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Atmospheric Citizenship Sonic Movement and Public Religion in Shi'i Mumbai

PATRICK EISENLOHR

Urbanity and urban belonging not only are approachable in terms of architectural and population density, patterns of consumption, or nodes of global capital flows, but also often manifest themselves as specific urban atmospheres. These are related to visual, sonic, and olfactory impressions that convey the mystique and feeling of being in the city. Being able to understand and contextualize these sensory impressions enables the urban dweller to successfully navigate the city, and mastery to do so across the internal boundaries of a highly segmented and residentially segregated postcolonial city constitutes a prized kind of knowledge, giving those in command of it a specific “urban charisma” (Hansen and Verkaaik 2009). But urban atmospheres, a main topic of this essay, do not just emerge through sensory impressions and their interplay, but also involve a somatic dimension of bodily encounter and immersion. Such atmospheres are holistic gestalten that cannot be fully reduced to particular sensory perceptions, even if, as in the case discussed here, the auditory plays a central role in the production of urban atmospheres. Following newer approaches in phenomenology, I approach atmospheres as distinct, material entities that bodies encounter and intermingle with.¹ As I will explain below, atmospheres fill spaces as they proceed from persons, objects, or their constellations in events.

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1. I draw on the phenomenological tradition of theorizing atmospheres as phenomena in their own right since the 1960s (Schmitz 1969, 2014; Böhme 1995). This is distinct from more recent treatments of atmosphere as a variant of affect, such as Kathleen Stewart's (2011: 452) characterization of atmospheres as “lived affect”; see also Ben Anderson's (2009) “affective atmospheres.”

Sonic phenomena can be very concrete exemplifications of atmospheres understood in such terms.

My focus is on sonic atmospheres in Mumbai and their connection to religious practices and forms of belonging. In Mumbai, religious festivals have played a long-standing role in the claiming of urban space. Mumbaikars often conceive such struggles over the right to the city in terms of competing religious communities that also have regional identifications. Religious processions have constituted an important part of this often violent mode of claiming of urban space that in Mumbai/Bombay was already notorious and subject to government regulation in the nineteenth century (Masselos 1982; Kaur 2003). There, religious processions, including their intense sonic dimensions (Lynch 2019), turn urban space into places associated with a specific “community” and their moral right to belong to the city, with far-reaching implications regarding housing, employment, and access to public services. This making of urban places is not just a matter of contest between religious communities but often also stands in tension with practices of urban planning and governance in Mumbai, not to speak of the intense competition over urban space and housing that the city has become notorious for (Appadurai 2000). Against the background of a history of intercommunal violence, more recently featuring Hindu nationalist and majoritarian targeting of Muslim minorities in the city and the latter’s progressive ghettoization, the ritual and performative marking of particular urban locales as specifically “Shia Muslim” is a powerful way of publicly claiming and reconfirming the right to be recognized as belonging to Mumbai. Hindu nationalist and Maratha regional chauvinists have in recent years violently rejected such claims.

This in turn raises questions of citizenship, more specifically the problem that “formal membership in the nation-state is increasingly neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for substantive citizenship” (Holston and Appadurai 1996: 190). The notion of cultural citizenship (Rosaldo 1994) points to the fact that there is no known polity in which legal citizenship is factually decoupled from the performance of ethnic, ethnolinguistic, and religious forms of belonging, or a combination of all above, further reworked through social stratification, even in nation-states that present themselves as highly inclusive, such as India and the United States. With the rise of Hindu nationalist visions of the Indian nation in recent decades, the range of sociocultural elements that falls within the limits of such cultural citizenship has further narrowed. Indian Muslims’ citizenship has become ever more precarious, despite their increasing attempts to justify their citizenship in terms of minority rights (Fazal 2012; Shani 2010; Williams 2012). In everyday life, citizens displaying markers that identify them as Muslims have faced growing difficulty asserting their citizenship, as to many the performance of Muslim identity

1 has placed them outside the boundaries of the nation, to a position of “abject citi-
2 zenship” (Sherman 2015: 12). Even among those who do not subscribe to Hindutva
3 ideology, the citizenship of those who are recognizably Muslim is frequently con-
4 sidered conditional. For example, non-Hindutva nationalist discourses have long
5 drawn a distinction between Muslims engaged in shrine-based “syncretic” ritual
6 practice influenced by Sufism that they consider as proper to India, and Muslims
7 who are followers of movements of self-understood Islamic purification. The lat-
8 ter are more likely to be placed outside the boundaries of the nation, despite the
9 centuries-old presence of such traditions within the boundaries of present-day India
10 (Menon 2015; see also Das 1984; Robinson 1983). The notion of atmospheric citizen-
11 ship I introduce in this essay also starts from the premise that the performance of
12 cultural signs and their ratification by others is central for full inclusion in a nation.
13 However, in contrast to previous formulations of the concept of cultural citizenship
14 (but see Trnka, Dureau, and Park 2013), it places greater stress on the felt dimensions
15 of such citizenship in such performances, highlighting its somatic dimensions that
16 often evade discursive rendering.

