburgh from studying Arabic abroad in Alexandria, Egypt, I found myself preoccupied with many questions. I had just returned from spending Ramadan, an Islamic holy month of worship and fasting, in a cosmopolitan Muslim city on the Egyptian coast of the Mediterranean Sea. The nights and days were peppered with the sounds of the *adhan* (call to prayer), the lilting voices of *qaris* (Qur'an reciters), and the beating of the *mesaharati*'s drum at dawn waking people up to eat before the fast, upon a constant sonic backdrop of cars honking, street vendors calling out, and the crashes of the ocean waves.

³ A set of norms practiced by a population based on the ideas, attitudes, and perspectives of the majority.

⁴ Children of Egyptian immigrants who were raised in the United States. In this study – Pittsburgh.

What was the motivation for Egyptians to play recordings of Qur'anic recitation – melodic recitation of the Islamic holy book – throughout the day? Was it cultural, or was it religious, and what level of agency did Egyptians have in doing such practices? What was the musical framework for the melodies people recited? They seemed to be improvised, but what cultural musical precedent were they based on? As a musician, and a Muslim, I could not stop thinking about these questions.

My parents, both scientists, raised me to value the scientific method of inquiry. According to the method, to pursue the answer to a question, one must make an observation, form a hypothesis, develop an appropriate experiment, then extrapolate conclusions from the results. Naturally, I figured these musical questions needed to be answered through such research.

But what I found in my pursuit of these research questions was vastly different from any research I had done before in the sciences.

Approximately one year after my return from study abroad in Egypt, I had begun to research Qur'anic recitation, its history, and its musicality through a review of the scholarly literature on the subject. I thoroughly enjoyed it, and my background knowledge increased tremendously. Contrary to what I expected, researching the topic only spurred further questions!

So, I began to plan a cross-cultural field study on the ways in which Qur'anic recitation affects the lives, opinions, and attitudes of Egyptian Muslims in Pittsburgh and Cairo, Egypt. I planned to interview interlocutors across the Egyptian diaspora to answer very particular questions I had about attitudes towards religion and musical inclinations.

Sitting on a concrete bench on my university campus in summer 2016, I spoke with my new faculty mentor, Andrew Weintraub, giddy with excitement to begin forming a set of

questions for interviews. Eager to create concrete methods of assessment, I even proposed that I conduct a survey to assess how interlocutors felt when listening to the Qur'an, marking their mood on a scale from 1 to 10. I was very concerned about how every smaller question would contribute to the main question, and I worried that I might include irrelevant discussions in the interview or influence my interlocutors' responses. I was not sure what exactly my research question was, and I felt I needed to focus it, in addition to standardizing the interviews and finding an objective way to analyze the data.

With a smile, my professor told me: "Favor the people's point of view. What *they* think is important is paramount to what *you* think is important."

I was shocked.

My research was about what my interlocutors thought was important to talk about? I thought *I* was the one choosing the topic! What if what they wanted to talk about something completely irrelevant?

But when I sat down across from my very first research participant, I realized my professor was right.

This study was no longer about what questions I thought needed to be answered. It was, in fact, about what answers the people wanted to give me, and what stories they needed to tell.

The role of a researcher can be a noble one. He or she is trusted to tell the stories of those he or she questions, surveys and observes. To tell the story that I, the researcher, wanted to tell, when in fact other issues may be more relevant or pressing to the people I study, would be a disservice to the people I had chosen to represent in my research.

On the day of my first interview, I nervously walked up Bigelow Boulevard in the chilly October air to meet my interlocutor, Ibrahim, a friend who had kindly agreed to help me in my

study by sitting down for an interview. We met in the lower level of the local mosque, where we found a table in the library, surrounded by books. I could not have been more excited, but I tried hard to keep composed and calm. I turned on my recording device, pulled out my pen and notebook, and took a breath, smiling.

Then, we began the interview. As planned, I played three recordings of Qur'anic recitation by different reciters, asking Ibrahim to let me know what he thought. And soon after he began to explain how he felt about each recording, a new conversation arose. He began to tell me about his experiences listening to the Qur'an as a child with his mother in the car. Among other stories, he even told me how he and his siblings would line up outside their parents' bedroom door to take turns showing their parents what they had memorized of the Qur'an. It was at this point, as I was laughing and smiling at the stories Ibrahim told, that I realized that I was not going to receive a clear-cut answer for any of my questions. But I did not mind. Because the insights I learned about Ibrahim, his attitudes, and his life from listening to what *he* wanted to say painted a much more three-dimensional picture than what I would have learned from a linear, question-and-answer format. I found every interview that followed to be the same in that regard.

The truth is, the human experience cannot be learned about through the scientific method. Humanity cannot be tested under controlled conditions, and variables' effects cannot be assessed over several trials. A P-value cannot be calculated from the type of data that I was learning to collect, if "collect" is even the appropriate word to use.

By the time the following summer 2017 arrived and I flew to Egypt again – this time as a researcher, not a study abroad student – I had conducted thirteen interviews in Pittsburgh. I had developed my skills in weaving a discussion, prodding my interlocutors to speak to me comfortably about their hopes, dreams, concerns and thoughts about their Egyptian and

American identities, about how they listened to the Qur'an, and about how they raised their children.

It had been two years since I last lived in Egypt. Again, it was Ramadan. Two years later, and the sounds of the *adhan* and the voices of *qaris* reciting the Qur'an still mingled with the noisy sounds of traffic and the cacophony of other sounds that come with city life. Not much had changed, in many respects. In fact, I still found myself asking questions about the sounds around me and their significance. But this time, although I was in Egypt for the sole purpose of making such inquiries and investigating their contexts and backgrounds, I allowed myself to listen to what the people's stories were, rather than think of routes by which to answer specific questions alone.

There are many ways to effectively perform research. I am currently a student researcher at a laboratory that works with *C. elegans*, a type of microscopic worm. I certainly do not offer them coffee and ask them to tell me about their lives. The experiments I conduct on the worms are driven by the scientific method, and I love it. It is effective and efficient and gives concrete answers on what "is" and what "is not" true or significant.

But it is not the only way to conduct research. Research, especially about people, can be a conversation, where the research participant helps to shape the narrative – and perhaps provides it altogether. I have realized that it is the role of the researcher to relay that narrative. That role is a noble one, and an important responsibility. It is one that should be upheld with utmost integrity and loyalty to the intention of the interlocutor, because what "is" and what "is not" true or significant sometimes can't be answered in a linear fashion.

Two years have passed since I first asked, “What is the nature and meaning of Qur’anic recitation to Egyptian Muslims in Pittsburgh and Egypt?” Two years of intense reading, study, interviewing and writing have come to a close. Do I have the answer?

Not quite.

But I do have narratives, and I do have stories. When people read my scholarly work, they read quotes from my interlocutors, descriptions of the cultural context, my analysis of the data, and my conclusions. But they are not linear, and they will not solve a cleanly formed research puzzle. Some may argue that is not a strong method by which to write a research paper, or that without a statistically significant sample size, hypothesis, test, and clean-cut answers, this is not research at all. I beg to differ. It is within these stories that I was humbled to have been told, that the answers to the big questions about human nature and culture lie. It is simply up to us to listen to them.

I sought out, via word of mouth, individuals to participate in my study. In Pittsburgh, where I am a native, this was simple. I had grown up around Egyptian Americans at the mosque and at social gatherings. Many of those who I called to inform about my study were excited to hear that I was beginning work on such a project. My final number of interviews conducted in Pittsburgh was thirteen, including five first-generation people mainly concentrated in their early twenties and eight immigrants of various ages and genders. In Egypt, I interviewed fourteen individuals of various genders and ages. All of the interlocutors in both Pittsburgh and Cairo were of the upper middle class. Unlike in the sciences, it was not necessary to match both sets of interlocutors by gender nor age. Rather than searching for statistical trends, this study aimed to make qualitative observations about the lives of those I studied.

This study was deemed “Exempt from Review” by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Pittsburgh due to its low-risk nature. My interviews were conducted using a set of questions which I used as a framework for the discussion (See Appendix). All interviews were recorded using a sound recorder, then later partially or fully transcribed, with emphasis on relevant sections of each interview. Field notes were taken during the study, and analysis of the data began concurrently with data collection.

In this thesis, I often refer to the dimension of Qur’anic recitation that involves the rendition of words melodically and rhythmically as a form of *music*. I would like to make clear that I use this term reluctantly and only because the English language does not contain another sufficient word to serve this function. In addition to the organization of sound by time, *music* in this thesis refers to a dimension of human experience with many different potential uses and functions. “*Music* is not a unitary art form, but rather that this term refers to fundamentally distinct types of activities that fulfill different needs and ways of being human” (Turino 2008, 1). By this definition, I will follow that Qur’anic recitation is music, because it “fulfills different needs and ways of being human” particularly through worship and devotion in religion. As you will read in Chapter 2, the social role of Qur’anic recitation in some interlocutors’ lives becomes of primary focus, due to interlocutors’ engagement with its musical and participatory elements. “Musical participation and experience are valuable for the processes of personal and social integration that make us whole” (Ibid.).

1.2 PIETY

To preface my discussion of the role of Qur'anic recitation in the lives of Egyptian Muslims, it is important to contextualize the practice of Qur'anic recitation by recognizing the myriad of other ways that Muslims practice their religion or be "pious." Additionally, the overarching concept of piety or religious practice is necessary for understanding what kind of action Qur'anic recitation is, and what other actions may accompany it in one's life.

What is piety? What makes an Egyptian pious? How does piety relate to music, sound, and, in particular, Qur'anic recitation? These are a few of the questions I sought to explore in the modern Egyptian and American contexts, through fieldwork on attitudes and practices surrounding the recitation of the Qur'an in Cairo, Egypt and amongst the Egyptian-American population in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

It is important to emphasize the temporal nature of such questions, for the meaning of "piety" is subjective and dependent on the historical, social, and political contexts in which one lives. Additionally, how sonic features of one's environment relate to piety must be described and measured carefully and consistently.

In fact, the word "piety" and its associated adjective, "pious," may pose challenges to my research. While "pious" may be used as a succinct and apt term to describe the level of one's participation in religious traditions and customs, it fails – when used by an outsider – to describe one's intentions and sincerity in doing so. Secondly, to classify research interlocutors as "pious" or not, seems to cast judgment on their value as a good person. This, of course, raises issues because I do not – personally nor academically – believe that religious involvement (the measure of piety) and goodness are necessarily linked.

I have considered using the word “devotion,” which seems less associated with intrinsic goodness. One can be “devoted” to a variety of things, and while it does hold a positive connotation, it does not imply that one who is devoted to a tradition is any better than one who is not. However, because the available literature related to my field of study uses the word “piety,” I have decided to use the word in order to maintain consistency with the body of literature. However, it is necessary to qualify the term for my particular purposes. Piety, here, refers to one’s practice of religion without implying any level of sincerity or intention.

How does sound – and in particular, Qur’anic recitation – affect someone’s ability or motivation to become more or less pious? What motivations do people have to perform pious acts involving the Qur’an? How do these motivations manifest themselves in terms of Qur’anic recitation and day to day life? Is there a separation between how individuals feel about their own piety versus the piety of their people? This applies both to Egyptians in Egypt and those in Pittsburgh.

While many previous works by scholars of piety and the Egyptian religious landscape have focused on the increased piety of Egyptians during the Islamic Revival of the 1980s through the early 2000s (Hirschkind 2006, Mahmood 2005, Nieuwkerk 2013), little ethnographic work has been performed concerning the same topic in recent years. There is a scarcity of literature on piety in post-revolution Egypt, and an absence of fieldwork on Egyptians and Egyptian-Americans’ attitudes towards listening to and reciting the Qur’an. This work aims to fill this void, and to comment on the state of the piety movement in Egypt at the present through the lens of Qur’anic recitation.

Nieuwkerk wrote about transformations of individuals from previously non-pious lifestyles to drastically different practices and worldviews during the 1980s and 1990s

(Nieuwkerk 2013). My work is on those who have not dramatically changed their lifestyles from the norm anytime recently. These individuals are either young (born in the 1980s or 1990s, during the Islamic Revival) or even if they experienced a transformation to increased piety, it was long enough ago to have made a certain level of piety an everyday norm such that they would describe it as part of life, rather than describe to me their transformation.

The prevalence of veiling during and after the Islamic Revival was a visual change in the Egyptian society. I hesitate to emphasize veiling as an aspect of piety because individuals can veil for a variety of reasons, including fashion, peer pressure, and non-religious cultural reasons. The Islamic veil is only a fraction of a code of etiquette – *hijab* – that requires Muslim men and women to maintain an appropriate, God-commanded standard of conduct in public. It is part of a larger Islamic standard of behavior that places the responsibility of appropriate public conduct on both sexes. I regret that veiling has become such a large topic of discussion, but the fact remains that because it is a visible, public act of worship – unlike praying in one’s home or abstaining from forbidden food – it has served as a gauge for Egyptian society’s fluctuation in commitment to “piety,” and as such is a useful and necessary object of analysis in the broader discussion of the Egyptian socioreligious landscape. Therefore, I include it in the following discussions on data collected about Qur’anic recitation and other Islamic practices of piety among those I spoke with.

1.3 THE NATURE OF QUR’ANIC RECITATION

As I discussed initially, the sound of Qur’anic recitation is unique. It is regulated by the rules of *tajweed*, which dictate the rhythm, timing, and pronunciation of the Qur’an when recited

(Nelson, 1985). However, its melodies are composed in performance by the reciter, who may be a professional or average daily practitioner (Ibid.). Due to the Qur'an's distinct identity as a divine text, its recitation is viewed in Islamic cultures as an art separate from the seemingly overlapping traditions of poetry and music (Nelson 1985, 190). "Thus, it must be recognized by those outside the culture that it is the uniqueness of the Qur'an that demands a special classification for its recitation, [...] for which there may be no parallel category in non-Muslim societies" (Nelson 1985, 190).

Recitation is categorized as either *murattal* or *mujawwad*. The *murattal* style of recitation, which I used as listening samples in my research, primarily aims to make clear the words of the Qur'an. Melody is normally kept simple, and the verses are read through without repeats or dramatic pauses (Nelson 1985). The *mujawwad* style, on the other hand, aims to create an entrancing, beautiful experience (Ibid.). It is characterized by melodic artistry which often includes changes in melodic contours, range, and modes corresponding with the meanings of the passages (Ibid.). In addition, pauses and repeats of phrases are possible, and add to the creativity of the style (Ibid.). When presenting the three reciters' recordings to my interlocutors, I presented only the *murattal* style due to its accessibility – it is both easier to understand and recite for an everyday Muslim – and so that the only variable impacting the interlocutor's response would be the reciter's personal style, not whether the recording was in *murattal* or *mujawwad* style.

2.0 PITTSBURGH

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is a medium-sized, increasingly cosmopolitan city whose recorded history first shows presence of Muslims in the 1920s (Martin 2018). Pittsburgh received African American Muslims who traveled up the Monongahela River as part of the Great Migration, and whose religious practices as a community were shaped over the years by the influence of foreign evangelists, civil rights movements, and changes in the community's membership over time (age, ethnicity, etc.) (Ibid.). Over the decades, a stream of Muslim immigrants from many countries have settled in Pittsburgh in addition to the original African American communities (Ibid.).

Most Egyptian families I have met in Pittsburgh at present arrived in pursuit of professional or educational opportunity, and are of upper-middle-class social status, primarily working in healthcare. This is consistent with the data on Egyptian immigrants to the United States as a whole, most of whom are well-educated and economically successful (RAD 2015). Following the population boom of the 1980s and 1990s, Egyptians under age 25 made up 50% of the Egyptian population, leading to a large number of educated youth unable to find work in Egypt (Ibid.). “Over the past four decades, demographic pressures in Egypt and lack of opportunities for a well-educated populace have been powerful emigration push factors” (Ibid.). Beginning in the mid-1970s, following the lifting of Egyptian legal barriers to emigration, Egyptians began to leave the country (Ibid.). In 2012, the United States was the fifth most common country Egyptians emigrated to (Ibid.), and the greatest concentrations of Egyptians in

the United States are in New York City and Los Angeles, residence to 40,000 and 20,000 Egypt-born individuals respectively (Ibid.).

