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Editorial Introduction:

Voicing Religion

Jeffers Engelhardt

It is hard to think about religion without thinking about voice. Voice mediates, populates, and reveals sacred texts and sounds; it is a locus of religious orthopraxy, boundaries, and belonging; it is a metaphor for and a cause of existence; it is a means of communication and relationship with spirits, saints, and ancestors; and it locates religion in embodied practice, affect, and acoustic space. Voice is an assemblage of identities, theologies, sensations, aesthetics, and mediations whose histories and meanings flow into and out of its particular renderings. Voice is an always-emerging intersection of the body (respiratory and alimentary organs that produce sound, resonant spaces within the body) and the sonic (timbre, grain, the voice part that is heard); the figurative (voice as a form of agency and identity) and the social (voice as social recognition and positioning); the human (voice as something species-specific) and the nonhuman (voices of divine beings and other species).

Given all this, it is no surprise that voice is at the center of burgeoning interdisciplinary conversations around music, sound, and religion. This special issue of the *Yale Journal of Music & Religion* takes up the theme of voice in the performance of sacred text, the articulation of religious and social difference, the performative dimensions of ritual, and the mediation of religion. To address the extent of voice in the religious practices and discourses they engage, the authors here approach voice both in its embodied, material aspects and in its social, sonic aspects.

The embodied, material aspects of voice are “inner choreographies”¹ of breath, muscle tension throughout the vocal apparatus, and shaped bodily resonances that make a voice communicative, timbrally distinct, musically attuned, and appropriate to a genre, style, or tradition. In these articles, this is singing or “language performance” (Frishkopf in this issue) per se—producing and shaping the vibrations that are taken up sonically by listening subjects or mediated beyond a particular acoustic space. Attending to materiality and embodiment means that the voices in these articles are situated in worlds of sensation, affect, and “voice as action”² (the embodied skill and labor of singing or language performance that make speech and song nonabstract phenomena).

Crucially, each of these articles recognizes that the embodied, material aspects of voice are always already in a feedback loop with religious traditions, theologies, social identities, ritual roles, and technologies. The sonic characteristics of voice are social. They are voicings of relationships within religious communities, between the human and the divine, and to meaningful times and places. For Nicholas Harkness, writing about Chris-

¹ Nina Eidsheim, “Synthesizing Race: Towards an Analysis of the Performativity of Vocal Timbre,” *Trans—Revista Transcultural de Música* 13 (2009), <https://www.sibetrans.com/trans/articulo/57/synthesizing-race-towards-an-analysis-of-the-performativity-of-vocal-timbre>.

² Nina Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 139.

tian *sŏngak* in South Korea, “voice is not merely a sonorous extension of an embodied individual or the natural expressive outlet or externalization of interior emotions, but also, and centrally, a channel-emphasizing phatic mode of social contact.”³ Harkness situates voice at a “phonosonic nexus”⁴ where lips, tongue, and breath shape sound around specific values guiding worship, prayer, and the participation of listeners. In broad perspective, this is the elaboration of a classic formulation of voice in linguistically and anthropologically informed music studies as “the material embodiment of social ideology and experience.”⁵

If it is hard to think about religion without thinking about voice, then the reverse is true as well—it is hard to think about voice without thinking about religion. From this, we get to other interventions in voice studies that take up the religious as well as the material, embodied aspects of the “phonosonic nexus.” Andrew Albin, Adriana Cavarero, Carol Harrison, and Karmen MacKendrick think

³ Nicholas Harkness, *Songs of Seoul: An Ethnography of Voice and Voicing in Christian South Korea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 16.

⁴ For Harkness, the “phonosonic nexus” is “the view of voice as an ongoing intersection between the phonic production, shaping, and organization of sound, on the one hand, and the sonic uptake and categorization of sound in the world, on the other. The voice as phonosonic nexus is a medium through which we orient to one another, not directly, but through phonic engagements with sonically differentiated frameworks of value that shape our social interactions.” Ibid., 17.

