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# Sounding Islam

## ECHO

In August 2011, I was sitting in Farhad's living room in a village in northeast Mauritius. Farhad is an Urdu teacher and a locally well-known reciter of *na't*, a popular genre of devotional Urdu poetry in honor of the Prophet Muhammad. We were talking about different ways of reciting this genre when Farhad reached for his mobile phone and played a recording by the well-known Pakistani reciter of *na't* (*na't khwan*) Owais Qadri. The short audio clip featured a very strong echo effect so that every word, every syllable was audibly repeated several times, the sound of the poetry blurring in this way, with only the beginning of the two lines of poetry "yā khudā" (O God) being clearly intelligible to us. With a critical look on his face Farhad remarked, "Do you hear this? This is Owais Qadri with echo. This is not good. What you just heard is from a *mahfil* [devotional gathering] with an audience. Now listen to this."

He switched to a different recording. "Now I make you listen to a *na't* by Qari Fasihuddin [Syed Fasihuddin Soharwardi, a well-known Pakistani *na't khwan*] in a studio, where all the facilities for echo, the microphone, all the apparatuses needed, are already there."

Āe ishq-e nabī mere	O love of the Prophet
Dil mein bhī samā jānā	Reside in my heart as well
Āe ishq-e nabī mere . . .	O love of the Prophet . . .

Farhad went on: "This is Qari Fasihuddin; you hear the simplicity of it, even with all the studio equipment." Indeed, there was a marked difference between the

two recordings, with Soharwardi's recitation being clearly intelligible. However, a discernable reverb effect underlying the studio recording was also evident in this second recording, which Farhad played for me as an example of a "simple" recitational style. Farhad continued:

Two years ago a Pakistani na't khwan came to Plaine des Papayes [a village in northern Mauritius], and he found the microphone and amplifier the hosts had ready not good enough—it had no echo. He just packed up and left without reciting! But Qari Fasihuddin Soharwardi is a *sayyid* [a descendant of the Prophet] and my favorite na't khwan. When he is reciting, he closes his eyes as if he were not even there, and he does not care about whether there is a microphone or not. Others demand digital microphones with echo, very loud. But if there is no microphone, a true lover of the Prophet will recite nevertheless.

For Farhad, exaggerated technical effects in the performance and circulation of this Muslim devotional genre stand in the way of piety. Even so, for him, technical renderings of the reciting voice of the na't khwan make it possible for the voice to exert its power—to stir love for the Prophet Muhammad in those listening. But as Farhad pointed out, "Some na't khwan even recite with a recorded 'background' *zikr* [a devotional rhythmic repetition of the names of God common in Sufism], 'Allah, Allah,' but using such a 'background' for a recital is forbidden. A lot of Pakistani na't khwan are doing that. Ulema [Islamic scholars and jurists] in Bareilly Sharif have issued a fatwa against it, and in Mauritius all na't khwan have stopped using it."<sup>1</sup>

Even though Farhad rejected the kind of technological artifice in the reproduction of vocal sound he considered exaggerated, clearly the mode of recitation he favors also relies on sound reproduction and studio techniques, such as a reverb effect. The latter suggests to listeners sound extending into a wide space, giving the sound a somewhat ethereal quality. Farhad's reactions to the two audio clips he played for me thus evocatively speak to the problem of the technicity of religion and to the anxieties surrounding it. One basic insight that has propelled research on media and religion in recent years is the inseparability of religious practices from media, including their technical dimensions. Commenting on such inseparability, Hent de Vries has pointed out that "mediatization and the technology it entails form the condition of possibility for all revelation, for its revealability, so to speak. An element of technicity belongs to the realm of the 'transcendental,' and vice versa" (de Vries 2001: 28). But for Farhad, an excess of such technicity can undermine the seriousness of such religious mediations. After some na't khwan became very popular and started to experiment with new technical effects that transformed the sound of their voices, Farhad found that "this does not sound right; na't has become too much a kind of banter [*badinaz*], just entertainment to make money." For him, the technical reproduction of voice central to the recitation of na't and other Islamic practices of engaging with the divine was a normal, almost

banal feature of the tradition he cultivates. Its technicity and artifice were unproblematic as long as these did not interfere with what the reproduced vocal sound conveyed—namely, the presence of the divine. The presence of the divine, however, depends on technical forms of mediation. As Jacques Derrida has remarked about such presence produced through technical mediation in religious settings: “This effect of presence cannot be erased by any critique” (Derrida 2001: 85). But for Farhad, a perceived excess of artifice in the technical reproduction of voice could also detract from such presence, making the entire pious exercise useless.

Farhad’s concerns about the “right” vocal sounds in recorded performances of *na’t* raise the question of what the sonic effects of the voice consist of. For Farhad, as for my other interlocutors in Mauritius, this was a difficult question to answer. He found it hard to fully describe what the “right” kind of reciting actually was. But when he played the two audio clips for me, Farhad knew which sound was good and had the right effect on listeners. The exaggerated echo effect in the recording by Owais Qadri did not deliver it, but the recorded voice of Qari Fasihuddin Soharwardi touched Farhad. Farhad was pointing to a sonic presence that was difficult to render into language. What does such sonic presence involve, why does it appear to be ineffable, and how does it act on those perceiving it? In this book I engage with these questions by addressing the issue of atmosphere in the sonic dimensions of religion. Examining the intersection of voice and technical media in a Muslim devotional context, I argue that the analytics of transduction and atmospheres that I lay out in the following chapters can provide a better understanding of sound in religion.

## SOUND AND ISLAM

*Sounding Islam* is a study of the sonic dimensions of religion, combining perspectives from the anthropology of media, the anthropology of semiotic mediation, and sound studies. Its setting is Mauritius, including a transnational world of Islamic networks in the Indian Ocean region linking Mauritius with India. Based on my long-term ethnographic research on devotional Islam in Mauritius conducted between 2003 and 2011, I investigate in this book how the voice as a site of divine manifestation becomes refracted in media practices that have become integral parts of religion. I account for the key role of the technical reproduction of voice in Islam in the regional context I describe, while rethinking the relationship of religion, voice, and media. Flows of sonic media undergird Islamic networks and authority in the Indian Ocean region, creating transnational religious publics. This part of the world has a long history of trans-oceanic links and is sometimes considered to be the “cradle of globalization” (Moorthy and Jamal 2010: 9).