Upon beginning to research my target demographic for this study, I first searched for previous literature on the history of Egyptian immigrants in Pittsburgh. My search was not successful, and the little I found was not specific to this city. As such, this study is a pioneering work on Egyptian immigrants to Pittsburgh and their lives. According to my review, this is the first ethnography of this population and one of the first ethnographies of Egyptian American communities like it elsewhere in the United States.

However, Muslims in the city of Pittsburgh have a rich history. I interviewed local historian and community organizer Sarah Jameela Martin in February 2018, and was fascinated by her personal experience. “Yes, we have had Islamic [grade] schools in Pittsburgh!” she said. Sarah Jameela arrived in Pittsburgh in the 1960s with her husband, John, after graduating from with her bachelor’s degree from a small liberal arts college in Philadelphia. She had converted to Islam upon hearing its tenets in a World Religions class, but “John and I weren’t... good practicing Muslims. I don’t even know if I had said my *shahadah*⁵! Well, maybe, with friends over a beer or something... You know, that’s how it was back then!” Shortly after she arrived in Pittsburgh, she and John found themselves driving in The Hill District, a historically African American neighborhood, on Wiley Avenue, when Sarah Jameela spotted the *shahadah* written on a sign outside a building. “Let me out here!” she told John. “My Arabic wasn’t good back then, and it still isn’t now, but I recognized the words on that sign,” Sarah Jameela told me. She ran inside and found an elderly African American woman peeling potatoes in the kitchen, who greeted her with the customary Islamic greeting of peace, “Asalamualaikum.” Sarah Jameela

⁵ The *shahadah* is the Islamic declaration of faith, said in public upon one’s conversion to Islam and repeated daily in prayer.

replied, “Hi, I’m a Muslim!” The woman suggested that she memorize seven lines, and come back the next Sunday. “So I memorized those seven lines,” Sarah Jameela said to me. “And those seven lines were *The Fatiha*,” the first chapter of the Qur’an. The next Sunday, the woman “was so shocked to see I had come back!” said Sarah Jameela. But the mosque, which was primarily made up of African Americans older than Sarah Jameela (who was then in her twenties), encouraged her to teach the children during Sunday School. “So I would be studying the stories of the prophets to teach the kids on Sunday! Poor kids, they didn’t know I was learning for the first time with them!” laughed Sarah Jameela. Sarah Jameela developed a close relationship with the first elderly woman she met, who was affectionately called “Sister Fudhal.” During our interview, Sarah Jameela began to cry, remembering the members of the Pittsburgh mosque that welcomed her as a new young Muslim.

This story, which occurred between two African American women in The Hill District in 1960s Pittsburgh, highlights the role that the memorization of the Qur’an plays in the creation of relationships and establishment of religious confidence in Muslims. The tradition of Qur’anic recitation in Pittsburgh extends early into the twentieth century, at least, according to Sarah Jameela’s research.

In researching and interviewing individuals from the Pittsburgh Egyptian Muslim community, I heard a great deal of genuine sentiments, sincere opinions, and heartfelt remarks. These included statements about how they choose to live, the reasons why they decided to move away from their original homelands and how they felt about it later. I feel I hold a responsibility to tell this community’s stories accurately and sensitively. As a researcher, my work is to analyze the data that I collect, to synthesize the parts of many stories told to reveal patterns and make sense of a phenomenon. However, I also believe in the power of a raw story told by the one who

owns it. Thus, I have attempted to provide complete and accurate accounts of my experiences listening to all of these generous individuals by including long sections of quotes accompanied by descriptions of interlocutors' expressions, the setting we were in, and the contexts of each quote. Additionally, I only had the privilege of interviewing thirteen individuals from the Egyptian American community in Pittsburgh for this study, due to limitations of time. But it is important to note that there are many individuals – many whom I know and many whom I do not know – who were not included in the study and may not be of the same lifestyles or opinions of those I researched in this study.

The soundscape in which the Qur'an is heard in Pittsburgh is also one of the modern age – additionally, it is much less obvious to anyone who does not seek it out. The sound of the Qur'an is privatized, technologically current, and takes on many forms. Islamic calls to prayer are not heard on loudspeakers, or broadcast in the streets, nor is this a concern or priority for Muslims I spoke with in Pittsburgh. Qur'anic recitation can be heard through earbuds as students in Pittsburgh catch a bus, streamed with accompanying video on YouTube, and alongside English translations on smartphone applications like *iQur'an*, *Qur'an Majeed*, and *Qur'an Explorer*. There have been many ways in which the mode of interaction with the Qur'an has evolved. For first-generation American Egyptian Muslims, it's clear that – while the text is the same – theirs is not their parents' Qur'an.

2.1 THEMES OF RESEARCH IN PITTSBURGH

In this chapter, I will focus on the following themes I found in analyzing data from interviews I conducted, which I hope will aid in elucidating the patterns of religious practice and meanings in the lives of the interlocutors I spoke with:

1. *Generational Meanings of the Qur'an*

This section encompasses the largest amount of information on how those I spoke to perceive the Qur'an as a sonic art form, its role in their lives, and how they interact with it. Particularly, here I compare these elements between the immigrant generation and the first generation. Themes that are discussed include "Textual versus Communal Significance," "Individual vs Group Experience," "Being Egyptian Enough/Authenticity," and "National Pride and the Qur'an."

2. *Nostalgia*

Here, I discuss theoretical frameworks used to illustrate different forms of nostalgia. This is done to create clarity surrounding the nostalgic feelings of Egyptian Americans I spoke to.

3. *Qur'an and Music*

Perhaps the most controversial of topics, here I expound on how Egyptian Americans I spoke to relate to the Qur'an through its sound, how they feel about connecting Qur'an conceptually to music, their stylistic preferences for different reciters, and the differences between hearing, listening, and reciting the Qur'an.

2.2 GENERATIONAL MEANINGS OF THE QUR'AN

What happens when people move from place to place? What happens to their cultural traditions, their names, their habits, their desires, goals and identities? These are classic questions concerning the immigrant experience. And the assumption is often that such cultural artifacts of the homeland are lost – partially or fully – as a result of the move to a drastically new environment and in the context of survival. That in mind, a natural question of this research is: What happens to Muslim Egyptian religious practice – particularly, Qur'anic practice – in the event of immigration to the United States? The answer is not as simple as “it gets lost,” or “it disintegrates,” or “it diminishes.” It deserves nuance, because while the mainstream exposure of first generation Egyptian Americans to the Qur'an certainly is far less than the exposure their immigrant parents had to it in Egypt, their experiences with the Qur'an were not necessarily nor consistently lower in frequency or quality than their parents'.

In fact, many times, due to the intentional efforts made by their parents, first generation Egyptian Americans began to memorize or learn to read the Qur'an in the home, rather than at school like their immigrant parents. Including an element of culture in one's home creates a different environment, where the parent becomes the teacher, imparting values intentionally. In school in Egypt, when immigrants learned the Qur'an, they absorbed it passively as part of the school curriculum, without emphasis from their parents. By virtue of being native Arabic speakers, Egyptian immigrants naturally read the Qur'an with more ease and fluency than first generation individuals do. But the efforts and practice that first generationers I spoke with dedicated to improving their ability to understand and read the Qur'an properly – in some cases – were far more concerted than those by immigrants at the same age.

And while all those I spoke with developed an increased interest in Islam and the Qur'an as they grew older, first generationers more commonly began their Qur'anic improvement endeavors at a younger age. By choosing to take elective classes in Arabic in college, and by choosing to listen to the Qur'an through their earbuds on their phone, first generationers consistently make more intentional effort to listen to the Qur'an. However, the presence of the Qur'an in their lives is still relatively less than it was in the immigrants' lives. In this case, it is important not to assume anything in particular.

In this study, I found that Egyptian immigrants to the US, who had been raised in Egypt, recite the Qur'an to relax and connect with their faith. Their first-generation American Egyptian children do this as well, but also viewed Qur'anic recitation as a means of building solidarity with others like them. This role of the Qur'an in their lives was largely unique to first-generation American Egyptians I spoke with. Interviews I conducted with first-generation Egyptian Americans, especially in their early twenties, involved laughing and fond reminiscence of times spent learning to recite the Qur'an with their peers. Learning to recite the Qur'an, perfecting their recitation, and reciting with their friends gave first generation American Egyptians a sense of community and belonging, which their parents did not significantly identify with.

"The Qur'an doesn't mean the same thing to every generation," Amir, a 52-year-old immigrant physician from Mansoura, Egypt said. A look of wonderment washed over his face as he began to explain to me how the Prophet Muhammed didn't go to great lengths to "explain what the Qur'an meant," and that many passages of the Qur'an had begun to make sense in new ways in every era. But aside from its text, the sound of the Qur'an has remained fresh and relevant, and has brought forth new insights for each generation.

I noticed that immigrant interlocutors, who were of different ages, genders, and characters, placed a larger emphasis on the meaning of the Qur'an than their mostly younger, American-raised counterparts. When engaging in a variety of discussions, immigrant Egyptians often returned to discussing the importance of the Qur'an's meaning. Hiba, a woman who moved from Cairo to an urban neighborhood of Pittsburgh in 2006, hosted me in her living room on a Thursday afternoon, waiting for her son to return from school. "In [interacting with the] Qur'an, you pay attention to the words." She had spent her childhood in Saudi Arabia, learning Arabic literature and grammar from a young age. Even Amir, who had told me that the Qur'an plays a different role for people in every generation, was referring not to the Qur'an's role in the community, but rather to its textual meaning.

Conversely, first-generation American Egyptian interlocutors spent more time describing their experiences learning how to recite the Qur'an, and how it related to their role in the community. Learning to recite was more often recounted as a communal "struggle" than by immigrant interlocutors. "We struggled, but we struggled together – you know what I mean?" said Adel, a 21-year-old, referring to himself and his other first generation Egyptian American friends. He recounted that as children attending Sunday school at the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh in the early 2000s, they were learning to read and recite the Qur'an. "I wasn't really a fan," he said, laughing, recounting how his parents encouraged him and his siblings to learn to recite the Qur'an. "It was seen as more of a chore, to be honest." But soon after, he nodded his head in thought, expressing "I would definitely teach my kids to recite the Qur'an." He said he would send his own children to Sunday school as well.

If he had viewed learning Qur'anic recitation as a chore, why would he "definitely" teach his children to recite? In addition to positive attitudes towards children cultivating God-

consciousness and a familiarity with the Qur'an at an early age, Adel enjoyed bonding with other Muslim children, especially Egyptians, in a haven of sorts, while learning to recite the Qur'an. He and others like him want to give this experience to their own children, who presumably will also grow up in the US. And although, as a child, the Qur'an memorization assignments themselves felt tedious, in retrospect, he actually enjoyed "struggling" and commiserating with other children like him. The sense of solidarity cultivated in such experience is one that the first-generationers I spoke to desire for their own future children.

A young lady with whom I spoke, named Sarah, recounted her own Sunday School experiences, such as asking to use the bathroom, then trying to climb out the bathroom window with her friends to escape the strict Sunday school teacher. "I don't know whether we learned all that we needed to learn out of [Sunday school], but we had fun and we made friends."

Communal experiences such as these were integral to building Egyptian Americans' identities, due to a shared sense of not feeling "not-quite-Egyptian." This sentiment was shared between youth with whom I spoke. Some youth were disappointed that their Arabic, while they were thankful for their skills in it, was not good enough. "I'll never reach my mom's level," said Ibrahim, another first-generationer in his twenties. But, to this day, he speaks Arabic with his mother and listens to Qur'an on his phone. "So, do I think I'm still a subpar Arabic reader? [laughs] Yes. When I go to Egypt, I can get by. But when I see my mom read, or understand something political, it's just way out of my league. I feel like I [laughs] I will never reach my mom's level, and I will try, and as I get older I will try harder. But I think it stands that I have subpar Arabic skills." When first-generation Egyptian American Muslims gathered, a desire to empathize with each other's not-quite-Egyptian identities, promoted solidarity between them. "I think part of what I liked about Sunday School here was that there were tons of like-minded

people. We were all children of immigrants (laughs) who had sub-par Arabic reading skills (laughs). We were all, kind of like, learning and enjoying it together. The community element of it made it very encouraging to learn and I also enjoyed coming here, as a kid I was excited to come here” (Ibrahim, age 22).

Additionally, Ibrahim expressed this same sentiment between him and his siblings, as young children. “Me, Adel, and Sarah are each one year apart. It was funny because we would literally stand in front of my parents’ door, waiting to recite. I remember the *Fatiha*, you know. Of course, there was a lot of tension, you know, we didn’t want to frustrate our parents. We [siblings] were very supportive [of each other]; yeah it was definitely a team effort there, we had each other to rely on and struggle with.”

Ibrahim also went to Sunday school. There, he found “tons of like-minded kids” with “sub-par Arabic reading skills,” he added, chuckling and shaking his head. “I remember how much we used to mess around with each other,” he said with a smile. “[The Qur’an] was difficult for me to learn,” he said, agreeing with Adel and others I spoke to. Adel, who I mentioned earlier as having struggled in but enjoyed his time learning to recite, was not alone in these experiences. He said, when he and his friends got together, they found themselves performing their daily prayers together. In fact, they led each other in prayer and recited the Qur’an aloud. Those I spoke to all relayed seriously that years later, Qur’anic recitation held value in their lives and was a source of comfort. Their experience, as children, contributed to their shared sense of identity as Muslim-American youth, as well as their solidarity with others and continuing ability to connect with God.

When Leila first heard the recording of Al-Minshawi, a wide smile spread across her face. She recognized his recitation style from childhood family road trips. This personal

nostalgia⁶ for their own childhoods in America, unique from many non-Muslim and Muslim American children, were important in developing their sense of urgency regarding familiarity with the Qur'an, its recitation, and its language – Arabic. The recitation of the Qur'an also cultivated a sense of unity between them and their families.

While some immigrant interlocutors expressed that learning to recite the Qur'an as children growing up in Egypt was a challenge, it was often one they faced alone. “My mom hired a *sheikh* (individual of Islamic knowledge) to teach me [how to recite],” said Nadia, who emigrated at age 20 to Pittsburgh from Alexandria, Egypt in 1989. “But I never got it!” she exclaimed. “It wasn't 'till I came here to Pittsburgh and began to study on my own in my twenties that I really started to learn.” Nadia lived with her mother on a street in Alexandria with mosques at every corner – and one right behind her house. However, Qur'anic recitation was a struggle she faced without the support of other children nor an attitude of urgency, due to her mother's lack of concern for her success in the task. In contrast, the first-generationers were raised in a land with very few mosques, but chose to face the challenge with other children like them, encouraged by the resolve and energy of their peers and parents. Over time and experience, they created between them a collective identity.⁷

Rather than fostering personal relationships, as it did with first-generation Egyptian Americans, Qur'anic recitation created a sense of national pride for immigrants I spoke to. Nearly every immigrant interlocutor wistfully recalled days of their youth waking up to the voice of the Abdul-Basit on the radio. Even those who were raised in relatively nonreligious households fondly remembered the Qur'an's sound echoing through the halls of their homes.

⁶ Nostalgia for one's nuclear family history and the traditions of one's childhood, especially in terms of learning to recite the Qur'an and listening to the Quran in the car, which was a memory multiple first generation Egyptian Americans mentioned

⁷ An identity shared by several individuals in a group, founded on struggles and experiences in common.

“No matter whether you were Muslim or Christian, you would learn Arabic through the Qur’an at school,” said Nadia, speaking about the use of the Qur’an as academic literature, growing up in Alexandria in the 1970s. The Qur’an was a constant in Egyptians’ lives before immigrating to the US, and as such, built a sense of national pride.

