

## Contents

	Note to Readers and Listeners	xi
	A Personal Prologue	xiii
1	Listening to the Desert	1
2	Hermits and the Quest for Solitude	23
3	A Way of Silence in a Noisy World	41
4	Monastic Desert Soundscapes	59
5	Echoes in Sacred Canyons	75
6	Ascent at Sonorous Sinai	93
7	Finding Home in the Desert	109
	Epilogue	123
	Acknowledgments	127
	Desert Monasticism: A Brief Glossary	131
	A Guide to Monastic Texts	133
	Notes	137
	List of Photographs	145
	List of Recording Locations for Chapter Codas	145

# 1

## LISTENING TO THE DESERT

*The world is made of sound.*  
—Tommy Orange, *There, There*

*Every soul has a distinct song.*  
—Joy Harjo, *Crazy Brave*

Nearly 1800 years ago, a young Christian man, probably still a teenager, left his Egyptian village and journeyed in stages eastward beyond the shores of the Nile River and into the remotest desert wilderness. His name was Antony, and he sought a solitary, quiet, and undistracted life, which ultimately led him to become a hermit in a cave near the shores of the Red Sea. In the hands of his biographer, the bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius, Antony's quest was deeply thwarted: Antony faced crowds of people, who journeyed from far distances in the hopes of hearing his teachings. He also fought with cacophonous demons, who roared like lions, crashed like thunder, and hissed like snakes. Athanasius's sensational story of Antony lit the imagination and hearts of Christians throughout the Mediterranean world. In ever-greater numbers, Christians began taking pilgrimages to see Antony in the desert, many deciding to live as hermits themselves. Over time, from the late third century onward, monasteries were built to house groups of monks. Monasticism grew and

flourished in the deserts of the Middle East between the third and seventh centuries. The desert became a sacred place—set apart as a place for contemplation, asceticism, and prayer. These developments changed the course of Christian history.

But there is an aspect to the story of Antony and those who followed him that has largely been forgotten: Antony left the noise and distractions of city life for the quiet of the desert, seeking solitude and silence and simplicity, but he found that the desert, too, was loud and distracting. The desert was surprisingly sonorous. He sought solitude, but community followed him. There is something quite reverberant about his story in our own world, where the incessant distractions of modern life and the ever-increasing noise of cities make many of us long for quiet solitude. In an effort to find quiet solitude, people are now drawn to YouTube “whispering” channels, take long solo treks on hiking trails, and go on meditation retreats. Antony’s story is one of many from ancient Christianity that reveals timeless tensions between community and solitude, the pulls of family and work, and what it means to live a devoted life. Perhaps most relevant today is the way that his story wrestles with the paradox of noise and silence, especially the noise and silence of the desert, a place often described by absences—of people, water, animals, and sound. And here his story, as well as the stories of monks in the following centuries, speaks urgently to our own time. These stories reveal how monks became part of the natural history of the desert, how they were shaped by their experience of desert sounds, and how they in turn impacted desert soundscapes.

This is a book about how the sounds of the desert—sounds like wind, water, thunder, animals, and even humans—shaped the development of Christian monasticism in the Middle East. But it is also about what listening to the desert today can teach us about our own quest for quiet and stillness. It

emerges from my belief that the past can teach us about the present, that our sounding world deeply shapes our sense of place and belonging, and that a religious movement—even the seemingly foreign practice of monasticism—can offer us new insight into our own changing world. Ancient Christian monks teach us about listening to the natural world, the quest for silence and solitude in arid lands, the paradoxical pulls of solitude and community, and the cultivation of deep inner quiet.

## *Origins and Literatures of Early Christian Monasticism*

Over the course of the first to fourth centuries CE, Christianity gradually spread in the towns and cities of the Roman Empire with an orientation toward community. The movement grew through communal connections—families, coworkers, neighbors—and it built institutional structures upon these relationships. Christians formed familial-like bonds, calling each other brothers and sisters. It was, and is, a deeply social religion. But from an early stage, Christianity, like Buddhism, also developed strong ascetic tendencies that eventually led to the vibrant, rich, and varied practices of monasticism that continue to this day. A variety of factors led to these developments, and a few key points are important to the themes of this book.

