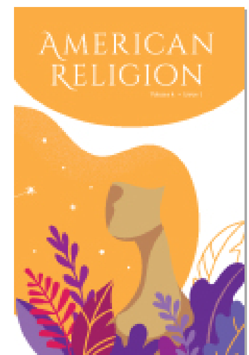
Religious Sounds and the Sounds Around Religion = Sonidos Religiosos y Sonidos en Torno a la Religión



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RELIGIOUS SOUNDS AND THE SOUNDS AROUND RELIGION

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Abstract

In this article, we explore the significance of ambient and other "non-iconic" sounds for interpreting American religious life. Drawing on examples from our work as co-directors of the American Religious Sounds Project, we consider what we learn by tuning into both the ambient sounds that surround religious practice and the ways that religious practices themselves can be made ambient. We also reflect on the affordances and challenges of representing ambient sounds on a digital platform. Ambience directs our attention to that which is often ignored yet also raises profound questions about our relationships with and responsibilities towards those whom we study. Instead of offering definitive answers to these questions, we aim to propose valuable directions for further inquiry.

Keywords: sound, ambience, religion, digital, archive, public

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SONIDOS RELIGIOSOS Y SONIDOS EN TORNO A LA RELIGIÓN

Resumen

En este artículo, exploramos la importancia de los sonidos ambientales y otros "no icónicos" para interpretar la vida religiosa estadounidense. Basándonos en ejemplos de nuestro trabajo como codirectores del Proyecto de Sonidos Religiosos Americanos, consideramos lo que aprendemos al sintonizar tanto los sonidos ambientales que rodean la práctica religiosa como las formas en que las propias prácticas religiosas pueden convertirse en ambientales. También reflexionamos sobre las posibilidades y los retos de representar los sonidos ambientales en una plataforma digital. El ambiente dirige nuestra atención hacia lo que a menudo se ignora, pero también plantea profundas cuestiones sobre nuestras relaciones y responsabilidades hacia aquellos a quienes estudiamos. En lugar de ofrecer respuestas definitivas a estas cuestiones, pretendemos proponer valiosas direcciones para seguir investigando.

Palabras claves: sonido, ambiente, religión, digital, archivo, público

RELIGIOUS SOUNDS ARE EVERYWHERE

"A goat! It's a goat! It's a goat, Dad!" A boy yells enthusiastically on a windy December day in Lansing, Michigan. "Don't touch," his father repeatedly warns, and then asks, "what is that, is that paint?" In the background is the sound of traffic and car horns honking. Loud footsteps can be heard as a woman walks by while ending her cell phone call. This 48-second clip of the Yule Goat on the Michigan State Capitol lawn is one of over 250 audio clips in the American Religious Sounds Project digital archive.[1] The clip is taken from a longer recording of spontaneous public responses to the Yule Goat statue that was erected by the Satanic Temple of West Michigan and displayed on the State Capitol lawn near a nativity scene and a menorah.[2] The arresting visual statement of the Yule Goat alongside Christian and Jewish symbolic images effectively engages the attention of visitors to the Capitol. But, are the onlookers' verbal responses and the ambient

1 American Religious Sounds Project, accessed April 24, 2022, https://religioussounds.osu.edu/.

2 Skylar Berlin, "Yule Goat on the Michigan Capitol Lawn," American Religious Sounds Project, recorded December 26, 2019, Lansing State Capitol, Lansing, MI, https://explore.religioussounds.osu.edu/visualization?target_visualization=archive&record=172.

noise surrounding them that is captured on the recording religious sounds? Why would our research team record and publish these particular sounds on a public facing website about religion in the United States? What might we learn about religion in the US when we listen to the sounds of a child identifying a goat statue on a public green space?

When we piloted what became the American Religious Sounds Project in 2014 in our midwestern cities, we set out to document sounds made by religious people and communities, sounds heard in religious spaces and contexts, and sounds produced and broadcasted anywhere that had explicitly religious content or language. Our goal was to create a digital sound map of religious life in our regions. Inspired by sensory and material turns in the study of religion, we enlisted student researchers to produce unique audio field recordings at a wide range of sites and spaces, including some conventionally regarded as religious and others that seemed ostensibly secular.[3] We edited and tagged their recordings, accompanied them with text and visual images, and shared them on a custom-built digital platform, indicating on a map the location in which they were produced. Over the years, we added a curated multimedia gallery, lesson plans, and other tools for exploring our growing archive. Always a work in progress, we took advantage of the affordances of the digital environment to offer public-facing resources for studying and teaching about US religious diversity through sound.[4]

From the start, we confronted basic definitional questions. What is a religious sound? What makes a sound religious, and what does it mean to describe something as a sound? How would we decide where and what to record? Our responses to these questions evolved over time, shaped by our own theoretical commitments, by the often idiosyncratic choices made by our student recordists, and through our conversations and exchanges with the individuals and communities we encountered in the field. Defining the scope of our collection was itself a collaborative and iterative process, one that required careful balancing of competing interests and investments. As our archive grew, it came to

3 In this context, we use "secular" in a relatively narrow sense to denote spaces commonly regarded as "not religious." This reflects a popular understanding of the secular, which we do not share, that defines it in opposition to the religious. Scholarship in the burgeoning field of secularism studies has done much to complicate this concept and to offer other ways of approaching it. We consider how attending to ambient religion contributes to these conversations below. On the sensory and material turns in the study of religion, see, for example, David Morgan, *The Thing About Religion: An Introduction to the Material Study of Religions* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021); and Sally Promey, ed., *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).

