

Conclusion

In this ethnography I argue for the utility of the notion of atmosphere in the study of religion, focusing in particular on its sonic dimensions. But atmosphere also appears to be a timely analytic across a broader range of fields. In recent years, intellectually incoherent, if not downright irrational, populist currents have profoundly shaken politics in different parts of the world, including the United States. Liberal commentators have been exasperated by the lack of respect supporters of such populist currents have for academic expert opinions, proven facts, rational arguments, and even appeals to enlightened self-interest. These all seemed to be less powerful than diffuse but widespread moods, affects, and felt truths. In the face of such an apparently widespread refusal of the deliberative register of the political, the analytical category of atmosphere is highly useful for understanding contemporary and at least partly media-driven transformations of the public sphere.

In the study of religion, it has become commonplace to stress that the Habermasian notion of a secular, deliberative public is far removed from empirical reality across the globe. Instead, analysts have stressed how religious images, sounds, and discourses are forcefully present in contemporary public spheres, intermingling with politics, advertisement, and entertainment. Criticizing a long-standing bias toward the study of belief, doctrines, and other propositional content of religion, scholars in religious studies and anthropology have, in the previous two decades, called for a study of the sensual, material, and embodied aspects of religion. My study of mediatized vocal sound in a South Asian Islamic tradition is informed by this sensibility. Nevertheless, the recent surge of interest in the study of material and sensual aspects of religion has entailed relatively little attention to

religious sounds in their nondiscursive modes, a tendency that I aim to counteract with this book.

Affect theory has featured prominently in the recent interdisciplinary study of sound, and it shares with an analytic of atmospheres a number of concerns. Among these is, above all, the need to grasp what cannot be discursively expressed and specified. The analytics of atmospheres and affect alike seek to capture the moods and felt currents that are reshaping politics and public spheres in defiance of the predictions of learned analysts who base their judgments on intellectual stringency and actors' substantiated interests. In my ethnographic study of sonic atmospheres in Mauritian Muslim devotional practices, I demonstrate how central atmospheres, as both objective and intercorporeal phenomena, are to religious experiences and practices. For my Mauritian interlocutors, the voice of a *na't khwan* would lift them above and away to a better place, to Madina, the abode of the Prophet, and possibly even a personal encounter with him. The sonic production of atmospheres that suffused the felt-bodies of these devotees of the Prophet thus contributed to their salvation and spiritual liberation.

This might at first resonate with the hopes of particular theorists that a politics of affect would unleash hidden and hopeful political potentials, break impasses, and thereby play liberatory roles (Hardt and Negri 2000). After all, the power of atmospheres and affects often lies in their utopian appeal to dissolve boundaries, political, social, corporeal, or otherwise. However, it should be obvious that the power of neither atmospheres nor affect is necessarily tied to liberation or salvation. For this, one hardly needs to point to the contemporary worldwide resurgence of populist and ethno-nationalist exclusionary politics and politicians, with their disdain for public deliberation and their thoroughly affective ways of campaigning. Despite the abundance of scholarship on nationalism that has traced its resounding success to rational motivations of actors and objective socioeconomic forces, the appeals of nationalism, too, have been atmospheric from the beginning. Moreover, as students of fascism told us long ago, there is nothing new or liberatory about the aestheticization of the political (Benjamin 1968, 1979 [1936], Jay 1992). The latter is a process that revolves around atmospheres (Böhme 1995: 42–44) and affects.

Yet there are crucial differences between atmospheres and affect as analytical categories. In chapter 6, I discuss how some scholars in the field of sound studies have treated sonic phenomena as a ready exemplification of the intensities and energetic forces they label as affect. Against this tendency, not only has my analysis in this book stressed the entanglement of sound and signification, but also I have argued against the identification of sonic atmospheres with affect. In separating affect conceived as the nonconscious workings of somatic intensities from signification, and by asserting that the former is necessarily prior to the latter because of a "half-second delay" (Massumi 2002), theorists of affect have found a new way to reinstate the body-mind divide. A shortened understanding