From its very origins, Christianity was inextricably tied to suffering: the story of a suffering Messiah, a Jesus crucified, and stories of his followers who were persecuted and martyred for their faith in him. But Christians also came to borrow from classical philosophy the ideals of self-control, concentration, and attention; and from Judaism, Christianity inherited the practices of fasting, prayer, and a reverence for sacred scripture. The word *asceticism*, which comes from the Greek

word *askesis*, meaning “practice” or “training,” refers to a wide variety of practices that Christians developed to withstand suffering in times of persecution, cultivate self-control, foster devoted and contemplative attention and inner quietude, and resist an attachment to worldly pleasures. Suffering came to be transformed into something to celebrate rather than to fear or avoid.

Monasticism grew from these ascetic tendencies. Our vocabulary here is both helpful and misleading. The term *monasticism* comes from the Greek word *monachos*, which meant “solitary one,” but in fact monastic practices were remarkably diverse, especially in the early stages of the movement. There were some wealthy urban Christians who turned their homes into residential monastic communities for men or women who wanted to pursue a life of celibacy, prayer, and contemplation. Others, like Antony, sought to live as hermits, eking out an existence on the fringes of society or, even farther, in remote caves and canyons of the Middle East. For them, the primary goal seems to have been withdrawal and solitude. But in the late third and early fourth centuries (and beyond), monasteries gradually came to be built, sometimes with formidable boundary walls, to create spaces for communal monasticism. Still other forms blended the communal and the solitary: for example, monasteries were built adjacent or connected to a network of caves so that monks could have time for individual solitude in cave hermitages while also living as part of a community in the monastery itself. The diverse forms of early Christian monasticism may have contributed to its appeal. Over time, the variety of options for monastic living in locations throughout the regions of Egypt, Sinai, Palestine, and Syria coupled with the sensational stories of monks that circulated in oral and written form led to a flourishing of monasticism.

One place of monasticism, however, outshone nearly all others: the desert. The historian William Harmless notes in

his book *Desert Christians* that “Egypt’s deserts were the edge of the world, a vast and remote frontier land. Almost overnight, those deserts seized hold of the fourth-century imagination.” But why did Christian monks choose the desert? After all, the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, and Sinai were regarded as uninhabitable wastelands—home to demons and the devil, dangerous wild animals, and marauding criminals. Why, then, did Christians, beginning in the third century, increasingly decide to become hermits and choose to live in monastic communities in the desert wastelands of the Middle East?

There is first the matter of simple geography and proximity: the Middle East is arid or semiarid. The distance between cities located in desert oases or along the Nile River and the surrounding desert wilderness was (and is) frequently very short. The threshold between community and solitude was narrow and easily traversed. Even today, aerial maps of Egypt illustrate this quite vividly: the narrow green line of cultivated fields and villages that runs north and south along the Nile River abruptly ends where the tan and brown desert escarpment, much of which is uninhabited, rises and extends to the east and west. The ancient walled city of Jerusalem offers another way to understand the distinctions between urban and rural, city and desert: just to the west and south of the ancient city, an ancient traveler would have quickly found themselves deep in the Judean and Negev Deserts. In antiquity, the distinction between town and desert, civilization and wilderness, was in many ways more stark than we find today.