4 American Religious Sounds Project.

encompass a wider and wider array of traditions and practices, including not just the formal sounds of organized worship but also the varied and often mundane sounds of everyday life. For example, we included iconic Christian sounds like bells ringing and choirs singing, but we also recorded people chatting about their families while wrapping Easter eggs in a Greek Orthodox church basement.[5] We have recordings of highly stylized Quranic recitation alongside the babbling and crying of babies during a communal Eid celebration.[6] Over and over again, we found ourselves drawn to the ambient sounds that accompanied ritual practice both inside and outside of formal religious spaces, such as the creaking of church pews as people settle into their seats or the roar of engines during a prayer given by a Raceways Ministries Chaplain at Shadybowl Speedway in De Graff, Ohio.[7] Whether recording in an intimate domestic space or a noisy public street, we listened intently for the sounds *of* religion and the sounds *around* religion.

Attending to the ambient qualities of these varied social settings advanced our understanding of religion in profound ways. In this article, we explore the significance of ambient and other "non-iconic" sounds for interpreting American religious life.[8] Drawing on examples from the American Religious Sounds Project archive, we consider what scholars of American religious studies can learn by tuning into the ambient sounds that surround religious practice and to the ways that religious practices themselves can be made ambient. Our analysis focuses both on the material and sensory conditions that allow certain religious forms to become part of the background noise of American public life and on the particular sensory and kinetic qualities that provide religious practices with their specific sound and character. Amplifying these points with concrete examples from our archive, we demonstrate how a sonic approach to the study of American religions can contribute to broader conversations about religious publicity and secularism.

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5 Amy DeRogatis, "Tsougrisma," American Religious Sounds Project, accessed April 22, 2022, http://arspgallery.com/tsougrisma/.

6 Joshua Schnell, "Eid al-Fitr - prayers," American Religious Sounds Project, recorded July 6, 2016, Lansing Center, Lansing, MI, https://explore.religioussounds.osu.edu/visualization?target_visualization=archive&record=33.

7 Caroline Toy, Isaac Weiner, and Lauren Pond, "Speedway races - prayer with drivers," American Religious Sounds Project, recorded September 11, 2016, Shadybowl Speedway, De Graff, OH, https://explore.religioussounds.osu.edu/visualization?target_visualization=archive&record=100.

8 By "non-iconic" we refer to sounds that are not typically or primarily associated with particular religious traditions. As we discuss below, there are certain sounds that tend to stand in as representations of particular traditions, like church bells for Christianity, the call to prayer for Islam, or the *om* for Hinduism. In this article, we encourage listening beyond these "iconic" sounds.

By bringing ambience to the fore, we call attention to that which usually goes ignored and unheard. In the final section of the article, we turn to the affordances and challenges of representing ambience on a digital platform. While some of these issues are more technical or theoretical in nature, others point to the profound ethical stakes of our work. By directing our attention to what—and who—can go unnoticed, listening for ambience raises important questions about our relationships with and responsibilities towards those whom we study. While we offer few definitive answers to these questions, we hope by raising them to model the kind of reflexive sensitivity that we believe responsible, community-engaged scholarship demands.

AMBIENT RELIGION AND THE AMBIENCE OF RELIGION

The noise is nearly deafening as you approach the asphalt track of Shadybowl Speedway on a race day. Even before you enter the small stadium, tucked away amidst the cornfields of De Graff, Ohio, you begin to feel the vibrations in your body as dozens of souped-up stock cars race around "the world's fastest 3/10th mile speedway." You hear country music blasting out of tinny speakers, spectators cheering and jeering, and, above all, the roar of the engines, drowning out all other sensations.

A few minutes before the start of the first race, a voice comes over the loudspeaker asking for quiet. The engines fade to a hum, a low, idling rumble, as the crowd hushes and rises for the national anthem and prayer. "Everyone on your feet," the announcer demands, "this isn't the NFL." On the track stands Kermit Wilson, an elderly white man with a balding head, who serves as volunteer speedway chaplain. Speaking over the stadium's static-y loudspeaker, Chaplain Wilson offers a blessing for the health and safety of the drivers. On this particular day, September 11, 2016, he recalls the spirit of unity that swept across the nation in the weeks and months following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and implores the crowd to call on God for guidance and protection each and every day, just as we did "in the wake of that terrible tragedy." His brief invocation mingles religious and patriotic themes, tinged with the racial politics of the announcer's not-so-subtle allusion to NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick's refusal to stand for the national anthem. Religion, race, and nation blend together seamlessly in a manner all too familiar to scholars of American religion.

