

Acknowledgments

As we write and rewrite book sections over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns and social distancing measures have muted and mutated our sonorous lives in dramatic ways. Religious communities have radically transformed their manifestations of togetherness and their very sense of congregation. Sikh *kirtan* singers in the gurdwaras of Singapore perform for the worshipers behind a plexiglass screen that allows them to mediate the divine while protecting the devotees from viral droplets. Elsewhere, Buddhist governments have ordered the monastic body of the nation to chant collectively the sutras that are mobilized in times of epidemics to foster sonic protection. Singing, an important part of many ritual gatherings, has been banned in several countries as a potential viral spreader. Some resisted the prohibition, some started humming sacred hymns from closed lips, behind their face masks. Others went digital, utilizing the technological means at their disposal to record, livestream, and reproduce religious sounds.

In the need for hope and comfort during the long Italian lockdown, quarantined Italians gathered on their balconies with their voices, bodies, and improvised instruments to share a collective experience of socially distant yet healing sound. Indian families erupted on their verandas on the evening of the first Covidian curfew to bang on metal plates, blow into conch shells, and chase away the disease in a much politicized episode of communal noise-making. In the spectral silence of the then Easter Sunday (2020), the moving voice of famed tenor Andrea Bocelli in a hauntingly deserted square of Milan reverberated in the electronic devices of thousands of remote listeners. As I typed on my keyboard, bird sounds appeared to be louder than usual, given the reduced traffic noise during the lockdown. The coronavirus had “quieted” the world and even helped seismographers to calculate tectonic vibrations with greater precision.¹

The conversations on religious sounds that gave birth to this volume are situated in a time of profound transformations of our sonic habits, when the public religious soundscape has gone increasingly silent, and the reproduction of sound is unprecedentedly regimented and digitally mediated. This volume on religious sounds, framed around senses, media and power, can offer timely and relevant reflections on the deeply felt

1 See Wei Hass, *National Geographic*, April 9, 2020. “These charts show how coronavirus has ‘quieted’ the world.” <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/coronavirus-is-quieting-the-world-seismic-data-shows>. Accessed May 4, 2021.

human need to gather around shared sonic experiences, and to sonically mediate bridges between human and other-than-human spheres. Having exacerbated social inequalities, the pandemic has also showed us how these mediations are unevenly accessed, interpreted, and distributed.

As this book project came to life in the course of Covidian times, we have exchanged religious sounds and ritual greetings with friends and families through social media and digital technologies. We became familiar with the sound of Zoom meetings, Skype calls, Facetime, and other digital notifications that have punctuated our domestic lives. We have learned to mute and unmute ourselves with the new sonic etiquette of remote working. We have heard the haunting sound of ambulances, the stillness of silent, empty streets in our cities, and in our skies devoid of air traffic. The livelihood of artists in the field of sound, music, and performance has been severely impacted.

Religions have mobilized sounds to sustain their own epistemologies of healing. Singaporean Sufis have developed techniques to perform *zikr* from home, logging into a shared online platform. The Matua religious community, in India and Bangladesh, has recommended daily sessions of *kirtan* singing and dancing to boost the immunity system, using sacred songs as a sonic vaccine.² The amplified voice of several muezzins requested the faithful to stay at home, instead of praying at the mosque.

While coexisting with the leftovers of a global health crisis and witnessing the unequal unfolding of the social return to “normal,” we propose a deep reflection on sounding and listening practices. We hope that this volume will offer useful tools, theories, and empirical evidence from the global South to help understand such dramatic changes and to make sense of the historical transformations and the human production of religious sounds.

This book was made possible by the support offered by Carola Lorea’s Religion and Globalisation research cluster at the Asia Research Institute (ARI), National University of Singapore, and by research cluster leader Prof. Kenneth Dean. We are thankful to the directorship and the events team members of ARI for having facilitated the development of this intellectual initiative. ARI has also generously contributed a large part of the fees for open access publication of this volume.

We are thankful to a long list of friends and colleagues who have read parts of this volume, offered feedback, and contributed in various degrees to

2 See Raka Banerjee, Dishani Roy, Carola E. Lorea, Fatema Aarshe, Khaled Bin Oli Bhuiyan. *The Sonic and the Somatic: Matua Healing Practices during COVID-19*, Asia Research Institute, NUS. <https://ari.nus.edu.sg/20331-73/>. Accessed April 1, 2021.

its current shape. We send our appreciation and gratitude to the Global Asia Book Series Editor, Professor Tak-Wing Ngo, for giving a home to this book project. Special thanks to the steering team of the International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS), the publications team at the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), Paul van der Velde and Mary Lynn van Dijk, and Saskia Gieling, Inge Klompmakers, Jasmijn Zondervan and Julie Benschop-Plokker at Amsterdam University Press (AUP), for helping in every stage of its preparation. We particularly appreciate that the publisher has taken all the necessary steps to concretize our request to integrate sounds and multimedia samples as part and parcel of the book. Lastly, we thank the three anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestions that have helped us immensely to improve our introduction and chapters.

Carola E. Lorea

