

Music and Trance as Methods for Engaging with Suffering

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Abstract This article explores a religious community in Algeria where, with the ignition and structure of ritual music, a wide spectrum of trance processes are explicitly cultivated so that pain and suffering can be engaged, moved, and expressed through trance dancing. The way that trance is described in *dīwān* indicates that it is understood as emerging primarily from the realms of feelings, particularly the dialectical role of painful feelings. Furthermore, varieties of trance are named and indexed either by the sorts of affects they involve or as types of actions that trance feels like. Thus, rather than trance being something of the “mind” here, it is an affective experience, ordered by how it *feels*. This article takes a close-up, sensory ethnographic approach to flesh out the rich, detailed taxonomy of feeling intensities that are used to describe how trance feels, examining what tranced suffering does both socially and personally. [affect, body, suffering, Sufism, trance]

Introduction

In the plaza behind a long row of towering apartment blocks in a residential district of Oran, Algeria, a large canvas tent was erected and metal barriers partitioned the space for the *dīwān* ritual. I propped myself up against one of the stabilizing cement blocks inside in order to preserve my energy for the seven hours of music ahead. The ritual began with lighthearted, playful opening songs to prepare the atmosphere after which we arrived at *Lafu*, the song whose role it is to musick the transition (*yfarresh*) of the entire social field—the complete aesthetic, affective, and experiential imaginary—into the sacred ritual proper. When the next song was announced by its main theme, a middle-aged woman sitting near me, Aisha, began to moan, burying her face in her hands and leaning over her crossed legs. Rocking back and forth, growing increasingly distressed, her moaning spilled into wails as she clutched at her legs. Several women near her encouraged her to get up, to rise and move toward the *ṭarāḥ*, the ritual space in front of the musicians, and move her body in order to cultivate trance. She ignored them and continued to rock and wail. The women insisted, “Get up, get up!” (*Nodī, nodī!*). One of them, Layla, waved over the spiritual leader (*moqedm*) to bring the ritual incense that helps individuals in borderline states to transition into deeper ones.

After picking his way through the crowd, the *moqedm* held the brazier of smoking incense under Aisha’s drooping head. Her rocking and wailing subsided somewhat, and she was then half pulled and half pushed to her feet by the women nearby. Guided to the *ṭarāḥ* (ritual space), leaning against Layla’s shoulder with eyes closed, she walked partially sideways as Layla helped her pick her way through the crowd, indicating to her where to step, and

delivering her to the front where the *moqedm* took over her care. In one swift motion, he whisked a green hooded cloak over Aisha's head—green is the color for the song that was playing. The *moqedm* patted her back firmly in encouragement, and, gradually, Aisha began to sway side to side in rhythm, swinging her torso. She bent more deeply at the waist, indicating that her trance state was intensifying. Her wailing shifted into a heavy, exhaling groan, expelled in time to the music as part of the technique of emotional release in trance.

As the call and response singing condensed into smaller phrases, the *ginbrī* (the main instrument, a three-string lute) compressed the riffs, and the metal clappers drove the quickening of the tempo—a feature of all *dīwān* songs. Aisha's movements also quickened and intensified, her arms lifting up and punching to the side in rhythm, her bending deepening until she fell onto her knees in front of the master of the *ginbrī*. From that position, she placed her hands on the ground to steady herself so that she could toss her head vigorously to the beat until, finally, she collapsed on her side and the music stopped. Just as with every completed trance episode, the musicians responded with a chanted prayer for the “Messenger of God,” the Prophet Muḥammad. This invocation blesses the space, recognizes the alleviation of Aisha's suffering, and reinforces the importance of human humility in relation to divine mystery.

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This article explores the Sufi ritual, *dīwān* (lit. “assembly”), in Algeria where, with the ignition and structure of ritual music, a wide spectrum of trance processes are explicitly cultivated so that pain and suffering can be moved and expressed through trance dancing. Trancers (*jedebbīn*, pl.) learn to cultivate trance through inner sensing of their own pain and suffering and, to the extent that they are consciously able, *jedebbīn* then “work” (*kbedem*) these painful feelings with the physicality of trance-dance movements and emotional expression like shouting. Ritual musicians are crucial to helping *jedebbīn* feel into and physically work their states through attentive musical responses such as by emphasizing or repeating certain parts of the music that *jedebbīn* are particularly responding to. The approach to pain and suffering here is exceptionally resonant with Asad's argument that, rather than being passive or as a state of victimization, pain can be active “as a *kind* of action” (2003, 69; italics in original). In *dīwān* too, pain and suffering are active; the ritual is full of actions that express and engage painful feelings.

Grappling with, analyzing, and representing trance has long posed an existential challenge to academic inquiry. Music and trance scholarship has mirrored, if not directly engaged with, relevant polemics in social theory, philosophy, and anthropology. At one extreme, philosophical paradigms like positivism were reflected in scientific approaches such as Neher's (1962) take on rhythm “causing” trance. At the other extreme, relativist, phenomenological approaches have been echoed by ethnomusicological scholarship (notably Friedson 1996; Norton 2009). While various takes on embodiment in music and trance scholarship privileged phenomenology, they have at times tried to strike a middle ground, such as Becker (2004) who aimed to bridge culture and biology by addressing the working of the limbic system in conjunction with culturally framed rhythmic entrainment. Alternative approaches, often overlapping, have sought broad structuralism (e.g., Lewis 1971; Rouget 1985) or

situated trance within single, cultural practices like traditional medicine (Roseman 1993), and relationships with ancestors (Berliner 1981), or embodied memory (Boddy 1989; Stoller, 1989, 1995; Emoff 2002; Kapchan 2007). While anthropologists and sociologists (notably Lewis 1971; Rouget 1985; Becker 2004) have surveyed the mechanisms of trance, causal explanation is not my priority here. Like Jankowsky (2010, 24), I do not see trance as a “problem to be solved.”