And yet, despite its place of prominence, Chaplain Wilson's amplified invocation was probably the least significant aspect of his work that day. For several hours, we circled the track with him on foot, recording snippets of his casual conversations with drivers in the pit and spectators in the stands. He talked about engine troubles and track conditions, health problems and hopes for the future, seeming equally at ease on the subjects of horsepower and torque as of God and

salvation. He led spontaneous prayer circles, offered informal blessings, and listened to whatever was on his "congregants'" minds. "With the racing business in particular," he explained, "if someone says they want prayer, they don't want you to get the book out, write down their name, and say, 'I'll pray for you at church.' They don't want that. They want it right now." All the while, Wilson's prayers were accompanied by the steady soundtrack of engines idling in place, cars roaring around the track, spectators chatting and cheering, vendors hawking food and other concessions, and a disembodied voice announcing upcoming races over the loudspeaker. Unlike the invocation, which was introduced by a general hush, the chaplain's other prayers that day seeped into the broader sonic environment of the speedway, forming part of the overall acoustic event, rather than standing apart as something discrete and separate. Chaplain Wilson cast a comfortable and familiar presence for those who gather weekly at the Shadybowl Speedway, notable to us, as scholars, only because of how unnotable his activities seemed to others.[9]

Our recordings of Chaplain Wilson's prayers offer an excellent example of what we would describe as ambient religion.[10] His evangelical ministry was not aggressively public, like what we find in other recordings in our archive, such as preachers outside the 2016 Republican National Convention or a Westboro

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9 To hear an audio collage of sounds from the Shadybowl Speedway, see Lauren Pond, "Mobile Ministry," American Religious Sounds Project, accessed April 24, 2022, http://arspgallery.com/mobile-ministry-exhibit/, and scroll down to "Raceway Ministry." Toy, Weiner, and Pond, "Speedway races - prayer with drivers."

10 As one of the reviewers of this article noted, many sound studies scholars might have described the sonic environment of the Shadybowl Speedway or the other sonic environments we analyze in this article as "soundscapes." As coined by pioneering sound studies scholar R. Murray Schafer, the notion of a "soundscape" similarly directs our attention to background sound, but Schafer's use of the term was embedded within a very specific prescriptive project that we do not share. While sound studies scholars today tend to use the term more descriptively, we agree with Ari Y. Kelman who has argued that "soundscape" is now used so broadly that it risks losing its analytical purchase. For the purposes of this article, we found that the category "ambience" better captured what we were trying to describe. For Schafer's use of "soundscape," see R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1993). For Kelman's critique, see Ari Y. Kelman, "Rethinking the Soundscape: A Critical Genealogy of a Key Term in Sound Studies," *Senses & Society* 5, no. 2 (2010): 212–234. On Schafer's legacy, we also recommend two episodes of the Phantom Power podcast: Mack Hagood, "Ep. 29: R. Murray Schafer (1933–2021) Pt. 1," *Phantom Power*, podcast audio, September 28, 2021, http://phantompod.org/2021/09/28/ep-29-r-murray-schafer-1933-2021-pt-1/; and Mack Hagood, "Ep. 30: R. Murray Schafer (1933–2021) Pt. 2: Critiques and Contradictions," *Phantom Power*, podcast audio, October 29, 2021, http://phantompod.org/2021/10/29/ep-30-r-murray-schafer-pt-2-critiques-and-contradictions/.

Baptist Church protest. His tone was not strident or antagonistic, nor did he go out of his way to call attention to himself. Yet his performance was certainly not private either. Instead, his calm, quiet demeanor and unassuming style brought religion to the public sphere by subtly integrating it into what otherwise might have seemed a wholly secular event. He rendered religion part of Shadybowl Speedway's ambient background. At the same time, as documented in our archival recordings, the other ambient qualities of the event—the engines and crowd noise and commercial activities—all entered into and became part of Kermit Wilson's religious practice. Racetrack religion had a particular tone and shape that emerged from the interplay of diverse acoustic elements, both religious and secular, coming together to form a distinctive ambience for the event.[11]

Our work with the American Religious Sounds Project has convinced us of the usefulness of the category of ambience for scholars of religion. In our understanding of ambience, we borrow from anthropologist Matthew Engelke's work on biblical publicity in England.[12] Engelke describes the ways that Bible Society members intentionally use visual and aural cues to embed Christianity into the background culture of British public life. Whether by hanging abstract angels in a shopping mall for Christmas or staging Bible reading sessions in coffee shops and pubs, the Bible Society intends for their public displays to be glanced at or overheard by others rather than demanding close attention.[13] By creating casual opportunities for spontaneous engagement with the Christian message, these performances are "supposed to help set the ambience of the public square," Engelke writes, "to be literally part of the 'background noise' of daily life."[14] As anthropologist Hillary Kaell further elaborates, ambience "refers to forces that are backgrounded but ubiquitous, filtering in and out of our sensory space."[15] In her analysis of wayside crosses in rural Quebec, Kaell demonstrates how these pervasive displays derive their power precisely from not being seen. Always

11 On the ways that different technologies of transport and communication give rise to different forms of religious practice, see Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 125–127; Isaac Weiner, *Religion Out Loud: Religious Sound, Public Space, and American Pluralism* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 105; and Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

12 Matthew Engelke, "Angels in Swindon: Public Religion and Ambient Faith in England," *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 1 (February 2012): 155–170.

13 On different styles of Christian public engagement, also see Meadhbh McIvor, *Representing God: Christian Legal Activism in Contemporary England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

14 Engelke, 164.

15 Hillary Kaell, "Seeing the Invisible: Ambient Catholicism on the Side of the Road," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 85, no. 1 (2017): 139.

present yet usually unnoticed, they "exert a kind of authority *as a result* of being ambient, rather than despite it."[16]

In different ways, both Engelke and Kaell draw our attention to the material and sensory forms through which public religion is constituted and displayed, to the ways that particular sounds, sights, and smells serve as markers of religion's public presence even as they undercut sharp distinctions between public and private or religious and secular. By focusing on how particular objects and practices are rendered part of the background culture of daily life, their analyses invite us to appreciate the social significance of sights and sounds that otherwise might go unnoticed.