Those raised in predominantly Muslim communities, whether in a village or in a densely-packed city, did not strongly correlate learning the tradition of Qur’anic recitation with creating personal relationships. Rather, they more strongly associated sounds of Egyptian reciters with Egypt and national pride and a sense of “home” than first-generationers. First-generation Egyptian Americans associated recitation in general with their religious identity and responsibilities, and rarely commented on the nationalities of Egyptian or non-Egyptian reciters.

However, the perception of a recitation’s *relatability* was a common topic of discussion only among first generation interlocutors, who looked to musical aspects of Qur’anic recitation as well as social connection as factors of appeal to it. “He just has more passion,” Ibrahim, told me of Mishary Rashid, whose recitation is more melodically expressive, melismatic, and tonally varied – in short, more “modern” sounding. Sarah, Leila, and others, all agreed in their independent interviews.

First-generationers I spoke to placed high importance on their connection to their religion and the Egyptian traditions of doing so, wanting to listen to and recite Qur’an often, and learn its meaning. But they said that it often does not come naturally nor easily. This is due to a lack of Arabic comprehension skills, which aids native Egyptians in quickly connecting to the Qur’an through its meaning. Also, first-generationers must actively seek exposure to Qur’anic recitation in an environment where it is not a common part of the soundscape. Thus, they cling to an aspect of recitation that they can relate to easily: musicality. When Adel heard the recording I played of

Mishary Rashid's recitation, he said "I like it a lot. It's like I'm listening to a song with good rhythm. It draws me to it like music." He later commented that "The more rhythmic [reciters] help me feel their emotion more than the ones who read just for the content – which I wouldn't be as interested in [listening to.]"

2.3 NOSTALGIA

This feeling of not quite belonging to the Egyptian collective identity, coupled with an "otherness" felt amongst the general American population, cultivated a nostalgia for Egypt. However, this nostalgia was often particular to the perceived religiosity of Egyptians and ease of daily Islamic practice in Egypt. Instead of being wistful for a purely cultural belonging, focused on ethnicity and tradition, first-generation Egyptian Americans I interviewed longed for a culture in which their *religion* would come naturally. But this sentiment did not come without criticism, and Leila, a 19 year old woman, said "I feel like the Qur'an[s recitation] is a lot less intentional [in Egypt], you know? People don't appreciate it." She had visited Egypt multiple times, and added, "Being a Muslim there is more cultural, and since it's easy, young people especially don't value it." Leila was not alone in her opinion, but the majority of first-generationers I spoke with held a nostalgia for ease of Islamic practice in the home country, and practiced that nostalgia by learning and reciting the Qur'an together. Sometimes, this nostalgia was only imagined; in other words, individuals who had never experienced life in Egypt also held nostalgia for the country.

Nostalgia has been discussed as a term that can hold more than one form. According to Seremetakis, American nostalgia implies trivializing romantic sentimentality, while Greek nostalgia is the desire or longing with the burning desire to journey (Seremetakis 1994).

Both definitions appear “romantic,” to me, but the essential difference between the two forms seems to be the urge to travel back. If this holds true, then the Americans I interviewed in Pittsburgh – Egyptian Americans who were raised in the city – were no exception. While interlocutors fondly recalled memories of visiting their loved ones in Egypt, or spoke with great respect and adoration for the morals, values, and culture of the home country, I did not hear any comments about a longing to return.

The same held true for their immigrant parents, who held a more vivid nostalgia for the country they once called home. Although they were happy to remember and recount tales of their lives in Egypt, the music, and the Qur’an that was heard there, they did not exude a sense of urgency for the return.

“You know what, I miss Egypt,” said Asma, a 44 year old homemaker who has lived in Pittsburgh since 2000. “I miss how my relatives used to gather together every week at my dad’s house. I miss how we used to check on each other all the time. But the Egypt I remember is not that same as it was now. I went back for the first time in 16 years and everything was different, *subhanAllah*⁸.” Asma clearly held a romantic sentimentality for Egypt, characteristic of American nostalgia, but because she was aware that the Egypt she held feelings for existed in her memory alone, she did not express a longing to return. “You know, every year we thought we might go back [to Egypt], but we stay. We are here for our kids – they grew up here, they don’t know anything else. The education is better here.” Asma explained this to me in a matter-of-fact tone. Her expression lacked the sort of burning sadness or longing to travel described as Greek Nostalgia by Seremetakis. Neither did it include an evocation of the sensory dimension of memory in exile and estrangement. Rather than a sense of exile and estrangement, Asma felt that she and her family left Egypt as a matter of choice and stayed for pragmatic reasons.

⁸ “Glory be to God” is a common Egyptian expression of wonderment.

“The senses, in modernity, are detached from each other, refunctioned and externalized as utilitarian instruments, and as media and objects of commodification”(Seremetakis 1994).

Several scholars have asserted the detachment of the senses from each other in the perceptions of the scholarly community and the general public. Classen views the five senses as culturally constructed (Classen 1993). She explains that sight separates the viewer from the viewed, providing a unique objectivity and thereby establishes itself as a scientific sense. Sound provides depth perception, while sight provides surface perception. The depth perception that sound facilitates gives insight into the interior understanding and dynamism of a subject or environment.

I would like to extend this argument to further distinguish between the significance of listening and the significance of orating. To listen is to pay attention to some sounds rather than others, and requires a certain level of concentration . But to orate, recite, or sing, transcends simply focusing on a particular sound in the environment, and requires the subject to produce sound from within themselves. This results in a stronger connection between one and the content of what they say, recite or sing, due to the sense of ownership and production.

Ibrahim, a 22 year old first-generation Egyptian American, told me in an interview that “If you’re driving somewhere you don’t physically have a Qur’an with you, you can experience it and listen to it without having it with you. So there’s some practical benefit to it.

By reciting it yourself, you can kind of experience that emotion to a degree to another level. If I’m silently reading versus ... If you’re reading the script to a play versus you acting it out... So when I read Qur’an... when I read it silently versus if I read it aloud and I can hear myself saying the words and I can actually think about what I’m saying, I think it’s more humbling and I feel like I’m getting more out of it. My relationship with God is there. It’s a

physical action that creates a greater sense of emotion or a better feeling. A lot of it is just feeling, you know? Getting closer to God.” Ibrahim both distinguished between listening and reciting the Qur’an, in addition to comparing reciting versus silently reading the Qur’an. This interplay of actions and the perceptions of such actions: listening, reciting, and reading, is indicative of a complex range of experiences that the Qur’an, as a practice amongst Egyptian Muslims, encompasses. Furthermore, hearing the Qur’an is different from listening to the Qur’an.

The interlocutors I interviewed in Pittsburgh often mixed descriptions of listening and reciting the Qur’an together. Leila mentioned that her dad taught them to vocally recite the Qur’an, then seamlessly elaborated that she and her siblings were reinforced this idea through listening to Qur’an recordings on road trips. For first-generation American Egyptian Muslims, it is clear that listening and reciting are intertwined auditory and vocal experiences associated with religious practice.

Battaglia presents nostalgia as a duality. It is both a mode of production as well as a mode of consumption (Battaglia 1995). She expands on this idea by introducing the consumption of nostalgia through listening to the radio, and its production via practice of. Finally, she asserts that through these modes, nostalgia is then embodied by the individual. Rather than merely a sentimental attitude, she argues that nostalgia is an embodied practice that is a “transformative action with a connective purpose” (Ibid.). Furthermore, nostalgia involves connections with a past object which contributes to future relationships.

In accordance with this theory, engagement with the Qur’an amongst Egyptians in Pittsburgh involves the consumption of nostalgia through listening to the Qur’an, and the production of it through recitation. However, I believe that the case in Pittsburgh is more

nuanced than this simple statement. The evidence I collected in my fieldwork indicates that indeed, engagement with the Qur'an amongst Egyptians in Pittsburgh involves the consumption of nostalgia through listening to the Qur'an across both generations: immigrants and first-generationers. But the data only suggests that recitation is used in this way in the present – not the past. In addition, both Leila and Ibrahim recalled with happiness, memories of their parents playing cassettes and CDs of Qur'an in the car. But they referred to recitation as something done – during their childhood – as a means of being obedient to their parents and also creating a sense of community with children in the same Qur'an class. And during adulthood, they used it as a means of individual spiritual growth. Therefore, Qur'anic recitation is not simply an expression of the consumption or production of nostalgia referring to the past. Instead, it is a dynamic and flowing experience that is engaged with nostalgia of the past equally with experiences and bonds in the present.

“Nostalgic practice supplements social life and qualitatively alters it” (Ibid.). This is seen in the example of Sarah going to Sunday school and commiserating with other students about their collective “struggle” in memorizing the Qur'an.

2.4 QUR'AN AS MUSIC

This desire to relate to the Qur'an through something familiar – music – also leads to an increased willingness to consciously and verbally associate the Qur'an with music, a taboo amongst many conservative Muslims. Those who associated Qur'an with music, too, emphasized a difference in the gravity of content between the two art forms, as well as a difference in the etiquette and respect with which one should regard them. But they were willing to find

similarities in their ability to evoke emotions, viewing the comparison between Qur'anic recitation and music as positive. “[As a child], I saw Qur'anic recitation as a chore, but now I do see it as music. There are a lot of options [styles] to listen to,” said Sarah. By juxtaposing the descriptions of Qur'anic recitation as “a chore” and as “music,” Sarah expressed that she regarded the association between music and Qur'anic recitation as positive. When I asked what music meant to her, she hesitated, deliberating, then answered “Well, music is a bunch of sounds that mesh together to make you feel the way you want.” What many first-generation Egyptian American Muslims look for in the quality of Qur'anic recitation mirrors what they look for in music. They seek primarily to relate to the *sound* of the recitation to find solace and connection with God, and encouragement to then seek out the meanings of the passages.

While Leila did not consider Qur'an to be music, she preferred Mishary Rashid's melodious recitation and admitted that she felt the Qur'an has musical qualities. “I think it gives it more emotional weight. When something sounds beautiful, you want to listen to it more,” said Leila, when asked why she felt the Qur'an is recited melodiously instead of simply read or recited aloud, like typical books or poetry. “It's not the same... if you want to listen to an audiobook it's not the same experience as listening to someone recite Qur'an. Someone monotone-ly reading the Qur'an [is] not gonna have the same effect as someone who has that [reciting] talent, you know?”

In Christopher Small's book *Musicking*, he insists that performance is the performer's modeling of ideal relationships. “When we perform, we bring into existence, for the duration of the performance, a set of relationships, between the sounds and between the participants, that model ideal relationships as we imagine them to be and allow us to learn about them by experiencing them” (Small 1998, 218). In the case of those I spoke with perceiving a Qur'anic

recitation performance as done “with emotion,” a set of relationships is created that models an ideal relationship that the interlocutors hold about their relationship with the Qur’an – and, by extension, God. They aspire to have an *emotional* relationship with God. “Well I liked a lot more the way this was recited. I like the sound of his voice. It also sounded like there was more emotion when he was saying it, which I think comes into play depending on how you recite,” said Bilal, 20, from Pittsburgh. Most interestingly, he added: “Usually if I’m reciting, as the *imam*⁹, while praying with a group of people, I try to put emotion into it like that (the recording).” Bilal here clearly indicated that he aims to create an ideally *emotional* relationship between himself and the Qur’an as he recites aloud, performing for his fellow Muslims in prayer.

Additionally, Small suggests that “[There is] a comparable confusion to that which [we] have seen surrounds the word *music*, for just as there is no such thing as music, neither is there such a thing as beauty. There are only qualities in an object or action that arouse in a perceiver a pleasurable response and make him or her perceive it as beautiful” (Ibid.). Music is a vehicle for communication and elicitation of pleasurable response in listeners via gestures. Mishary Rashid’s recordings were perceived as most pleasurable, and the recording by him which I showed to interlocutors is characterized by gestures of melisma, a minor mode, and high fidelity recording. These gestures were perceived as beautiful by those I spoke with in this case, and highlighted that the listeners’ their ideal relationship with God is one characterized by *emotion*.

Furthermore, it is likely that the first-generation Egyptian American Muslims’ shared attitudes towards Qur’anic recitation and what aspects of it they seek to relate to, aided in the sense of solidarity with other first-generation Egyptian Americans. “We as a generation are exposed *much* less to [Qur’anic] recitation,” Sarah said. She explained that she looked for the most *musical* sounding recitations to help her connect to the Qur’an. This, in combination with a

⁹ An *imam* is one who leads a group in prayer, often reciting the Qur’an aloud.

shared lack of understanding of classical Arabic, tied the Pittsburghers of this generation together.

2.5 OTHERNESS

The desire to relate to the Qur'an through its musical gestures and characteristics is amplified by a perceived otherness of Qur'anic recitation compared to mainstream American music – secular and non-secular – and an analogous otherness of Islam compared to mainstream American culture – secular and non-secular. Whether or not this “otherness” is an objective truth is not the question, because it exists in both the popular American discourse today and has seeped into the consciousnesses of first generation Egyptian-American Muslims I spoke with. “Music represented culture in two ways: as a form of expression common to humanity, and as one of the most extreme manifestations of difference” (Bohlman 2012, 31). Bohlman here discusses empire and colonial encounter, however I believe the theory can be applied to the immigration of Egyptians to Pittsburgh, where the power geometry is shaped by the “new” (Egyptians) encountering the “existing” American population.

Neither Egyptians nor Muslims at large are colonizing the United States, however this dynamic exists in an analogous way, and is amplified by the popular media representation of Muslims seeking to “dominate” the United States; while it is not statistically backed as a claim, the concept of Muslim colonization of America exists within the public consciousness and seeps into the attitudes of Egyptian Muslims I spoke with in Pittsburgh, exemplified statements like “I want to show my coworkers I’m just like them and normal, even though I’m Muslim. That Muslims are normal!” said Mo, a graduate student. “And so I’m proud to be Egyptian, and I

openly advertise that, despite what happens. A big part of [my attitude] is [due to] Islamophobia” (Ibrahim, age 22).

“The awareness of difference intensifies encounter, and that awareness engenders wonder and awe, which, however, lie precariously close to fear and violence. Music marks the moment of encounter, for it stands out as the form of communication that is at once most familiar and most incomprehensible” (Ibid.). It is for this reason that in discussions primarily about Qur’anic recitation and what it means to people, first generation Egyptian Muslims I spoke with mentioned feelings of otherness and fear. Although Qur’anic recitation is one element of a Muslim’s way of life that is different from that of mainstream American culture, it provides respite to Pittsburgh Egyptian Muslims I spoke with in the face of othering. Those I spoke with

The meaning that Qur’anic recitation holds to people and across different times, differs. While immigrants in this study viewed it as a source of religious comfort and national pride, Egyptian children raised in America used it as a means of both connecting with their faith and with others in their personal communities. “It’s important that music and dance [...] are not just seen as static symbolic objects which have to be understood in a context, but are themselves a patterned context within which other things happen (Waterman 1990: 213)”(Stokes 1994, 5). Qur’anic recitation is one musical ritual too in which spiritual connection is created between an individual and God, and in this case, their peers. Immigrants who grew up in Egypt, experienced Qur’anic recitation by themselves through the radio, school, and the mosque. Despite the Qur’an’s large presence in the Egyptian environment, they found these experiences to be largely personal and individual. But while first generation Egyptian American Muslims often felt alone in general society, in their small Muslim community, and through their experiences with Qur’anic recitation, they could feel very much united.