Focusing on an Islamic setting, I approach the embodied voice as the crucial mediator that brings Mauritian Muslims to God while aligning them with a particular South Asian reformist Islamic tradition through performance. The notions of

transduction and sonic atmosphere are of key importance here. They allow one to investigate the sonic aspects of religion beyond previous approaches to the voice in religion, which have emphasized, above all, its metaphoric aspects. Transduction and atmosphere point to the role of energetic flows and movement in sonic events, which provoke perceptions and bodily sensations that can be described in semi-otic terms but are not exhausted by them. This may recall previous discussions about the “autonomy of affect” from meaning (Massumi 2002). However, in contrast to most versions of affect theory, I stress the close entanglements between transduction, atmosphere, and signification. I show how the force of sonic atmospheres merges with discursively elaborated religious themes. Mauritian Muslims often engage in the type of mediated religious performances I analyze in order to gain what for them is a more direct connection to the divine, an experience they describe as literally being touched and seized by a reciting voice. Focusing on *naʿt*, I examine the emergence of such seemingly immediate experiences of the divine through transduction—that is, the effect on performing devotees of what scholars in the field of sound studies call the “auditory real” (Cox 2011: 153–155, cf. Kittler 1999 [1986]: 16). Taking this sonic dimension seriously, in *Sounding Islam* I trace the impact of voice and its circulation through technologies of sound reproduction on religious sensations.

In the humanities and social sciences, approaches to the study of sound have been split between the idea that sound itself has the power to affect bodies—an assumption associated with the concepts of affect and the “auditory real” current among a range of scholars in the field of sound studies—and the notion that cultural practices centered on the self and the body invest sound with power, a notion prevalent among anthropologists and historians, including some scholars in sound studies. Drawing on an analytic of atmospheres and the phenomenology of the felt-body (*Leib*) in distinction to the physical body (*Körper*), I propose overcoming this divide. *Sounding Islam* is centered on an account of how these two dimensions of the power of sound interact. The sonic is powerful in itself; but culturally attuned bodies and selves also ascribe power to sound. As I explain later on, sounds contain suggestions of movement that bodies perceive. However, in order for sonic suggestions of movement to seize someone in a religious setting like those I describe in this book, they also must pass through bodily attunement and interact with religious and cultural values and ideologies that mediate the power of sound.

My work builds on previous treatments of the voice in sociocultural and linguistic anthropology. Anthropologists have stressed the key role of the embodied voice to articulate subject positions and to perform alignments with forms of social and cultural value. But my book also departs from these approaches, as it assigns the sonic dimensions of the voice a more central position, without falling into psychoanalytic essentializations ascribing prehistorical or precultural roles and characteristics to the voice. I hereby intervene in larger debates about vocal

sound and media in the social sciences and humanities that so far have been characterized by the split mentioned above, between scholars emphasizing the historically variable significations of sound (Bull and Back 2003, Feld et al. 2004, Samuels et al. 2010), and those taking sound and its attendant media as prime occasions for an affective turn that accounts for the ways that sound affects, articulates, and touches human bodies (Evans 2002, Shouse 2005, Schrimshaw 2013). Aiming to overcome this rift, I emphasize in the following chapters the deep entanglement of these two approaches, showing how vocal sound in devotional Islamic contexts sonically enacts suggestions of movement that figure in more than metaphoric ways on the narratives, values, and imagery of a particular Islamic tradition.

Following this intellectual route, my analysis contributes to the current rethinking of the category of religion, which has seen a large-scale shift, from a focus on belief and philological research on doctrinal content, to performance, public embodied practice, and the sensual dimensions of religion (Asad 1993, 2003, de Vries 2008). It draws on the rapidly growing literature on media and religion (Meyer and Moors 2006, Engelke 2010, Hirschkind 2006, Eisenlohr 2009, 2011a, Schulz 2012, Stolorow 2005; see also Eisenlohr 2012 for an overview), addressing how religious presence, or the felt proximity of the divine, comes about as a result of media practices (Blanton 2015). In investigating uses of sonic media, the book specifically takes forward the study of “religious sensations” (Meyer 2008), a theme that also speaks to a broader anthropology of the senses (Howes 2003, Porcello et al. 2010, Stoller 1989). Research in the latter field has shown how such sensations are rooted in the particularities of historical paradigms and contexts. Understanding the relationships between sound, bodily affection, and signification also necessitates an account of what I call the transductive elements of religion. Taking the example of the sonic dimensions of the reciting voice, I show how sonic events also revolve around the transduction of energy from one state to another, generating sonic atmospheres that enter into relation with historically specific religious traditions. In doing so, I contribute to the exploration of the key role that media, in this case technologies of sound reproduction, play in shaping religious practices and sensibilities.

Work on the sonic dimensions of religion has not quite generated the same amount of interest as studies on religion and visual culture, and this has prompted some to critically remark on the “deafness” of the study of religion (Weiner 2009: 897) that reflects a long-standing ocular centrality of North Atlantic intellectual traditions. Nevertheless, the recent sensorial and media turns in the study of religion have also led to a marked surge in interest in sonic religion (Hackett 2012, Wilke and Moebus 2011, Gerety 2017). In anthropology, a main pioneer of the study of culture through the medium of sound is Steven Feld (1982, 1996). Feld coined the concept of *acoustemology*, or ways of knowing and engaging with human and environmental worlds through sound, a notion that has inspired other scholars working on the sonic dimensions of religion (Eisenberg 2013, Macdonald 2013).

Building on this notion, I aim, in this book, to expand anthropological approaches to sound through the analytic of transduction and atmospheres.

One major cross-disciplinary focus of research on sound and religion is the relationship between sounds, religious spaces, and political belonging. Analyzing the “acoustic territories” (Labelle 2010) and geographies of urban sound (Wissmann 2014) religion, scholars in anthropology, religious studies, geography, and other disciplines have investigated how religious sounds produce urban spaces, both sacralizing and dividing lived environments in religiously diverse settings. As these sounds permeate urban space, they frequently imply claims by religiously defined communities of belonging to a locality, which are sometimes contested (Oosterbaan 2009, Sykes 2015, de Witte 2016). These studies have shown how religious sounds that are performed in public directly impinge on questions of citizenship (David 2012, de Witte 2016). This is a dynamic especially evident for Islamic sounds in diverse urban settings (Moors and Jouili 2014, McMurray 2012). In particular, the Islamic call for prayer (*azan*) has become the focus of controversies and has triggered local debates about Muslims’ right to the city and overall political belonging (Lee 1999, Tamimi Arab 2015, 2017, Weiner 2014). In addition to the *azan*, other Islamic sounds, such as public sermons and genres of praise poetry, add to the contests over sonic space (Schulz 2012, Larkin 2014, Eisenberg 2013). This line of study has illustrated the interlocking of the spatiality of religious sounds and the problem of cultural citizenship (Rosaldo 1994).

