

Afterword: Sonic Materiality, Religion, and Non-Religion

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Abstract

The afterword centers on the following question: If it is the case that the forms of territoriality and belonging such as those discussed in the contributions to this volume are already constituted and well-known through discourse, why should one pay attention to the sonic? It is argued that the particular entanglement of the sonic with embodiment enables religious sounds to provide somatic evidence for religious ritual outcomes, experiences, cosmologies, and aspirations. Sonic materiality with its inbuilt multimodality also affords the bundling of the forms of territoriality and belonging that feature prominently in the book's contributions with religious traditions and practices, suffusing them with the same felt qualities at the level of felt-bodily motion and perception.

Keywords: sonic religion, embodiment, atmospheres, religion and media, semiotic mediation, material religion

The case for the sonic: Beyond Eurocentrism

Ranging from Roma camps in Italy across Iran, Sindh, Bengal, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia to Taiwan, this volume's geographical spread of religious sounds beyond the global North is striking. The contributors to this volume do not just make a case for the crucial role of sound in religious practices across several traditions. They also show how thinking about and theorizing the sonic has long been pivotal to several religious traditions outside the North Atlantic world. The decentering away of theorizing the sonic from what used to be known as the West (see also Steingo and Sykes 2019) that the contributors join in is not just evident in the sheer range of

places and settings in Asia that contributors engage with. Such decentering, also highlighted in the introduction to this volume, is at the heart of contributors' foregrounding of long traditions of sonic theologies, philosophies, and cosmologies from, for example, India and China, in addition to European intellectual traditions. Sonic cosmologies developed in India and China many centuries ago conceived the sonic as a churning cosmic oneness out of which the world of actual entities emerges and is renewed, as contributors to this volume show, assisted by musical and ritual performance, ritual speech, and bodily discipline. The fact that such sonic thinking long anticipated certain traditions of theorizing the sonic in modern European philosophy has gained surprisingly little attention. In modern European philosophy there is a kindred line of thought on the sonic as providing privileged access to a cosmic oneness out of which everything emerges but that cannot be grasped through discourse and conceptual thought. This line stretches from Schopenhauer via Nietzsche to Deleuze and takes the sonic to be an all-pervading "sonic flux" (Cox 2018) in proximity to the virtual (e.g., Deleuze 1998 [1980]: 78), the forces of difference and multiplicity that generate the actual. One possible reason for this omission in modern philosophy and sound studies may be that in European academic categories such ancient Indic and Chinese theorizing of the sonic has been framed as "religious" and mythological rather than philosophical. The perspective taken by the contributors to this volume who show how sonic practices and experiences bundle the religious with the non-religious not only overcomes this opposition between religion and ostensibly secular theorizing. Writing from outside the global North, the authors also demonstrate how the omission from sound studies and sonically inclined philosophy of entire non-European traditions of thinking the sonic can be corrected.

The engagements with religious sounds in this volume do not just feature an impressive spread across geography and religious traditions. They also showcase a striking diversity of themes that sonic practices in religious settings have come to be intermeshed with. Two main threads running through the chapters are a concern with spatiality and territoriality on one hand, and social and political identifications and forms of belonging on the other. These are fields that are often known and transacted through discourse, including religious discourse, as well as legal discourse in the case of political identifications and territorialities. One might therefore ask: If it is the case that the forms of territoriality and belonging such as those discussed in the contributions to this volume are already constituted and well-known through discourse, why should one pay attention to the sonic? The overwhelmingly discursive dominance in scholarly approaches

to territoriality and belonging raises the question of what makes the sonic in religious contexts powerful in articulating spatiality and territoriality as well as forms of belonging. What can the sonic meaningfully add to the discursive constructions of spatiality and belonging that tend to dominate attention among scholars in the humanities and social sciences who work on gender or political boundaries and identifications? Is it because they function as mere symbols of particular kinds of spatiality and belonging, that is, only as arbitrary signs in the sense of representing something through social convention? Several of the contributors to this volume suggest otherwise when they show how religious sounds act out belonging and spatiality or territoriality in and through the body and bodily sensations. In other words, this line of analysis suggests that the sonic, as traveling kinetic energy that comprises but also exceeds the range of the sonic that is audible or acoustic, contributes to the felt dimensions of belonging and spatiality in a particularly salient way. Sonic practices and movements are significant because they coproduce and at the same time provide somatic evidence for the kinds of spatial and political organization and dynamics the contributors to this volume address.

Felt bodies, embodiment, and the sonic materiality of the religious

The intermingling of sonic materiality and felt bodies appears to be at the heart of such felt aspects of belonging and spatiality. The coupling of sonic materiality and embodiment already comes with an inbuilt relationship to the spatial. This is because it often revolves around suggestions of motion, modifications of the body's felt spatial economy that its interaction with the sonic as dynamic events, kinetic energy propagating through space, including bodily space, bring about. Such modifications of the body's spatial economy through dynamic sonic materiality can be extended and made relevant for the very broad array of themes surrounding belonging and territoriality that the contributors analyze. One way to do this is to understand sonic modifications of the body's spatial economy as a bundling of different lines of experience by creating resonances between them (Abels 2020, 166), including those related to religious traditions.