In setting out to document and record the sounds of American religious life, we followed their lead, tuning into disparate examples of what we might describe as ambient religion. But we also grew just as interested in the other ambient sounds that *surrounded* the practices we were documenting. That is, we came to understand ambience in two ways, as referring both to how religion can be made part of the ambient background and to how the ambient qualities of a given social situation shape and constitute religious practices. We aimed to capture and record moments when religious sound blended into the background acoustics of daily life as well as the ambient sounds of spaces and activities commonly deemed religious.[17]

Take the example of racetrack chaplaincy. As noted above, we heard the sounds of Chaplain Wilson's prayers and conversations amidst the deafening roar of car engines, the persistent hum of crowd noise, and the tinny echoes of amplified music. Our recordings document how Wilson made religion part of Shadybowl Speedway's ambient background and in turn how the distinct material and sensory qualities of the racetrack shaped his delivery of the Gospel message. Or in the case of coffee shop Bible readings, we aimed to record both the kinds of religious conversations meant to be overheard by others, like those that Engelke describes, and also the other sounds of the cafe (the brewing of coffee, piped-in music, keyboard typing, even other conversations) that were part of the experience of studying the Bible in that context.[18] To appreciate religion as it is lived, practiced, and made public required us always to situate it within its broader auditory environment.

Approaching ambience in this way should attune scholars to the significance of seemingly peripheral sounds in more formal religious contexts, too. Whether

16 Ibid., 161.

17 To be fair, both Engelke and Kaell gesture to this other way of understanding ambience but do not center it in their analyses. Engelke, in particular, attends to the smell of cappuccino and the ringing of the cash register in the cafe but does so to call attention to the commercial transactions that are the condition of entry to the public for the Bible Society's work.

18 To hear an example of a church-sponsored conversation about theology staged in a public restaurant, visit Caroline Toy, "Pub Theology discussion," American Religious Sounds Project, recorded October 8, 2015, Koble Grill, Westerville, OH, https://explore.religioussounds.osu.edu/visualization?target_visualization=archive&record=83.

it was the creaking of pews during Catholic mass or the laughter and crying of children during an Eid prayer, our recordings document the full range of sounds that communities make when gathered together in worship.[19] Paying attention to ambience brought us into other institutional spaces as well, such as kitchens and social halls. One recording features the sizzles and pops of boiling oil as volunteer cooks at a Serbian Orthodox Church prepare for a Lenten fish fry.[20] Another recording captures the casual chatter and sociality of a communal *langar* meal following services at a Sikh gurdwara.[21] How might these ambient sounds expand the ways scholars of American religion think about religious practice? How might an attention to ambient sounds shift the focus from scripted formal practices and leaders in expected spaces to spontaneous actions by practitioners in unexpected places?

Ambience draws our attention to that which is usually taken for granted, to the ever present yet easily ignored sensory qualities that give a place its particular character. Especially when conceived in acoustic terms, ambience foregrounds that which is in the background. It invites us to consider the sounds that make up the underlying atmosphere of a place, whether formal religious institution or outdoor speedway, whether main sanctuary or basement social hall, whether private religious grounds or a public state capitol lawn. Religion, too, can be ambient when its public expressions fade unnoticeably to the background. There is an ambience to religious practice and religious practice that is itself ambient. Listening for the sounds of religion invites us to take seriously each of these types of ambient expression, to take note of what usually goes unnoticed, in order to consider what the sounds might tell us about American religious and public life.

WHY AMBIENCE?

In studio recordings, record producers might occasionally add background noise, such as coughing or clapping, to create the impression that the music

19 Lauren Pond, "Eid al-Fitr celebration," American Religious Sounds Project, recorded June 25, 2017, Ohio Expo Center, Columbus, OH, https://explore.religioussounds.osu.edu/visualization?target_visualization=archive&record=34.

20 Lauren Pond, "Lenten fish dinner - food preparation and conversation," American Religious Sounds Project, recorded April 15, 2016, St. Stevan of Dechani Serbian Orthodox Church, Columbus, OH, https://explore.religioussounds.osu.edu/visualization?target_visualization=archive&record=60.

21 Amy DeRogatis, "Interview with practitioner about langar," American Religious Sounds Project, recorded February 19, 2017, Guru Nanak Sikh Center, Lansing, MI, https://explore.religioussounds.osu.edu/visualization?target_visualization=archive&record=56.

was recorded live. Rather than detracting from the performance, ambient sounds are thought to render the recording more "authentic" by conveying a feel for the character or atmosphere of the place in which it was produced. They can enhance the sense of "being there," drawing the listener into the experience of being fully present at the moment of creation.

The ambient sounds on our field recordings are not artificial or inserted after the fact, but they, too, are preserved to convey the feeling of being in a specific time and place. They make sensible how the recordings in our archive are not polished studio productions, abstracted from the context of communal gathering and worship. Instead, they are produced in particular moments and spaces, capturing the sounds of religion as it is lived, embodied, and enacted in everyday life. They are akin to audio snapshots, aural fieldnotes, offering fragmentary glimpses into the reality of American religious life as it is practiced in time and space.

Many existing collections of sacred sounds concentrate on the essential meaning of isolated sounds themselves, often focusing on iconic sounds such as the *sh'ma* or call to prayer, or the chanting of *om* or sacred mantras. These recordings abstract the ritual from its particular context of production, implying that its meaning and function transcends any particular time and place.[22] Our recordings locate specific, even idiosyncratic, performances within their broader sonic and social environment. By including all sorts of ostensibly meaningless ambient noises, they remind us that religious practice always takes on meaning and shape within highly specific contexts. It is often these ambient sounds that provide a soundtrack for communal belonging and ritual practice.