Part of the difficulty of dealing with trance has to do with its implications of “consciousness” that is notoriously difficult to define, much less study. While we can no longer “equate the realm of consciousness phenomena . . . with the realm of mind” (Frankfurt 1987, 27), trance has often been associated with states of the mind or the brain. However, the way that trance is described in *dīrwān* indicates that it is understood as emerging primarily from the realms of *feelings*, particularly the dialectical role of *painful* feelings. Furthermore, varieties of trance are named and indexed either by the sorts of affects they involve (such as chills, paralysis, or being pulled on by an invisible force) or as types of actions that trance feels like (such as a sense of traveling, or being hit by something). Thus, rather than trance being something of the “mind” here, it is an *affective* experience, ordered by how it *feels*.

For this reason, while there are many phenomena at work in *dīrwān* rituals that could be put into conversation with the robust anthropological literature on “spirit possession” ceremonies, this essay primarily speaks to two bodies of literature: the anthropology of pain and suffering and the anthropological and ethnomusicological scholarship of trance. The latter is particularly needed because, aside from Becker (2004) and Kapchan (2007), the importance of affects and emotions, specifically painful feelings pertaining to trance, has not been widely studied.

The key assertions of this essay are that (1) the main goal of *dīrwān* is to provide a space for suffering with the intent to emotionally and physically engage with it through musicked trance dancing and manage it in ways that exercise the relational nature of suffering; (2) trance varieties, as various states of consciousness, are considered primarily *affective* experiences and processes—rather than processes happening in the “mind” or brain—because of trance’s inextricability with human suffering in *dīrwān*; and (3) the actualization of suffering through the grammar of trance *does* things: because suffering is essential to developing a strong character, humility, and closeness to God, the suffering person is honorable and trustworthy. The approach here is a “close-up,” sensory ethnographic one that privileges the rich taxonomy of feeling intensities that are used by *dīrwān* insiders to describe the many ways that trance can *feel*. As well as detailing why and how suffering and trance are connected and what they do for individuals and the *dīrwān* community, this article describes the complexities of trance dancing—what it involves and how it works—from onset to completion.

What is *dīrwān*?

Algerian *dīrwān* is a musico-ritual tradition that originated, coalesced, and developed from the trans-Saharan slave trade, combining the practices and sensibilities of various sub-Saharan

ethnolinguistic groups. *Dīwān* developed over hundreds of years of trans-Saharan traffic by the descendants of these diverse populations as they came into contact with Berber and Arab cultures and social organization in present-day Algeria. Under three centuries of Ottoman rule, these populations were heavily influenced by the local, popular religious practices and the sociopolitical organization of Sufi lineages. Subsequently, *dīwān* gradually developed into an Afro-Maghribi ritual practice predicated on many of the same structures of other musical traditions within North African popular Islam: saint veneration, trance, and musically generated ritual healing (Dermenghem 1954; Pâques 1964; Turner 2017).

Dīwān insiders, *ūlād dīwān* (lit. “children of *dīwān*”), identify Bilāl, the first *muezzin* (caller to prayer) and a former Abyssinian slave, as their spiritual father and refer to their community as “Bilāliyya” after the Sufi pattern of taking the name of the leader or *shaykh*. Today, *dīwān* functions quite practically as mental-emotional healthcare. *Dīwān* rituals are semipublic, community events open to all ages. Their primary goal is to cultivate registers of trance in adepts who can range from amateur to expert. Thus, they are often sponsored by someone who is “afflicted” with emotional, mental, or physical pain and suffering, although they may also be organized around key dates in the Muslim calendar, such as the Prophet Muḥammad’s birthday.

The ritual architecture is entirely founded on 12 or more musical suites that are divided up by content and origin so that a given ritual can contain 80 or more songs (*brāj*, pl; *borj*, sing), always played in the same order, and can last from six to eight hours. Anywhere from three to dozens of *brāj* (songs) can make up a single suite. Each suite requires the meticulous utilization of specific ritual props, colors, scents, foods, and physical movements or ritual actions. This aesthetic protocol means that all the senses are continually engaged, intensifying the affective experience which, in turn, helps precipitate trance for those so inclined. Almost all suites can induce trance states although, according to the nature of the *brāj* (songs) within, these states vary dramatically in intensity.

Quite importantly, in Arabic, no single term exists for what we call “trance.”¹ In *dīwān*, “trance,” as a general phenomenon, is a dynamic continuum where all trance types share a repertoire of bodily affective phenomena (like chills, paralysis, grief, or anger), but they are differentiated by the intensity of these feelings and the degree of loss of control on the part of the trancer (*jedēb(a)* sing., male/female). During any given episode, *jedebbīm* (trancers) typically fluctuate along the continuum of trance types, from mild to intense, including trances that involve supernatural agents who sometimes take partial or total control of human bodies. In this regard, *dīwān* can be considered part of the family of “spirit possession” rituals, although this is not primarily how these rituals are locally portrayed. Spirit inhabitation of human bodies occurs in *some* trance, but these cases are only one type of many trance registers.² In general, information on the origins and ritual behavior of “spirits” or other supernatural entities is sparse at best and often contradictory. That is not to say that supernatural entities are not important. They can influence the labeling of trance quality because all spirits have particular aesthetic and emotional qualities to them: some are serene, others are violent. If a *jedēb(a)* (trancer) is regularly afflicted by a spirit, his

or her social identity becomes wrapped up with the emotional and aesthetic qualities of that spirit. He or she becomes known for the associated song-spirit as a badge of vulnerability. However, even when speaking about these cases, the supernatural is usually downplayed, and, instead, the intense affects and emotions involved are emphasized. This is because, regardless of the type of trance unfolding or one's viewpoint on the existence of spirits, trance in *d̄r̄wān* is always *affective* terrain: it is always wrapped up with painful feelings.³