Sonic materiality is crucial for such bundling of otherwise disparate strands of life, which in the studies this volume brings together include forms of belonging such as gender and political identifications, the spatial experience of borders and sonic territories, all synaesthetically acted out in and through the body. Finally, this bundling also extends to religious

traditions along with acoustemologies and bodily attunements that need to be part of this bundling process. Sonic practices make all these distinct lines of experience commensurable, temporally weakening the distinctions between them, by investing them with the same, overarching feel through modulating felt bodies' spatiality. Such a bundling of different lines of lived experience through sonic intermingling with bodies in religious settings can also include dimensions and aspects of life that are not *prima facie* classifiable as religious. While sonic practices as those analyzed in this volume often reinforce religious sensations, and religious traditions more broadly, their bundling of different strands of life through bringing forth resonances between them may also blur the boundaries between religion and non-religion. This recalls instances of "ambient" religion (Engelke 2012).

An approach that pays attention to how the sonic unites, as the contributions to this volume exemplify, all these disparate strands of life by making them resonate with each other cuts across enduring divisions that have structured the study of the sonic, including sonic religion, for some time. Among these is, first, the distinction between sonic, non-linguistic materiality, and discourse. As several of the contributors demonstrate, the sonic materiality of religious discourse, such as in poetic and ritual song and recitation, is highly consequential for its success as a religious performance precisely because it plays a crucial role in the generation of religious sensations. Religious discourse not only has obvious material dimensions, the latter also play a key role in such discourse's performative efficacy. More broadly, the division between sonic, non-linguistic materiality and discourse also points to different methods in the study of sound, including religious sounds. One can explore religious sound by studying discourse about sound, such as the discourse on sound that is part of a religious tradition and through ethnographic studies of what religious practitioners, listeners, and musicians have to say about religious sound. This approach to religious sound so richly brought to the fore by many of the volume's contributors is indispensable for understanding the deeply meaningful role that sound plays in the discourse of religious traditions, culminating in the complex sonic theologies and cosmologies that several contributors lay out in their chapters. However, such deep engagement with discourse about sound also needs to be complemented by an investigation of sonic materiality beyond the latter's discursive renderings. Understanding the sonic as effecting a bundling of otherwise distinct strands of life, including religious traditions and discourse, is a way to overcome such bifurcation between discourse and sonic materiality in the study of religious sounds.

Taking the sonic as an atmospheric force that bundles a diversity of lines of experience also overcomes a second, related opposition in the study of the sonic in the social sciences and the humanities, including in religious contexts. This is the distinction between the sonic as a force that is powerful in itself versus sound as socio-culturally authorized to be powerful, for example, through religious discourse or traditions of bodily attunement. The contributions to this volume suggest that both of these dimensions need to be joined in order to do justice to the central role of the sonic in religious settings. The sonic in religious settings is both powerful in itself as well as subject to authorization as powerful. The two perspectives only point to different ends of a continuum of meaningfulness along which religious sounds operate. The sonic as a force that is powerful in itself comprises the diffuse, underqualified meaningfulness of sonic motion as traveling kinetic energy with, in Peircean terms, the iconicity (relationships of qualitative likeness) and indexicality (relationships of causality and contiguity) that are part of its materiality. But sonic events also include the more qualified dimensions of meaningfulness that construct it as powerful through discourse and forms of bodily attunement that are part of religious traditions. To return to the figure of the sonic as bundling otherwise disparate strands of life, including religious traditions, both the diffuse sonic meaningfulness that inheres in its material dynamics and their discursive and habitus-related qualifications need to be part of the bundle for it to be effective in religious settings. That is, modes of bodily attunement and religious discourse need to be included in this process of imbuing all the strands of life that are brought together through sonic performance and intermingling, giving it the same feel through the modulation and modification of felt space, making them resonate with each other. In such ways, the modes of territoriality and belonging entangled with the religious that this book is about can be felt through the sonic in ways that evade and exceed discourse.

Sonic materiality as medium of the divine?