Attending to ambience centers the practice of listening as a mode of inquiry and understanding. The recordings in our archive are products of particular interpretive choices made by the recordists who produced them. The recordists have to choose where to position themselves within a space, where to direct the recorder, what to amplify, and what to mute. They are not so much recordings of particular sounds as of particular listening experiences, preserving multiple, overlapping, often ephemeral sonic expressions, some in the forefront, some in the background, without reducing them to a singular field of vision.[23] By tuning

22 For example, see the *Interfaith Voices* radio series on "The Soundscapes of Faith," November 14, 2014, https://interfaithradio.org/soundscapes. Also see the CD accompanying Guy Beck's widely used textbook, *Sacred Sound: Experiencing Music in World Religions* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006).

23 The mixing of sonic and visual metaphors here is deliberate to heighten this contrast between multiplicity and singularity or, we might say, stereo and mono ways of perceiving the world. Sound studies scholars regularly contrast the multiplicity or pluralism of fields of listening with the relatively singular line of sight.

into the ambient sounds of religious practice, we aim to reinforce the idea that our knowledge of religion is always situated and, at least in part, shaped by the choices we make about how to study it.

Ambient sounds also convey and reinforce shared communal values and reveal differences and similarities across religious traditions. The hushed quiet of a mainline Protestant church service might suggest a different notion of sacred reverence than the steady din of chatter or conversation often heard in a Jewish synagogue or Hindu temple. The creaking of pews as Catholics kneel together or the shuffling of Muslim bodies as they prostrate themselves in prayer might signal a common emphasis on humility before God. The sounds associated with food preparation and consumption, alluded to above, underscore the significance of houses of worship as sites of communal bonding and sociality. And the echoes of laughter documented on numerous recordings in our archive remind us of the central role that humor plays across religious traditions.

Ambient sounds travel, and as they do, they cross boundaries and undercut sharp distinctions between public and private, religious and secular. For example, one of the recordings in our archive comes from a weekend-long celebration of Vesakha, the Buddha's birthday, at a Theravada Buddhist temple in Columbus, Ohio.[24] For two and a half days, the temple's resident monks engaged in marathon sessions of chanting and meditation inside the temple's main sanctuary. Outside, the temple hosted a cultural bazaar, featuring food, kiosks, and vendors selling all sorts of Thai and Lao goods, whose activities stayed mostly distinct from the indoor rituals. Our recording begins inside with the monks, whose voices are heard prominently in the forefront, the ambient sounds of the festival just audible in the background. After a few minutes, the recordist moves outdoors, and the perspective shifts. The sounds of the monks' ritual chanting can still be heard, softly, amidst the now prominent noise of the ostensibly secular bazaar and of traffic on the nearby highway. Their faint echoes permeate the atmosphere of the celebration, blurring the boundaries between inside and outside, public and private, temple and marketplace, religion and culture, just as the sounds of the festival enter into the monks' devotional practice. Sound serves as a medium of contact, embedding religious practices within their broader social environment.

The boundary crossing propensities of sound are particularly evident in cases when religion itself is rendered ambient, as in the examples discussed in the previous section. As religious practices are made part of the background noise

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24 Isaac Weiner, "Vaisakhi puja," American Religious Sounds Project, recorded May 21, 2016, Wat Buddha Samakidham Temple, Columbus, OH, https://explore.religioussounds.osu.edu/visualization?target_visualization=archive&record=128.

of pubs and cafes, of speedways and truck stops, they become public without necessarily being recognized as such. They "help set the ambience of the public square" without calling attention to themselves.[25] This insight, as developed by Engelke, Kaell, and others, makes an important intervention into scholarly conversations about secularism and religious publicity. According to common understandings of political secularism, religion ought to be solely a matter of private faith and individual choice. By staying in the background, ambient religion goes public but, at least ostensibly, does so in a manner that does not violate the conditions of secular modernity. It allows individuals to choose whether to engage it, to determine for themselves whether or how to respond to overheard conversations and casual entreaties. It affords the possibility that religion might be publicly present without being noticed at all. As Kaell puts it, "Ambient religion is powerful because it engages secularism by upholding its tenets while also interweaving Christianity into public spaces."[26] It offers us evidence of religion that is public yet not entirely so, secularist without being quite secular.[27]

Of course, not all religious expressions can become ambient in this way. For sounds to be ambient, they must go unnoticed, and not all sounds can escape attention. Not all sounds can become part of the background noise of everyday life. It is no coincidence that the examples cited by Engelke and Kaell involve public displays of Christianity, the dominant religion in the contexts they study. Being part of the background, present yet not noticed, audible without attracting attention, seems a distinct affordance of belonging to the majority.[28] Minority religious expressions are far more likely to be seen and heard and to elicit response. The Islamic call to prayer has garnered more attention than church bells when broadcast outdoors in American cities, for example.[29] Or consider the sounds of the boy responding to the goat statue on the State Capitol lawn. He and the others do not comment on the nativity scene and the menorah, two symbols

25 Engelke, 164.

26 Kaell, 162.

27 Another important intervention in this conversation is Charles Hirschkind's conception of sounds creating a "counter-public." See Hirschkind, especially pp. 123–125.