Connections Between Suffering and Trance

The Background

Many cumulative conditions foster a favorable atmosphere to make trance possible, including a comfortable ritual location, the social warmth of the community, and, especially, the quality of the musicians (Turner 2020). With the right sensory conditions, certain feelings are stirred. Like so many other Sufi practices across North Africa and beyond, in *d̄r̄wān*, it is accepted that feelings can be so intense that they spill over into trance states and “take over.” In *d̄r̄wān*, however, these feelings are always painful ones: trance is primarily understood to precipitate out of some kind of suffering or *ghabīna*. From injustice and offense to racism and genocide, *ghabīna* indexes a large range of types of suffering and painful feelings.⁴

In this context, “feelings” (*iḥsās*) refer to a broad category including concepts of senses and sensibilities; however, the feelings that are most directly related to trance are best translated with the Anglophone terms “emotion” and “affect.” It is difficult to isolate emotion and affect because, especially regarding suffering and trance, affects (including bodily senses) and emotions are deeply intertwined; their conceptual boundaries often bleed into one another, and they often create or subsume one another. For example, as well as (or instead of) a suffering adept sobbing out of despair, he might become paralyzed, experience stomach ache, or collapse. His physical pain may cause him to sob, or his sobbing may cause physical pain, and these symptoms may start and stop suddenly or ebb and flow. In ritual, mental-emotional pain and physical pain are coterminous. Indeed, as Asad pointed out, particularly when it comes to painful feelings, physical pain and mental-emotional pain are central to one another and perhaps “two aspects of the same event” (2003, 81n27). Such is the case with affect and emotion here. Because emotions and affects usually overlap in such a way as to be quite difficult to separate, such entanglement is most accurately translated as “feeling.”⁵

Given that the primary goal of *d̄r̄wān* is to cultivate trance, and the primary constituents of trance are various forms of suffering, what does suffering do here?

The Sufi context in which *d̄r̄wān* exists is a necessary background to consider first. John Bowker asserts that, “what a religion has to say about suffering reveals, in many ways more than anything else, what it believes the nature and purpose of existence to be” (1975, 2). Indeed, in *Redemptive Suffering* (1978), Mahmoud Ayoub argues,

“Purposeful suffering is the holy struggle (*jihād*) of man in the way of God. This is so regarded both at the personal level and at the social level, where personal suffering could

be meaningful for the society and its religious life through history. This idea has its definite roots in the Qur'ān and continued to play an important role in later Islamic piety, especially in Sufism." (1978, 15)

Likewise, in *d̄r̄wān*, suffering is purposeful and a critical part of existence. Suffering not only causes one to draw nearer to God, but it is a part of life that belongs to the nature of God's omnipotence and omniscience. Adepts consistently stated that only God knew the origins and natures of people's suffering and that one must always remain humble and gracious; suffering had a purpose even if that purpose was not known or ever revealed. This virtue was embodied partly through the chanted prayers that interspersed the ritual music and by the fact that the ritual was stopped for the call to prayer.⁶

Bowker continues, stating that "suffering not only forms character but reveals character: the ability to bear pain without complaint or despair separates the "sincere from the insincere" (1975, 111). Similarly, Asad points out that, in Islam, "[a]part from being necessary to the development of moral discrimination, the endurance of pain is considered to be a necessary means of cultivating the virtue of *sabr* (endurance, perseverance, self-control) that is itself basic to all processes of virtue-acquisition" (2003, 90). Furthermore, pain can be, itself, agentive (79). Sharing this perspective, *d̄r̄wān jedebbīn* (trancers) who were known to suffer greatly and trance consistently were treated with noteworthy respect, empathy, and deference. Others spoke honorably and generously about them, and their states were meticulously cared for in ritual.

Furthermore, the ability and courage to attempt to engage painful feelings in trance dancing is a status marker. Trance is not for the weak spirited; it is almost always an unpleasant process. Trance dancing one's suffering is an ability to both give in at the ideal moment, take control at the ideal moment, or just be courageous enough to not have any sense of control during the unfoldment of trance. Like case studies in other field sites, suffering can be a way to demonstrate to others or to oneself, "simply the power to endure" (Das 1997, 69). Just as Ayoub argues that "suffering is proportionate to man's piety and status with God" (1978, 24) in *d̄r̄wān*, those who were deemed to have *no* experience with suffering were often mistrusted or seen as less moral, such as one white, wealthy benefactor of the rituals about whom I frequently heard such criticism.⁷

Similarly, high-ranking ritual experts stated that because a certain popular *d̄r̄wān* singer was white and he had therefore never suffered racism, he could never reach the epitome of respect. Others expressed similar views: notably, that suffering could be heard in the tone quality of any singer's voice. The best musicians were those who had endured hardships in life because it engendered a special ability to not only relate to and musically affect others, but to elicit trance. In brief, this stance is reminiscent of James Davies's (2011) "positive model of emotional discontent" in that suffering is not necessarily disempowering (see also Asad 2003, 71). On the contrary, "meaning and fulfillment in human life can be attained not in spite of, but *through* suffering" (Ayoub 1978, 23, italics mine).

The Foreground

In *dīrwān*, suffering is at once religious, social, and personal. A person's suffering is embedded in a broader Muslim subjectivity (humble before God, a courageous martyr), an individual subjectivity intertwined with the *dīrwān* community of social relationships (that sometimes also cause suffering), and with one's own personal struggles, quotidian hardships, and familial ghosts of suffering. Sometimes suffering was deemed to belong to someone else, a kind of ghostly disembodied suffering that attached itself to a person.⁸ Exploring suffering in *dīrwān* as an ethnographer certainly had a phantom-like quality; its meanings were often just as ineffable as the trance it precipitated.⁹

First, there was a sense that one should not speak too much about pain and suffering. Although it is expressed in public, what suffering is “about” is still deeply private. In the beginning, when others did indulge my questions and concern with speculations, they whispered and were concise: a death in the family, relationship problems, financial stress, or illness. What was “wrong” not only depended on individual life circumstances, family history, and social position, but also on who I asked about whom; there was no single type or cause of suffering related to trance and no single way to interpret that trance. These kinds of cursory exchanges about “what was wrong,” then, primarily served as sympathetic symbolic gestures, a way of staking out with verbal landmarks the topography of what was not being said or what could not be spoken.