3.0 EGYPT

I spent the month of Ramadan, June 2017 living with my cousins, aunt and uncle in their apartment in Heliopolis, Cairo. In Egypt, Heliopolis is called *Masr el Gedida*, or “The New Cairo.” I was told that it was built by a rich baron in the early 20th century, aiming to provide all the amenities of a modern city in a spacious, modern suburb. More than one hundred years later, Heliopolis is one of the most densely populated areas in the country, and home to the presidential palace. Compared to Alexandria, Cairo’s little sister city on the Mediterranean sea, the cars in Heliopolis are newer, clothes are more expensive, and the streets are cleaner. The soundscape is dense, filled with cars honking, street vendors calling out their wares, *shabi*¹⁰ music blasting out of car and shop speakers. It isn’t much different from what it was like 20 years ago, as recorded by scholars of that time, but one thing is different. The sound of the *adhan*, or call to prayer, is no longer as pervasive. Despite this, five times a day, my relatives would pause what they were doing to wash their face, head, arms, and feet, face Mecca, and pray. I observed this, too, at an office space and at a community event run by a non-profit organization.

While the religious aspects of the public urban soundscape in Egypt had diminished, their associated private acts of worship continued to be expected and practiced by many.

¹⁰ *Shabi* literally means “of the people,” and is a term which refers to modern Egyptian pop music. The genre is characterized by DIY aesthetics, fast tempos, heavy percussion, and use of Egyptian colloquial Arabic. It is often associated with the low class of Cairo due to its origination in street weddings and parties and its heavy use of slang and crude language (Gilman 2014). The word itself carries many cultural connotations outside of music alone (Ibid.).

I observed that religiosity and - by extension - the Qur'an play multiple roles in Egyptian culture. During my time collecting ethnographic data in Egypt, I learned that these conflicting roles manifest themselves in several domains. It is important to note that the time of my fieldwork – the Islamic holy month of Ramadan – may have significantly affected the atmosphere of Cairo compared to its state during other months of the year. Due to the belief that good deeds are multiplied in value during Ramadan, many Muslims emphasize doing good deeds and worshiping God through engagement with the Qur'an. As such, typically pious and typically non-pious Muslims alike commonly increase their acts of worship during Ramadan, performing more prayers, listening to and reciting the Qur'an, and speaking about religion. This is associated with the practice of daytime fasting from food, drink, smoking, impolite conversation and sexual activity.

In addition, I must be careful to emphasize that I only interviewed a small sample of individuals, each of whom held unique opinions and experiences. By no means are my observations meant to represent Egyptian Muslims as a whole, nor make generalizations about the small subset Egyptian Muslims who fall into the same class as those I spoke with. Rather, I have done my best to accurately portray the opinions and attitudes of only those I had the wonderful opportunity to speak with.

In this chapter, I begin with a discussion of various cultural and religious pressures and social norms in order to accomplish several goals. The first, is to establish a contextual sense of place, such that when we begin to discuss Qur'anic recitation as an element of the soundscape as well as a traditional practice in people's daily lives, its position can be placed accurately amongst the myriad of other elements that are present in modern Egyptian society. It is important to understand the cultural struggles tied to piety, individual agency, and social pressures to be more

or less pious. Discussions on clothing, prayer, and attitudes towards religion and the ways in which religion spread in the past few decades are helpful in understanding what struggles Egyptians face and why they may feel the ways that they do about listening to, hearing, and reciting the Qur'an.

3.1 SETTING THE SCENE

I can't remember the first time I visited Egypt. I was a young child when my parents went to my father's homeland to visit relatives for the summer, and we repeated the trip many times afterwards, one or two years apart. There is a photograph of me and my cousin at ages three and four, respectively, standing in front of a huge electric fan on my cousins' balcony in Cairo. Our bangs are plastered to our foreheads because of the sweat, and I can't say that much has changed in terms of the heat. When I landed in Cairo on May 27, 2017 to conduct research, I was instantly greeted with a wash of hot air. I felt like I had been submerged in pure, dry, heat, and it's exponentially stronger when walking under the sun. As I rolled my suitcase alongside my uncle and cousin who had picked me up, I was overwhelmed by the scenery. I had experienced it so many times, but still, the flat openness of the sandy desert terrain and the vastness of the cloudless sky above jarred me upon arriving. The overwhelming smell of dust in the dry air signaled to me that I was in Egypt. Compared to Pittsburgh, with its winding roads and steep hills covered in voluminous green trees, humid summer air and frequent rain showers, Cairo felt like a completely different planet.

The geography of an ethnographic field site shapes the modes of musical performance that are possible and ideal. As we sped nearly silently across the highways from the Cairo

International Airport and landed in the dense landscape of urban Cairo, the scene changed. And the sounds changed. I found that in modern Cairo, the combination of densely packed urban centers, chaotic, multi-laned dusty streets and the intense heat of the summertime all contribute to the ways in which sound is performed, played, and participated in. Air conditioning is expensive, so people often leave their windows open in the car and at home. As a result, the music that others play becomes open to public consumption, and also melds with the sounds of the city. Constant honking of cars and the rumbles of motorcycle engines and drivers yelling at each other and dogs barking and street children selling goods weaves in and out with the rhythmic, bass-heavy sounds of loud party music from a nearby taxi and smooth, methodical Qur'anic recitation from another. Apartment buildings dominate almost the entirety of the scene, gray and brown buildings packed closely together across huge, wide-sprawling streets and inner neighborhoods (Figures 1-4). With a population of more than nine million people (Masriya 2017), Cairo seems to be bursting at capacity.



Figure 1. This is a top-down view of a Heliopolis neighborhood. Ramadan drink vendors and fruit vendors stand opposite each other.



Figure 2: This is one side of a typical main road in Cairo.



Figure 3. This is a typical storefront in Cairo. Shopkeepers often sit outside, chat, and smoke cigarettes or hookah. The radio often plays Qur'anic recitation or music.



Figure 4. A main road in Cairo.

I stayed in my aunt and uncle's apartment in Heliopolis (*Masr el Gedida*, in Arabic) and shared a room with two of my three cousins. "Wow, all the cars here look so new..." I commented one day to my cousin. I was surprised because in Alexandria, Egypt's second largest city and the metropolis I had spent two months living in to study Arabic in 2015, the cars were mostly older models from the seventies and eighties which are continuously fixed and refurbished. "Yeah, you're right. It's the capital, so you'll find that a lot of things here look more modern than in Alexandria," my cousin replied.

On one of the first few days of my stay, another cousin wanted to introduce me to a place she hoped to find people for me to interview. After crossing the busy street, we entered a quieter network of streets that were lined with small apartment buildings and *villas*, or stand-alone houses (Figure 5). One of the *villas* had been converted into a "coworking space," one of many privately owned locations for professionals and students to work and study together outside the home or office (Figure 6). The center was cool and well-air conditioned. And it was at this center that I met several people to interview.



Figure 5. A quiet neighborhood in Heliopolis, walking distance from a busy, multi-laned road.



Figure 6. Coworking spaces such as this one are for study, work and social activity, and are commonly frequented by the demographic I spoke with in Cairo.

In addition, I interviewed individuals who circulated in the same social spheres as my cousins and their friends. One particular evening, I sat across from Hannah and Ahmed, a young Egyptian couple, late on a Friday night at a dinner gathering. Seeing my chance, I grabbed the young couple for an interview. I had flown across the Atlantic to conduct an ethnographic field study on religiosity of the upper middle class in Cairo, and I set the goal of conducting flawless interviews. My voice recorder at the ready, I asked “What do you think of Muslims in Egypt?” Ahmed answered first, so I asked another question, hoping to hear Hannah’s response. But Ahmed answered first again, and when Hannah added her opinion, she simply reiterated what Ahmed said. I began to get frustrated. Then, Hannah’s father - Ahmed’s future father-in-law - appeared. Under his watchful gaze, Ahmed’s answers about religion became more zealous. “Yes, the Qur’an is so essential!” I had allowed for an odd power dynamic, where Hannah aimed to support Ahmed, Ahmed wanted to impress Hannah and her father. The interaction was a clear example of a typical public social dynamic in modern Egyptian culture, and was both gendered and generational. Nonverbally, Hannah assumed the gendered role of a supportive female by allowing Ahmed to dominantly express his opinion, just as Ahmed later subdued himself to allow Hannah’s father to take dominance. This careful cultural dance was not what I intended to observe, but I learned from it.

Listening to the recording later, I laughed. I was so eager to conduct the interview that I went against my previous decision to interview interlocutors individually. As the days went on, I certainly did not perform every interview as perfectly as I had aimed to, but I improved with every experience. During future interviews, I was careful to interview individuals without friends or family present, but I also learned to allow for mishaps in research. They help improve methodology.

Over the course of the month I spent in Cairo, I made observations, new and old, about the environment and the people who resided in it. Throughout my interviews, I learned surprising and interesting things about the role of Qur'anic recitation in modern Egyptians' lives.

3.2 CLOTHING

Clothing is a common mode of expressing religious identity as well as social class in Cairo. *Abayas* (long dresses traditionally worn by Arab Muslim women) and *galabeyas* (similar robes worn by men, particular to Egypt) often symbolize a low social status, according to middle class interlocutors I interviewed.

But some interlocutors also expressed desire to wear religious clothes such as headscarves and abayas in their social and professional spheres. "I wish I could wear an abaya, but it's just not professional," lamented Soha, a 20-year-old woman in college.

Interlocutors made it evident that the Egyptian culture encourages public feedback of others' behavior, expressing that they made constant, conscious decisions about how they dressed and behaved in public. From ironing their clothes to striking a balance between appearing "too religious" and "too secular," to using religious invocations in public, Egyptians I spoke with were frustrated with societal policing of their actions.

The self-correcting Egyptian society provides its critique in spheres of visual presentation (clothes) as well as aural (what one listens to).

Religiosity is seen as both a positive and a negative.

If one appears too religious, he is regarded as extreme or uneducated. But if one appears too secular, he is shunned as unpatriotic and disloyal to his community and identity.

A sheikh holds high status, and a middle-class woman was once referred to as “wonderful,” qualified by “she wears the niqab,” but a middle-class woman aiming to further her career does not normally wear such traditional garb herself, nor publicly announce her religiosity. Hannah, who was in her twenties, excitedly told me about her mother in law. “Yes, you should interview my mother in law! She would be great for your research. She wears the niqab and knows so much about the Quran!”

Interestingly, Hannah herself gushed about her mother in law’s conservative appearance while she herself wore a sparkly top which read “Come get it,” black skinny jeans, and took multiple pictures for Snapchat on her iPhone, clad in a case depicting a cartoon rabbit making a vulgar gesture.

This verbalized desire to be religious lies in a precarious balance with the desire not to appear low-class, unprofessional, extreme, or old-fashioned.

In addition to outward expression of religiosity in public, this goal of balance is seen in private family life. “My father was so moderate. He wanted us to know our Lord but also have fun!” said Mary. “There is no reason why we shouldn’t be Muslim and live a normal life.”

The only domain in which I did not observe a conflict between “too much” and “too little” practice was in the act of listening to the Qur’an. While spending time in Egypt and speaking to interlocutors there, I learned that there is public debate in Egypt about the appropriateness of calls to prayer, the drummer who wakes people up before dawn in Ramadan, and other religious sounds being broadcast in public domains. But regarding personal practice, I observed no objections to individuals listening to and reciting the Qur’an. On the contrary, listening to the Qur’an or reciting it was almost unanimously championed by those I spoke with,

including a Coptic Christian woman who did not actively listen to the Qur'an herself. "I think it sounds nice!" she said.

Individuals' acts of worship in Egypt are generally measured carefully by individuals, who anticipate the public's assessment of their status. Thus, it is peculiar that Qur'anic recitation appears to be exempt from this judgment. Regardless of how much Qur'an a person reads or listens to, no amount is considered to be too much.

A good Egyptian is one who is committed to fulfilling the "variety of ambitions, goals, and aspirations, foremost among them the desire on the part of ordinary Muslims to live in accord with the demands of Islamic piety within a context of rapidly changing social, political, and technological conditions" (Hirschkind 2006).

When Charles Hirschkind referred to these changes in the environmental condition in Egypt, the year was 2006. Ten years later, changes in such fields (social, political, and technological) have occurred and have been drastically altered. The onset of the 2011 revolution during the Arab Spring and the fall of then President Hosni Mubarak, the subsequent democratic election of Muslim Brotherhood party member Mohammed Morsi, and finally his eventual ousting via a military coup in 2013 both indicated and spurred a change in political values and social norms. Morsi was Egypt's first democratically elected president, but after winning the popular vote by a hair, half of the country's citizens were left disappointed. This was not helped by the fact that many of Morsi's decisions and other occurrences during his term were not well received by many Egyptians. The country was divided.

After the military coup in 2013, many Morsi supporters were arrested, incarcerated, and framed as terrorist sympathizers. In an attempt to distance themselves from the political party

The Muslim Brotherhood, which runs on a platform of Islamic ideals, many Muslim Egyptians began to decrease public displays of religiosity.

Interestingly, an interlocutor named Manal brought up a phenomenon she called the “Amr Khaled revolution,” which she described as a micro-movement in the early 2000s amongst young adults in listening to lectures by Amr Khaled. How women around her began having *halaqas* at home and at university, encouraging each other to pray, fast, and dress more modestly. She recounted her time partaking in this era with a sense of sentimentality and nostalgia. Manal felt that this period of communal support gave her the strength to move forward into her professional life, where such support for religious expression and practice was not present, to say the least.

“Darling, I don’t like that on you!” said a coworker, referring to Manal’s headscarf, when Manal first began to wear it. “I was so bothered!” said Manal.

Clothing in Egypt is relevant to this discussion for several reasons. Firstly, public presentation is central to Egyptian life. How someone presents themselves aesthetically is emphasized and societally policed in different ways. In a bitter irony, middle class men, women, and children walk down the streets of Cairo and Alexandria in ironed shirts and slacks. Their hair is combed and they wear fragrant perfume. To leave the house in flip flops is a sign of poor upbringing. In addition to this culturally secular practice of dressing well outside the home, religious symbols in everyday wear also hold significance. Coptic Christians are often seen wearing crosses, and after the Islamic Revival, headscarves became ubiquitous amongst women across social classes(Mahmood 2005). In a society that pays much attention to public appearances and in which people currently battle with issues of religious and cultural identity,

analysis of clothing – particularly, the phenomenon of Islamic veiling – as an element of Islamic practice and Egyptian culture alongside Qur’anic recitation, is beneficial.

Professionalism and conservatism in Egypt were often regarded as placed on opposite ends of a polar spectrum, amongst those I spoke with. Professionalism is often associated with modernity, which is tied to Western-ness and by association, secularism. Conservatism may be associated with a dedication to the past and, in some cases, a lower social standing. However, it is important to note that within conservatism, there is a divide between perceived “educated conservatism” and “practiced conservatism.” Educated conservatives who hold degrees from reputable universities in the Islamic sciences such as theology and religious law are highly regarded. But those perceived to simply practice conservative rituals simply because it is what those around them do are respected much less. “They [lower class individuals] only wear [the abaya] as a part of their culture,” said Soha, a business major at the German University of Cairo. She was replying to my observation that many women did wear abayas in public on a daily basis. “I wish I could wear an abaya to this work meeting, but I can’t really wear it out unless I’m going to the masjid.”

It is important to distinguish the Amr Khaled phenomenon from the Islamic Revival experienced by urban Egypt during the 1980s and 1990s. While the Islamic Revival was a large-scale movement that impacted the social norms of Egyptians across social classes, the Amr Khaled movement mainly impacted elite Egyptian youth (Sobhy 2009). His talks were circulated in the early-mid 2000s, and are still widely listened to today (Ibid.). The role of the Islamic soundscape is to configure urban space acoustically through use of Islamic media forms, and Amr Khaled’s recordings and summer camps for teenagers added variety to the available media forms that impacted Egyptian society. The Islamic Revival was rooted in an “amalgam of forms

of association, practice, learning, and sensibility” (Hirschkind 2006). So, while the Islamic Revival included a large-scale mix of many external and internal inputs, the influence of Amr Khaled is much more restricted to the upper social class (Sobhy 2009).