of signification and semiosis informs the drawing of such a divide. Considering that sonic atmospheres' primary effect is to intervene in the spatial economy of the bodies of those exposed to them, I have pointed out that the suggestions of movements such atmospheres contain are fundamentally meaningful. In Peircean terms, such movements also constitute indexical and iconic relationships. These forms of semiosis are inherent to the sonically enacted movements that atmospheres contain, and not the product of the imposition of arbitrary mental forms after a half-second delay. Vocal sound turned out to be shot through with signification. Pace Kittler (1999 [1986]: 16), the sonic and its technical reproduction is no pristine "real" in Lacan's sense, uncontaminated by social and cultural qualifications. Further, atmospheres do not fit affect theory's opposition between states of full awareness and biophysical processes that cannot be consciously experienced. Following Hermann Schmitz, atmospheres, such as the weather or sonic phenomena, are "half-things" (*Halbdinge*) that come and go and that can also be registered without full conscious awareness. Moreover, their effects are not automatic, as atmospheres can also be merely observed. In my ethnography of devotional practices among Mauritian Muslims, I have stressed that the sociocultural receptiveness of persons also influences whether a sonic atmosphere can seize them. In other words, the sociocultural and historical conditioning and qualification of bodily perception plays a crucial role in the effectiveness of sonic atmospheres. My respondents entered performances of devotional poetry with an already existing aural archive and sectarian biases.

One of my main concerns in this book was to take the sonic seriously in its own right and to be attentive to its own specific modalities and knowledge. Seeking to do justice to sonic presences that are difficult to render into language, I have approached them as atmospheres that enact suggestions of movement. In my ethnography of poetic devotional performance, the discursive and sonic dimensions of the voice are closely intertwined but not reducible to each other. This becomes especially clear when considering sonic atmospheres' enactment of bodily felt movement. Crucially, such movement figures in more than metaphoric ways. These movements, such as the sensation of being carried away, support the discursive aspects of the poetry but constitute a separate sphere of knowledge. As the ethnography demonstrates, vocal sounds in Mauritian Muslim devotional performances turned out to be representations of social and religious values. However, taking sound seriously requires going beyond treating sonic phenomena as representations of something else.

Writing against a long tradition that sees voice as the expression of subjectivity and closely connected to a person's self, several theorists have stressed a fundamental "otherness" of the voice. As I discuss in chapters 1 and 5, Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar have in different ways argued for the "spectral autonomy" (Žižek 2001: 58) of the voice, betraying an uncanny foreignness. Adding to the theme of autonomous voices, the spread of sound reproduction technology has made the

presence of voices separated from the bodies that produce them, once the object of puzzlement and awe, a banal feature of contemporary lifeworlds. Furthermore, my ethnography has highlighted the importance of religiously grounded ideologies of the voice that feature the theme of the voice as an “other.” In the Islamic setting I have investigated, divine presence permeates the reciting voice, thus featuring an “otherness” of the voice in a specifically striking way. Against universalizing arguments about the otherness of the voice, an analytic of atmospheres stresses the boundary-weakening affordances of sound. Sonic transduction as a process relativizes the limits of bodies and, therefore, also the boundaries between bodies, as suggested in my discussion of atmospheric incorporation in chapter 6. In addition, an analytic of transduction highlights generative powers in a Simondonean sense. Sonic transductions can provoke religious sensations across bodies and subjects, such as the feeling of being carried away to a more desirable destination like Madina. Similarly, among my interlocutors, these sonically enacted suggestions of movement could also result in the sensation of overcoming the confines of one’s self, blurring the distinctions between vocal sound impacting bodies from the outside and vocal sound as pertaining to a defined subject. Approaching vocal sound as a transductive, and therefore atmospheric, phenomenon in its ethnographic context thus questions philosophical and psychoanalytical claims about the radical otherness of voices.