There is an even more compelling reason why hermits chose to go into the desert, for by the time this movement began, the desert had a long religious history—as a place of danger and temptation, yes, but also as a place of wandering and revelation. The biblical stories of the ancient Israelites migrating through these deserts after they had been freed

from slavery in Egypt were a key sacred narrative for early monks. So, too, were the stories from the New Testament Gospels of Jesus being tempted in the desert. In these stories and many others, the desert was an important place to go for solitude, to withdraw from society, to hear the voice of God. The practice of withdrawal—setting out on a journey, leaving one’s home, going to a quieter place, and spending time alone—was both a biblical idea as well as a Greek and Roman one. Again, language may help us understand this ancient concept: the Greek word *anachoresis* meant withdrawal, retirement, retreat. It is from this ancient word that we get our English word *anchorite*, meaning “hermit.” The idea of withdrawal was not new when Christianity began developing; it was already an old idea, one that existed long before Christianity emerged in the first and second centuries. In times of battle, it meant retreat to a safe place. But for philosophers, it meant something else. For the first-century Stoic philosopher Seneca, the idea of withdrawal was much more concrete: in one of his letters, he complains of the noise coming from the bathhouse below his writing studio. The noise becomes too much for him and he decides to withdraw to the country, a place that is more conducive to philosophy, concentration, and writing. A place decidedly quieter. Monks recognized this storied and sacred history of the Bible and drew upon philosophical ideas about the power of solitude as they made the desert their home.

Above all, the desert was a place of profound paradox that sparked the imagination: a place hot and cold, deathly dry but also home to violent floods, dangerous and yet potent with revelation and salvation, seemingly empty but with abundant evidence of humans and other animals, and surprisingly noisy and silent. It is in these paradoxes where we can best understand the cultivation of listening among ancient monks. And the monks’ practices of meditation, concentra-

tion, and listening in the harsh desert environment, the image of the solitary hermit wrestling with the demons in the desert, and stories about the strength and resolve of these monks in the wilderness—these ideas traveled westward and eventually contributed to the establishment of Christian monasteries throughout Europe, the British Isles, and beyond. Reasons for choosing a monastic life naturally varied from person to person, and the geography, climate, and form of monasticism varied as well, but there was a common thread: a desire to “listen with the ear of the heart,” as Benedict of Nursia, Italy, wrote in his influential sixth-century *Monastic Rule*.

Our information about early Christian desert monasticism comes from two main sources: a diverse collection of texts written in Greek, Coptic, Syriac, and Latin between the third and seventh centuries CE and recent archaeological excavations of ancient monasteries. Since the literatures of monasticism are diverse, it may be useful to orient the reader to the substantial written sources that reveal the history and development of desert Christian monasticism. Beginning in the late fourth century, we see the first biographies of individual monks written sometimes by their students or, if they were heads of monasteries, by their successors. Some of these biographies are full-length books, such as the *Life of Antony*; others are much shorter and found in collections of stories about monks in Egypt and Palestine. One such collection, the *Lausiac History*, was written in the fifth century by the writer Palladius. The most famous and widely distributed collection of stories and sayings of monks was called *Sayings of the Fathers*, an anthology that was written anonymously in the fifth or sixth centuries and circulated in two forms: one was organized alphabetically by the names of monks; the other was organized thematically. Other anthologies include the fifth century *History of the Monks in Egypt*, also written anonymously, and the late sixth- or early seventh-century



book *The Spiritual Meadow*, written by a monk named John Moschos who traveled throughout the Middle East to collect and record the stories of monks. In addition to biographies and collections of stories and sayings, monastic rules for individual monasteries began to be written in the fourth century, with the most famous of these being the Pachomian Rule, which included guidelines for monks on nearly every aspect of daily life in the Pachomian monasteries, including details about how to observe daily prayers, maintain proper mealtime modesty and decorum, limit travel beyond the monastery walls, and contribute to the various tasks assigned to monks. Finally, there was a wide array of treatises, letters, and philosophical and practical instructions for monastic life that were written by monks beginning in the fourth century. I draw especially from one of these treatises in particular, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, written by the seventh-century abbot of Saint Catherine's monastery in Sinai, John Climacus. Whenever possible, I pair these texts with material evidence recovered from archaeological excavations, which are vital for understanding the complex and dynamic history of early Christian monasticism.