Manal contrasted her nostalgia about the feeling of being supported and loved in her religious community with a feeling of discomfort at what she described as the unveiling trend of the past two or three years. Manal now works part-time from home in order to spend more time with her two school-aged children, a 12 year old girl and a 10-year old boy. She expressed concern about raising her children – particularly her daughter – in a society that was increasingly liberal. “All the girls in her class are starting to have boyfriends, and they want to wear hot shorts. I try to explain to her why we do things in our religion, and I think she gets it. But the pressure is real. It’s worrying.”

One interlocutor I spoke with, a 22 year old graphic designer in Cairo, expressed his frustration at the way Egyptian society set up expectations for women. He described how, during his time in college, the teaching assistants would always spend more time helping the attractive female students rather than the female students who weren’t as traditionally beautiful. “I’m sorry to say this, but we [Egyptians] make our women more shallow than our men because of what our society expects out of a woman.” He described how his sisters and mother were very intelligent and independent, but other women he had met he felt were clearly “*sut-hee*,” or shallow. This discussion brought up the concept of agency. Tarik felt that there existed a lack of agency in Egyptian women in determining their personalities. This, he felt, was due to Egyptian society’s preoccupation with female beauty as a marker of value, even in professional life.

I met Hassan, a man in his late 20’s, at a Starbucks in the middle of Ramadan. I offered to buy him a drink. He gladly obliged and ordered a medium Frappuccino, which he happily sipped

during our interview. Hassan was nonreligious, and interestingly, he also felt he was societally attacked and at risk for his views being too secular. “Have you told your dad about your views?” I had asked him. “No, I don’t want to lose his financial support.” When I asked him whether he told many people. He said he didn’t really, “you wouldn’t,” he said, “not unless you wanted –” and at this point, he drew his finger across his neck, indicating death or metaphorical death. “Really?” I asked. “Well, kind of,” he said.

This discomfort of individuals on both ends of the spectrum inspires several questions. Do individuals exist on such a theoretical “spectrum” who are, rather than feeling scrutinized, satisfied and comfortable with their modes of religious practice? Are there Egyptians who do not feel judged for the ways in which they decide to do so? Secondly, what is the Qur’an’s role in determining where someone lies on such a spectrum? And finally, what levels of agency do individuals hold in religious life in Egypt?

The answers to these questions are difficult to determine definitively, but while considering them, it is useful to remember that aspects of identity such as gender, socioeconomic status, and race play roles. “Different arrangements of gender inequality often coexist within a given culture, the specific forms of which are a product of the particular discursive formation that each arrangement is a part of” (Mahmood 2005).

3.3 THE ROLE OF THE QUR’AN

“Any house in Egypt will have Qur’an playing inside. It’s just part of life in the house,” said Sharaf, an English professor in Heliopolis. “It’s something with *baraka* (blessings) in it. They (Egyptians) feel it’s important to hear it all the time.”

“Is that good?” I asked. “It depends on the intention... but I think it’s no problem,” replied Sharaf nonchalantly. “It’s the words of *rabbinna*,” he noted, when I asked him how the words of the Qur’an sounded. At the art center, I interviewed the receptionist, a jolly woman named Mary, who gushed to me about her granddaughter. “She knows how to put her hands up and make *duaa*, and just talk to *rabbinna*! She even uses the word *rabbinna* all the time.” I noticed that certain terms were used often in Egyptian discourse. One of them was *rabbinna*, which means “our Lord” in Arabic. The use of the term evokes a sense of communal piety, since it refers not to one’s individual lord, but one that belongs to the speaker and the listener. It is used affectionately, sarcastically, in times of happiness, and in times of anger and distress. Several phrases are well-known that are oft-used with *rabbinna*, and the peppering of these phrases into conversation is not necessarily indicative of a person’s religious affiliation nor their conviction. Rather, it is simply a part of the conversation that indexes the religious undercurrent of the culture. But Mary’s pride in the fact that her toddler granddaughter was already using this religious word indicated that she placed value in children’s Islamic awareness.

Hatem, a high school math teacher at a private international school¹¹, also took pride in his young children’s religious upbringing. “My first priority is to make them aware and conscious of God,” he explained. “If I’m praying I’ll bring them along to stand next to me and pray. Now they even pray on their own sometimes,” he said matter-of-factly. He and Mary made it clear that instilling habitual engagement with the Qur’an into the values of their children was something of importance to them.

The practice of Qur’anic recitation was tightly knit into the lives of those I spent time with in Cairo, sometimes in ways that were so normal and commonplace that interlocutors didn’t

¹¹ A school comprised of Egyptian students, which uses an international curriculum and model. Several types exist in Egypt, including American, German, British, and Canadian.

think twice about them. The summer I conducted fieldwork in Cairo, 2017, a young interlocutor named Nadine was preparing to take several college entrance exams, one of which was the national religious studies exam. The exam was one of several highly stressful exams that comprise *sanaweyya 'amma*, or the comprehensive set of college entrance exams taken by graduating high school students in Egypt. She studied for these exams with much stress, focusing mostly on core subjects such as math, reading, and government. The religious studies exam consisted of several free-response questions, asking students to write down passages from the Qur'an which should have been memorized during the school year. Nadine said "I only had enough time to memorize part of one of the *surahs* so I just hoped it would be enough for the exam!" I remember the day she returned home from her religious studies test, the last one of all. She was so relieved to have finished, that she fell onto the couch, sipping a cup of fresh mango juice from one of the many juice shops nearby. She seemed amused with herself, "I just opened the test booklet, and it said 'write *Surat al Noor* from verse 10-18.' *Oh shoot*, I thought. *Alright, let's do this!* And so I wrote the section I knew from *Surat Luqman*. 'Alif, lam, meem...'" Nadine recited the first verse of the Surah, miming as though she were writing the letters on the page. "Then, I flipped the page, and saw another excerpt I didn't know! So I wrote the section I knew again! 'Alif lam meem...'"

Nadine passed her exam. And she scored high on the important exams, math and English. "It's stupid," she said, when asked her opinion on the religious studies exam. "Honestly there's no benefit to just memorizing the verses. I don't know the meanings of the words that I memorized! Emphasis on 'memorized!'" Nadine explained that she did not value memorization without understanding. She felt that there was little benefit to the exam, which every Muslim high school student takes (Christian students take a religious studies exam on Christianity). "If

you did a survey of students, they would say ‘I memorized to pass the test,’” said Nadine. “And that’s the school system’s fault because they’re making us learn religion just to get good grades. I think they (the school system) just do it to be able to say they fulfilled their responsibility to teach us the subject. I guess that’s because any respectable school – like mine,” she added with an air of sarcasm, “would have religious studies. They wouldn’t want anyone saying anything bad about the school.”

Another interlocutor, who worked at an art education and community center, told me “When I was little, all the shops on my street would play Qur’an on the radio. And I would hear it when I was going anywhere. I heard it on the TV, on the radio... and also in school during morning assembly” (Nabil, age 27).

The presence of Qur’anic memorization in the college entrance exams as well as in school is an example of the pervasive memorization and recitation culture of the Qur’an I observed in Egypt. The Egyptian social pressure to appear religious is highlighted by Nadine’s statement about why the school system teaches religion through memorization. Nadine expressed awareness of a public expectation to maintain religious practice to remain respectable. The institutional place of Qur’anic memorization is one way I observed the Qur’an and religious practice’s presence in organized structures in Egypt outside the family home.

When I arrived in Egypt, my cousin gave me a gift of a Ramadan-themed planner (Figure 7-9). These commercially available Ramadan-themed planners were sold in bookstores and marketed to the religious youth of Cairo. The planners were brightly colored, allowing their users to check off the prayers they completed each day, and other worship practices such as reading sections of the Qur’an. Fun stickers with stylish designs were included. The commercial and social prevalence of such gifts highlights religious practice or piety’s presence in Egypt in and outside of the home.

Three nights before the end of Ramadan, I spotted Soha, a twenty-year-old woman, curled on the couch diligently reading the Qur'an with a pencil in hand, marking off the sections she completed. "You're trying to cram reading, aren't you!" I joked with her. "Yeah, you have to get in as much reward as you can! I'm trying to catch up," she laughed. Many of those I spoke with in Cairo also enjoyed reading the Qur'an for personal and spiritual benefit. "When I listen to the Qur'an, I get into a new zone..." (Nabil, age 27) "It's better than anything else I listen to!" (Samia, age 21)

Soha and her mother took part in an organized Qur'an memorization and religious encouragement group, aptly called *tahfeez*, or 'memorization.' The group was led by a formidable, stern middle-aged woman who Soha respectfully referred to as 'el-Hagga', an honorific meaning 'the one-who-has-performed-the-Hajj,' the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca. Every Saturday morning, the group met at Zahrawan, a women-led charity organization in Heliopolis, to assign new passages of the Qur'an to memorize and to motivate each other to practice Islam with enthusiasm. And at dawn, every morning, a Whatsapp group chat would explode with messages from the group, riddled with 'flower' and 'heart' emojis. The messages were check-ins to confirm that each group member had successfully prayed the early morning prayer and recited the *adhkar*, short praises of God that are recited much like the Qur'an, many of which are extracted from Qur'anic verses. Soha was assigned the task of reminding the group of these tasks one morning, and panicked when she realized that she had forgotten. El-Hagga sent her a private message, politely but sternly reprimanding her for forgetting. Soha's sister was quick to criticize *tahfeez* and the pressure that el-Hagga placed on her students to memorize the Qur'an, and never accompanied her mother and sister to the meetings "She made them cry,

once!” said her sister. But Soha appreciated the push to worship, saying that it provided her with motivation to be a better Muslim.

Intrigued by this concept and reminded of American sports coaches and teams, I decided to join the group one hot day in early June, Ramadan. The Zahrawan building was several stories high, housing a bustling store on the first floor, selling foods, jewelry and handmade goods made by underprivileged women (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Shoppers pay for purchases at Zahrawan.

The room where *tahfeez* was held was large, and approximately thirty women sat on chairs in a circle, with El Haggga sitting at the front of the room, dressed in a black *abaya* and a white headscarf. When several women entered the room late, apologizing and giving excuses, El

Hagga simply looked at them, then asked them to sit down. El Hagga urged the group to recite the Qur'an, "Even if you're working, you have to do it anyway," she said, her voice strong. One woman protested, "You don't know what kind of kids I have, or what kind of man I have at home!" But El Hagga explained intensely that she, too, was pushing herself to recite and worship more. "He who loves God loves for his brother what he loves for himself," she said. "We're with you from the beginning to the end. Not here to just teach you then go home." Trying to rile up the group, she asked "What do we do in the last third of the night?" referring to the Islamic practice of worshipping in the last third of the night. "We eat!!!" exclaimed one elderly lady, and the group burst into a fit of laughter. After El Hagga finished her motivational talk, the group dispersed to recite to each other the Qur'anic passages they had been assigned to memorize over the past week, teachers checking students' accuracy (Figure 9). While teachers listened to students, other students socialized, laughing and chatting with each other.



Figure 9. At *tahfeez*, a woman recites Qur'an from memory, her teacher checks her accuracy.

More personal interactions with the Qur'an existed in the lives of those I studied in Egypt, as well. Many emphasized the importance of understanding the text as well as memorizing it for recitation. "For kids, it's better to understand first, then memorize. Because you get these kids who have memorized the Qur'an but they don't know what they're saying!" – (Nabil, age 27). One woman I spoke to, named Lina, explained why she liked to listen to the Qur'an, "I like listening to Qur'an. There's barakah in it. The angels come to listen to it," she said softly. She recounted the first *surah* she was assigned to memorize by her father in the 1970s. "At first, it was a big struggle. I was fifteen, I think, and my sister and I were assigned our first big assignment. I think it was either *al-Saffat* or *al-Maeda*... We sat next to the cassette player and replayed the sections over and over again to memorize them! It was a big struggle. I used to mispronounce words and ask questions."

Additionally, I personal and emotional experiences with the Qur'an were common. "When someone can recite the way Al-Minshawi recites, you know he has a certain magical quality" (Nabil, age 27). I witnessed emotional responses to Qur'anic recitation first-hand while attending late-night *taraweeh* prayers at Masjid Sayyidna Safiyya, a medium-sized mosque in Heliopolis (Figure 10). A private or public practice, *taraweeh* prayers are only performed during Ramadan, and are characterized by long stretches of *murattal* Qur'anic recitation either at home or at the mosque. Oftentimes, one of the thirty sections of the Qur'an is recited each night, such that all thirty sections of the Qur'an have been recited by the end of Ramadan. It was around eleven o'clock in the evening as I walked to the mosque, and a light, warm breeze blew through trees on the sides of the dusty road.



Figure 10. Masjid Sayyidna Safiyya.

The yellow glow of the street-lights illuminated the steady stream of men and women entering the mosque, and a young girl led women to the elevator to the women’s prayer area – a large balcony on the second floor, overlooking the men’s prayer area below (Figure 11). The intricately decorated ceiling of the mosque was painted in red, yellow, green, white and blue hues, and two air conditioning units and more than a dozen electric fans whirred on the walls, swiveling to keep worshipers cool. The prayer began, and the imam recited the Qur’an steadily and quickly, in order to finish the section in a timely fashion. At the end of the prayer, approximately two hours later, the imam began to recite a *dua*, prayers to God to protect us, forgive our and our parents’ sins, grant us and our parents paradise, ease our struggles and relieve oppression around the world. The *dua* was poetic and eloquent, like the passages of the Qur’an from which much of it was derived, and the melodious recitation soon gave way to tears and soft weeping from the imam and worshipers alike. Each worshiper, standing shoulder to

shoulder with those in the tightly packed rows of the mosque, seemed to experience an individual and deeply personal, yet collective and shared connection with the recitation. After the prayer ended, an air of calm happiness seemed to permeate the space. Women hugged and greeted each other, passing around cups of water and mint tea, as well as dates and candies. The experience repeated every night throughout Ramadan, and worshipers continued to show physical emotional responses to the recitation of the Qur'an over the loudspeakers. Especially when the last section of the Qur'an was finally completed, tears welled up in the eyes of those around me who were overcome with emotion. This experience, repeated throughout the month, indicates that there was a clear, significant impact of listening to the Qur'anic recitation in prayer on those who attended the *taraweeh* prayers at this mosque. While personally touching enough to elicit physical responses such as crying, the practice was also community-based and impacted by the social and communal dynamic of those who lived in the same area.



Figure 11. Women relax during the break halfway through *taraweeh* prayer.

In summary, I observed both an intensity and a lightness in the practices and attitudes surrounding Qur'anic recitation in Cairo. While there were clearly personal connections and experiences with Qur'anic recitation, there also was the surprisingly broad presence of Qur'anic recitation institutionally, in greater, more public ways than the simple broadcasting of its sound in the streets. The ways in which Egyptians engaged with Qur'anic recitation were varied in method and opinion.

3.4 QUR'AN AS MUSIC

Consistent with previous scholarly observations, Egyptians I spoke with in Egypt expressed that they music as a means of enjoyment and indulgence. However, these opinions did not necessarily dictate their willingness to associate Qur'anic recitation with music. "Delight and happiness!" said Sharaf. "It's mostly for enjoyment. Most Egyptians like music. Some don't if they're religious, because of the content of the lyrics and talk of relationships without marriage..."

"What's your opinion about Qur'an being musical?" I asked him. "Of course, it has *nagham*... I think the musicality of it helps its function." Sharaf, a classic Egyptian music enthusiast, couldn't resist mentioning the connection between Qur'anic training and voice training in the Egyptian entertainment industry of the Golden Age. "Lots of great singers start out with the Qur'an," and he is correct. Umm Kulthum, the great ballad singer of the 20th century was first trained in Qur'anic recitation by her father, the village sheikh (Danielson 1997b). It is this training that is often credited with teaching her excellent breath control and diction (Ibid.). "I used to listen to Umm Kulthum when I was very young, about four years old. It was a bit

strange, to be honest,” said Sharaf, who then mentioned that his own kids -in their early adulthood now – enjoyed singers whose lyrics were less “heavy.”