One reason for such discretion was the fearful respect around supernatural beings—both God and other entities. Discussing others' misfortunes at too much length was risky because speaking of bad things could attract them; words had energetic vibration that could send ripples out and affect change.¹⁰ Moreover, speaking too much about suffering—complaint—could indicate a weakness of character and an inability to bear pain that could reflect negatively on one's faith. Indeed, some shared their stories of suffering or distress with me primarily out of *pride* for what they could bear or how deeply they could feel, like several young men who boasted to me about how they struggled in various rituals, from enduring paralysis to uncontrollable crying.

However, some stories of suffering were simply not possible to convey. Rather, faithfulness to such suffering is possible only through the “very *indirectness*” of its telling (Caruth 2016, 27; italics mine). Analogously, trance and what it suggests for going in and out of various registers of consciousness—and therefore, varying abilities to stay present with or narrate pain—is a reflection of the anemic communicability and shareability of pain (see Trnka 2008). Similarly, in ritual, there was often a silence around “causes” or details of suffering. When it was possible and appropriate to ask for more context to tranced suffering, my subjects indicated that these were not the “right” questions. Rather, the consensus was “suffering is suffering.” As Gordon (2008) put it, perhaps this is because explanation itself often fails to provide comfort or solution.

Along these lines, over 18 months of fieldwork, the trans-Saharan slave trade was only mentioned by *ūlād dīrwān* a handful of times and was sometimes denied as having occurred at

all. When it *was* brought up in conversation or interviews with my interlocutors or even when people spoke of it in ritual, it was regarded as a largely unknown past, with the exception of some family roots across the Sahara (e.g., surnames) and grandparents who had once passed on stories that had since been forgotten. Unlike its sister tradition, the Moroccan *gnawa*, an explicit connection between *slavery* and suffering was never made by my interlocutors and only a handful of song texts reference the trade and the suffering it imposed.¹¹ Nevertheless, *ūlād dīrwān* take pride in having a strong connection to their parents' and grandparents' generations and to their community histories. After all, *dīrwān* is transmitted along family lines. Several reported that certain *jedebbīn* in trance had visions of their deceased relatives, began trancing to these relatives' songs, and could access some of the feelings these relatives had. Cvetkovich's (2007) notion of ancestral "emotional archives" is helpful here, archives that, despite being vague or ephemeral, pour through and grip bodies.

Whether or not there was explicit knowledge about the slave trade, a sense of *narrative* was nearly completely absent.¹² As Ahmed explored, rather than "what is pain about?" the better question was "what does pain do?" (2013, 27). While the intimate details of pain and suffering were rarely discussed at length, my *dīrwān* friends spent hours talking to me about *trance*: how it fills the minds, bodies, and hearts of *dīrwān* adepts. Although also difficult to talk about for their ineffability, trance registers could stand in for talking about suffering. Trance terms were often used as euphemistic taxonomies, meaning that it was far more appropriate to ask about a person's trance type than about their suffering. For example, *jedebbīn* whose mental health was deemed rocky due to struggles with ill-intentioned spirits were called *maḍrūbbīn*: "the ones who are struck."

Trance phenomena have a natural barrier: unlike human suffering that is embedded in earthly realms, trance belongs to divine mystery. If those I asked about trance did not have answers, it was because of this mystery: they were not intended to know and neither was I, particularly given my lack of ritual training. Consistent with Sufi epistemology, the very inaccessibility of such knowledge is precisely what indexes its stature and importance. Thus, because I could only learn what I was "meant" to learn, as I was told, my subjects were more comfortable sharing the details of trance than details of suffering. We talked about what trance does to manage or shape suffering and what it does to *cause* suffering, particularly when it made harsh physical demands, such as some trance states that drive *jedebbīn* to move vigorously for hours until collapsing from exhaustion. Movement could be "both a cure and a pathology" (Pinto 2011).

We discussed the aesthetics of trance such as what it means to trance well and correctly. Adepts spoke about how trance could shape and historicize a sense of self in time given the hundreds of *dīrwānat* (plural) a *jedēb(a)* attends over his or her lifetime. Indeed, from early on in my fieldwork, no one ever seemed to be "cured" by ritual or was "discharged." The terms "healing" or "catharsis" never seemed appropriate to describe what took place because the kinds of suffering that *dīrwān* attends to resist closure. Life was deemed to be full of inevitable suffering. Pauline Boss's (1999) coining of "ambiguous loss" speaks to this dynamic where getting over pain is not the goal. Rather, there are certain kinds of suffering

that cannot be mended and that need to be returned to, over and over, so that the emotional and physical bodies of individuals become a living memorial.¹³

Sharing this approach to suffering, *dīwān* provides a temporal structure in which pain can emerge without the need for “coherent” narration.¹⁴ The regularity and repetition of *dīwān* rituals—in high season, sometimes three a week—lets suffering continuously inhabit its networks of meanings where the burden of sequence can be taken on by the robust ritual musical structure. It was in the physical and affective repetition of pain—by going into trance in ritual, over and over, always to the same songs—that individual suffering not only took on a public presence that could be shared (seen, felt, and cared for by others) but that staked a claim to suffering and expanded one’s social value and visibility: those who suffer become known and respected for “their songs.” The quality with which *jedebbīn* tranced to their songs, however, was a common topic of conversation. Such discussions were always rich with the local vocabulary for trance that was based in the many ways trance feels.

The Affective Terrain and Taxonomies of Trance

As we saw with Aisha’s example, every variety of trance in *dīwān* begins with a musically activated unsettling of what is considered a “normative” bodily-affective state.¹⁵ This unsettling marks active thresholds and their penetration: thresholds between one’s physical body, emotions, affective state, mind, and sense of self. This bodily-affective response is a visible, physically experienced moment when shifts of control occur between the person in question, the “subject” entering into any kind of trance state, and some “other” aspect, whether it be a strong emotion or some other agent.