17 Returning to questions of citizenship and belonging in urban settings, such as
18 Mumbai, there is a growing body of research asserting that sound and sonic perfor-
19 mance can mark spaces, especially urban spaces, as belonging to a particular group
20 and make a case for their inclusion and belonging, or can be flashpoints for contes-
21 tations over cultural citizenship. In this struggle over aural borders and the city as
22 “aural borderland” (Western 2020: 297) the Islamic call to prayer (*azan*) is among the
23 most notorious examples (Lee 1999; Tamimi Arab 2017; Weiner 2014), but so can be
24 other Islamic genres, such as broadcast sermons (Eisenberg 2013; Larkin 2014). What
25 is the specific role of sound in accomplishing such links between people, places, and
26 forms of belonging? There is much more to sound than its affordances as a marker,
27 as an indexical or symbolic sign that stands for something, in this case Muslims.
28 Markers need not be sonic in order to do their work of representation, and this
29 raises the question of where the specific sonic contribution to such forms of belong-
30 ing lies. In order to take sound seriously, one needs to also engage with the proprium
31 of sound—that is, the modalities of knowledge and meaning-making that make it
32 special and that are not reducible to discourse, images, or visual signs. What is it
33 about sound and the sonic that makes it a focal issue in this regard?

34 My answer is that there is a privileged relationship between the sonic and the
35 emotive that makes it central to urban contests over belonging to a city, and by
36 extension, in my Mumbai example, also belonging to the nation. This is not about
37 resuscitating the tired contrast between supposedly distancing and objectifying
38 visibility—an untenable notion in its own right—and aurality as a domain of inti-

macy and nonseparation, a contrast traceable to Christian theology about spirit and letter that Jonathan Sterne has aptly called an “audio-visual litany” (Sterne 2003: 15–17). There is a privileged link between the sonic and the emotive because the sonic engages the felt-body in a most encompassing way, as it is not just perceived by the hearing apparatus but potentially the entire body, its flesh.² In this, the phenomenological distinction between the felt-body (*Leib*) and the physical body (*Körper*) is important.³ Sonic phenomena are processes of wavelike, vibrational passing of energy through a medium, and these processes often ignore the boundaries between objects, humans, and their nonhuman environments. Several scholars have therefore likened sonic phenomena to affect (Goodman 2010; Shouse 2005).⁴ The workings of sound often appear ineffable to those exposed to them; this is also related to the often-remarked power of particular forms of organized sound like music to profoundly move people in ways they often struggle to describe in words. Here I would like to introduce atmospheres as an analytic to do justice to this proprium of sound. At the same time, atmospheres also allow a new perspective on urban space as something that is felt and provokes particular sensations, sensations that in turn impinge on the crucial urban question to whom that kind of space belongs.

An Atmospheric Right to the City

Much Twelver Shi‘i activism in Mumbai bases its claims for the inclusion of Twelver Shi‘is in the city, and by extension also the Indian nation, on discourse, including

2. The distinction between the sonic, traveling vibratory phenomena, and the acoustic, the limited range of the sonic that humans can perceive with the hearing apparatus, is crucial here. Writing of sonic rather than acoustic atmospheres, I emphasize the ways in which atmospheres can seize and intermingle with the felt-body in ways that exceed the sense of hearing. The notion of flesh also evokes the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968: 148), who used it to describe the body’s doubling as both sentient and sensible, and its consequent intermingling with the world when, in the case of one hand touching the other, the body touches the body as an other, and feels being touched by it, or when the body utters vocal sound and senses one’s own voice uttering. From this, he draws the following conclusion: “That means that my body is made of the same flesh as the world (it is a perceived), and moreover that this flesh of my body is shared by the world . . . (the felt [*senti*] at the same time the culmination of subjectivity and the culmination of materiality), they are in a relation of transgression or of overlapping” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 248). The flesh here stands for the fundamental overlap and entanglement of body and world, of which the perception of the sonic is a prime example.

3. This distinction goes back to Helmuth Plessner ([1925] 1982) and was taken up by Edmund Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. The neo-phenomenologist Hermann Schmitz (2014: 31–32, 83–84) takes the felt-body (*Leib*) to reach beyond the boundaries of the physical body, comprising what is felt to pertain to the body beyond its conventional limits. The notion of the felt-body is useful for an understanding of how sonic phenomena intermingle with bodies.

4. For a critique, see Eisenlohr 2018: 124–28. See also Maria Frederika Malmström’s (2019: 57–69) work on how sonic vibration provokes affective states in recent political upheaval in Cairo.