Nadine kept both Qur’anic recitation and pop music on her mp3 player, and said she enjoyed having both, but “it felt weird when I wanted to listen to songs and then he (a reciter) would start like ‘*audhu billah*’¹² and I’d just be like – ‘OKAY!’ (and skip the surah)” Nadine mentioned Anghami, a music streaming platform used in the Middle East that operates much like Spotify. “Anghami did this new option, where they would blend the end of a song and the beginning of [the next] song, so you don’t feel the gap between the songs! However, it was drawback to Nadine! Here is Nadine, listening to *Al-Fatiha*, and then ‘dun dun dun, dun dun dun!’ (singing the opening melody) AS THE GUY STILL READS [QUR’AN]. It was the last verse, and you hear the instrument part of *Shape of You*¹³!” she laughed. “What should I feel?!” she exclaimed, jokingly. “It was funny, I was like ‘what is happening?’ Anghami, why did you do this to me?” “Yeah, it was hilarious! but at the same time it was weird.” “It only happened once, and I found it was awkward in a sort of funny way...” she said, chuckling. “But I’ll make sure it doesn’t happen again! Because, no way!”

“What’s so bad about that happening?” I asked. “Because! The Qur’an should be respected, and particularly with this song, *mayenfa’sh* (isn’t right).” The matter of fact way in which Nadine expressed this point, despite her thorough amusement while recounting the tale of her mishap, highlights how Qur’anic recitation is consumed and regarded – even when mixed in playlists with music and listened to in the same spaces. Interlocutors commonly expressed similar opinions, whether or not they considered Qur’an to be music itself. The most common idea brought up in response to whether Qur’an was music or not, was that Qur’an demands a

¹² This phrase begins every Qur’anic chapter. It translates to “I seek protection from God.”

¹³ Shape of You was a hit song by American popular music singer Ed Sheeran.

certain etiquette of respect when being listened to or recited. “I feel [Qur’an] is different from music. Because singing doesn’t have specific rules... Qur’an has to be calm, not rowdy” – (Soha, age 20). “Qur’an has its respect. You have to concentrate while you’re listening to it. Meanwhile, music can be listened to in any place, and your body can be in any position” – (Yara, age 23).

3.5 PERCEPTIONS OF PIETY IN EGYPT

“There is not much emphasis on religion,” said Sharaf, speaking of present-day Egypt. “Otherwise, life would be better,” he said, sadly. “People don’t have time for anything other than work. People *talk* a lot about religion, but they don’t practice it, really. It’s reducing, the frequency of people listening to the Qur’an.” As we continued the conversation, Sharaf seemed to become more cynical and quick to criticize the Egyptian society. He had lived in South Carolina, USA for ten years in the eighties and nineties, pursuing his doctorate degree. “When I was younger, morals were much better.”

Nadine, who had moved from Madina, Saudi Arabia, back to Egypt with her family while she was in middle school, said “Being in Saudi had a big effect on me (morally). First, we respected teachers a lot. We stood up when the teacher enters and said ‘asalamualaikum.’ Respect was a just thing there. Here in Egypt, students talk back to their teachers all the time. I was shocked.” This opinion was supported by others’ statements, as well. “This generation is totally messed up! My fourteen-year-old cousin swears all the time, walks around wearing make-up and hot-shorts. That’s not our culture at all!” said Samia, 21, emphatically.

A recurring theme of skepticism towards Egyptian's true levels of sincerity, as well as consistent criticism of Egyptians' moralities in general and lack of regard for religion and general morals, was apparent throughout interviews I conducted in Egypt with both young and old.

3.6 MUSIC LISTENING HABITS OF YOUNG ADULTS

"One cannot speak of a single relation of contemporary culture to music in general, but of a tolerance, more or less benevolent, with respect to a plurality of musics. Each is worth as much as the group which practices it or recognizes it" (Boulez 2000). This leads me to ask, what personal attitudes do upper-middle-class Egyptian young adults hold about the natures and purposes of genres of sound in their lives? Do they juxtapose religious sounds, such as that of the Qur'an, with the sounds of popular Egyptian music, or compare them? And where are these opinions rooted?

During my time in Cairo, I was able to explore these questions as well as questions about Qur'anic recitation directly. I investigated their music-listening habits and the attitudes they held towards different forms of sonic expression in their surroundings, in order to better contextualize the role of Qur'anic recitation in their lives and outlooks. To reiterate, "Upper-middle-class Egyptian youth" in this study refers to young adults of a social class in urban Egypt not considered the most affluent of all, yet due to their enrollment in private international schools, international universities, and their resulting tendencies to be bilingual or multilingual makes them high-class in relation to the vast majority of the Egyptian population, of which only 30% attend university, and of the 30% only half graduate (Economist 2009).

Following the 2011 Egyptian Revolution during the Arab Spring and the ousting of then President Hosni Mubarak, Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood was democratically elected in 2013 by a very small margin. His term yielded low popular approval and bred frustration across social classes and religious identification for various reasons. This resulted in a popular protest and a subsequent military coup, after which military leader Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi took power in 2014. Today, although life in Egypt has reverted to a state of daily normalcy, Egyptians young and old alike find little economic opportunity, freedom of expression, and frustration in a highly corrupt society based on social connections rather than merit. Hassan, an artist in his late twenties I interviewed, expressed his frustration with the current state of Egyptian society, saying “You can’t breathe psychologically.” Interlocutors I spoke to often expressed the opinion that life in Egypt had reverted to its pre-revolution state in 2010.

One aspect of life that has remained present throughout the years of political turmoil is music. Music is known to be an integral part of Egyptians’ lives, so much so that it has been said to “flow out of the taps” (Hammond 2005). I too witnessed this fondness of music during my time spent in Egypt, and through interviews and interactions with young upper-middle-class Egyptian interlocutors, I learned what kinds of music they preferred to listen to, and their attitudes towards the various sounds in their environment.

When I asked, “What music do you listen to?” Nadine, a 19-year-old freshman in college replied “Random. It all depends on my mood. In Arabic though I only listen to Cairokee... And Amr Diab on rare occasions...” Nadine was quick to make clear that listening to music sung in Arabic was not the norm for her. When I asked for more details on what music she does listen to, she said “Uh, I like pumping music and songs. You know, with drums and loud instruments,” avoiding using identifying qualities such as genre or language. Finally, when I prodded her

further, asking whether she could provide me with examples, she said “I always listen to English. [Listening to] Arabic is rare [for me],” then proceeded to list her current favorites, which included *Rise* by Katy Perry, *Wolves* by Selena Gomez, *Despacito* by Daddy Yankee, *Rock-a-bye Baby* by Clean Bandit, and several songs by the American pop singer Sia. Nadine was well aware of her preference for foreign music, and cited Cairokee – a group that rose to fame in 2011 after the Egyptian Revolution and is known for its inspirational songs (Shalaby 2015) – and Amr Diab, the most popular Arab pop singer in the Middle East (Hammond 2005), as the only two exceptions. Both of these artists produce songs with broad appeal.

Hassan, too, expressed that he especially liked Beyonce and Adele, both American female pop music icons.

Tarik, a 22-year-old graphic designer explained, constantly code-switching¹⁴ from English to Arabic, that what music he listened to was “Nothing specific, just... it’s very... if you look at my playlist you won’t find anything specific. If I hear a pop song on the radio and I think it’s catchy, I might go back [to my computer] and listen to it [again]. But I don’t usually like pop, I think it’s very... I hate the lyrics so much, they’re always very, like, extremely shallow.” This perception of Egyptian pop music as shallow and substance-less was not uncommon amongst those I spoke with. But while many Egyptians of the previous generation express similar attitudes towards Egyptian pop music’s “low” value in comparison to Arabic classical music and classics of the Golden Age¹⁵ such as those of Umm Kulthum and Abdel-Halim Hafez (Ibid.), the youth I spoke with did not make this comparison, expressing their preference for foreign music. Egyptian youth have been observed to not listen to Arabic classical music (Gilman 2014),

¹⁴ The act of switching from language to language mid-sentence, often observed amongst bilingual individuals (Albirini 2016)

¹⁵ Commonly regarded to be from the 1950s-1970s, primarily in Egypt (Hammond 2005, Danielson 1997a)

perceiving it as old-school – a vintage relic belonging to their parents. “Not many of our generation like music of the old generation,” said Soha, a young woman in her early twenties. Tarik showed me an indie English band he was interested in at the time, the lyrics of which were so unidentifiable that I initially asked whether the song was in German.

Talking of whether he listened to Egyptian pop music, Tarik said “We might listen to it sometimes [in school], but only ironically... Because it’s not our music, you know?”

The upper-middle-class Egyptian youth I spoke to do not listen to Egyptian pop nor Arabic classical music, but rather, they listen to foreign music, especially American pop music. Arabic music was rarely mentioned, but if any was listened to, interlocutors listed music that was alternative in genre, independent/indie, or perceived to convey a message with which the listener identified.

The relative lacuna of Egyptian pop consumption reflects a lack of Arab nationalism previously noted by other scholars (Ibid.) and the attitudes expressed amongst those I interviewed may index a loyalty to cosmopolitanism and a desire to escape from a hopeless political context.

An example of an alternative and message-filled Arabic music group is *Mashrou’ Leila*, a Lebanese indie band that has gained popularity amongst upper-class Egyptian youth. “If anything [sung in Arabic], they (other youth like me) might listen to *Mashrou’ Leila* or other similar bands,” said Tarik. Their song *Fasateen*¹⁶ (2009) highlights issues such as marriage between individuals of different religions. It is in a poetic meter, sung in a lilting, slurred voice above a sparse acoustic instrumental backing. Much like the indie band Tarik showed me,

¹⁶ “Dresses”

Mashrou' Leila in this example also sings in a way that is difficult to perceive as Arabic at first listen. The song, which is similar in style and liberal content to others by the band, stands in stark contrast to typical Egyptian pop anthems such as Amr Diab's smash hit *Leily Nahari*¹⁷ (2004), a typical love song and *Boshret Kheir*, the anthem of the 2014 election of President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi, with its national anthem-like instrumentals and classic Arabic *iqā'*¹⁸ mixed with party beats, urging Egyptians to vote in what resulted in only 46% of eligible voter attendance (BBC 2014). The preference for alternative music may reflect a disenchantment with commercial and political endeavors in popular culture.

Compared to religious sounds present in their surroundings, such as the *adhan* and recitation of the Qur'an, upper-middle-class Egyptian youth I spoke with held Egyptian pop in a significantly different regard – whether or not they held positive opinions of Qur'anic recitation. In interviews I conducted, interlocutors expressed Egyptian pop to be class specific, as Tarik said, where religious sound was class neutral. Egyptian pop lacked substance where religious sound was content-heavy, it was perceived to be not relatable while religious sound was relatable due to its presence in the home. Finally, Egyptian pop was regarded as transient and trend-based whereas religious sound had a quality of timelessness, sometimes associated with divinity.

Upper-middle-class Egyptian youth I spoke to held interesting attitudes towards Egyptian pop music consistent with previous scholars' findings. Young Egyptians in general mostly ignore political pop songs, and regard nationalist works of the Golden Age as curios of the past (Gilman 2014, 45). Young elite Egyptians I spoke with do not exhibit strong national pride, thus do not desire to listen to overtly nationalistic music. Upper-middle-class Egyptians do not want to

¹⁷ “My night, my day” a form of endearment

¹⁸ An *iqā'* is a Middle Eastern rhythmic mode or drumming pattern.

associate themselves with *baladi*¹⁹ music or culture (Gilman 2014, 97), not necessarily because they look down upon it, but because they do not relate to what they perceive as a foreign culture. According to Tarik, engaging in listening to the music of others feels inauthentic. But because the Qur'an and other religious sounds are not tied to a particular social class, those I spoke with hold different attitudes towards it.

In a time where the socioeconomic gap between the social classes in Egypt continues to widen, the attitudes displayed by these individuals indicates a cultural shift towards favoring foreign cultures and attitudes, perhaps as a result of political dissatisfaction. It also may be a display of a rejection of nationalistic tokens, and might reflect an increasing dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in Egypt. The differences in perceptions of Egyptian popular music and religious sound may indicate a separation between religious identity and national identity. These conclusions in totality may manifest themselves in a wave of educated Egyptian emigrants in the coming decade, seeking opportunity and identity outside the boundaries of their country. But that remains to be seen. For now, upper-middle-class Egyptian young adults continue to participate in music-listening, forming bonds with and distancing themselves from cultures inside and outside their borders.

¹⁹ *Baladi* literally means “country,” and can denote a lower social status or educational level when used in conversation.

4.0 COMPARISONS

Since its inception, the Qur'an has been transmitted through the oral tradition of memorization and recitation (Mattson 2013, Nelson 1985). Centuries later, the Qur'an continues to be recited and memorized worldwide in various styles by average Muslims and professional reciters (Ibid.).

The previous two chapters provide portraits of individuals in Pittsburgh and Cairo, living their lives with their families, traditions, and in the contexts of their respective cultures. They explore the role of the Qur'an – and particularly, its recitation – in the lives of the individuals in these far apart cities, elucidating how discourse about lived experiences with Qur'anic recitation elicits opinions about national and religious identity, stances on religious practice, pedagogy, and nostalgia in Egyptians and their Egyptian American brethren. For the first generation Egyptian Americans I spoke with in Pittsburgh, recitation of the Qur'an serves as a means of communing with others who shared similar experiences, beliefs, and identities. These individuals consider the melodic contour of the Qur'anic recitation to be of paramount importance, signifying a reciter's level of "emotion" and "passion," and listening to the Qur'an is used primarily as a means of creating a sense of connection with God, loved ones, and with other Muslims. Nostalgia for the motherland was characterized by a longing for a sense of religious ubiquity and belonging, and a return to familiar scenes, for first generationers and immigrants, respectively. In Egypt, a frustration with the current sociopolitical status of the country and daily life in Cairo shrouded the conversations I had with interlocutors. Moderate in daily religious practice, many of those I spoke with aspired to a higher level of worship, and criticized the public society for either being

too secular or too religiously permissive. Like those I spoke with in Pittsburgh, Egyptian interlocutors in Cairo engaged with the Qur'an for personal and spiritual reasons, but the environment in which they live creates a much more public presence of the Qur'an in their lives.

In this concluding chapter, I draw more direct comparisons between the results of the studies I conducted in Pittsburgh and in Cairo. I would like to again emphasize the nature of this study, and consequently the nature of the comparisons that can feasibly be made about the information I gathered and the research experiences I had. In my ethnographic research, I pursued inquiry about two cultures through means of participant observation and interviews. The subject matter is vibrant and human, therefore I chose to pursue my inquiry through informed experiences, literary and qualitative research, and interviews – not based on carefully controlled constants and selected variables. As such, the comparisons I draw here shed light on the connections between those I spoke with in Pittsburgh and those I spoke with in Cairo, not drawing conclusions about all Egyptian Muslims in Pittsburgh and Cairo as a whole. Statistical significance, is not relevant to this research, because ethnographic studies such as this are works of partial truths (Clifford 1986) – the only kinds of truths that can be learned about when learning from people, their words, emotions, and lived experiences.

As discussed in the introduction, Egypt holds a unique position in the history of Qur'anic recitation. A popular music and film hub (Danielson 1997b, Gilman 2014), Cairo, Egypt, was where the sound of the Qur'an was first broadcast over radio (Hirschkind 2006). As of when this study was conducted in 2017, a rich tradition of Qur'anic recitation in pervades Muslim households. Participants in Qur'anic recitation include those who actively memorize or passively acclimate to it, and through these means, the common Egyptian becomes familiar with its sonic qualities, words, and poetic rhythm. The sound of the adhan and religious verses is heard across

the urban soundscape of Cairo, however according to interviews I conducted and my own observations while conducting fieldwork, it seems that this is currently declining. Since the 2011 revolution and the 2013 military coup, modern Cairo has been riddled with sociopolitical tension, and according to those I spoke with, Egypt's religious soundscape is evolving. "The government is reducing the number of mosques that broadcast the adhan," (Lina, age 57). "We don't hear *taraweeh* through public loudspeakers anymore!" (Manal, age 39).