⁵ Steven Feld, Aaron A. Fox, Thomas Porcello, and David Samuels, “Vocal Anthropology: From the Music of Language to the Language of Song,” in *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, ed. Alessandro Duranti (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 332. Also see Steven Feld and Aaron A. Fox, “Music and ‘Language,’” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23 (1994): 25–53; Marlene Schäfers, “Voice,” in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, <http://doi.org/10.29164/17voice>; and Amanda Weidman, “Anthropology and Voice,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43 (2014): 37–51.

through the sonorous vocality of translation and reading, the theological implications of embodied voice and abstract language, and the experience of listening to and resonating with the voices of ritual and scripture.⁶ Kristina Nelson, Anne Rasmussen, and Jeffrey Summit examine the intersections of religious subjectivity, institutionalized pedagogies, and vocal style in the envoicement and performance of sacred texts.⁷ Finnian Gerety, Sarah Bakker Kellogg, and I analyze the effects of mediation and amplification on the enactment and scale of ritual, the liveness and immediacy of voice, and the recognition of religious identities.⁸ Christine Thu Nhi Dang and Richard Jankowsky encounter voice as a place-specific articulation of spiritual authority, the efficacious power of spirits and saints,

⁶ Andrew Albin, *Richard Rolle’s Melody of Love: A Study and Translation with Manuscript and Musical Contexts* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2018); Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005); Carol Harrison, *The Art of Listening in the Early Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Karmen MacKendrick, *The Matter of Voice: Sensual Soundings* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

⁷ Kristina Nelson, *The Art of Reciting the Qur’an* (New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2001); Anne K. Rasmussen, *Women, the Recited Qur’an, and Islamic Music in Indonesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Jeffrey A. Summit, *Singing God’s Words: The Performance of Biblical Chant in Contemporary Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁸ Finnian M. M. Gerety, “The Amplified Sacrifice: Sound, Technology, and Participation in Modern Vedic Ritual,” *South Asian History and Culture* 8/4 (2017): 560–78; Sarah Bakker Kellogg, “Ritual Sounds, Political Echoes: Vocal Agency and the Sensory Cultures of Secularism in the Dutch Syriac Diaspora,” *American Ethnologist* 42/3 (2015): 431–45; Jeffers Engelhardt, “Listening and the Sacramental Life: Degrees of Mediation in Greek Orthodox Christianity,” in *Praying with the Senses: Contemporary Orthodox Christian Spirituality in Practice*, ed. Sonja Luehrmann (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 58–79.

and histories of movement and displacement.⁹ In a final thematic grouping, Estelle Amy de la Bretèque, Ashon Crawley, and Patrick Eisenlohr describe the registers of speech and song, timbre and formant strength, and the Blackpentecostal “aesthetics of breathing” in Crawley’s “whooping,” “shouting,” “noise,” and “tongues” that produce religious voice.¹⁰

So how do the four contributors to this issue of the *YJMR* think about religion through voice and voice through religion? A pair of themes emerges to address this question: Michael Frishkopf, examining language performance in Islamic ritual, and Marissa Glynias Moore, examining voice in mainline Protestant congregational singing, approach voice as paralinguistic excess, as more than mere communication, and as performative action. Sean Williams, examining the religious syncretism of Sundanese sung poetry, and Ying Diao, examining the mediation of Lisu Christian devotional singing, approach voice as a channel that assembles religious practices across historical, class, ethnic, and geographic difference through style and sound. These articles, in other words, model the approach to voice as a sonic/material and representational/figurative religious phenomenon.

⁹ Christine Thu Nhi Dang, “Erotics, Poetics, Politics: The Spheres of Action of Senegalese Sufi Voices,” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 26/3 (2017): 349–72; Richard C. Jankowsky, “Voicing the Between in Tunisian *Ṣtambēli*,” in *Resounding Transcendence: Transitions in Music, Religion, and Ritual*, ed. Jeffers Engelhardt and Philip V. Bohlman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 79–93.

¹⁰ Estelle Amy de la Bretèque, “Voices of Sorrow: Melodized Speech, Laments, and Heroic Narratives among the Yezidis of Armenia,” *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 44 (2012): 129–48; Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017); Patrick Eisenlohr, “Suggestions of Movement: Voice and Sonic Atmospheres in Mauritian Muslim Devotional Practices,” *Cultural Anthropology* 33/1 (2018): 32–57.