28 On the ways Protestantism has shaped the background culture of American secular life, see, among numerous other sources, Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); and Charles McCrary and Jeffrey Wheatley, "The Protestant Secular in the Study of American Religion: Reappraisal and Suggestions," *Religion* 47, no. 2 (2017): 256–276.

29 On disputes over the call to prayer, see Isaac Weiner, "Calling Everyone to Pray: Pluralism, Secularism, and the Adhan in Hamtramck, Michigan," *Anthropological Quarterly* 87, no 4 (2014): 1049–1077; and Alisa Perkins, *Muslim American City: Gender and Religion in Metro Detroit* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

that go unnoticed and unremarked upon in the clip. Noticing the goat statue and hearing the ambient public sounds is the point. This religious group has placed the statue in order to draw the public's attention to what goes unnoticed (the nativity scene and the menorah) in public space. The sounds we recorded allow listeners to hear how viewers engage with ambient religion. Whether celebrated or condemned, underrepresented religious groups or symbols cannot fade to the background quite so easily.[30]

There is a politics of ambient faith, in other words, which also must be considered when attending to religious ambience. Documentary projects on religious pluralism tend to concentrate on the institutions and experiences of minority religions, especially immigrants and newcomers, who are thought to comprise the primary constituent components of America's religious diversity.[31] As we set out to do our work, however, it seemed just as important to tune into the sounds of American Christian life. This was not just because Christianity, too, is part of the soundscape of American religious life, but precisely because of the ways that its public presence is often taken for granted. We wanted to render audible that which is often ignored, to render strange that which seems familiar. Our archive includes recordings of Muslim political activism, Jewish shofar soundings during the time of COVID, pagan and Buddhist processions down main city thoroughfares, and numerous other examples of minority traditions performing their practices in public. But it also includes recordings of Christmas music piped into an outdoor shopping mall during the month of December, church members handing out water bottles at a local farmer's market, and church bells chiming in the distance. These commonplace sonic performances tend to escape notice precisely because of how ubiquitous and widespread they are. Their power emerges from their *failure* to attract attention.

In bringing ambience to the fore, then, we wish to invite reflection on how and why certain sounds become ambient and not others, and on what is at stake in demarcating particular sounds as religious or secular, public or private. Our archive offers few definitive answers to these questions. Instead, we hope its contents prompt valuable occasions for further inquiry.

30 For further elaboration of this point, see Isaac Weiner, "'And Then! Oh, the Noise! Oh, the Noise! Noise! Noise! Noise!' Or How the Grinch Heard Christmas," in *The Public Work of Christmas: Difference and Belonging in Multicultural Societies*, eds. Pamela E. Klassen and Monique Scheer (Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's Press, 2019), 36–59.

31 See, for example, the Pluralism Project based at Harvard University, pluralism.org.

PROBLEMS/CHALLENGES

In the final section of this article, we identify a few tensions that emerge from our focus on non-iconic sounds and ambient religion. We also note some of the challenges of disseminating our work on a digital platform, despite its obvious advantages for allowing users to hear (rather than simply read about) the sounds in our archive. We find these tensions and challenges productive for deeper engagement with the nuances of studying and representing the sounds of religious practices in the United States.

First, we acknowledge that the sense of "authenticity" conveyed by including ambient sounds on our recordings can be somewhat misleading. It is not lost on us that our efforts to provide a sense of being in a particular moment and space may be in tension with producing edited clips and featuring them on a digital platform. The process, from beginning to end, de-contextualizes and then re-contextualizes the final product. The 48-second clip of the boy responding to the goat statue has been separated from the source of the longer raw audio. The two-and-a-half-minute collage of sounds from the Shadybowl Speedway splices together multiple moments from our afternoon with Chaplain Wilson. Visitors to the website are not experiencing the documented events directly. Instead, their experiences are mediated by and through the choices made by individual recordists, the quality of the audio recording, the multimedia producer's editing decisions, and the text and images that accompany each clip. And clips only appear on the website in the first place if the research team agrees that they will add to the richness of the archive. The authenticity of the recordings is both real and constructed at the same time.

This problem is hardly unique to our project. Critics have worried about the relationship between recorded sound and its source since the advent of audio recording technology.[32] And as Brian Hochman has shown, ideas about "sonic fidelity" have a complex history that is entangled with the anthropological practice of documenting diversity. In *Savage Preservation*, his fascinating account of the mutually co-constitutive origins of ethnography and modern media, Hochman argues that the phonograph only "began to emerge as an authentic reproducer of the real" in tandem with efforts by nineteenth-century dialect writers, anthropologists, and ethnomusicologists to "preserve" the sounds of cultures they believed were "vanishing."[33] The phonograph solved an ethnographic

32 Kate Lacey, *Listening Publics: The Politics and Experience of Listening in the Media Age* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013); Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); and Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

33 Brian Hochman, *Savage Preservation: The Ethnographic Origins of Modern Media Technology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 76.