At the moment of musical ignition, some people report feeling nauseated, dizzy, or heavy, while many others reported feeling a knot in the solar plexus from the beginning of a song. Others curl into a ball and bury their faces in their knees or hang their heads and sway. Many said at the moment trance comes on, “I just don’t feel right” (*ma ḥasīt mlīh*), and it is common to tremble (*zenzel*). On the positive side, several ritual elders spoke to me about the common sensation of shivers or gooseflesh: *chuwwek*.

These first moments when a *borj* starts can explode with movement. Many will run toward the ritual space (*tarab*) but others, particularly in cases of supernatural inhabitation where affects can be particularly extreme and unpleasant, will run away from the *tarab*, trying to avoid or escape the sensations brought on by the music, similar to how Aisha initially refused the advice to get up and move. Some adepts even bolt for the door, and it is customary that a friend or family member should restrain them or bring them back. However, the first few moments of musical ignition can also bind and block movement. Several men reported that they become immediately physically paralyzed (*t’awwej*) when they heard the melody of a certain *borj*.¹⁶ One of these men shared his detailed story with me, visibly shaken by and worried about what happened to him, and afraid to attend a *dīwān* again. Others go limp or pass out, collapsing in place.

As trance takes shape, three common terms are utilized to refer to broad, possible categories: *jedba*, *ḥāl*, and *bori*. These registers are differentiated primarily by their affective intensity, and this intensity is in direct correlation to the loss of human agency. Agency here means the ability of a *jedēb(a)* to consciously act. In other words, while *all* trance involves some kind of agency loss, the more intense the trance is, the less self-control a *jedēb(a)* has. The most common register is *jedba*, meaning “attraction” from the Arabic root *j-dh-b*. This attraction (note: an affect) equates with a certain magnetism: it is understood as a feeling of being pulled on, at least partly if not fully, against one’s will, to the ritual space to *tejdeb*—*tejdeb* here is the verbal form of trance. *Jedba* trance is always understood to involve some degree of loss of agency on the part of the *jedēb*. The terms for “trancers,” *jedebbīn*, and the singular form *jedēb(a)* (male/female), also derive from the same Arabic root indicating attraction, to be attracted, or the one who is attracted (by something). On one end of the spectrum, *jedba* can be “gentle” in stimulus (“*khelwī*”) so that, although it might entail some struggle, *jedebbīn* have the ability to end their trance at will. Or, while they may not be able to end the trance, they will be conscious until the body is too exhausted to go on. Moving up in affective intensity is the register of *ḥāl*, which involves increased loss of human agency. Here, not only do some *jedebbīn* feel a loss of control, but they also might feel that part of their sense of self is wavering or absent; *ḥāl* can easily move into degrees of amnesia.¹⁷

The most intense of the registers is *bori*: supernatural agents partially or entirely take over the bodies of *jedebbīn* so that the *jedēb(a)* has even less control, if any at all.¹⁸ Here, *jedebbīn* may remember very little or nothing at all. The entities involved are most commonly *jnūn* (plural for *jinn*), supernatural beings discussed in the Qur’ān and *hadīth* (collections of stories about the Prophet), made of smokeless fire and who live in a parallel world. While humans cannot typically see or hear them, *jnūn* can hear and see the human world and interact with it. The *jnūn* are often considered mischievous and potentially dangerous, but they can also be helpful, wise, and teach humans skills or give them special abilities. These relationships with the *jnūn* are primarily considered in terms of health and sickness. *Jnūn* are also inextricable from suffering because their inhabitation of humans can both cause suffering and be entangled in other causes of “everyday” suffering. For example, profound emotional states like grieving the death of a loved one can make someone more susceptible to a *jinn* inhabitation.

Just like *jedba* and *ḥāl*, *bori* trance manifests by destabilizing the *jedēb(a)* affectively, such as causing physical pain, paralysis, fainting, anger, or weeping. Most commonly inhabitation trance expresses as the most intense forms of physicality, such as defying pain thresholds of the body in self-mortification practices like self-cutting or eating hot coals. Even in these cases, inhabitation can be partial; often, *jedebbīn* have some degree of conscious presence of mind whether or not they have agency over their own bodies or feelings. This is key here in that it challenges stereotypes of spirit possession. Exactly on this point, ritual elders explained that there are *degrees* of being inhabited by different entities, and these degrees are parsed out by *what it feels like* to be the inhabited human. For example, this inhabitation trance can feel like being mounted (*merkūb*), being lived in (*maskūn*), being hit (*maḍrūb*), being inhabited by a kind of wind (*meriyūb*), or being “sick” (*mrīḍ*). Part of the use of the

term “sick” references the chronic and often brutal suffering of *jinn* affliction that, unlike other registers of trance, is especially unpredictable, unpleasant, and dangerous. In other words, inhabitation trance is not uniform but, just like other trance registers, it is nuanced and variable.

Throughout a given episode, trance develops in various ways. Some demonstrated intense responses, like throwing their arms about, thrashing on the ground, or throwing their heads back with grimaces of pain. Loud sobbing might arise in any stage of the process. In fact, a wide spectrum of “uncontrollable” crying is one of the most prominent markers of the penetration of thresholds between human and nonhuman agents. For still others, they might scream or hit themselves, slapping or pounding their own thighs, or tearing at their clothes or hair. To index how these events feel, adepts use a nuanced taxonomy, rich with sensory, bodily, and emotional imagery.

