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# Music, Sound, and the Aurality of the Environment in the Anthropocene

## Spiritual and Religious Perspectives

Kate Galloway, Guest Editor

This special issue of the *Yale Journal of Music & Religion* explores the nuanced, complex, and discursive connections among music, sound, aurality, and the environment in global expressions of spirituality and religious activity. By examining how environments, places, and nature are approached as sites endowed with spiritual and religious significance, this issue focuses on the intersections of music, sound, religion, and the environment to extend the cross-disciplinary conversations taking place within the study of music and sound in the environmental humanities. This field is referred to by some scholarly communities as ecomusicology.<sup>1</sup>

The environment is a shifting concept, a combination of surroundings and conditions, and a place that encompasses all living and nonliving things. The sacred ecologies of such environments are experiential spaces where the corporeal (e.g., ritual movement and gesture) and the sensory (e.g., spatial features of an outdoor congregational space), the human (e.g., spiritual and religious sounding as something species-specific) and the nonhuman (e.g., voices and soundings of spiritual beings, ritual objects, and other nonhuman species), and the personal (e.g., intimate private moments of reflective prayer) and the political (e.g., collective activist action) complexly intersect. We need diverse listening perspectives and voices that illustrate how we perform and listen to sounds, music, and texts encoded with environmental knowledge.

Issues concerning the environment are intersectional and bound up in both productive and destructive ways with complementary, contrasting, and at times, divisive worldviews. Only recently have studies of music and the environment begun to fully address these important sites of intersection and conflict.

As I write these words, millions are grappling with the catastrophic ramifications of hurricane-related flooding; the nearly unimaginable physical and socioeconomic damage caused by widespread wildfires in California, Australia, and elsewhere; extended heat waves and droughts; and other devastating extreme weather events that have become ubiquitous rather than rare occurrences highlighted in news headlines. Such events remind us of the fragility of our ecological systems and our human dependence on them. As the world comes together to address the issue of climate change, the Global Climate Strike and the variety of activism that continue to resonate out from these events are promising. The campaigning of Greta Thunberg, the young Swedish environmental activist, has gained international recognition and sparked a resurgence of climate-change activism by a broader demographic.<sup>2</sup> Although Thunberg's exposure and the protests she has inspired are significant, we must consider why equal attention has not been paid to the marginalized black, brown, and Indigenous youth and activist groups who have been at the forefront of grassroots climate movements. These

movements challenge systemic injustice, the violence and trauma inflicted by capitalist ventures, and environmental damage that is directly connected to colonialism. Whose environment and whose nature are we paying attention to, protesting for, and holding up as valuable? Greta Thunberg, like many of the “canonic” figures commonly addressed in discussions of music and the environment (e.g., John Luther Adams, R. Murray Schafer, David Dunn), presents an environmental activism that is palatable to white people, an environmentalism that can easily be mapped onto their personal politics without significantly impacting their everyday socioeconomic comforts.

When youth of color mobilize because their communities are under threat or destroyed by oil and gas pipelines, industrial waste, and water pollution, they are met with far less local and international support. These issues of erasure and inclusion in climate activism illustrate why a more global approach to music and the environment is desperately needed. These events and ongoing climate activism also remind us to value the nonhuman environment. For some individuals and communities, respecting the environment as sacred and saturated with religious value is but one approach to mitigating environmental degradation and counteracting the myriad ways in which environments are being radically altered by human activity. It is my hope that the diverse ideas and perspectives presented in this issue of the *Yale Journal of Music & Religion*, which intentionally includes varied geographic positionalities and negotiates a spread of religious and spiritual views, will help us all find new ways to respond with thoughtfulness and integrity to the rapidly changing world in which we work, create, live, and sound.

This issue approaches religious and spiritual perspectives and musicking on broad terms. When we turn our attention to the resonant relationships among music, sound, environment, and spirituality and listen to the sacred ecologies of expressive culture, a range of ecocritical spiritual and religious practices surface. Some of these modes of ecocritical listening to and performing spiritual and religious practices include: musical pilgrimage to sites of ecospirituality; religious music that promotes environmental ethics and the principles of sustainability; the intersections between traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) and spiritual practice; music that promotes the benefits of nature through settings of religious texts and/or musical pilgrimages to sacred ecological sites; nonhuman musicality and sonic agency; site-specific music used to voice religious perspectives; music that celebrates and preserves nature or evangelizes for environmental issues; music and healing following events of environmental trauma; ecocosmological music; the politics of borrowing nonhuman music and sounds; Indigenous expressive culture or non-western sources to evoke ecospirituality; applied ethnomusicology and public musicology in environmental leadership and volunteerism; and the performance of religious music at environmentalist festivals, rallies, and protests.