"problem," namely that of how to overcome the subjectivity of the situated listener, who had recourse previously only to text and writing when documenting the sounds of difference. The phonograph promised an objective, unmediated encounter, a direct experience of the "sounds themselves," unfiltered through the culturally preconditioned biases of ethnographic observers. It could offer true "fidelity" to the source material, a sense enhanced by its ability to capture everything about an event, ambience and all. Some nineteenth-century preservationists even suggested phonograph recordings might be *more* accurate and useful than being present at the event itself, for the listener could appreciate them again and again, "isolated from the distractions of the field encounter."[34]

These assumptions about the objectivity of audio recording devices strike us as naive today, yet they continue to shape the ways we listen. It is all too easy to ignore the role of mediating technologies in the production of documentary recordings. As we have suggested, recorded ambient sound heightens this sense of auditory realism, the feeling that one is being transported to a particular time and place and encountering it "as it is." However, we must remember that listening is never an unmediated experience, and the audio recorder is not a neutral or objective device. Ambience promises greater authenticity, yet it, too, is constructed in the ways we have noted, its presence the product of particular choices made by recordists, editors, and designers. It is never simply "there."

Through our work on the American Religious Sounds Project, we have become convinced of the value of audio recording and digital publishing as methods for deepening our understanding of American religions and for overcoming some of the limits of traditional print-based scholarship. Yet we do not want to do so in a way that reproduces the naive auditory assumptions of the past. Recording ambience has much to offer us, but what it cannot do is overcome the inherent cultural situatedness of all scholarship and interpretation. We also need to be mindful of the "preservationist" impulses of nineteenth-century ethnographers even though we do not share them. Ideas about sound recordings as an "unmediated medium" developed in tandem with historically specific, and racist, ideas about cultural difference and social evolution that have rightly been rejected by responsible scholars today. Yet we recognize that those ideas still might shape our interactions with the communities we record, especially in the case of those indigenous groups who were the primary subjects of preservationist projects. We are accountable to this past.

Thinking about our relationships with and responsibilities toward our community partners leads to a second tension of emphasizing ambience. The types

34 Ibid., 105.

of sounds we choose to produce and highlight are scholarly choices and do not necessarily match the choices of the communities and people who we record. In fact, our focus on ambient and non-iconic sounds was sometimes at odds with the interests of particular religious communities. It wasn't unusual for a community representative to express surprise when we asked to record something outside of formal worship, as when Michigan State students requested permission to record at the Church of the Resurrection Ox Roast Festival in Lansing, Michigan, in 2016. Although the priest eventually consented, it was with the express condition that we also record during a worship service and that we include both recordings on our website. He was concerned about what it would mean to represent his church through the ambient sounds of an Ox Roast alone. His hesitancy forced us, as scholars, to reflect on whether our interpretive choices were providing deeper understanding or just creating a distraction from what "really" mattered to the people whom we were recording.

There are other representational concerns that arise from the public-facing nature of our project. Only the people who wish to be heard agree to be recorded. Only religious groups who produce sounds that are not considered too sacred to be put on a digital platform or shared widely outside of their community will consent to contribute to the project. Not surprisingly, this led to an over-representation of majority religions and, particularly, mission-minded religious people and groups. The communities that have a theological mandate to be heard and are not worried about unwelcome attention are more likely to feel comfortable having their sounds on a public platform. The clips that are in our archive, therefore, do not offer an exhaustive representation of the religious diversity within our communities but do reflect which religious groups were more likely to want to be heard. In attending to ambience, we want to acknowledge again that our archive is partial, fragmentary, and possibly idiosyncratic, not an unmediated, neutral account of the American religious landscape as it "really" is. We repeat this point not to apologize for it but to re-emphasize that such is the nature of any account of American religious diversity, itself always the product of scholarly invention rather than a pre-existing reality waiting to be discovered and disseminated.

Finally, we wish to note the challenges of representing ambient sound on a digital platform. Our medium—the digital platform—gave us the ability to share the sounds we had recorded but also raised new questions for us. Building a public-facing website pushed us to think about the form in which we were presenting the sounds as well as the function of how we were guiding users to engage with the archive.

From the start of our project, we worked closely with digital humanities librarians and an application development team to create an architecture

for cataloging and displaying our recordings. We developed a unique tagging schema that would enable users to search our archive and filter its contents by different types of sound. As we tried to anticipate how users might engage with the collection, we debated which sounds needed their own tag and how specific each tag should be. In the end, we created metadata categories for twenty-six distinct sound types, including chanting, singing, speaking, laughing, and clapping. We tagged recordings that included "instruments" but also added specific tags for "piano/keyboards" and "drums" because of their prevalence across our recordings.[35] After some discussion, we included a tag for animal sounds and most recently added one for stomping.[36] It was often difficult to decide how to apply our tags, and most of our recordings ended up being tagged with multiple sound types. When possible, we returned to the communities we had recorded to gather their perspectives. We created sound types based on what we—and they—noticed as we listened rather than pre-determining them in advance. Tagging was a highly iterative and collaborative process. In all of our deliberations, we continually returned to basic questions about what listening for laughter or chanting or silence (also a sound type) told us about religion in the United States.[37] Why was it *useful* to be able to filter our archival collection in this way?

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35 To hear a clip tagged for "instruments," see Lauren Pond, "Kirtan," American Religious Sounds Project, recorded February 2, 2019, Maryland Park Apartment Clubhouse, Maryland Heights, MO, https://explore.religioussounds.osu.edu/visualization?target_visualization=archive&record=151. To hear a clip tagged for "piano/keyboard," see Katie Graber, "Sunday service - Cheyenne reading," American Religious Sounds Project, recorded October 29, 2017, White River Cheyenne Mennonite Church, Busby, MT, https://explore.religioussounds.osu.edu/visualization?target_visualization=archive&record=134.