Another strand of research has focused on the role of religious sounds in ethical listening, particularly in Islamic settings. Against the background of a powerful Qur’anic paradigm of vocal recitation as the site of divine presence (Graham and Kermani 2006, Gade 2006), scholars have investigated the act of listening to Islamic vocal sounds as part of a larger complex of pious dispositions, bodily habits, and carefully cultivated orientations that many Muslims consider a foundation for ethical life (Hirschkind 2006, Frishkopf 2009, Harris 2014). In some contexts, new forms of consumption and entertainment have shaped the listening to Islamic sermons on audiocassettes, pointing to the intertwining of Islamic moral renewal and aspirations to middle-class lifestyles (Schulz 2012). In other settings the ethical dimensions of the voice intersect with the tactics of sectarian struggle (Menon 2015: 135–168). There are also other forms of engagement with Islamic sounds beyond the vocal, mainly in the form of Sufi music, whose adherents supplement the primacy of vocal genres of Islamic self-fashioning with other instrumental sounds in the quest for an encounter with the divine (Kapchan 2008, 2009, Qureshi 1986, Wolf 2014).<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, as inspired as many of these studies are by the sensory and material turn in the study of religion, they have stopped short of accounting for what the specifically sonic contributions to religious sensations and embodied dispositions actually consist of. The workings of sound in religion, including vocal sound, comprise far more than the role of a sonic representation of discursive themes

important to religious traditions, such as specific forms of Islam. What is needed is an account of how the perception of sound can actually bring about the religious marking of contested urban territory, make a case for the belonging of a specific religious group, or create pious dispositions for an ethical life in individuals in more than a metaphorical way. In short, for a proper understanding of religion, it is necessary to take sound seriously and not to reduce it to something else, such as a stand-in for ultimately discursive meanings or social values (Feld and Brenneis 2004). Religious sounds have a capacity to act on those perceiving them, in a manner going beyond such well-established domains of analysis. That is, we need to get at the proprium of sound in order to understand its specific ways of creating knowledge and sensations if we are to explain its entanglement with discursive meaning and social values. This entails a closer analysis of the specificities of acoustics and sonic parameters than has been customarily undertaken in the study of sonic cultures, especially the sonic dimensions of religion.

One of the premises of the book is that sound is a separate modality for creating meaning and knowledge that also requires other forms of access besides discursive description. For the study of sound in Islamic contexts, where previous ethnographic work has mainly focused on verbal descriptions of sound and its effects (Hirschkind 2006, Kapchan 2008, 2009), this is particularly relevant. Taking sound seriously necessitates paying close attention to its qualities and features, and this cannot be done by verbal description alone. For this, a formal analysis of sound, such as the one I undertake in chapters 5 and 6, is indispensable. Such analysis is necessary in order to avoid the immediate reduction of sonic events to language. I emphasize that such formal analysis does not downplay the ethnographic record; on the contrary, all such analysis is closely connected to and builds on my ethnography. While my interlocutors found it difficult to put the qualities and effects of vocal sound in words, they metaphorically described vocal sound, and what such sound did to them, in ways that strongly resembled the terminology of neophenomenological approaches to atmospheres. Also, as will become clear later on, even though the sonic is, in principle, independent from language, the sonic and discursive aspects of *na't* recitation turned out to be closely intertwined. As a next step, in order to attend to the particular affordances and effects of sonic events as they become enmeshed with discursive dimensions of religion, it is necessary to engage with the analytics of transduction and atmospheres.

#### AN ANALYTIC OF TRANSDUCTION: RELIGION, VOICE, AND MEDIA

The notion of transduction plays a central role in my exploration of voice, media, and religion. Transduction refers to the transformation of energy from one material modality into another. In anthropology, transduction has recently been deployed to analyze the transformation of discourse between different material



states in “spirit writing” (Keane 2013), to account for nonreferential aspects of translation (Silverstein 2003, Handman 2014); the notion has also been taken up in anthropological work on religion and media (Engelke 2011). Regarding sound, Stefan Helmreich has analyzed sonic immersion as transduction (Helmreich 2007, 2010). My approach differs from such previous uses of the notion of transduction, as I expand my analysis beyond the transformation of one type of energy into another, focusing more on transduction’s potentialities and generative capacities. In doing so, I draw on a formulation of transduction by Gilbert Simondon (1924–1989), first formulated in his 1964 thesis (Simondon 1964). Simondon is now widely acknowledged to have provided crucial inspiration for Gilles Deleuze’s materialist philosophy of becoming. In my analysis of the sonic dimensions of religion, transduction features in at least a double sense. First, in a more mundane manner, transduction describes the processes of converting energy from one mode into another that are at the heart of sonic events, including those in which media play a central role. These are foremost the energetic interactions between the body and air. When the hearing apparatus converts the variations in air pressure we call sound waves into analogous nerve impulses, we speak of transduction of one form of energy into another. This is also the case in vocal performance, when muscles and body cavities, in conjunction with the vocal tract, produce variations in air pressure that then travel as sound waves. Transduction in this sense is also crucial to all sound reproduction technology: “Modern technologies of sound reproduction use devices called *transducers*, which turn sound into something else and that something else back into sound. All sound reproduction technologies work through the use of transducers” (Sterne 2003: 22, emphasis in original). A microphone may convert sound waves into analogous variations of electrical current and voltage, while conversely such variations in electricity can be transduced into variations of air pressure by a loudspeaker. Different forms of media storage, from the gramophone, to the CD and the MP3 file add additional layers of transduction to the process. Such forms of energetic transduction are the condition of possibility for sonic events, including their mediatized versions.