The literatures of monasticism, also sometimes called collectively the Desert Fathers, offer vivid windows into the history of monasticism. But even here we need to be cautious, because all of these texts were written in praise of individual monks, in praise of asceticism and monasticism. They aren't what we would consider "history" today. They are hagiographical texts—in other words, writings about the holiness of the Desert Fathers, the "saints." Still, they are essential to the story I tell in the coming chapters—a story about how the paradoxes of solitude and community, silence and noise, natural sounds that terrify and comfort, and a desert harsh yet sacred came to shape the development of Christian monasticism.

## Natural Soundscapes in a Time of Change

Our sounding world so deeply shapes our sense of place and our sense of who we are that we often forget to give sound the close attention it deserves. We live in a world of sound. Sounds encircle us, reverberate within our bodies, emanate from above and below. We are enveloped by the sounds of streets and traffic and labor, sounds of birds and trees and wind, of home and family and friends, of dissonance and violence, of voice and of silence. We swim in sound. And, in turn, we shape our acoustical environments and alter the workings of sonic biospheres. Sounds orient us in our world—they animate and enliven our sense of place, and entangle us in a reverberant ecology of place, time, and weather. Sounds guide us to food and safety, help us avoid danger and imminent destruction, and foster our sense of mystery, memory, longing, and belonging. They shift our gaze and change our behavior. Humans are not alone in the gravitational pulls of the sonorous; birds and trees and whales and many other beings are deeply shaped by their acoustic environments.

We do not need the physical ability to hear to be influenced by ambient environmental sounds. After all, sound is fundamentally a vibrational event—vibrations that have duration, frequency, and quality. Sounds vibrate and reverberate around us all the time. The well-known deaf percussionist, Evelyn Glennie, puts this most eloquently in her “Hearing Essay”: “There is a common misconception that deaf people live in a world of silence. To understand the nature of deafness, first one has to understand the nature of hearing”; hearing, she claims, “is basically a specialized form of touch. Sound is simply vibrating air, which the ear picks up and converts to electrical signals, which are then interpreted by the brain. The sense of hearing is not the only sense that

can do this, touch can do this too. If you are standing by the road and a large truck goes by, do you hear or feel the vibration?" Sounds are deeply tied to our sense of touch and our sense of well-being. In recent decades, we have learned especially about how important natural sounds are for our health, our connections to one another and to the environment, and our quality of life.

"We are," naturalist and acoustician Michael Stocker writes in *Hear Where We Are*, "always submerged in sound and vibration; it excites our ears and touches our bodies, our skin and our bones." We feel sound and it shapes the places we work, where and how we live, and how we travel. It also shapes a sense of who we are—we hear *where* we are, we hear *who* we are. Sounds trigger memories and animate our daily narratives. Phenomenology can help us understand how essential soundscapes are to our experience of life itself. As a philosophy of lived experience, phenomenology teaches us that the body is fundamental to perception and sensation, as David Abram articulates in his book *The Spell of the Sensuous*. He writes that "the body is that mysterious and multifaceted phenomenon that seems always to accompany one's awareness"—an idea that is important for understanding how sound shapes our sense of place and who we are in a place. How we experience the sounds around us is interwoven with our collective and individual identities, and paying attention to sound offers us an opportunity to come into our bodies, inhabit our place of being, and understand who we are.

Tuning into sounding worlds is now more urgent than ever, because climate change is altering natural soundscapes in dramatic ways. UNESCO called 2020 the "Year of Sound," in part because our natural soundscapes are changing so rapidly. Much of what is unfolding in real time today was predicted almost sixty years ago by Rachel Carson in her book *Silent Spring*: "Over increasingly large areas of the United

States,” she wrote, “spring now comes unheralded by the return of the birds, and the early mornings are strangely silent where once they were filled with the beauty of bird song. This sudden silencing of the song of the birds, this obliteration of the color and beauty and interest they lend to our world have come about swiftly, insidiously, and unnoticed by those whose communities are as yet unaffected.” Audubon and Cornell University’s Lab of Ornithology released reports in the spring of 2020 indicating that some 30 percent of the birds around the world have been lost since 1970. So, too, scientists have shown a dramatic collapse in insect populations. Even the sonic dimensions to marine life have changed, including the decline of whale populations and the silencing of their sonority because of the dramatic increase in the noise of shipping traffic.