36 To hear a clip tagged for "animal sounds," see Joshua Schnell, "Blessing of the animals," American Religious Sounds Project, recorded October 4, 2015, All Saints Episcopal Church, East Lansing, MI, https://explore.religioussounds.osu.edu/visualization?target_visualization=archive&record=13. To hear a clip tagged for "stomping," see Lauren Pond, "Columbus witches ball," American Religious Sounds Project, recorded October 28, 2016, First Unitarian Universalist Church, Columbus, OH, https://explore.religioussounds.osu.edu/visualization?target_visualization=archive&record=144.

37 To hear a clip tagged for "laughter," see Joshua Schnell, "Sunday service - sermon," American Religious Sounds Project, recorded October 18, 2015, First Congregational Church UCC, Grand Ledge, MI, https://explore.religioussounds.osu.edu/visualization?target_visualization=archive&record=118. To hear a clip tagged for "chanting/reciting," see Isaac Weiner, "Vaisakhi puja," American Religious Sounds Project, recorded May 21, 2016, Wat Buddha Samakidham Temple, Columbus, OH, https://explore.religioussounds.osu.edu/visualization?target_visualization=archive&record=128. To hear a clip tagged

We struggled the most with the tag for "ambient." Ambient sounds were present on almost every recording in our archive, yet we had to be careful about applying the tag too broadly. A filter term has no value if it turns up every data point in the set. At the same time, we did not want to forego the term altogether because of how convinced we were of the significance of ambient sounds for our project. Instead, we decided to distinguish between recordings in which the ambient sounds were truly prominent or central to what was being documented and recordings in which the ambient noises were more peripheral or incidental. This distinction could feel somewhat arbitrary at times. It also underscored for us one of the crucial ironies of representing ambience on a public-facing digital platform. As we have suggested, attending to ambient religion means attending to those sounds and practices that are present yet generally unnoticed, often unnoticed even by those who belong to the community making the sounds in question. When we invite visitors to our website to take note of these ambient sounds, and especially when we distinguish between "prominent" ambient sounds and "peripheral" ones, we render them no longer ambient. We call attention to sounds whose very significance lies in *not* being noticed or in being present *without* being prominent. What does it mean to record such sounds and share them in this way? How are we fundamentally transforming their meaning through our mode of representation? What is gained and lost in doing so?

Moreover, we hope to find ways of representing what we have described as the *politics* of ambient sound on our digital maps. As we argued above, not all religious practices and communities can be rendered ambient in the same way. Some stand out as different, unfamiliar, unexpected, while others fade unobtrusively to the background. Some communities may be more audible than others. Yet digital sound maps tend to have a leveling effect, representing each sound file as an interchangeable "flag" or geographic locale.[38] How might we develop alternative modes of visual representation that take better note of the entangled relationship between religion, sound, space, and social power? How might we represent our recordings in ways that better account for different kinds of audibility and inaudibility, that distinguish more sharply between those sounds that

for "silence," see Jake Kowal, "Zazenkai retreat," American Religious Sounds Project, recorded February 7, 2016, Wat Buddha Samakidham Temple, Columbus, OH, https://explore.religioussounds.osu.edu/visualization?target_visualization=archive&record=132.

38 The visual medium of the map also creates accessibility challenges for website designers and users.

attract attention and those that are taken for granted, or between those that are readily available to be recorded and those which may be more marginalized or muted? In our embrace of new digital tools, we do not want to miss what Birgit Meyer describes as the "politico-aesthetics" of religious expression, or the legal regulations and social norms that govern who can make themselves heard, and how, and that shape our assumptions about who and what belongs in public.[39] Our attention to ambience is meant to amplify these issues, not silence them.

CONCLUSION

What do we learn about religion in the United States when we tune into non-iconic sounds, ambient religion, and the ambient sounds surrounding religion? What do we learn about our scholarship when we build digital tools and present this type of research on a publicly accessible digital platform? Our experiences of researching and building a digital archive and platform have taught us that sound is a critical medium for investigating religious practices, examining intentional and unintentional religious encounters, and hearing the ways that religious ideas, concepts, and actions cross into the public sphere. We have found that non-iconic religious sounds are as significant and fully embedded in community religious practices as emblematic sounds that scholars and community members tend to identify as the most recognizable sound of their tradition. Additionally, we have come to learn that the ambient sounds of religion in public spaces show us that religious practices (especially in dominant religious traditions) can blend into the sonic environment, rendering it a part of the aural landscape. That sonic background—the ambience surrounding religion—has an effect on religious practices.

To present the non-iconic and ambient sounds, we created a digital platform and digital tools for the public to hear and interact with our research. The digital medium affords many opportunities but also comes with challenges. Collecting, archiving, and publicly displaying religious sounds raises significant concerns about the politics of representation, the de-contextualizing of religious sounds, and the subjectivity of the recordist as well as the application development team that set up the architecture and digital tools for searching and using the website. All of these considerations are kept in the balance as we remain aware of the role

39 Birgit Meyer, "Lessons from 'Global Prayers': How Religion Takes Place in the City," in *Global Prayers: Contemporary Manifestations of the Religious in the City*, eds. Jochen Becker, Katrin Klingan, Stephan Lanz, and Kathrin Wildner (Zürich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2014), 597.

we play as scholars, the interests of the communities that are heard and unheard on our website, and the ability of the public to hear the sounds of religion in the United States. As scholars of religion continue to attend to the sensory elements of religious practices, and especially as they opt to share their research on digital platforms, we invite further conversations about the possibilities and limits of identifying, analyzing, and representing religious ambience in our scholarship.