But there is a second, perhaps more important, way in which transduction is central to my analysis. Following Gilbert Simondon, transduction can be understood as a process of “individuation,” in which new entities, such as objects, organisms, or psychic phenomena, emerge from an inchoate, “pre-individual” milieu (Simondon 1992 [1964]). For this to occur, two or more dimensions of this milieu have to interact, entering an energetic exchange that in turn produces new entities and phenomena, often more complex in structure. According to Simondon, a “pre-individual” milieu is also “metastable,” containing unresolved tensions and therefore energy (Simondon 1992 [1964]): 302). Cutting across older distinctions between “nature” and “culture,” as well as between the human and the nonhuman, transduction is the process that engenders the new, by mediating between disparate energies in a domain.

This term [transduction] denotes a process—be it physical, biological, mental, or social—in which an activity gradually sets itself in motion, propagating within a given area, through a structuration of the different zones of the area over which it operates. Each region of the structure that is constituted in this way then serves to constitute the next one to such an extent that at the very time this structuration is effected there is a progressive modification taking place in tandem with it. The simplest image of the transductive process is furnished if one thinks of a crystal, beginning as a tiny seed, which grows and extends oneself in all directions in its mother-water. Each layer of molecules that has already been constituted serves as the structuring basis for the layer that is being formed next, and the result is an amplifying reticular structure. (Simondon 1992 [1964]: 313)

Simondon extends this model of the genesis of new entities from “pre-individual” milieus across physical, biological, and ultimately, human domains, including the creation of mental phenomena and social groups (Simondon 2005, Scott 2014: 126–149), which all rely on the transfer of energy through material media. In this book, I approach sonic processes of transduction as individuations in Simondon’s sense. This means that the energetic mediations between air and body result in the generation of something else, here chiefly bodily sensations and attendant psychic phenomena that stand in relationships of analogy with the forces of transduction that produce and structure them in the act of sonic immersion. My Mauritian Muslim interlocutors described such effects as the sensation of being profoundly seized and moved by a voice.

As I discuss in chapters 5 and 6, sonic atmospheres comprise the mechanism through which transduction creates new phenomena in a Simondonian sense. Drawing on approaches to atmospheres in recent strands of phenomenology, I describe sonic events as resulting in the emission of energetic forces—chiefly differences in air pressure—that fill spaces between their sources and those perceiving sound while intermingling with the bodies of those receptive to them. As I will explain, such sonic atmospheres act on the felt bodies of those perceiving them through suggestions of movement. Studying religious sounds and their mediatic circulation in an Islamic setting requires paying attention to sonic transduction as atmospheres, if the analysis is to progress beyond the discursive dimensions of such sounds. The analytic of atmospheres illustrates in concrete terms the creative processes of sonic transduction. In the ethnographic settings I describe, we understand how transduction operates, in a Simondonian sense, through analyzing sonic atmospheres.

Transduction as sonic atmospheres is an approach that does justice to the effects of the embodied voice against the backdrop of the cultural and historical specificities of Islamic traditions in their Mauritian and transnational settings. Chapters 2 and 3 of this book introduce the historical and ethnographic contexts of Mauritian Muslims as people who are part of dense networks of migratory, religious, and economic exchanges across the Indian Ocean world. I focus on the practice of *naʿt*,

which is very popular among the followers of the *Ahl-e Sunnat wa Jama'at* tradition (the term is frequently abbreviated to “*Ahl-e Sunnat* tradition”; Sanyal 1996) in Mauritius. Sound reproduction has come to play a key role for this genre. I detail how recordings of presentations by acclaimed reciters of *na't* are widely listened to beyond the boundaries of ritual contexts. They have also been turned into models to be emulated in local live performances on important days of the ritual calendar, as well as during auspicious events in peoples' lives, such as weddings and moving into a new home. Furthermore, I analyze how media-enhanced performances of this devotional genre work to bring about the spiritual presence of the Prophet and other Islamic authorities, such as prominent Sufi saints. These performances enact the alignment of ritual participants with the *Ahl-e Sunnat* tradition, known for its emphasis on venerating the Prophet. Analyzing a range of performances in detail, I particularly focus on the shifting participant roles in a deictic field. In this field, performers assume responsibility for the poetic utterances in honor of the Prophet while, at the same time, seeking to cast their performance as a faithful reenactment of poetic words assumed to have been authored by revered saint-poets who experienced a close spiritual relationship with the Prophet.

Not just the poetic texts, but also sonic dimensions, are of crucial importance to the success of the performance as a means of rapprochement with the Prophet. Of particular significance are the qualities of the reciting voice. My Mauritian Muslim interlocutors regarded such qualities as essential for bringing about a state of love, longing, and affection for the Prophet that helps bridge the gap between the Prophet and Muslim devotees in the context at hand. Mauritian Muslims deploy sound reproduction technologies to access and safeguard exemplary qualities of the voice. For them, the perceived authenticity of vocal qualities and performance is important in a double sense. On one hand, media-supported circulation and safeguarding of what is felt to be the “right” performative and vocal style address concerns about the authenticity and correctness of a key Islamic practice. This is an important concern in the diasporic context of Mauritius. There, Muslims, who have an Indian background, constitute a minority and consider themselves far removed from centers of religious authority. On the other hand, the qualities of vocal recitation of *na't* are deemed essential for the performative success of the devotional practice. Successful performances enable ritual participants to spiritually apprehend the Prophet and to experience him as close by. Therefore, the voice, and technical means for its reproduction, are pivotal in bringing about the perceptible presence of the divine.