New water patterns affect sound, too. The loss of waterways—due to drought, for example, and to draining and redirecting rivers and creeks for use in agriculture—contributes to both a silencing of natural sound as well as the desertification of landscapes. Marc Reisner’s *Cadillac Desert* traces the history of how the American West’s water has been lost and the devastating effects of dams, overuse, and agriculture. “We set out to tame the rivers,” he writes, “and ended up killing them.” The fact is that deserts around the world are growing in size and “dry places,” as William deBuys writes in his book about the American Southwest *A Great Aridness*, will become “drier.” Reduced water means fewer birds and fewer animals more generally. In the polar regions, where ice is melting more rapidly than ever, the acoustical changes go in the opposite direction as the calving of icebergs and sound of waterfalls occur in new places with dramatic sonorous effects.

Wildfires, too, have an enormous impact on the sound of the environment—both in the noise they produce and the

silences that lie in their wake. In Norman Maclean's poetic telling, the noise of a crown fire sounds "like a train coming too fast around a curve and may get so high-keyed the crew cannot understand what their foreman is trying to do to save them." A deafening noise leading to utter silence. In 2020, Australia experienced one of the most devastating bushfire seasons in its history. We do not yet know what the full impact will be of fire on wildlife, but it is likely to change the natural soundscape for a long time to come. The same is true of the American West where fire seasons appear to be lengthening and intensifying, forever changing the environmental soundscapes of the region.

The changes in our natural soundscapes are compounded by the simultaneous amplification of human-generated (anthropogenic) sounds: the sounds of jets, trucks and cars, sounds of urbanization and development and industry. It is increasingly difficult to experience our natural world without the intrusion of such sounds. In the late 1960s, just as the composer R. Murray Schafer was beginning to conceive of his World Soundscape Project with the goal of attending to the increasing problem of noise, the environmental movement began to grow and flourish in North America. Environmental writers like Edward Abbey, ranger for Arches National Park in the 1960s, was an early proponent of protecting the national parks from anthropogenic noise. And the National Park Service's extensive ongoing research into noise pollution in the national parks shows just how deleterious the effect of human noise on wildlife can be, with the most striking example of noise pollution being the problem of tourist helicopter flights over the Grand Canyon National Park. And noise isn't just a problem in national parks; how challenging it is to find quiet in our everyday places of home and work, too.

In response to the environmental movements of the late 1960s, the historian Lynn White Jr. wrote an article called “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” in which he argued that the problem of ecological change and environmental degradation was due to the “triumph” of Christianity over paganism in the ancient world. He claimed that “Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen” and that Christianity rejected ancient animistic ideas about how God or gods or spirits could be found in natural objects like wood, trees, streams, mountains, and so forth. Instead, White argued that the Christian version of creation, found in the biblical book of Genesis, where God gives Adam power to name animals and power over the natural world, fostered a sense of nature as a resource solely for human consumption. White’s arguments have been highly influential, and his essay is often cited in books and articles about environmental degradation and climate change. While there are some important ideas in his essay, my research on how monks were shaped by environmental sounds and how they regarded sounds as important signs—signals of safety or signals of danger—suggests an interdependence between monks and the natural world that cautions us against White’s simplistic argument. One of the best ways to see the mutual dependence between monks and their desert environments is through the monastic sayings and stories about desert soundscapes. It is time, I believe, to rethink White’s claims and to uncover a more nuanced history.

The sayings and anecdotes of the monks in the deserts reveal an interdependence between humans and other animals, between humans and their environment. This relationship between monks and animals, between monks and the desert, manifests itself in monastic stories about desert soundscapes. The sounds of crashing thunder, wind whistling through reeds,

the howls of wolves and hisses of snakes—these and many other sounds taught monks lessons about listening and about living in relationship. Monastic literatures suggest that the sounding environment shaped monks' sense of both where they were and who they were. At times, the sounds signaled danger, such as the arrival of armies and impending war; at other times, sounds signaled safety, such as the sound of water in a parched landscape. And, as we see today, the development of monasticism in the desert also led to a reshaping of those soundscapes—the sound of the *semantron*, the wooden board that was used to call monks to prayers, was just one example of the anthropogenic changes monks brought to the landscape.