For example, the terms *yh̄j* or *yethawwel* index when the trancing body feels like stormy, crashing waves, “like the sea in winter,” as one woman described it. The French verbs *défouler* and *dégager* or the Algerian dialect verb *yfūjī* index a sense of affective emptying out or unloading, similar to Brennan’s description of affective movement as a “dumping, externalizing or projecting outward” (2004, 2). In other ways, trance is a “being away,” to be out of one’s senses, to “go absent”: *yghīb*. *Yghīb* is also used to mean “being unconscious.” Adepts used this term (or *yduwwakh*) to distinguish when people cannot remember what they did or said during trance. Similarly, some express trance as a feeling of traveling—“he went [away]”: *Rah!* In the same register of experience, trance can actively “take” an adept (*yjebdek*), steal or kidnap a person (*ykbatfuk*). Despite all this variety, every trance register must be physically moved in order to be realized and abated.

Moving Painful Feelings through the Body: How Trance Engages Suffering

Trance develops and deepens *only* through physical movement and expression of the affects experienced by the *jedēb(a)*. Otherwise, painful feelings can lock down the body and create an unnecessary level of suffering that is beyond the range of what *dīwān* rituals are able to manage.¹⁹ The ability to sufficiently move trance through the body involves a *play of agency* either between aspects of the *jedēba*’s sense of self or between the self and a supernatural entity. Again, “agency” here refers to the ability to act during trance. This phenomenon constitutes the seemingly paradoxical nature of trance, what has been noted as unsettling binaries of volitional and nonvolitional action (Kapchan 2007). When trance involves fluctuating agency between aspects of the self, these aspects can include competing desires, one’s emotions, one’s bodily impulses, or one’s need to trance dance.²⁰ In other cases, supernatural presences appear in human bodies, taking control of those bodies’ actions and feelings.

All trance in *dīwān* involves fluctuations of control and action by various agents at work, primarily aspects of the self that can take over. For example, *jedba* trance is commonly

expressed as strong emotions or pain—one part of the self—“taking over” so that *jedebbīn* lose their ability to entirely control their bodies and actions.²¹ This is consistently expressed as *ma ḥakemsb fī rūḥī* (“I cannot control myself”). Most *jedebbīn* reported varying degrees of control over their actions, despite how consciously aware they felt. These degrees of agency usually fluctuated in any given episode; rarely was trance a flip of a switch, but rather it ebbed and flowed. Even in cases of spirit inhabitation which might seem to be the clearest example of a *jedēb(a)* losing all control, these cases *also* include the ability for the *jedēb(a)* to be aware and have some degree of control. While some adepts could not report on the experience due to amnesia, several others reported that they were fully conscious of being inhabited: they were aware of the spirit or *jinn* in their body and of what their body was doing, but they had no motor control over their physical, affective, or emotional abilities.²²

Fluctuation between agents and their agency is crucial because, in *dīwān*, trance is understood to recalibrate self-other and self-self relationships. The relational, variegated shifting of agency between various agents and aspects in question allows suffering to emerge in all forms of trance.²³ Just as Wittgenstein (1961) argued that all pain is ultimately relational, so is all trance in *dīwān*: this is one of the key reasons why trance helps manage suffering. This fluctuation is a way of temporarily recalibrating the many aspects and agents involved. It allows “hearing from” certain aspects that perhaps tend to be muted or in the background and then attending to them, engaging with them, or responding to them differently. Quite literally, through trance dancing, trance can be a way of moving in and out of certain feelings or aspects of the self. Even the complete loss of agency, such as fainting or falling into catatonic states, allows aspects of the self to go offline while other aspects or agents have the opportunity to come forward and even take over.²⁴

While such descriptions are reminiscent of dissociative phenomena, I want to emphasize that the phenomena in question here can be complex and graduated. Competition for agency between agents can also manifest as conscious decisions to override parts of the self or other agents, such as women ingesting oral remedies to shut down the body’s urge to trance dance when the ritual circumstances were not to their liking. Or, as we saw in the example of Aisha, ritual experts administer incense to elicit more intense affects, and *jedebbīn* are encouraged, if not physically *made*, to get up and trance dance. Others are physically stopped from trancing if they engage in dangerous or inappropriate behavior. While the intent is to engage painful feelings through the body in trance, such engagement is not always successful. Sometimes a *jedēb(a)* may not be able to complete his or her trance and may go home in pain or worse off than he or she was to begin with.²⁵ Ritual failure to produce and complete trance for the needs of the community are not uncommon. Indeed, these relational plays of agency between self-self and self-others are complex.

With this in mind, and particularly since *jedebbīn* sometimes have little control over their bodies, how are painful feelings moved through the body in trance dancing? How does this process work?

From the moment of the musical ignition of trance, there is a sensory listening with the body.²⁶ This somatic listening can be experienced as both volitional and nonvolitional, meaning one can intend to “listen” with the body or simply experience one’s body reacting. This notion of bodily attunement is resonant with Csordas’s (1993) “somatic modes of attention,” and it is rooted in lifelong “cultivation of inner senses,” to borrow Luhrmann’s phrase (2012, 185).²⁷ Over years of attending rituals, *jedebbīn* learn to carefully sense the minutia of their own feeling states in order to engage with them. Then, with the help of the music, they respond to them and express them through the physical movement of trance dancing until the feelings abate.²⁸ As one elder put it, trance is coerced by a song because, like nothing else can, music “reaches deep inside and finds the tender places.”

For example, *jedebbīn* commonly report that, as soon as a song starts, a knot develops in the solar plexus, and it “needs” to be loosened through particular bodily movement. Such affects can also involve paralysis, passing out, or going limp. In these cases, *jedebbīn* will be helped, even propped up by another adept, and their limbs will be moved like a puppet until the *jedēb(a)* regains enough consciousness to move autonomously. There are semicodified, “correct” ways of moving that are enforced by the ritual elders who scold *jedebbīn* if they deviate in undesirable ways.²⁹ *Jedebbīn* must manage the subtleties between learned movement patterns, their own spontaneity, divine inspiration, and competing outside forces like the will of a spirit or pressing indications from the musicians. By and large, trance-dance protocol draws from a repertoire of gestures and movements that are understood as the most efficient techniques for “working” (*kbedem*) and relieving the affective states, such as side-to-side swinging of the head, deep bending at the waist, or through sounded emotional expressions like screaming, crying, or moaning.³⁰ That said, however, while sufficient and appropriate movement of painful feelings through the body is crucial, it is often not straightforward. Trance can be physically binding, causing catatonic states, convulsions, or paralyzation, as previously noted. Moreover, many forms of trance are extremely physically demanding, and it is not uncommon for a *jedēb(a)* to spend 30 minutes to an hour working his or her state.