The sacred ecologies of expressive culture that stage and respond to environmental crisis articulate the personal and collective political and geographic ramifications of climate change. They enact these performative gestures while also producing new knowledge, participating in healing, and imagining possible productive environmental futures. The poetic and

political soundscapes of spirituality and religious practice are approached on broad terms in expressive culture. Aesthetic forms are used to communicate knowledge and embodied experiences of environmental crisis, drawing on different modalities with the intention of reaching different audiences. Performance-based arts responses with distinctive relational and sensory registers illuminate ecological pressures and systems of understanding the environment in ways that are complementary to scientific knowledge, producing productive dialogue among the arts, humanities, and sciences. The arts are often framed as more personal than the data science and policy modes that typically communicate the magnitude of the environmental crisis and systems of environmental monitoring. Expressive culture can be used as a form of environmental activism, ideas, and themes that transgress boundaries and unite human and nonhuman actors across the globe.<sup>3</sup> Expressive culture and sacred ecologies of the arts, as illustrated in the case studies of this issue of the *Yale Journal of Music & Religion*, are contributing to the discussion of environmental crisis and scholarship as activism. The essays in this special issue gesture toward the ways the sonic arts are used as forms of ritual expression, performances of responsibility, and modes of activism; as spaces for reverence and monumentalizing; as moments to honor loss and suffering; and, at times, as expressions of ecological and neoliberal guilt.

Each of the authors in this special issue explores alternative registers of understanding the local, which includes the environmental knowledge of a specific place, its soundings, and its community of listeners. The inclusion of diverse definitions of environmental data, and the use of different

registers and packaging of environmental knowledge, have the potential to make environmental crises legible to broader audiences and more relevant to local communities that are directly impacted. As the Indigenous (Métis) scholar Zoe Todd points out, “Evidence generally precludes the flash of a school of minnows in the clear prairie lakes I intimately knew as a child, or the succulent white fish my stepdad caught for us from the Red Deer River where I was growing up.”<sup>4</sup> By opening up to Indigenous epistemologies of the land, one that includes an ethics of kinship with the nonhuman, we can collectively develop a healthier understanding of human actions on the environment, and more generally the cultivation of sustainable human–environment relations and ways of being-in-the-world. Climate-change science is deeply rooted in colonial power systems that systematically exclude scientific knowledge production informed by different worldviews, values, and ethics, including civic laboratories and citizen science, feminist methodologies, and Indigenous ecological knowledge (IEK).<sup>5</sup>

The environment is bound up in spiritual communities and religious practices, the ways religious listening is mobilized to hear and attend to the human and nonhuman sounding environment, and how we forge spiritual connections with a place. As Denise Von Glahn has argued, Amy Beach often used music to convey her multivalent religious-romantic-scientific understanding of the nonhuman environment. Beach was what Von Glahn refers to as a “skillful listener” who heard spirituality in the nuanced musicality of avian vocalists in the soundscape. Birds, for Beach, were a “divine messenger, which tied her to an

earlier Deist tradition that located God in nature,” and her many writings that “speak of nature as God-made-visible suggest her connections to that tradition and to American Transcendentalism.”<sup>6</sup> In contrast, Rebecca Dirksen’s extensive fieldwork in Haiti has revealed the devastating impact of deforestation on the sacred ecologies of expressive culture and its materiality.<sup>7</sup> The *tanbou* (drums), for instance, are a focal point in Haitian expressive and spiritual experience; however, deforestation and climate change have seriously threatened the trees that master drum makers use to craft the *tanbou*. Deforestation and climate change in Haiti are bound up in the loss of the sacred, but also contribute to the erasure of a vital part of the country’s spiritual soundscape.

The concept of the soundscape, a term that surfaces in many places in this special issue, bridges ecomusicology and sound studies. The term was developed in the 1960s during the World Soundscape Project’s interdisciplinary study of the sonic environment and popularized in 1977 with the publication of R. Murray Schafer’s *The Tuning of the World*.<sup>8</sup> In my own work on Schafer and his inclusion of ritual performance in his series of experimental site-specific music theater works collectively called the *Patria* cycle, performers, audience members, and volunteers unite to perform logistically complex multisensory spectacles in unconventional performance environments (e.g., in a forest, on the surface of a wilderness lake). Notions of ritual are engaged by Schafer in his compositions through the reinterpretation of ritual performance, the borrowing and remaking of diverse narrative sources, spiritual traditions, and religious worldviews, and

site-informed environmental theatric and sonic practices. Schafer’s participatory compositions use environments as actual stages and embodied experiences through performance. Schafer’s work evokes Keith Basso and Steven Feld’s exploration of collective and individual experiences of sense of place.<sup>9</sup> Humans are “placelings,” says Edward S. Casey, “and our very perceptual apparatus, our sensing body, reflects the places we inhabit.”<sup>10</sup> Schafer firmly believes that contemporary society has lost touch with ritual, tradition, and place. In response to this perceived loss, Schafer conceived works of music theater to revitalize the active participation of audiences in the content and shape of performance events. Through performance they relearn how to ethically engage with place and repair fraught and unbalanced relationships among humanity and the nonhuman world. Ritual, for example, in *Patria* is a transformative experience when it is enacted and performed within the framework of established rules and shared values.