The ancient Christian monks who left their villages and cities for the quiet of the desert knew what we are increasingly recognizing today: the sounds around us shape our sense of place, of who we are, and our feelings of belonging and our feelings of alienation. I am interested in the ways that monks wrestled with the external sounds of the world, how they cultivated a quality of inner listening, and what we might learn about our own world from their experience and their stories. How in the midst of cacophonous surroundings might we cultivate a sense of inner quietude? How might we protect the places that provide us with the solace of bird song, wind, waves, and so many other natural sounds as our world thrums ever more noisy? These questions are at the heart of my inquiry into the past. For me, the desert—paradoxically both noisy and silent—is a compelling place to reconsider our care for the environment. And the first step is to listen.

### *Acoustic Paradox of the Desert*

Imagine a single sound. The sound of nothing, of emptiness—the sound of silence. Listen and imagine more closely and

perceptively: perhaps you hear a slight ringing in your ears, the sigh of your breath, or the beating of your heart. Listen yet again and soft sounds emerge from the silence—a slight gust of wind, a distant bird, an echo of rock faint and nearly imperceptible. You are seated along the rim of a vast landscape of sand dunes, rock, and craggy mountains. All around you are the telltale colors of desert—the scorched and bleached earth, rusty and tawny. Below lies a wide-open valley floor with the distinctive snaking outline of an ephemeral river, a desert wadi now completely dry. You begin to feel the noonday heat, you close your eyes to the bright sun, and again you hear nothing. You are alone and the landscape seems utterly devoid of life—an empty wasteland.

The silence you hear is a sound experienced by desert dwellers and travelers for thousands of years. The dramatic landscape of the desert, vast and formidable, contrasts with its primordial silence. Cast a wide net and you will find many throughout history have described the desert as stark and silent. One has only to recall the stage for the biblical prophet Elijah's revelation, which is set in the wilderness after a sound of "sheer silence." Eucherius, a fifth-century bishop in Lyon, France, wrote that "no sound is heard in the desert save the voice of God." Modern travelers to the desert have similarly noted the silence. T. E. Lawrence, the famed Lawrence of Arabia, remarked on both the "friendly silence of the desert" and the "silence" that tormented his ears in the Arabian Desert—a deafening silence. And John C. Van Dyke, the American art historian turned desert lover in the early twentieth century, praised the deserts of the Southwest for their quiet: "The desert is overwhelmingly silent. . . . But . . . for all the silence, you know that there is a struggle for life, a war for place, going on day by day." Countless have sought the desert wilderness for a quiet that makes possible revelation. It is a land designed for hermits and solitaries, nomads



and restless adventurers. If there is an acoustical signature associated with the desert—real and imagined—surely it must be its overwhelming silence.

But there is another perspective on the acoustical desert, long evoked by some of the very same visitors and residents. Travel down into that valley floor and you will find an oasis with clear water, a waterfall cascading over rocks, trees and brushy reeds rustling with a cool and shaded breeze, and pigeons with their guttural warble. Listen again. Here the desert is overwhelmingly sonorous and resonant. Stay awhile, until the wind picks up, and you may hear an echo of biblical proportions. In Moses's final song to the Israelites before he ascends Mount Nebo and to his death, he rehearses how God brought the Israelites through a "desert land," in a "howling wilderness." C. Leonard Woolley and T. E. Lawrence's survey of the Zin wilderness in the southern Negev and northern Sinai Deserts reported that the "the noise of the falling water . . . is so great that a man cannot hear himself speak."