Vocal recitation in the performance of *na't* is embedded in a particular South Asian Islamic tradition in the Mauritian diasporic context. Ritual listeners engage with the “moving” effects of the reciting voice through the discursive and other semiotic categories of this tradition. Moreover, *na't* performances provide social occasions for shared attention to particular ritual texts and their stylistic dimensions. They are therefore constitutive of social relationships between participants as Mauritian Muslims jointly seek to align themselves with the *Ahl-e Sunnat*

tradition through performing and listening to na't poetry. But the work of sonic transduction involves more, providing an additional mode of religious engagement. Here, the reciting voice features as an agent that transports Mauritian Muslims listening to na't closer to the divine, acting on their bodies in a powerful way. The discursive and the transductive are different yet closely entangled dimensions of religious mediation, providing solutions for the problem of presence (Keane 1997: 51, de Vries 2001, Engelke 2007). Pace Hirschkind (2011), the problem of religious presence is not just an artifact of Protestant ontologies that center on a dichotomy of inner spirit and outward material forms but can also be found in many other contexts. In a broad range of other religious traditions, though not all (Robbins 2017), human actors do not take the relative presence of the divine, or of other non- or semihuman actors inhabiting a usually imperceptible otherworld, as self-evident. Since whatever is considered the divine can be perceived as relatively closer or more removed depending on context, religious practitioners have devised a great diversity of practices to enhance their connection with the divine, involving spoken and written language, material objects, images, and sounds, in connection with technical media such as print, photography, sound reproduction, and the latest audiovisual media. For example, when Hindus engage in the intense visual and quasi-tactile interaction with their deities known as *darshan* (Eck 1998), many of them draw on technical media such as chromolithography, photography, and digital audiovisual media in order to increase the deities' presence for them (Jain 2007, Pinney 2004). Most Hindus who engage in these media practices are not guided by Protestant oppositions between inner spirit and outer materiality. Instead, for them the material and the divine are powerfully intertwined, indeed indistinguishable, as *darshan* revolves around a "physical relationship of visual intermingling" (Pinney 2001: 168), in which the gaze is "a vehicle of transmission for powerful essences" (Jain 2007: 262). Neither can scholarly interpretations of such practices drawing on the notions of presence and mediation be simply understood as the effect of Protestant genealogies of religion in academia.

A desire to enhance their connection to the divine also underlie my Mauritian Muslim interlocutors' uses of the technical media that I analyze in this book. Here, sound reproduction is in turn central to the search for technical solutions for accessing the divine. However, media, as long as they function in expected, habitual ways, have a propensity to erase themselves in the act of mediation (Bolter and Grusin 1999). Whether we are using audiovisual media, making a phone call, being absorbed by a book, watching a movie, or working in front of a computer screen, as long as media operate successfully they phenomenologically disappear from awareness, withdrawing in the face of what is being mediated. The latter appears to be fully present, while the technical apparatus and the social and institutional relationships it is part of recede into the background. Media's capacity for "aesthetic self-neutralization" (Krämer 2008: 28) appears to be a necessary condition for media to perform the work of mediation. Closely related to this propensity for

self-erasure is a paradox of mediation: in order to get more immediate and direct access to whatever is being mediated, and to gain a sense of immediacy, people in the contemporary world deploy ever more complex apparatuses of mediation (Mazzarella 2006). Media practices thus involve a constant alternation between states where media are highly perceptible and obviously present, and moments where their propensity to disappear in the act of mediation gets activated. Several authors have argued that the sense of immediacy depends on mediation (Bolter and Grusin 1999, Krämer 2008, Eisenlohr 2009), and that it must ultimately be understood as an effect of the latter's technicity. The performance of *na't* is a summoning of divine presence that can result in a sense of intimacy with the Prophet, enabled by a technical apparatus that in moments of such closeness with the divine tends to experientially disappear. This form of mediation is based on the webs of discursive meaning that constitute this Islamic practice, as well as on the power of sonic atmospheres. In the interactive process between sonic transduction as atmospheres and discursive meaning, the former accounts for the especially powerful and seemingly immediate sensations of the divine.

#### THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF SOUND AND VOICE: TRANSDUCTION, SIGNS, AND ATMOSPHERES

*Sounding Islam* suggests a new direction for the anthropological study of sound. To this end, I propose sonic atmospheres as an analytic for the ethnographic engagements with sound in socioculturally diverse contexts. The anthropology of sound has, among other theoretical developments, worked above all through two principal concepts, soundscape and acoustemology. *Soundscape* is a term coined by the Canadian composer Murray Schafer (1994 [1977]). Drawing on an analogy with the term *landscape*, *soundscape* is intended to describe the totality of sounds perceived by an individual in a given spatial setting and environment. My work is inspired by the holistic approach connoted by the soundscape concept and by its emphasis on the relationality of listeners and their environments. Also, the parallel with *landscape* suggests the deep cultural shaping of the environment in which listeners are embedded (Samuels et al. 2010). Schafer's romantic critique of urban, mechanical, and industrial sounds as presumably polluting pristine soundscapes also led him to denounce "schizophonia," the separation of sounds from their sources through modern technologies of sound reproduction, as negative and abnormal. Schafer's organic holism is thus ill equipped to engage with contemporary worlds (see also Kelman 2010), including religious worlds where sound reproduction is ubiquitous and has profoundly shaped listening habits and expectations for more than a century. My analysis also departs from the concept of soundscape in that the latter's analogy with landscape ties it to the notion of a three-dimensional space that is limiting for the study of religious moods and atmospheres produced by sonic events and listening experiences. Also, the "-scape" component of soundscapes

seems to suggest a relatively stable setting and downplays the temporality inherent in any sonic event and listening experience (Helmreich 2010, Ingold 2007).

In contrast, another analytic used by anthropologists in the ethnographic analysis of sonic events, *acoustemology*, does not suffer from the implicit privileging of a static three-dimensional space or from a bias toward temporal stasis. Steven Feld developed the notion in order to describe acoustic knowing—opening up ethnographic investigation into sound and listening practices through which people come to know and orient themselves in their cultural environments. To illustrate this notion, he described a rainforest environment in which listening skills acquire special importance. In contrast to *soundscape*, listening is understood as a place-making practice rather than an activity unfolding in a three-dimensional space. Also, *acoustemology* is attentive to temporality as it approaches a “sensual time-space,” while one of its principal modalities of knowing is the change of sounds over time: “sounds are heard moving, locating, placing points in time” (Feld 1996: 98).