Understanding the sonic as making disparate strands of life resonate with each other, bundling the religious with the non-religious in the process, also opens up a new perspective on religion as a form of mediation between human actors and the divine. A perspective that stresses the materiality of the religious, which is also emphasized in the introduction to this volume, and an interest in media and mediation has often gone hand in hand. Following a “media turn” in the study of religion (Engelke 2010), much recent

work on material religion has treated objects, images, and technical media as mediators that enable interaction between humans and divine worlds, however conceived. From the perspective of such media-oriented investigation of material religion, it would seem that religious sound and sonic materiality are an additional dimension of religion as media. Nevertheless, the eventful and fleeting materiality of the sonic offers another, distinct angle on the influential paradigm of religion as mediation (Eisenlohr 2022). Unlike objects, images, and the material infrastructures and apparatuses of technical media, the sonic is no stable in-between connecting humans and the divine. This is because it does not respect the boundaries of bodies and their environments, or between bodies, intermingling with and passing through them. In particular, the dynamic merger of the sonic with felt bodies, which is the ground for religious sounds' emotive power, is dramatically at odds with conventional notions of mediation. These are based on the existence of a stable in-between, a clearly demarcated third that is distinct from two entities or domains it is supposed to connect by bridging spatial, temporal, or qualitative gaps between them. While the merger of the sonic with felt bodies appears to go against any notion of mediation, evoking a kind of immediacy instead, the sonic does not permanently erase the distinctions between the strands of life they bundle by making the felt body, learned bodily dispositions, discourse, and forms of belonging resonate with each other. Instead, sonic motion acts as a mediator between otherwise different, sometimes even disparate strands of life, including those related to religious traditions, by prompting them to temporarily blur into each other and imbuing them with a shared feel. In this way, the centrality of the body, or more precisely the felt body, is vindicated, as several contributors to this volume make clear, when it becomes the prime site in which such mediation between humans and the divine unfolds through sonic motion. In other words, the sonic makes different or even disparate lines of experience commensurable through motion sensed by the felt body.

The propensity of the sonic to pass through and blur the boundaries between bodies is also responsible for its social and collective force. As the contributors' studies in this volume testify, this is also very much in evidence in religious settings. The potential of the sonic to bring about a temporary merger of bodies, taking hold of them simultaneously by investing them with shared feelings greatly contributes to the formation of religious community. This creation of community through somatic connection can simultaneously extend into the felt aspects of other forms of sociality such as the political identifications and territorialities that feature prominently in several of the book's chapters. Theorist of atmospheres Hermann Schmitz

has called such a merger of felt bodies by atmospheric forces like the sonic “solidary encorporation” (2014, 59). The somatic evidence provided by such solidary encorporation made possible by felt bodies’ openness and permeable boundaries that the sonic acts upon supports the forms of religious and political community that play such a prominent role in the studies this book brings together. Together with the awareness among those present that others are immersed in the same sonic event, such coupling across a multitude of bodies can act as a powerful force of sociality and enables the sonic to play such central roles in religious contexts.

Sonic aesthetics and political projects

The centrality of embodiment in the sonic enactment of gender, borders, and political belonging through religious sounds also points to the complex relationship of the aesthetic on one hand, and the ethical and the political on the other. In fact, in several of the contributions, ethical and political stances feature, along with the generation of religious community, as perhaps the most significant performative outcome of the religious sounds studied. Given that there is at best only a loose coupling of aesthetics and ethics as well of aesthetics and politics, how can ethical and political projects be propelled by the sonic, including religious sounds? The link is highly variable and far from self-evident. The same or similar aesthetics, such as the sonic experiences and sensations in the chapters of this volume, can, in principle, be linked to very different ethical and political positions. Here also, looking for the power of the sonic in its bundling of different strands of life, including religious traditions as well as ethical and political aspirations, makes it possible to better understand the role of the sonic in such ethical and political projects. Making such different registers of lived experience commensurable by temporarily blurring distinctions between them in sonic motion, the aesthetics of religious sounds becomes tied to particular ethical or political aspirations. Sonic intermingling with felt bodies make contingent connections between aesthetics, ethics, and politics seem self-evident through somatic evidence, felt in the flesh. Not only does the loose coupling between aesthetics and politics make an ethnographic encounter with the sonic, including religious sounds, rewarding, because of the need to account for how such coupling could even appear unquestionable in moments of sonic intermingling and immersion. More broadly, only the irreducibility of the sonic, including religious sounds, to political and ethical projects, makes studying the sonic worthwhile in itself. Sonic performances

and experiences produce an excess that resists full capture by political and ethical projects, opening up the possibility of feeding into new spatial politics, social hierarchies, and modes of belonging.

As the explorations of religious sound in this volume show, sonic practices and experiences play a unique and also a profoundly multimodal role in constituting the felt aspects of the religious, activating audition, touch and kinesthetics simultaneously. Reconceptualizing religion through the sonic, the contributors engage with several key dimensions at once that have dominated scholarship on religion in recent years. The workings of the sonic are central to material religion, to religion as medium between humans and the non-human divine, as discursive tradition, as embodied forms of discipline, as well as an institution of belonging. With its stress on the sonic generation of non-discursive bodily knowledge (Lorea 2022), the study of religious sounds can account for the bundling of the non-religious with the religious and vice versa, highlighting such sounds' bridging qualities that are a main mode of how bodies intermingle with the world.

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