The sense of "howling wastelands" reverberates in striking ways in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Puritan narratives about conquest of the Americas, where fear and ambition collided. Explorations of the American Southwest by John Wesley Powell and others likewise noted the "perpetual roar" of desert canyons. Pause to imagine these sounds: the wind as it "howls" around and through desert caves and canyons, the excess of spring floods, rolls of thunder across barren escarpments, and even, if you allow yourself to imagine with the monks of late antiquity, the sounds of demons hissing and cackling in the dark. You might encounter here at the water's edge people in conversation, cattle and horses, machines and industry—all driven by the availability of water. Listen again and you might hear the sounds of mili-

tary ranges, strategically placed in “empty” deserts, and the sounds of vibrant city life. The desert grows cities.

The striking acoustical paradox of the noisy and silent desert, the cacophony of its lively cities and the quiet emptiness in remote reaches, pulls at our imaginations. To those who have lived in the desert their whole lives, who have inherited traditions from their ancestors who also lived there, the variety of sounds, the desert’s multilingual voices, are often experienced intuitively. For those less familiar, it may seem strange that a landscape or environment most often associated with desolation and absence—one that superficially, at least, may appear dead—could invite careful listening. But from the soft sounds of wind through a juniper to the crash of thunder, the desert is surprisingly sonorous and rich with sound if we pay attention.

The fact is that the desert has never been deserted and the signs of human, animal, and plant life in the desert extend for thousands of years. Prehistoric rock art, native and indigenous traditions, and the material histories of desert life all speak to the powerful ways that the desert is alive with sound. The most vital resource in the desert is, of course, water. Geographer Nick Middleton offers the following definition of a desert: “an arid zone . . . where the supply of water by all forms of precipitation is exceeded by the water lost via evaporation and transpiration.” In such dry places, humans have resided in the “microhabitats” where water can be found in the desert: oases, springs, ephemeral streams, rivers—all of these water sources have supported human life. These habitats also nourish plant life and provide for animals and birds; they are rich with sonority, and their ecology includes the coexistence of humans and animals. Humans have impacted desert regions even as they are also affected by them—a relational history that is ever evolving.

## Learning to Listen by Recording

In the spring of 2015, I was seated at the canyon rim of the Zin wilderness, a place of storied traditions about Moses and the Israelites in Israel's Negev Desert. I was trying to capture the sound of desert silence that made such an impression on monks and travelers over the long course of history with a set of microphones and a digital recorder. My research had already begun on desert sounds and the development of Christian monasticism, but I had become frustrated by my reliance on ancient texts. I wanted to *experience* the acoustical desert. And, above all, I wanted to understand what it might mean to peel back the layers of history and to hear the faintest echo of the sounding past. I had hoped for silence or, at least, some quiet natural sounds free of anthropogenic noise. But I found myself frustrated at every turn by the intrusion of distant trucks, ubiquitous air traffic, dogs barking, and the whistling starlings flitting about the canyon walls. Slowly and reluctantly, I gave way to the experience of elusive silence, noting that this too was an important feature of monasticism—the desire for solitude, stillness, and quiet was always sought but seldom found. I also became convinced that the quest for silence, and claims of a silent desert, often came at a price—namely, the silence of those who had long inhabited these lands.

Since 2012, I have been making field recordings in desert environments. As I intimated in the prologue, I began to record the sounds of nature while on vacations with my family when my children were young. I suppose my first impulse was to capture a sound that we had heard just like we might capture a moment on camera—a memento to remind us of our trip. These recordings were like souvenirs from our travels. In this sense, my early attempts to capture sounds resonate with Susan Stewart's remarks in her 1993 book *On Longing*:

“The souvenir speaks to a context of origin through a language of longing, for it is not an object arising out of need or use value; it is an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia.” Listening to these early recordings now returns me to a different time and place. Hearing, memory, nostalgia, and longing are closely intertwined.