The authors featured in this special issue collectively locate notions of musicking, sound, nonhuman nature, and the environment in relation to expressive modes of spirituality and religion such as community performance, folklife, ritual, poetics, sacred music, congregational musicking, and the sacred. The authors also challenge readers to decentralize the human in how we hear and value the environment and how we listen to and perform soundscapes of spirituality and religious practice that are bound up with experiences and politics of the natural environment.<sup>11</sup> Intellectual and aesthetic challenges that displace the human from a central position and desperately needed actions in response to environmental crisis

begin with the interdisciplinary study of the environment. The contributors to this special issue extend that interdisciplinary study of the environment to include music, sound, spirituality, and religious practice and weave it through their essays in insightful ways.

It has been a pleasure to work with the authors across this themed issue of the

*Yale Journal of Music & Religion*. I continue to be fascinated by the ways in which they engage with specific examples of arts of environmental attentiveness that create opportunities to listen across diverse disciplines. Each of these disciplines has an intellectual, personal, and moral stake in the aesthetics and politics of environmental crisis.

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## NOTES

1 See Aaron A. Allen and Kevin Dawe, eds., *Current Directions in Ecomusicology: Music, Culture, Nature* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Aaron A. Allen, Jeff Todd Titon, and Denise Von Glahn, "Sustainability and Sound: Ecomusicology Inside and Outside the University," *Music and Politics* 8/2 (2014): 1–26; Aaron A. Allen, "Ecomusicology: Ecocriticism and Musicology," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 64/2 (2011): 391–94; Rebecca Dirksen, "Haiti, Singing for the Land, Sea, and Sky: Cultivating Ecological Metaphysics and Environmental Awareness through Music," *MUSICultures* 45/1–2 (2018): 112–35; Mark Pedelty, *Ecomusicology: Rock, Folk, and the Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).

2 Thunberg's speeches and actions have inspired an unprecedented number of her school-aged peers around the world to take part in climate-change activism. The participatory character of these new forms of youth-based activism has been attributed to "the Greta effect."

3 For further scholarship on the public and activism application of expressive culture, see Rebecca Dirksen, "Reconsidering Theory and Practice in Ethnomusicology: Applying, Advocating, and Engaging beyond Academia," *Ethnomusicology Review* 17 (2012): 1–35.

4 Heather Davis and Zoe Todd, "On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene," *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 16/4 (2017): 747.

5 See further Max Liboiron, "How Plastic Is a Function of Colonialism," *Teen Vogue*, Dec. 21, 2018; Max Liboiron, "Care and Solidarity Are Conditions for Interventionist Research," *Engaging Science, Technology, Society* 2 (2016): 67–72; Sara Wylie, Nick Shapiro, and Max Liboiron, "Making and Doing Politics through Grassroots Scientific Research on the Energy and Petrochemical Industries," *Engaging Science, Technology, Society* 3 (2017): 393–425. At Memorial University of Newfoundland, the Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research (CLEAR), directed by Max Liboiron, takes a feminist anticolonial approach to environmental science and science and technology studies (STS), applying grassroots citizen science to the study and monitoring of marine toxicants and plastics. In their work, Liboiron and CLEAR articulate pollution as a form of colonialism. For more information about CLEAR, see <https://civiclaboratory.nl/>.

6 Denise Von Glahn, "American Women and the Nature of Identity," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 64/2 (2011): 402.

7 Rebecca Dirksen, "Haiti's Drums and Trees: Facing Loss of the Sacred," *Ethnomusicology* 63/1 (2019): 43–77.

8 The term has also acquired a broad application in and beyond sound studies that is largely separate from its original, exclusively environmental connotation. See, for example, Karin Bijsterveld and Trevor Pinch, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Jonathan Sterne, ed., *The Sound Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900–1933* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); and Karin Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound: Technology, Culture, and Public Problems of Noise in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

9 See Keith Basso and Steven Feld, eds., *Senses of Place* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996).

10 Edward S. Casey, "How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena," in Feld and Basso, *Senses of Place*, 19.

11 For scholarship addressing modes of knowing and sensing beyond the human, see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013); Rachel Mundy, *Animal Musicalities: Birds, Beasts, and Evolutionary Listening* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2018); Kalpana Rahita Seshadri, *HumAnimal: Race, Law, Language* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Michael Silvers, *Voices of Drought: The Politics of Music and Environment in Northeastern Brazil* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2018); Hollis Taylor, *Is Birdsong Music?: Outback Encounters with an Australian Songbird* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017); and Alexander Weheliye, *Habeus Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).