My investigation of the experience of religious presence mediated by sound, in particular the voice, and by technologies of sound reproduction, draws on *acoustemology*’s “exploration of sonic sensibilities, specifically of ways in which sound is central to making sense, to knowing, to experiential truth” (Feld 1996: 97). An analytic of transduction specifically points to the immersive character of sound and to the ways in which listeners *comingle* with sonic phenomena. Transduction as sonic atmospheres emphasizes the passing of sound from body into air and vice versa, as sound waves are registered not only by the hearing apparatus but also by the entire body, including its bones. Against the notion of a three-dimensional *soundscape* experienced by a subject separated from it, transduction directly addresses the sonic ways in which the boundaries between humans and their environments blur (cf. Ingold 2007). But vocal sound as transduction is more than the mere passing of energy between air and the body undergoing transformation into different modalities. Inspired by Gilbert Simondon’s rendering of the concept that takes transduction to be the mechanism of individuation of new entities across a broad ontological spectrum, I highlight in particular the generative capacities of sound. Sound’s passing through the body creates emotions and other phenomena at the interface of the psychological and the physiological—in my ethnographic account specifically the experience of the divine. In contrast to *soundscape*, transduction as sonic atmospheres thus highlights somatic intermingling with sound. Furthermore, unlike *soundscape*, transduction is fully equipped to do justice to the temporality of sound in several ways. It is attentive to the durational character of sound, attending to the precise morphology of unfolding sonic events as constantly and rapidly changing bundles of characteristics, such as loudness, pitch, and timbre. In addition, it brings to light that which sound creates in the process of embodied vocal performance and listening—in my analysis, events and phenomena commonly described as religious.

An analytic of transduction as sonic atmospheres also affords new insights for the anthropological exploration of voice. For a long time, anthropological engagement with the voice has centered on the broad use of the notion of voice as a trope for agency and subject positions. A particularly fruitful aspect of this strand of research is the attention given to “voicing,” the fact that speakers often have a repertoire of different relationships to their utterances. Here, *voice* refers to “the linguistic construction of social personae” (Keane 1999: 171). Single speakers often rapidly shift between such typified “voices” indicating distinct interactional stances as they relate to their utterances, as either reported speech, parody, or discourse for which they take personal responsibility (Bakhtin 1981, Hill 1995, Irvine 1996). More recently, a smaller number of scholars have also ventured into the ethnographic analysis of the embodied voice. Current research in anthropology pertaining to the voice is engaged in demonstrating and strengthening the links between formerly split approaches to the voice, combining the analysis of interactional stance and the investigation of voice as an embodied, sonic phenomenon (Bakker Kellogg 2015, Harkness 2014, Kunreuther 2014, Weidman 2006, 2014; see also Faudree 2012: 525–526). Scholars such as Nicholas Harkness and Amanda Weidman (2006), who attend to the embodied voice and what Harkness has called the “phonosonic nexus” (Harkness 2014) have all shown how ideas about the voice have been outcomes of historical formations such as gender, nationhood, religion, or neoliberal accounts of agency. They have thus sought to elucidate culturally and historically variable ideologies of the voice. The latter often rely on characteristics frequently ascribed to the voice, such as deepness, inscrutability, and a profoundly bodily and emotive character, in order to naturalize historically contingent links between certain forms of vocal performance and particular subject positions or sociopolitical formations (Srivastava 2006). In concert with other semiotic and media ideologies (Keane 2003, Gershon 2010), they make it possible for vocally performing subjects to align themselves with semiotic formations of value: “The voice as phonosonic nexus is a medium through which we orient to another, not directly, but through phonic engagements with sonically differentiated frameworks of value that shape our social interactions” (Harkness 2014: 17). This line of analysis shows parallels to analyses of “voice registers” in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology. In such analyses, scholars have traced the indexical and iconic links between particular qualities of the voice and the performance of particular subject positions in given ethnographic contexts, such as associations of falsetto voice and interactional stances of respect among Zapotec speakers in Mexico (Sicoli 2014), or “creaky voice” and the persona of a “hardcore Chicano gangster” among Latina gang members in California (Mendoza-Denton 2011).

This productive strand of research implies a critical stance toward psychoanalytic approaches to the voice, where the voice sometimes features as a subversive element, owing to its “spectral autonomy,” which decouples the voice from the speaker’s body and subjectivity (Žižek 2001: 58). The voice disrupts the flow of



signification while, at the same time, being the focus of intense and unspeakable desires, constituting a trace of the forever lost “real” in a Lacanian sense. Mladen Dolar’s theory of the “object voice” is the most elaborate example of this, taking “the voice, the object voice, as one of the paramount ‘embodiments’ of what Lacan called *objet petit a*” (Dolar 2006: 11). Such psychoanalytic scholarship takes the embodied character of the voice seriously and realizes that it cannot be easily be subsumed under processes of signification. However, as Dolar’s account of the “object voice” shows, it has also furthered a tendency to essentialize the voice as a structure of universal deep-seated drives or desires, ascribing to it prehistorical and precultural qualities.

My analysis shares the anthropological impetus to deconstruct such essentializations of the voice and to provincialize psychoanalytic theorizing of the voice that combines writing from a North Atlantic perspective with universalist pretenses. My account of the voice in Muslim devotional practices in Mauritius in the context of the Indian Ocean world shows the historical and sociocultural variability of what the voice is held to be and what it accomplishes. Also, I demonstrate how performing certain qualities of the voice makes it possible for actors to align themselves with valued subject positions in interactions with others.

*Sounding Islam* attends to a key dimension of the embodied voice that is largely missing in previous engagements with the voice, which I aim to capture through the analytic of transduction. With this I do not just mean the complex interplay of muscles, bodily cavities, and the vocal tract that transduces bodily motions into movements of air, converting them into waves of differences in air pressure. I also point to the generative role of such transduction, as it creates new phenomena in the bodies through which movement of energy passes, remaking what it encounters in ways analogous to its own structures and qualities, not unlike the growth of a crystal. Previous ethnographic investigations of the voice have largely employed frameworks of historical and cultural meaning, understanding them as “material embodiments of social ideology and experience” (Feld et al. 2004: 332), or have accounted for the workings and effects of the voice in Peircean semiotic terms (Faudree 2012: 525–526, Weidman 2014), with particular attention to aspects of Peircean firstness (Harkness 2014).

