

Nov 7th, 3:00 PM - 4:00 PM

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“Sounding the Nile” in Nubian Musical Expression

Regan Homeyer
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Abstract: Nubians are indigenous peoples of the Nile River Valley whose ancient civilization parallels that of ancient Egypt. In 1964, 50,000 Egyptian Nubians were removed from their homeland along the Nile because of President Gamal Abdel Nasser’s initiative, the Aswan High Dam Project. With fertile lands and sacred temples doomed to inundation by the waters of what is now Lake Nassar, Nubians were resettled in government built villages that promised both preservation of culture and modern conveniences. What these riverine people received, in fact, were poorly constructed, unfinished dwellings located in the desert, more than five miles from the Nile. A repertoire of music evoking memory and a longing to return to the Nile homeland emerged during the years surrounding removal. I use the representational figuring of the Nile in these “Songs of Return” as a point of departure to explore my central research question: How do Nubian musicians sound the Nile in song-writing and performance. During fieldwork in Egypt summer 2018, I challenged a central tenet of my thesis: that music asserts presence and prior habitation in a way few other expressive forms can. My subsequent research findings, shared in this presentation, reveal how the Nile and its environment factor into Nubian music, not as subject or object “sounding” through lyrics that speak *about* the river; rather, through a “sounding” *of* the river rooted in ways of knowing (epistemological) and ways of being (ontological) that are tied to sensory perception, embodiment, and place.