While they provided an advantage, the presence of relatives and friends in Egypt and my proficiency in colloquial Egyptian Arabic were coincidental, while my choice of fieldwork in Cairo, Egypt, was based on research. I would have gone to India, if that was the most relevant location to answer my questions. When I began to research Qur'anic recitation, its sounds, styles, history, and cultures, I realized the significance of Egypt. Admittedly, I was delighted by Egypt's prominence, because I was positioned well – through my linguistic and cultural competencies as well as through my personal connections – to conduct a study in Cairo. I conducted the two studies I did in Pittsburgh and in Cairo because to understand more about the role of Qur'anic recitation stylistically and pedagogically is to better understand identity formation and attitudes towards religious practice and identity in Egypt and its diasporic community in Pittsburgh.

Through my fieldwork and my years of living in the community, it has become clear to me that Pittsburgh's Muslim population is uniquely diverse ethnically and racially. This community includes a group of Egyptians: immigrants and first-generationers. In the mid-1970s, Egyptians began to emigrate from Egypt, and today, the United States is the fifth most-emigrated to country across Egyptian emigrants (RAD 2015). Like any American immigrant community, they choose to emphasize and leave behind aspects of their culture. Studying what they choose to maintain of Islamic practice and Egyptian Qur'anic recitation culture, and how these choices

impact their lives, opinions, and attitudes, helps shape a better understanding of this relatively new diasporic community.

The community I studied in Cairo in the summer of 2017 was affluent relative to the majority of Egyptian citizens, being of the “upper-middle class.” The individuals were educated to a college level or above, and many were well-travelled, whether for education, work, or otherwise.

The key points of comparison are as follows:

- What role does the recitation of the Qur’an play in the lives of these two communities?
- How do Egyptian youth in Cairo and Pittsburgh perceive different styles of recitation?
- Is Qur’anic recitation compared to music? Why or why not?
- How does religious practice affect their perceptions of Egypt and the Egyptian identity?

In both Pittsburgh and Cairo, Qur’anic recitation was considered an important part of life by interlocutors. “[Without the Qur’an,] I think my understanding [of Islam] would be a lot more limited and would take a lot longer. Learning to recite the Qur’an [as a kid] was huge,” said Ibrahim, from Pittsburgh. “We recite the Qur’an, not just read it, because I think it gives us these primal feelings – reactions to melodies are in our nature. I don’t think I’ve ever just ‘read’ it. Reciting it is the only way I know how,” said Tarik, from Cairo. “If I’m feeling stressed, I’ll listen to the Qur’an. It’s soothing,” said Leila, of Pittsburgh.

In interviews, interlocutors commonly expressed that they chose to listen to Qur’anic recitation in times of stress, panic, fear, or general discomfort. Across interviews in Egypt and Pittsburgh, there was little coherence about whether Qur’anic recitation must be listened to with

full attention, rather than playing in the background. Many interlocutors believed that it must be listened to with full attention, and brought the concept up in conversation, but did not adhere to the concept strongly in practice. The association between Qur'anic recitation, its role as a soothing practice, and family interaction was also apparent in both field studies. Tarik, Soha, and Nadine spoke about memories of their parents playing Qur'anic recitation on cassette tapes for them to fall asleep to, much like lullabies. And Leila, Ibrahim and his siblings, and Bilal all recalled listening to the sounds of a Qur'an reciter in the car on family road trips.

However, I observed that Qur'anic recitation still manifests itself in very different ways in Pittsburgh and Cairo. The involvement of Qur'anic recitation in the everyday lives of those I studied in Cairo extends beyond the description in Chapter 1 of the Qur'an's sound being ever-present in the public soundscape. In Pittsburgh, I found interaction with the Qur'an to be mostly spurred by one's own agency and largely confined to the private sphere. While *taraweeh* prayers were not a part of my fieldwork in Pittsburgh – as it was not performed during Ramadan – they were attended during Ramadan by Pittsburgh Egyptian Muslims as well. However, in Pittsburgh, the pressures or motivations for engaging with the Qur'an came from the family circle or close social circle, if at all. Individuals in Pittsburgh learning to recite the Qur'an, teaching it to their children, or listening to it, did so out of personal motivation to maintain identity. These practices were done if and when Pittsburgh interlocutors desired to. And as discussed, this individual practice of religion was a point of nostalgia for Egypt among some I spoke with. On the other hand, I observed engagement with the Qur'an in Cairo to be notably more institutional and present in the drudgeries of daily life, and interweaved with social and professional pressure. For example, one of the Egyptian college entrance exams require Muslim students to learn passages of the Qur'an and write them from memory on the exam. Failure to succeed in these exams –

taken only once – drastically affect an Egyptian student’s future professional prospects (See Chapter 3). These differences in the environment in which Egyptians practice Qur’anic recitation through listening, reciting, and memorizing, are important to keep in mind when discussing the experiences and attitudes of individuals in Pittsburgh and Cairo.

It seems that the general role that Qur’anic recitation plays – in daily life, pedagogically, and for spiritual comfort – has been maintained across the diaspora, and that there is little difference between what the nature of Qur’anic engagement is like in the personal lives of those I observed and interviewed in Egypt versus in Pittsburgh. However, in addition to individual motivations for reciting the Qur’an, certain social pressures to recite the Qur’an exist in Egypt alone. These pressures include maintaining an image of religiosity within a certain standard of public respectability, and achieving high scores on college entrance exams. On the other hand, in Pittsburgh, motivations for Qur’anic recitation seem to include a desire to maintain and build identity in a new country.

At the end of every interview I conducted in both Pittsburgh and Cairo, I asked my interlocutor if he or she would like to recite a part of the Qur’an for me. I did not observe any trends in responses to this request in either location. Their responses varied, and those who hesitated or refused often cited not having anything memorized well enough to recite to me. I found this interesting, because one does not need to recite from memory, and could recite as they read from a printed copy of the Qur’an. But this reason for not reciting seemed significant. Perhaps, because Qur’an is given a high status – higher than that of music – interlocutors felt that they must be connected to it or deeply affected by it, and that it must be memorized, in their hearts, before they felt worthy enough to recite it. Or perhaps, people didn’t like hearing themselves recite aloud. “*Souti mish helw*” (I don’t have a nice voice) some people said, which

could either imply that they were simply self-conscious, or felt that the Qur'an deserved to only be recited by nice voices

In Pittsburgh, participants often described more melodic renditions of Qur'anic recitation as "more emotional." "Well I liked a lot more the way this was recited. I like the sound of his voice. It also sounded like there was more emotion when he was saying it. The fluctuation of the tone [definitely makes a difference]," said Bilal, a man in his twenties from Pittsburgh. "His voice is richer, if that makes sense, also there's more emotion in it," said Leila of Pittsburgh about Al-Minshawi. "You can kind of like hear passion in his voice. The way he articulates his words and the way he enunciates—I feel like it's comforting to me, this voice," said Ibrahim.

First-generation Egyptian Americans I spoke with in Pittsburgh explained that emotional or passionate Qur'anic recitation facilitated greater personal connection with the Qur'an. Interestingly, Egyptian interlocutors did not make this comment. To equate melody with emotion is to equate less melodic delivery, which characterizes the *murattal* recordings of Abdul-Basit and Al-Minshawi I presented, with lack of emotion. I noticed this lack of association between melody and emotion early on in my fieldwork in Egypt, and I speculate that it may be due in part to several factors. First, there exists an increased vocabulary in Arabic to describe music, which I became aware of during interviews. Interlocutors would use several different nouns to describe sonic phenomena that all are normally referred to as either "music" or "sound," in English. This results in an increased aptitude for non-musicians to describe sounds and music accurately. Secondly, Egyptian young adults have a naturally deeper and more fluent comprehension and grasp of Arabic, the language of the Qur'an, than their first-generation American counterparts. As such, they rely less on Qur'anic recitations' aesthetics of melody, melisma, and modal change – characterized by Pittsburgh first generation interlocutors as "emotional" - to create their

connection to the Qur'an. Instead, the connection is established through understanding of the meaning directly. Finally, the lack of exposure to prominent Egyptian reciters in Pittsburgh may create an unfamiliarity with and an aversion to their sound.

Egyptian and Pittsburgh interlocutors equally expressed various opinions on the topic of Qur'an's relationship to music. When asked whether they considered Qur'anic recitation to be music, some responded hesitantly, some responded negatively, while others responded affirmatively without hesitation. During my research before I traveled to Egypt, I considered the hypothesis that those in Egypt would find it less acceptable to categorize Qur'anic recitation as music. This was based on the debate which exists amongst Muslims about the permissibility of listening to music in Islam (Marcus 2007) and because of the previously established regard for music as an art form that is engaged with for pleasure and frivolous indulgence – as opposed to a weighty entity such as the Qur'an, believed to be divine (Nelson 1985). However, while these two points were involved in individuals' positions on the subject, I did not notice any significant increase in the frequency of aversion to the subject amongst those who lived in Egypt relative to Egyptian Americans.

- “I don't know. I think so? Just because it's something that's enjoyable for people to listen to if you actually do enjoy it and it's very similar.” (Bilal, Pittsburgh)
- “There's a certain etiquette that comes with listening to Qur'an that doesn't exist for music. That being said, in a way, I could see it being musical in a sense, that it does create that sense of emotion or feeling that music does at well. But I wouldn't call it music.” (Ibrahim, Pittsburgh)
- “I would call it music, since it's a bunch of sounds put together... But you don't really listen to Qur'an like you listen to music. Not casually, like that...” (Tarik, Cairo)

An occurrence that was very unexpected, was that Egyptian interlocutors alone expressed confusion at the question “Do you consider Qur’an to be music?”

Samia, an interlocutor in Cairo, responded in confusion, “Do you mean *musiqa* or *ughniya*...?” I was shocked, the first time that I heard hesitation in response to my question in Egypt, because those I spoke with in Pittsburgh had never hesitated to answer due to a misunderstanding of the question. If those in Pittsburgh hesitated, it was only because they were not sure of their answers right away.

I quickly realized that my question was unraveling due to the language with which I was conducting my interviews. In Arabic, *musiqa* is a cognate of “music,” but it does not imply the broad spectrum of pleasurable, intentional, and organized sound that “music” in English does. In fact, a similar word with such broad meaning does not exist in Arabic. Instead, several words of narrower connotation are used. *Musiqa*, I was taught in Egypt, usually brings to mind a piece that involves musical instruments, and may or may not include vocals. *Aghaani* (“songs,” s. *ughniya*) translates loosely to “songs,” but specifically refers to pieces sung with the human voice. But when I asked my research question, I didn’t *mean* to ask whether Qur’an was perceived to be an *ughniya* and certainly it wasn’t *musiqa*, since its recitation never involves instruments in mainstream Islam. I meant to ask whether Qur’anic recitation could be associated with “music,” in the broad sense that the English word entails.

And so, some interlocutors got it, and others did not. And I consider this to be a flaw in my own expectations for the study, as well as a demonstrative learning experience about the ways in which language shapes thought and understanding of one’s own cultures and traditions.

Here, the differences between interlocutors’ native languages of English and Arabic are highlighted, and the ways in which they responded to the question highlights a difference in the

ways Egyptian youth whose native language is Arabic think about their religious traditions differently from their Egyptian American counterparts in Pittsburgh. It is possible that Egyptians are more hesitant to categorize recitation as “music” because there are so many words to describe different kinds of music and aspects of music-like phenomena that to describe Qur’anic recitation as music is to simply lump multiple categories into one. Even immigrants to the United States, whose mother language is Arabic and for whom English is a second language did not bat an eye when I asked them “Do you consider Qur’an to be music?” in English.

Several Pittsburgh Egyptian youth in my study expressed that religious practice was easier in Egypt, emphasizing the efforts they and their immigrant parents made to implement Islamic practice and belief in their daily lives. They praised their parents for their efforts, and were careful to be respectful about their peers’ various faiths when discussing them with me. “Over here (US), you’re just not surrounded by those [Islamic] values. It’s a lot easier to be Muslim in Egypt.” (Bilal, Pittsburgh)

Even Leila, who did not agree with the idea that practice being easier in Egypt inherently meant it was more meaningful, intentional, or valuable, acknowledged that “In Egypt, you hear the Qur’an all the time...”

On the other hand, Egyptian youth expressed copious amounts of skepticism about the ways Egyptians practice religion in Egypt – Islam and Christianity both.

Hassan: “Islam here is really not practiced sincerely. People just do it to be perceived well by society.”

Soha: “I wish I could wear an *abaya* here... It’s just not considered professional.”

May: “This ridiculous Egyptian mentality that we have to memorize everything to be good religious people.”

Another interesting emphasis that differed between interlocutors in Egypt and interlocutors in Pittsburgh is what should be emphasized in children's upbringings. Pittsburgh Egyptian Muslims I spoke to – both immigrants and first generationers alike - stressed the difficulties a child can face in learning Arabic or appreciating the Qur'an if he or she is not exposed to and trained in Qur'anic recitation as a child. On the other hand, several of those in Egypt emphasized a frustration with the pervasive Egyptian culture of memorization, criticizing its prioritization of rote memorization over comprehension of the words, meanings, values, and concepts contained within the verses learned. "They can't understand what they're saying!" said Nadine, raising her voice in frustration as the cars honked behind her through the doors of her balcony. We were sitting at her dining table, and she was becoming increasingly thoughtful and stressed about the system in place for educating children in Egyptian tradition. This is consistent with a current trend of exasperation with the status quo of Egyptian cultural tradition and a move towards alternative culture and thought (Gilman 2014).

In Pittsburgh, the immigrant's classic urgency to maintain cultural ties (Maira 2002) is exhibited by the worry about not being able to understand Arabic and grasp Qur'an later in life. Pittsburghers I spoke with were not too concerned about the understanding part in the context of the act of recitation itself. Egyptian frustration with existing system in Egypt was apparent, where the feeling that rote memorization at a young age is suppressive of true understanding and may lead to a misunderstanding or apathy towards religion later in life.

Interestingly, both groups are concerned with creating a "solid foundation" upon which their children can confidently learn about their religion over time and throughout their adult lives.

I observed that in Pittsburgh, the immigrant generation is more interested in the textual meaning of the Qur'an than their first-generation children. Does this have to do with age? Will these young people as they get older, become more textually oriented and more solitary in their interactions with the Qur'an? My data suggests, no. Rather, it appears that the first-generation Egyptian American focus on sonic qualities of Qur'anic recitation is associated with their removal from the Egyptian context. In Egypt, young interlocutors emphasized the meaning of the Qur'an, despite lamenting that the way they were taught the Qur'an overemphasized memorization and did not provide enough textual understanding. In addition, these young Egyptians did not express their experiences with the Qur'an as one that was communal, unlike those I spoke with of the same age in Pittsburgh. Qur'anic recitation was used to build community and strengthen social relationships between first generationers in Pittsburgh in a way that was not mentioned in immigrant or Egyptians in Cairo's experiences. While the action of reciting the Qur'an, is considered to be a diasporic return to one's "putative homeland" (Slobin 2012, 104), it is an American experience unique to those I spoke with in the Pittsburgh community of Egyptians who grew up in the 2000s. Furthermore, it created a sense of unity amongst these young individuals around an aspect of daily life. Qur'anic recitation serves as a musical practice which defines "otherness," while it does not do so in the homeland.

Certainly, young Egyptians who remain in their country of origin cannot serve as a control for this study, as the Egyptian socio-political context has been ripe with change and tumultuous identity questions in modern times. However, the differences seen between them and their American counterparts highlights a major question of the study: What happens when people move to different places, and the context changes from saturated with cultural content to

unsaturated? This is an interesting issue central to the modern experience of American immigration and diaspora.