As soon as possible after the onset of the affective response—the marker for the beginning of trance—the job of the *jedēb(a)* is to make his or her way to *ṭarah*, often with difficulty or with some help from others, to *move* and cultivate the affects with the help of the music. In other words, it has to be “worked out,” even exhausted, with bodily motion and affective expression. The process demands that a person go *further* into a sensory-affective-emotional world of the suffering that triggered the onset of trance in the first place, moving toward the pain, even amplifying it. Again, this is done with the help of laboring musicians and ritual experts. Precisely because the physical and affective movement of this pain is visible and audible, pain can potentially circulate, be felt by others, and penetrate others in its vicinity.³¹ Such demanding engagement with suffering is also a reason why some adepts ingest remedies to shut down the body’s response, refuse to approach the *ṭarah* when affective symptoms of trance begin to emerge, run out of the ritual, or even avoid the rituals altogether. Figure 1.



Figure 1. A trancer (*jedeb*) works his body, bending deeply at the waist with the sound of the *ginbrī* directing his trance. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

When trance escalates and intensifies, *jedebbīn* sometimes engage in acts of self-harm such as self-beating with hide whips, or stabbing one's legs or abdomen with knives. For example, *brāj* about the Tuareg people who were operative in the trans-Saharan slave trade require *jedebbīn* to turn spears on themselves in time to musical cues understood by the *jedebbīn*. Sometimes self-harm suggests degrees of dissociation, or it can be stylized and performative like a feat of bravery or physical mastery: an ability to bear pain that is sometimes attributed to the protection of spirits, saints, or a *jinn*.³² In the latter case, some *jedebbīn* reported that a supernatural agent incites or requires its host to hurt him or herself.

Leaving aside for a moment explanations for how individuals are able to endure such pain, or why they might not be able to feel it, within the world of *dīwān*, it is important to underscore that the behavior of inflicting pain on the self usually functions as a technique for intensifying affect. Ritual experts condone and encourage these acts up to a certain point. Given the priorities in *dīwān* for engaging with painful feelings, self-harm is an intense form of “going deeper” into suffering. Again, it resonates with the ethos to fully feel it, realize it, and complete it. For example, an older *moqedm* (spiritual leader) was known for regularly entering into trance by singing the text to a certain *borj* after which he would begin to cry. Then, he would take a pair of metal clappers from one of the musicians near him and began forcefully striking his forehead with them until he was stopped by someone on the *ṭarah*.

In such cases, the *jedeb* works himself, striving to meet and mingle with the affective intensity of the pain: leaning into the sharpness serves to push past the threshold where the suffering hovers. This means that when painful feelings begin to emerge, *jedebbīn* learn to fight against any impulse to withdraw from the sensations, and, instead, they focus their full bodily and affective attention on the painful feelings in order to feel them more thoroughly, to



Figure 2. A *moqedm* wraps his arm around a *jedēb* and sings into his ear to encourage him to go deeper into painful feelings. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

intentionally dig into the pain and intensify it—such as striking oneself—so that it can fully peak and then recede.

As Kapchan says of sound and the body—the two primary tools for releasing pain in *dīwān*—“The way through is in, the way in . . . is through.” (2015, 41). Trance in *dīwān* operates on this approach. The way through pain is to *engage* it by feeling into it with inner senses and then to work it and intensify it through the many musically aided bodily techniques of trance dancing Figure 2.

Final Remarks

The priorities of this article have been to describe the affective constitution of trance, the process of engaging suffering through trance dancing, and to show what tranced suffering *does* both personally, in terms of actualizing pain and suffering, and also socially, in terms of religious and community values about suffering. One conspicuous implication of these points is that tranced suffering always takes place with a ritual audience. The public nature of trance in general is well studied, and, while space does not allow for a deep analysis of this dynamic, it is worth noting that trance in *dīwān* similarly (re-)calibrates the sufferer’s place within a wider network of interdependent, affective relations. Indeed, coming back to local attitudes previously mentioned, tranced suffering publicly signals the sufferer as both vulnerable, thus requiring the care of the ritual community, and also strong and courageous for being able to bear and engage such suffering, thus earning the respect of the ritual community. Trance publicly marks the ability to feel deeply—to really suffer—and, nevertheless, keep going. It validates the contours of a haunted life, a faithful life, and an honorable life.

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Notes

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1. Only when translating into French, or to speak very generally, did my interlocutors use "*la transe*." Otherwise, they used specific terms.
2. I refer to these cases as "inhabitation," for three reasons: (1) it is the closest translation of the local, Arabic terminology; (2) such supernatural incorporation is rarely total unlike the common use of the word "possession," and; (3) in order to explicitly resist the Orientalist legacy of the term "possession."
3. In other words, unlike other Sufi practices, this is not ecstatic trance or rapture.
4. I define suffering as chronic, ongoing pain, both mental-emotional and physical.
5. However, the two notions can be differentiated to some degree. Emotions are recognized in *dīwān* as condensed, patterned, and socially recognizable feelings, like grief or anger. They are typically experienced as originating in the self (*naḥs*) or the soul (*rūḥ*) and tend to have certain existential overtones, such as responding to one's fate. Emotions always have sensory qualities to them and, when experienced by a human, as opposed to being in the air, they are felt in or with the body. When emotions are in the air, they can invade bodies, just as spirits do, and cause painful feelings without a clear reason or origin. In all of these cases, emotions are made up of affects (e.g., anger emerges as bodily heat) and could, therefore, be considered a part of the broader category of affect (see also Massumi 2002). On this note, in stating that trance is "affective terrain," this means that it includes both emotions as well as bodily sensoria. On the other hand, while all emotions are experienced as affective, not all affects have emotional content. *Dīwān* music was discussed by insiders in affective ways—efficacious as low-frequency sound waves that vibrate in the air and rumble in the gut (affect)—even though, for some, the music elicited no emotional response.
6. At other times, some said that *dīwān* is a way of remembering and submitting before God.
7. On pain, suffering, and morality or virtue, see also Throop (2008, 2010).