Peircean semiotics has the great advantage of allowing one to approach social life as a meaning-generating process in a highly differentiated way. To this end, Peirce not only distinguished between different kinds of signs, such as the well-known triad of icon, index, and symbol, thereby differentiating likeness, copresence, and convention as different modalities of meaning-creation, but he also cast the sign as always standing in a triadic relationship with an object (what a sign stands for in the modes described above), and an interpretant, the latter being “whatever a sign creates insofar as it stands for an object” (Kockelman 2005: 234). Interpretants can take various forms, such a cognitive or emotional state or reaction such as an insight, a feeling, or a social action. Crucially, interpretants can



themselves become objects of other signs, so semiosis has an inbuilt tendency to propel chains of social action, as signs always beget new signs and actions. Semiosis thus understood appears to be not only irreducibly social but also generative and processual, insofar as the flow of signification is coterminous with the turns and emergent qualities of social life (Peirce 1992, Parmentier 1994, Agha 2007). Seen from such a Peircean perspective, the sound of a voice in the Muslim devotional settings I investigate is thus always a complex sign, standing for an object—such as the quality a voice is perceived to be like—while indicating the copresence of other objects, such as social stances and values, or standing for an object it signifies by convention. Simultaneously, not only is it a sign of something, but also it can be a sign *for* somebody, who will react to the apprehension of the sign-object relation through the production of an interpretant—for example, by taking a religious stance or being seized by religious affect, which would be an “affective interpretant” in Peircean terms (Kockelman 2013: 121).

In *Sounding Islam* I bring this tradition of semiotic analysis to bear on the performance of Muslim devotional poetry. However, I also contend that this framework does not exhaust certain somatic modes of religious engagement that I aim to elucidate through the notions of transduction and sonic atmospheres. This is not to argue that semiotic signification and sonic movement are opposed modalities, and that my analysis attempts to get at some sonic “real” outside language or metaphor. In fact, sonic movement is shot through with signification. Signification is not arbitrarily imposed on sonic movement from the outside but is inherent to its processual forms. Instead of contrasting sonic movement with signification as such, my argument is that sonic movement and the discursive dimensions of vocal recitation are two different modalities of the devotional practices I analyze in this book. In the examples I discuss in the following chapters, they are closely intertwined but can, in principle, operate independently from one another. This is why I insist on taking sound seriously in its own right. However, both dimensions are suffused with signification from a semiotic point of view. The semiotic is not confined to the discursive alone: it also extends to sonic dynamics.

In addressing the religious sensations provoked by audition, my book also builds on Hirschkind’s analysis of “somaesthetics” (Shusterman 2002) in another Islamic setting (Hirschkind 2006: 85). Deploying a Simondonean understanding of transduction, I seek to pinpoint the mechanisms responsible for the frequently remarked upon power of sound and vocal recitation to bring about religious sensibilities. One of the hallmarks of such sonic power is that its effects are often experienced as deeply encompassing yet exceedingly difficult to describe in concrete terms. This is because one of the key possible impacts of sound and the reciting voice is the creation of atmospheres. A focus on sound and atmospheres is helpful in order to re-center the discussion of ethical sensibilities away from the inner states of subjects.

Perhaps the most compelling way to apply a logic of transduction to the analysis of sonic events and their effects lies in drawing a connection to phenomenological

work on atmospheres. According to neophenomenological philosophers Gernot Böhme and Hermann Schmitz, atmosphere is not an interior mood but an objective phenomenon in the world, something “that proceeds from and is created by things, persons, or their constellations” (Böhme 1993: 122). Atmospheres are distinct entities that exist independently from human subjectivity and can be felt and encountered by bodies: they are “the occupying of a dimension-less space or area within the sphere of experienced presence” (Schmitz 2014: 30). As they flow forth from objects and other things in the world, atmospheres can be understood as “ecstasies of the thing” (Böhme 1993: 110). These tangible ecstasies of things and persons not only can be sensed by the felt-body but also are themselves feelings. Arguing against subjectivist and interiorist accounts of the sensate dimensions of atmospheres, Hermann Schmitz has pointed out: “Feelings are atmospheres poured into space and powers that seize the felt-body [*Leib*]” (Schmitz 2014: 30). According to Schmitz, the phenomenological felt-body can intermingle with atmospheres, making the latter’s perception possible.

Sound and sonic events provide concrete possibilities for empirically investigating the workings of atmospheres understood in neophenomenological terms. Taking a lead from such work on the objective qualities of atmospheres, I draw inspiration from recent work in cultural musicology proposing that sonic phenomena and events can also be understood as atmospheres (Abels 2013, 2017a, 2017b). Sonic phenomena have an objective existence, they unfold in time and are measurable. Sound “flows forth” from objects and persons, constituting the latter’s “ecstasies” in tangible ways, and acts on perceiving bodies through suggestions of movement. Human bodies register sound by intermingling with sonic phenomena through transduction. Sound encounters and passes through bodies, being transformed into other types of energy in the act of immersion. The intermingling of felt-bodies with sound as atmospheres is at the heart of the often-described peculiar power of sound and music to move people, generating moods and feelings that often resist discursive rendering (Eisenlohr 2018). The objective power of transduction notwithstanding, the registering of sonically generated atmospheres is not the same for everyone. Not only is it “always the body social that is enunciated in and through the voice” (Feld et al. 2004: 341), but also the perception of vocally created atmospheres depends on learned, cultivated forms of attunement that make Mauritian Muslims receptive to particular sonically produced atmospheres, having acquired the appropriate modes of religious listening to the reciting voice. Even though they found it difficult to put their sonic perceptions in words, my interlocutors in the field did offer descriptions of their culturally embedded perceptions of vocal sound. They thereby drew attention to the significance of auditory cultures, learned techniques of attending to sonic events that are part of larger cultural frames, such as the auditory cultures in my ethnography of a particular tradition of Islam (Bull and Back 2003, Erlmann 2004, Feld 1996, Feld et al. 2004, Schmidt 2000, Sterne 2003). As I discuss in chapter 5, there are

deep resonances between the ways my interlocutors described their affection for vocal sound within the framework of such auditory sensibilities and an analytic of atmospheres.

*Sounding Islam* provides an account of the particularly commanding characteristics of sound and voice in the field of religion, doing justice to both transduction as sonic immersion (the intermingling of sound with bodies) and the generative powers of sonic events. The book thus sheds light on a key dimension of religion, the sonic incitement of sensations that are often difficult to translate into language. At the same time, I investigate the performance of Muslim devotional poetry in a manner showing the embeddedness of the sensations and affects that sound provokes in particular historical traditions and dynamics.