Egyptian Americans of both generations associated being Egyptian with being Muslim and Islamic practice, whereas Egyptians in Egypt tended to verbally distance the two entities, separating Egyptians from Islam. Leila was the only first generation Egyptian American interlocutor who made a point of separating the two. “I think religion is more important to [my parents] than most things,” she said. “I always feel like they took more pride in being Muslim than being Egyptian.” She said, “They focused a lot on religion more than Egyptian culture specifically. I know some people whose parents focus on speaking a heavily Egyptian dialect at home and [the emphasis is] not necessarily ‘let’s work on your Qur’anic recitation’ or ‘let’s teach you how to read [classical Arabic],’ [other Egyptian parents] just constantly [emphasize] ‘*ammeya* (Egyptian Arabic).” By considering Egyptian Arabic to be a distinct entity from Qur’anic recitation, Leila distinguished between being Egyptian and being Muslim.

Several social factors must be taken into consideration when an effective ethnographer begins to parse through his or her data. I address the generational differences in attitude, opinion, and practice that I noticed throughout the thesis. All interlocutors were of the same social class and economic status, and were of the same ethnicity and race. The only remaining factor to analyze was gender. Is there a gendered element to individuals’ experience with the Qur’an? Surprisingly to me, I did not observe it to be the case in Pittsburgh nor in Cairo. This may be for several reasons.

Firstly, the language of the Qur’an is written mostly in masculine lexical forms, however in Arabic, this is the default gender, and is thus neutral rather than specific to males. Therefore,

the Qur'an's text generally speaks to both men and women, except for particular sections which are distinctly directed solely toward either gender.

Secondly, based on the accounts I heard from interlocutors, there was little difference in the ways in which females were raised to learn the Qur'an compared to their male counterparts. So it naturally follows that there would be little gendered difference in their attitudes towards the Qur'an. One female interlocutor in Cairo, Samia (age 21), described going to the local mosque every weekend with her two older brothers before ping-pong practice, then all three of them leaving early – to the dismay of the sheikh – in order to arrive on time for their sport! Samia relaying her story about going alongside her brothers to the mosque to study the Qur'an, in addition to practicing ping pong with them, indicates that they were not treated differently educationally. I witnessed this to be common amongst others in Samia's socioeconomic class, especially in activities that are considered to be appropriate and safe for individuals of either gender.

Islam carries a long tradition of female Qur'anic scholars, notably Aisha bint Abi-Bakr, the wife of the Prophet Muhammad and widely regarded as an authority by Islamic scholars for her transmission of *ahadith* (Geissinger 2011), which are accounts of the life and sayings of the Prophet, respected by Muslims second to the Qur'an itself. Furthermore, the Qur'an and *ahadith* encourage education of both men and women in Islamic and secular knowledge. These factors may also have influenced the prevalence of women engaging with the Qur'an I witnessed in Cairo. Women I spoke with did not discuss experiences with the Qur'an significantly different to their brothers. Islamic practice contains certain gendered aspects such as in matters of marriage, inheritance and financial responsibilities, but on a day-to-day basis, the ways in which Islam is

practiced by both genders are largely the same. Rituals, prayers, what is forbidden and what is permissible are all gender-neutral.

However, it is possible that the equal treatment of daughters and sons in religious teachings I learned about from Samia and others may be applicable only to the socioeconomic class of the interlocutors involved in this study. All interlocutors in both Pittsburgh and Egypt were from the upper-middle class, where it may be that less Egyptian cultural influences impact the ways in which children are raised Islamically, due to an increased emphasis on cosmopolitanism.

5.0 CONCLUSION

My responsibility as an ethnographer is to sew together threads of information such that they make sense at the end. But not every piece of data collected leads to a concrete conclusion.

Modern ethnographic writing breaks out of the traditional scholarly mold of regimented writing, but because the topic I discuss is challenging and involves multiple layers of information, I have attempted to describe and regulate all the components in an organized and understandable fashion. Despite this, I have found that the questions have still grown out of the ethnography, rather than the ethnography answering my original questions.

In planning the study and during preliminary research, I developed an expectation of a linear investigation, in which I would survey participants about their emotional responses to Qur'anic recitation samples, ask them questions about their backgrounds, and then come to conclusions about the nature of Qur'anic recitation. Considering this, I developed an interview framework, which included questions that I hoped would spark discussion and introspective thought (See Appendix). In this, I was successful. Interlocutors were engaged and interested in the topics I asked them about, and conversations flowed smoothly from one idea to the next, often veering into territory I had not expected, but that helped me to contextualize and better understand an individual's mode of thinking and sense of self. But what was surprising was that sometimes, what I thought were clear questions were not understood by my interlocutors. This led to confusion and sometimes, I needed to reword the question in order for some interlocutors to understand. Other times, questions did not seem relevant to the conversation I had with a

particular interlocutor. Reactions of confusion, misunderstanding, or short responses to questions were valuable responses themselves, of course. Because they indicated to me how an interlocutor perceived a larger question. The most significant example of this is when I began to realize that the question “Do you consider Qur’anic recitation to be music?” collapsed when in Egypt, since the concept of music is much less broadly defined as it is in English. As I discussed in Chapter 4, interlocutors became confused, since the conceptualization of purposeful or pleasurable sound is different in the native Egyptian Colloquial Arabic speaker’s psyche.

Related to this was the challenge I faced in translating my questions to Arabic equivalents when I arrived in Egypt in summer 2017. To translate “What did you think of that [recording]?” verbatim into Egyptian Colloquial Arabic seems unnatural and awkward, and to convert it to its equivalent phrase in Egyptian Colloquial Arabic will almost definitely elicit the response “*Helw*” meaning “It’s nice,” out of convention. So I changed my question to “Is this familiar to you?” which is not exactly the same question as the one I asked in English, but to ask the same question would have been to elicit an irrelevant response. I found that, contrary to my expectation, my interview format was more effective as a dynamic, adjustable entity than a controlled constant.

Nostalgia, as theorized in Chapter 1, manifested itself in two different ways in Pittsburgh and Cairo. In Pittsburgh, the nostalgia I witnessed was tightly associated with a conceptualization of Egyptian society. This is true for both immigrants and first-generationers I spoke with. Much of Battaglia’s concept of “American nostalgia” and its associated longing to return to one’s home was exhibited by those I spoke with in Pittsburgh. Nostalgia in Cairo was also blatantly apparent, to my surprise. I had expected that since those in Cairo had never left, there would be less nostalgia amongst those who I interviewed there. This nostalgia was a memory of a moral, pious, and kind Egypt, discussed in bitter descriptions of Egyptian society

today as a network of corruption, moral facades, capitalistic greed and individual insincerity. As a manifestation of the religious persona, nostalgia captures an essential feature of the religious individual: the aspiration to better oneself, and by extension, one's society. The idea that one's environment could be better, or that oneself could be better if only they were in a better environment, is enhanced by the awareness or imagination of a better place or a better past.

An aspect of this study which I had initially expected to hold more significance was the perception of different styles of Qur'anic recitations. Contrary to my expectations, there was little difference between those in Cairo and those in Pittsburgh in their preferences and perceptions of the various reciters whose samples I played. I – almost simplistically – am inclined to conclude that those of the older generation and those of the younger generation simply enjoy different styles because of their familiarity with the styles of their childhoods and pasts. Consistently, interlocutors referred to styles as being their favorites because they “heard this when I was a kid!”

Small argues, in his book *Musicking*, that “Like any other stimulus, [musical performance] requires active work on the part of the perceiver to convert the raw stimulus into meaning.”(Small 1998, 219) It is based on a preset “grid of relationships that appear as ideal” held by the perceiver (Ibid.). “When we take part, whether as performers or listeners or in any other capacity, in a musical performance that we find beautiful, it must be because the inner relationships of the performance accord, or fit, in some way with those relationships which we imagine to be ideal” (Ibid.)

So interlocutors who listened to Mishary Rashid and found his recordings to be more “beautiful” because it was more “emotional,” responded this way due to the gestures which Mishary Rashid uses that recall an ideal network of preset, positive relationships in the

interlocutor. These included childhood memories, familiarity with melismatic gestures, and the tendency of Arabic music performance practice to be simple and sparse (Rasmussen 2016). These in combination allowed the interlocutor to perceive the recitation as beautiful. I argue that the primary component of this relationship network that influenced the ways in which these gestures were perceived is the connection between the musical gesture and the memories of the interlocutor.

As discussed in Chapter 2, family traditions of listening to certain reciters in the car became fond memories for young adults I spoke with in Pittsburgh. Immigrants in Pittsburgh and older Egyptians I spoke with in Cairo also referred to early morning radio shows which broadcasted Abdul-Basit's recitation every morning before they left for school. And in Chapter 3, Egyptian youth I spoke with referred to Mishary Rashid's voice as being the sound they associated with the Qur'an as children, whether it was because their mother played his cassettes for them as they fell asleep, or because the shops on the street where one lived used to play his recordings on their loudspeakers. "Because people commonly hear particular styles of music played by particular individuals or social groups or in particular regions, music typically serves as a powerful index for these types of identity" (Turino 2008, 8). "Music also commonly indexes the people and situations where we have heard the music" (Ibid.) This is exhibited clearly in first generation Pittsburgh Egyptian Muslims' experiences with Qur'anic recitation I mentioned. It is also exhibited clearly in Nadine's experience hearing Abdul-Basit's voice in her grandma's kitchen, and two interlocutors' experiences hearing Al-Minshawi in the car, and Egyptians who grew up in the 1970s hearing Abdul-Basit on the radio before going to school. The indexicality of Qur'anic recitation was exhibited strongly across all those I spoke with in Pittsburgh and in Cairo. This indicates that part of the emotional draw of the Qur'anic recordings

was not only due to the gestures with which the music of the recitation was recited, but also due to a network of memories associated with the Qur'anic sounds.

But it is also possible that there exists a level of complexity to these preferences which I have not been able to identify. Future, more in-depth analysis of the reasons why individuals prefer certain styles of Qur'anic recitation would benefit from literature review of sound studies and the formation of memories and preferences.

Turino mentions that anthropologist and scientist Gregory Bateson (1972), “notes that the arts are a special form of communication that has an integrative function – integrating and uniting the members of social groups but also integrating individual selves, and selves with the world.” And it seems that interlocutors I spoke with were aware of and in agreement with this concept, that Bateson argues, which is that if typical, verbal language alone were enough for human communication, then the arts – and thus, music – would have disappeared. And in addition, that the patterns presented in the arts provide a means through which human beings become the most deeply connected with the natural world. In this case, the melodic contours, rhythmic patterns, and vocal timbres associated with Qur'anic recitation are the patterns of the Qur'an that allow Muslims to feel connected to God. Since God is considered to be a part of the natural universe in Islamic belief, through musical expression of the Qur'an (God's word), the believer is able to connect to his or her truth.

What was perhaps the most interesting to me throughout this study, and particularly during the time that I conducted interviews in Pittsburgh, was how interlocutors chose to speak about themselves. Specifically, what words they chose to identify themselves with, and how willing they were to do so. I found that those in Pittsburgh whom I spoke to were willing, confident, and almost automatic in their self-identification as “Muslim Egyptian American”

when speaking with me. They were highly aware of what labels they associated themselves with, and had strong abilities to explain why these labels suited their identities. And additionally, there was a high level of nuance in interlocutors' definitions of themselves. Even when discussing the topic casually, Leila was thoughtful about how she placed herself in the context of a changing American culture. "I'm American, but I'm not a normal American either," said Leila. "But then again, so many Americans have diverse backgrounds that it (American culture) is kind of changing now..."

In Egypt, the hyphenated identity is not as blatantly in the public consciousness. Considering the history of race relations and immigration in the United States, there has been and exists a constant demand to identify oneself racially, ethnically, culturally, and religiously. Identifiers exist in Egypt, but in an extremely different way, shaped by a vastly different social history. Rather than where one came from, Egyptians are often defined by their social class and marked by professional labels. In casual and professional conversations alike, Egyptians refer to each other's professions and social statuses often through the use of prefixes, such as "*Doctor*," "*el-Madame*," "*el-Hagga*" (senior individual), etc. The history of colonization, race relations and immigration in the United States creates a vastly different environment, which shapes the ways that everyday individuals view themselves.

Interestingly, interlocutors in Pittsburgh remembered Qur'anic recitation as a social event which helped to build solidarity and a shared identity with other Egyptian Muslim youth. Ironically, the musicality of Qur'anic recitation does not always lend itself to participatory performance. The unpredictability of the melody and rhythm – the former of which is determined entirely by the reciter and the latter of which is dictated by the lexicon of the *surah* – makes it difficult for others to join the main reciter and recite in unison or in a groove. It is done in certain

contexts, for instance in learning situations, in which a lead reciter reads a verse and the others repeat, attempting subconsciously to synchronize with each other. Alternatively, students may take turns each reciting a verse in sequence, what Turino terms *sequential participatory music* “in which everyone takes a turn alone (Turino 2008, 48).” In addition, in mainstream Islamic worship contexts, usually only a single reciter recites while the others listen along during prayer. Despite this, Qur’anic recitation has found itself to be both presentational performance and participatory, allowing a similar experience to what Turino describes as follows: “At such moments, moving together and sounding together in a group creates a direct sense of *being* together and of deeply felt similarity, and hence identity, among participants” (Turino 2008, 43).

I found that despite the vastly different soundscapes in Pittsburgh and Cairo, the role of Qur’an in life is maintained across diaspora, amongst those I spoke with. Seeing melody as emotion in the recitation of the Qur’an indicates a desire for first-generation Pittsburgh Egyptian youth to connect with their cultures through means they can more easily grasp: *sonic appeal*. An emphasis on the affective quality the Qur’an and the purpose of Qur’an in their lives as a means of emotional support and expression of devotion is seen in Pittsburgh alone. Change in language use across diaspora has effects on how questions about religious practice are perceived. And the question of whether Qur’anic recitation is music is an entirely different question in English and Arabic. Language ultimately changes the ways in which Egyptians and first generation Egyptian Americans perceive their religious traditions. Further study and analysis of these communities will elucidate questions about religious practice, identity, and diasporic change. In particular, future studies could find benefit in ethnographically studying other Muslim or Egyptian communities across the United States, or other social classes in Egypt. These comparisons will contribute to a new body of literature on the shaping of American Muslim society and culture.

Additionally, research on gender's role in religious practice and engagement with Qur'anic recitation would be particularly interesting. In a time when many questions are being asked about American Muslims, it is important to analyze aspects of the Egyptian Islamic culture in order to better understand how it evolves and to more clearly understand its impact on individuals' perceptions of themselves and their communities.

APPENDIX

GUIDED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Background

How old are you? (ask if/when appropriate)

Where did you grow up, and how long have you lived in Pittsburgh?

Listening

I'd love to show you a surah.

play Abdul-Basit

Ask specific questions about how they perceived the recording. "Is this familiar to you? Do you know who this was? What did you like about it? How does it make you feel?"

[Repeat for Al-Minshawi then Mishary Rashid]

Other questions:

Did you listen to Quran recitation growing up?

Where? (Through recordings, parents, siblings, at mosque...?)

What did you think of it?

What is the purpose of music in Egypt?

Do you feel there is a difference between the purpose of music in Egypt and in the US?

What about how it's regarded?

How are different types of music regarded in Egypt? In Pittsburgh?

Do you consider Qur'an to be music? Why or why not?

What are the differences between Quranic recitation and music?

where would you buy a Quran tape?

What is Quranic recitation to you?

Why is it recited? Why not just read, not "sung"?

What do you feel is the difference between hearing Qur'an read and Qur'an recited?

Are some reciters "better" or "worse" than others? What makes a reciter "good"?

What do you think of children learning to recite the Quran?

Is it important to teach your children to recite Quran? (or: How do you feel about children learning to recite?)

Was it important in your family to learn to recite? Why?

Did you learn to recite Quran? At what age?

How do you think people get better at reciting the Quran?

How did you learn? Who taught you? Did it involve listening?

Have you ever heard of women reciting the Quran?

Would you like to recite something for me?

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