In “Paralinguistic Ramification of Language Performance in Islamic Ritual,” Michael Frishkopf explores how the paralinguistic or nonreferential, performative, affective aspects of voice operate in the “ramification” of Islamic ritual—the ways in which Islamic ritual globalizes through intensely local iterations and practices. Unlike the linguistic content of Islamic ritual, which is relatively fixed in Arabic and in terms of form (the Qur’an, the *adhan*), the sounds and styles of language performance are part of the “familiar sonic milieu” of Islam. Hearing the recitation of sacred text through the paralinguistic qualities of timbre, tonality, melody, and improvisation is fundamental to Islamic ritual. Frishkopf suggests that voice—an amalgam of linguistic and paralinguistic performance, “the reciter’s true feeling in response to the Word”—is “the unified core” of Islamic ritual, not language alone or abstracted.

Marissa Glynias Moore, in “Sounding the Congregational Voice,” moves conversations about congregational singing in mainline Protestant Christianity from voice as object to voicing as action; from longstanding debates over qualities of vocal sound to the act of congregational singing in the performance of liturgy. Moore asks, “What role does sound play when the voice is considered through its practice, rather than through its materiality?” When attending to participation in this way, the sonic qualities of voice, Moore suggests, matter most in relationship to their source—the congregation. As an aggregate of individual voices and bodies, the congregation is a voice and body that, to different degrees, subsume the sounds of individual voices. The source of a congregational voice is not attributable to an individual; there are, with outstanding exceptions, bodies but not voices,

inverting the idea of the acousmatic voice¹¹ without a body. For Moore and the theologians, practitioners, and scholars she engages, the congregational voice is about participation rather than aesthetics or hermeneutics, which is ultimately what extends the congregation to its place within a global body of Christ.

For Sean Williams in “Sonic Liminalities of Faith in Sundanese Vocal Music,” historical, class, and religious transitions in Sundanese society are voiced in *tembang Sunda*, a genre of sung poetry associated with the hereditary aristocracy. Through *tembang Sunda* performance, the golden age of Sundanese culture in the Hindu kingdom of Pajajaran (fourteenth–sixteenth century c.e.) encounters the progressive Islamization of Javanese and Indonesian society over the past several decades. In Williams’s study, sung poetry engaging characters from the *Ramayana* and associated with aristocratic Pajajaran-era *tembang Sunda* performance contexts rubs shoulders with contemporary Islamic popular songs (*kawih*) with Arabic and Sundanese texts. Sonically, the women’s voices that sing *tembang Sunda* and *kawih* navigate the generic and social significance of melodic register, vibrato techniques, and Sundanese/Arabic code-switching. Together, as Williams asserts, these syncretic, transitional modes of voicing Sundanese identity articulate the “liminal regionalism” of Sundanese religious, social, class, and gender identities.

Finally, in “Mediating Gospel Singing: Audiovisual Recording and the Transformation of Voice among the Christian Lisu in Post-2000 Nujiang, China,” Ying Diao traces the changing meanings of Christian Lisu voice

from the adoption of missionary congregational hymnody in the early twentieth century to the transnational circulation of *mutgguat ssat* popular devotional songs and their place in Lisu worship. Diao starts from the perspective of Lisu singing (and the concept of material religion it represents) as mediation. Voice and media extend from the body, across domains of textuality and orality, to link Lisu congregations to one another and to God. The Lisu style of singing missionary hymnody emphasizes this mediating role, downplaying the sonorous excess of voice by emphasizing text delivery through an “emotionally neutral, loud, and solemn” vocal style. *Mutgguat ssat* singing, on the other hand, is “sentimental” and draws attention to the qualities of mediated voice. What matters for Diao in this transformation is that when Lisu use *mutgguat ssat* DVDs in worship, their unmarked status as “new” media shows how voice remains the essential medium for connecting the missionary past to the future of transnational Lisu Christianity.

¹¹ See Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).