Treating vocal sound as atmospheric is, however, in line with Merleau-Ponty’s insights about the felt-body as both sensible and sentient. Our felt-bodies can be perceived as an “other” insofar as we can make our own bodies the perceptual object of our senses like the bodies of other people, even though at the same time our bodies are the existential ground for our being in the world and any of our perceptions. Our bodies are thus simultaneously own and other, as “I hear myself from both within and without” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 148). Merleau-Ponty used the example of a person touching her hand with her other hand to illustrate this condition of the body as both sentient and sensible (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 133). Even more intriguing is the rapid transformation of a hand from sentient to sensible and its potential reversibility in the case of a “touching of the touch, when my right hand touches my left hand while it is palpating the things, where the ‘touching subject’ passes over to the rank of the touched, descends into the things, such that the touch is formed in the midst of the world and as it were in the things” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 133–134). However, sonic practice as atmosphere is a social phenomenon and thus transcends the frame of a solitary felt-body as sentient and sensible. What the study of atmospheres, in particular atmospheric incorporation, can tell us is that our felt-bodies can at least sometimes be one with those of others, even though the latter’s alterity is not effaced by atmospheric incorporation in an enduring sense. In other words, in such situations, our felt-bodies can be sentient together with those of others, while the latter remain sensible to us.

Sound reproduction's central role in the Muslim devotional practices that are the focus of this study highlights how the reproducibility of sonic atmospheres has become part of the technicity of religion. The intrinsic connection of religion and media, including their technical dimensions, has become a fruitful starting point of analysis for the recent "media turn" in the study of religion, where a growing number of authors have analyzed the role of media in shaping religious practices and sensibilities. As I have noted, my Mauritian Muslim interlocutors took the intertwining of technical media such as sound reproduction and their devotional practices for granted, but also expressed doubts and anxieties about this entanglement. Such doubts were linked to more than just the perceived influence of the music of popular Hindi films ("Bollywood") on the recitation of devotional poetry. For several of my interlocutors the routine use of technical artifice such as a reverb effect in recordings of na't performances could also be overdone. As Farhad made clear in the vignette at the beginning of this book, exaggerated technical effects in the manipulation of vocal sound turned the recitation of devotional poetry into impious "banter." In such instances, there was no activation of media's capacity for self-erasure that is usually responsible for the powerful feelings of immediate spiritual presence generated by technically reproduced sonic atmospheres. On the contrary, the kind of technical artifice perceived as exaggerated made the technical apparatus of mediating spiritual presence highly perceptible again, thereby occluding spiritual presence instead of conveying it.

The technical reproducibility of sonic atmospheres was one of the main motivations for the widespread use of sound reproduction in the Mauritian Muslim devotional settings this book is about. The reproducibility of atmospheres is prominent in other fields as well, such as urban planning and marketing, where the atmospheric appeal of newly planned or renewed neighborhoods is often carefully crafted through visual effects of the built environment and illumination (Hasse 2012: 65–70, Edensor 2012; see also Edensor and Sumartojo 2015). In particular, Gernot Böhme's theory of atmospheres as "ecstasies of the thing" has highlighted the manufacturing of atmospheres through design, such as in architecture (Böhme 2006). In my account of the intersection of voice and technical media in an Islamic context, the manufacturing and reproducibility of sonic atmospheres emerges as a central theme. The possibility to reproduce sonic atmospheres is grounded in what Wolfgang Ernst has called the *Gleichursprünglichkeit* (the quality of being equally original) of a voice and its technical reproduction—that is, the circumstance that there is in principle no phenomenal difference between the two as sonic events. Nevertheless, several among my interlocutors were deeply suspicious of the effects of accomplished voices that did not belong to a na't khwan who was demonstrably pious in his overall conduct of life. The technical reproducibility of sonic atmospheres raised the issue of what some of my respondents called "fabricated emotions" standing in the way of piety. A voice and its technical reproduction can

generate the same sonic atmospheres, enacting the same suggestions of movement. Nonetheless, as I hope my ethnography has made clear, the receptiveness to sonic atmospheres cannot simply be technically reproduced in the same way, as it is a matter of listening and other bodily habits, sectarian biases, and aural archives that Mauritian Muslims bring to the audition of na't recitals.