## BACKGROUND AND METHODS

I first became interested in the Muslim devotional practices that are the subject of this book during my dissertation research in 1996–1998 on the cultivation of “ancestral languages” among Mauritians of Indian background, who comprise nearly 70 percent of the population (Eisenlohr 2006a, 2007). In Mauritius such languages, among them Urdu, were hardly ever known by ancestors migrating from India to Mauritius. But these languages came to play important roles in the constitution of diasporic and national forms of belonging in the twentieth century, decades after migration from India to Mauritius had ended. They are never used as vernaculars; they primarily function as ethno-religious markers and are used in, above all, religious contexts. The Mauritian state heavily supports the cultivation of these ancestral languages, especially by teaching these languages in the school system and by training teachers and producing schoolbooks and other teaching materials in these languages. This markedly contrasts with what was, until recently, a near absence of state support for Mauritian Creole, the vernacular language of the great majority of Mauritians. Transnational religious networks that link Mauritius with India and Pakistan are another context where ancestral languages, among them Urdu, are important. In Mauritius, unlike in South Asia, Urdu is not a vernacular language used in everyday life but is mainly restricted to Islamic ritual contexts. The exception is the work of a very few Mauritian writers who have created fiction in Urdu; their works are published in South Asia and also largely read there (Edun 2006). Mauritian Muslims who are of Indian origin, and who are officially recognized in the constitution as a separate community, are unique in the country for laying claim to two ancestral languages, Urdu and Arabic. Both languages are taught in state and state-supported schools to students of Muslim background. The official recognition of Arabic as an ancestral language further reinforces the point that the “ancestral” quality of such languages is rather disconnected from the actual linguistic practices and knowledge of Muslim ancestors who migrated from India to Mauritius in the nineteenth century.

In my earlier research, between 1998 and 2003, on Muslim identities, religious mobilizations, and notions of the secular in Mauritius, I found that the study of Urdu and Arabic was strongly related to sectarianism, as adherents of different traditions of Islam from South Asia compete with each other in Mauritius, as is also the case throughout South Asia (Eisenlohr 2006b). Muslim students, like other Mauritian students in the school system, can study only one ancestral language. I often noticed that families following the Ahl-e Sunnat wa Jama'at tradition chose Urdu over Arabic, while those who were adherents of the Deobandi tradition, including those active in the Tabliqi Jama'at, and Salafists would favor the study of Arabic over Urdu. In Mauritius, as in South Asia, devotional practices in Urdu that involve eulogizing the Prophet Muhammad and other Islamic authorities, such as Sufi saints, are prominent points in sectarian difference and contestation. The recitation of na't poetry in honor of the Prophet in devotional gatherings known as *mahfil-e mawlud* is among the most significant of the occasions that provoke critiques among followers of purist traditions, who see in the poetry's exuberant praise of the figure of the Prophet a danger to the unicity of God. I found that media practices were completely intertwined with the recitation of na't poetry. In the late 1990s, I still encountered the use of cassettes, while in the early years of the twenty-first century there was a rapid shift to CDs, which have since been supplanted by digital audio files played on mobile devices such as cell phones.

Having been trained as a linguistic anthropologist, I set out to analyze how na't recitation operated as a mode of interaction between Mauritian Muslims and the divine. Investigating the use of linguistic registers, deictic markers, and shifts in participant roles during performances, I paid attention to how my Mauritian Muslim interlocutors deployed sound reproduction as a means to enhance their connection with the divine. Much of this initial focus of my research is evident in chapters 2 and 4 of this book. The qualities of the voice of a good na't khwan was the subject to which my conversations with my Mauritian Muslim friends frequently returned, as they described the safeguarding of these voice qualities as one of the primary motivators for making and listening to sound recordings of the genre. How, then, can one capture what makes up the desired qualities of the voice? As I will show, my interlocutors spoke about such qualities in a variety of ways but also acknowledged that, ultimately, the qualities and effects of vocal sound were difficult to put in words. This in turn raised the question of how to account for what happened in those moments that my Mauritian Muslim respondents described as the feeling of literally being touched or even carried away by the sound of vocal recitation.

In the years between 2003 and 2011, I attended numerous mahfils throughout northern and eastern Mauritius, where I interviewed and had many semistructured conversations with Mauritian na't khwan and na't aficionados, who frequently also listened to na't recordings outside the established ritual times and events associated with the genre. In addition to recording these interviews and semistructured

and open-ended conversations, many of which took place in several sessions, I audio-recorded the performances I attended and video-recorded some of them. I also collected a corpus of cassette and CD na't recordings that were sold or otherwise distributed in Mauritius. And I participated in the regular social life of several of my interlocutors and made visits to the homes of many others far beyond the context of na't performances and other events connected to the genre.

Since my work on this devotional genre, media, and voice grew directly out of my earlier research on ancestral languages among Mauritians of Indian origin, Urdu teachers initially played a major role in facilitating my fieldwork on na't. Through the help of an Urdu teacher and members of his family in a village near where I had lived during my initial fieldwork in northeastern Mauritius, I first learned about and witnessed the devotional practice among Mauritian Muslims that is the focus of this book. Other Urdu teachers I knew in northern and eastern Mauritius did the same, introducing me to their neighbors, acquaintances, and family members, most of whom had very different educational and professional backgrounds. Over time, my field of respondents snowballed as they kept on referring me to new interlocutors. As in any other ethnographic undertaking, what I learned through these interactions about the intersections of media, voice, and Muslim devotional practices in Mauritius was not exhaustive, and I cannot claim to have covered all possible perspectives current among Mauritian Muslims. Apart from interlocutors whose public roles were self-evident in the conversations I had with them, and those who had no objections to being named, I have changed names in order to protect the identities of my respondents as is the convention in my discipline.

Unsurprisingly, transnational Islamic networks turned out to be of great importance for understanding the devotional practices that are the focus of this book, as will become evident in chapter 3. In 2009, I complemented my research by following the links of a particular network from Mauritius to Mumbai, where I was already engaged in a different research project on religion and media among Twelver Shi'i Muslims (Eisenlohr 2015a, 2015b, 2017). I visited and had conversations with a Sufi sheikh residing in Mumbai who made yearly trips to Mauritius at the invitation of his spiritual followers there. I also conducted a number of interviews and open-ended conversations among Sunni Muslims in Mumbai who were following the same tradition as my friends and interlocutors in Mauritius, some of whom were also involved in the distribution of devotional media such as mp3 disks and video CDs of na't recitals. The significance of these Islamic networks spanning the Indian Ocean were in turn a prominent topic in the conversations I had with my Mauritian Muslim interlocutors, who displayed a great variety of stances toward such transnational religious links, ranging from enthusiastic engagement to downright skepticism about the motives of those involved.