But over time, I began to hone my skills in recording nature, because I became convinced that listening to the desert today might teach us about the acoustic desert of the past. The practice of recording the desert also became a practice of listening. I enrolled in Cornell University’s Lab of Ornithology’s Natural Soundscape Recording Workshop in 2013. The workshop that year was based in the Sierra Nevada mountains at San Francisco University’s Field Campus and the instructors were experienced field recordists, experts in radio production, and ornithologists. Most of the students were advanced graduate students and avid birders who wanted to use recordings of particular birds and other animals to understand animal communication, behavior, and ecology. I was there to understand how field recording might enable me to better understand early Christianity monasticism.

Equipped with a set of microphones mounted on a tripod, a digital recorder slung crossbody and attached to headphones, I began to travel on my own—to the four North American deserts and to the deserts of southern Israel—becoming increasingly convinced that the practice of recording, as well as the content of my recordings, could teach me something about ancient monasticism. At first, my goal was to have an experience of being completely alone in the desert: to sit on my folding camp stool and listen closely to the sounds around me while capturing them on my recorder. I would try to find the most remote possible location—a place where there would be no human noise, no cars and trucks, no jets, and no voices. I wanted to be both awed and afraid. Could

I imagine myself into the deserts of late antiquity? Could I imagine what ancient monks experienced? We can't know, of course, about past experiences, but history writing does require imagination. And, I think, experimentation. And here language can help, for the closest word we have for "experience" in ancient Latin is *experimentia*: to experiment also meant to experience. Field recording was and is for me both experimental and experiential.

Recording also taught me to listen. I didn't leave microphones set up for hours and do something else, I sat and listened through the headphones to the sounds of the place. The field recordist Peter Cusack has written that "if you're a field recordist then you get to listen very intently to where you are recording; that develops your listening all the time. . . . If you get into an intense listening mode you can actually hear a huge amount, not just sounds, but the spaces between them and their relativity, the acoustics of the place." This resonates with my own experience. Field recording is an exercise in deep listening and it requires time: find a good location, set up the equipment, pause, quiet my own body, turn on the recorder, and just listen. And frequently the microphones—high-quality omni microphones—captured sounds my own ears couldn't hear: the voices of hushed campers in a remote area of Big Bend National Park; the sounds of footsteps in the oasis Ein Aqev in Israel's Negev Desert; distant military practice in the Zin wilderness. Field recording is both contemplative and frustrating. In our world, even the most remote-seeming desert places are teeming with anthropogenic sound.

In this sense, there is an important reverberation of the ancient monastic quest for silence and solitude—one that they found always deferred, always frustrated. Listening and recording provide discoveries about the contemporary world but also about the past. Some of the sounds I've captured in my recordings are sounds that I had completely missed in reading monas-

tic texts—the croak of a raven, the silence in midday desert heat, the sound of rocks clattering down a cliff. There is a kind of conversation that can speak across time and medium (text and recording), one that reveals something about our own world and our place in it. It's important to emphasize that the recordings that now accompany this book are not intended to teach readers and listeners exactly what ancient monks heard, but rather to provide an evocative register and moments of listening that take us beyond the written word. The word *evoke*, which comes from the Latin word that meant “to call forth,” is fitting here, as my goal in sharing recordings from desert environments is my own attempt to call forth a reverberant past, to cultivate wonder and imagination, and to illustrate how the past might speak to our present through sound.

Ancient monks inhabited a surprisingly and richly sonorous desert, a place chosen for its challenges and potent paradoxes. In doing so, they transformed the desert from a feared landscape into a sacred and desirable one. The call of the desert was also a call of the ear and the heart. And by understanding their call, we can nurture our own practices of listening.

## CODA



The desert's rich sonority—its quiet and its noise—can sometimes be experienced over the course of a single night as winds go from gentle and calm to loud and blustery. And then there are the springs, perhaps at dawn, where birds begin their song beneath rustling palm trees. Move into the canyon and arrive at a waterfall cascading down a limestone cliff. There the pigeons warble alongside white-winged doves. Heat rises, winds still, the workday begins: jets fly overhead, traffic on roadways picks up, and sheep and goats are corralled in metal holding pens.