8. Several times, my interlocutors reported that the disembodied emotions of others were attaching to or invading them. When I became sick during fieldwork, I was also told that this might be happening to me.
9. Fieldwork was based in Oran, Algeria, and the western corridor cities south to Bechar, supported with regular travel across Algeria to study other *d̄r̄wān* communities, including those in the Mزاب valley, Algiers, and the east. Fieldwork spanned in total 18 months between 2013 and 2016.
10. Many would not mention a spirit by name for fear of attracting it.
11. Between the years of 2008 and 2011, I conducted 18 months of fieldwork in Morocco on the *gnawa*.
12. On the storytelling act and painful feelings, see Desjarlais (1997, 23).
13. Kapchan (2007) has explored this phenomenon through the notion of the “wound” that does indeed have resonance here. However, my subjects were vague about the origins of suffering, and connections to trans-generational suffering from the slave trade was barely mentioned. Thus, it is difficult to succinctly theorize the notion of the wound within *d̄r̄wān*. Moreover, while ritual repetition in order to placate spirits is a common aspect of other spirit possession ceremonies, as mentioned, there is no consensus in *d̄r̄wān* on the reality of spirit possession, so discourse points mostly in other directions.
14. On structuring pain, see Asad (2003, 80).
15. I use “bodily-affective” here in order to encompass what we typically parse out in English as “emotions,” “affects,” and “sensations.”
16. For example, during one *d̄r̄wān* I attended, a man nearby suddenly fell over and was lying face down on the ground, his body rigid and seemingly paralyzed. Standing at the head of the paralyzed man, an elder began to gently lay two butcher knives flat on the body of the adept at various joints. A couple of minutes later, the man was pulled slowly to his feet and, half walking, half stumbling, entered to the *ṭarab* to move his trance.
17. Like the term *jedba*, *ḥāl* is a common Sufi term that has a variety of meanings based on context and regional usage. The use of the terms in *d̄r̄wān* is particular. In fact, usage varies slightly even between regions of Algeria.
18. Bori is a non-Arabic, Hausa term and one of many linguistic markers of *d̄r̄wān*'s sub-Saharan origins.
19. There was a local discourse about the limits of *d̄r̄wān* to treat certain forms of mental-emotional illness, such as individuals deemed as “mad,” or in cases of mental disabilities like Down’s syndrome. It is difficult to generalize about these cases since opinions varied greatly. Nevertheless, there was at least a general agreement that *d̄r̄wān* deals with certain kinds of suffering but is not a cure-all.
20. While many of these aspects are largely intertwined, some are conceptually parsed out in *d̄r̄wān* discourse, particularly regarding the multiple senses of self, such as individuals having bodily, emotional, and psychological aspects that can move between the foreground and background. This viewpoint shares concepts that resonate with notions of deep selves and public selves, double-consciousness, or core and extended consciousness as they pertain to emotional experience in Western psychology, neuroscience, and philosophy (e.g., Panksepp 1998; Damasio 1999; Becker 2004).
21. There are some connections here with other kinds of trance such as *ṭarab*—trance elicited by heightened emotion. See Racy (2003).
22. For example, a woman in her thirties recounted a five-hour story about having been afflicted by a *jinn* for years. She described her sobbing as both her own and that of the *jinn* inhabiting her. Although the two of them emoted for different reasons, they cried at the same time. They used the same bodily-affective mechanisms: her upset breathing, her tears, her shaking, her swollen eyes, her elevated heart rate, her contracted body.
23. This was consistently reported by my interlocutors, even when I attempted to distinguish between the various types of trance.

24. This is not to trivialize or romanticize the painful realities of such experiences such as when fainting or going unconscious is caused by *jimm* affliction. Nevertheless, such cases are understood as a recalibration of relationship dynamics that must take place in order to achieve well-being.
25. I witnessed this several times during my fieldwork period where ritual experts, including musicians, were unable to help complete a particularly “stuck” trance state and gave up, leaving the *jedēb* in a painful state.
26. For kinds of bodily listening and the senses, see Geurts (2002).
27. Not only was this described in discussions with my subjects, but I was instructed various times on how to trance dance. When I visibly responded to certain songs, and if I did not approach the *ṭarab* of my own accord, I was physically made to get up and move. My subjects very much enjoyed discussing my trance-dancing abilities and shortcomings.
28. Such an ability to sense inwardly and move feelings physically in trance states is a habitus of a skilled body (see Scheer 2012) that possesses a repertoire of abilities and expressions. Children can attend rituals with their parents and some learn quite early how to move on the *ṭarab*; even toddlers begin imitating their parents, bobbing their heads and swaying from side to side.
29. For example, one young man began crawling on the floor and was told to stop or leave.
30. “Working the state” or “working the spirits” are common expressions in *dīwān* and in analogous traditions such as the *gnawa*. For example, see Kapchan (2007).
31. For example, a young man reported that he felt sadness when he heard a particular song, and yet the sadness had no clear subject or source. Not only did he not know why he felt sad, he is not sure if the sadness was his or if he had “picked it up” from someone else.
32. Such phenomena are seen in many Sufi orders and are often viewed as a demonstration of one’s immunity to harm due to protection or blessing of a saint—what is called *baraka*, divine blessing. This explanation of immunity does emerge in *dīwān*, particularly in the songs for saints, but even in these cases, there are conflicting ideas about the cause and purpose of such acts.

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