1 religious narrative.⁵ But the “live” Muharram processions also contribute to the Shi’i
2 claim to a right to the city in a different way, even though they certainly also involve
3 discourse and images. Their sonic aspects and their quality of dynamic movement
4 are crucial in this respect. The drumming, the rhythmic breast-beating, the ampli-
5 fied chanting of *nauha*, a genre of poetic lament for the martyrs of Karbala, along
6 with the dynamic movement of bodies and ritual objects through the streets, com-
7 bine to emit a palpable atmosphere that give the neighborhoods through which the
8 procession passes a certain Shi’i quality in nondiscursive ways. This spreading of the
9 quality of being “Shia” is not just an arbitrary, symbolic marker.⁶ It is about a col-
10 lective experience of suggestions of motion exerted by sounds and the actual move-
11 ment of people and objects through a neighborhood. While this evokes the work of
12 Henri Lefebvre, both his notion of the right to the city (Lefebvre 1968) as well as
13 his work on rhythmanalysis (Lefebvre 2004), I suggest that neo-phenomenological
14 approaches to atmospheres are more useful in order to understand bodily felt qual-
15 ities of city neighborhoods that go beyond what can be discursively specified. Here
16 I draw on an understanding of atmospheres as energetic forces that fill spaces and
17 act on felt-bodies, as formulated by philosophers Hermann Schmitz and Gernot
18 Böhme. According to them, atmospheres blur the boundaries between subjects,
19 as well as the boundaries between subjects and their nonhuman environments.
20 Atmospheres are not interior moods but “ecstasies of the thing” (Böhme 1993: 110),
21 material phenomena exuding from persons, objects, and their constellations, that
22 in turn intermingle with sentient bodies. According to Schmitz, atmospheres are
23 the “occupying of a nondimensional space or area within the range of experienced
24 presence” (Schmitz 2014: 30). One reason why atmospheres are important is their
25 emotive qualities; they lend a diffuse and holistic “feel” to situations and environ-
26 ments. According to Schmitz, emotions are not a matter of subjective interiority,
27 but atmospheres are themselves emotions as they spread and fill spaces and touch
28 and become entangled with feeling bodies: “Emotions are atmospheres poured out
29 spatially” (Schmitz, Müllan, and Slaby 2011: 255), they move the feeling body (247),
30 and their perception through somatic mingling with them is similar to feelings of
31 warmth, cold, being under the weather, feeling pain, or being immersed in sound.
32 Atmospheres are palpable through the subtle suggestions of motion they exert on
33 those intermingling with them (Schmitz 2014: 85). Drawing on recent work on
34

35 5. Among the most significant actors of such activism in Mumbai is the Twelver Shi’i media center World Islamic
36 Network; see Eisenlohr 2015a; Mirza 2014; and below.

37 6. I here use the term *symbol* in a Peircean fashion, as a sign relationship established by social convention (in
38 distinction from icons and indices).

1 music, sound and atmospheres (Abels 2013, 2017, 2018; see also Eisenlohr 2018; Rie-
2 del 2015), I suggest that sonic events and the flow of bodies as in the Muharram pro-
3 ceSSIONS are very tangible exemplifications of such suggestions of motion that those
4 exposed to them feel. They are modifications of the felt space of the body that pro-
5 voke emotions. When such atmospheres fill urban space, as in the unfolding of the
6 Muharram processions, with its sounds of mournful poetry, the sounds of rhythmic
7 self-flagellation with blades fastened to chains and breast-beating, drumming, and
8 the dynamic flow of masses of black-clad participants pressing through the streets,
9 carrying large and elaborately decorated ritual objects linked to the events at Kar-
10 bala such as *alam* (ornate battle standards with signs of the family of the Prophet)
11 and *tazia* (decorated replicas of the tomb of Hussain and other martyred imams),
12 they exude a feel that lingers on and pertains to a city neighborhood. Such an atmo-
13 spheric feel of a neighborhood is akin to what Schmitz has called “internally dif-
14 fuse meaningfulness,” an excess and plurality of meanings that are holistic and inex-
15 haustible and blend into each other to such a degree that they are hard to specify
16 (Schmitz 2014: 53). Therein lies the palpable “feel” of a neighborhood as “Shia” that
17 can never be verbally described in an exhaustive way. Its diffuse holism conveys
18 the feel of a neighborhood as something difficult to render into language, but as an
19 undeniable presence. Video and audio recordings of the Muharram processions and
20 the events linked to them, such as *majalis* (assemblies where devotional and mourn-
21 ing poetry are recited and chanted) on the days preceding the processions, circulate
22 very widely in Mumbai and are nowadays posted on online video portals and shared
23 online. Part of the appeal of such recordings is their affordance and invitation to
24 relive the ritual events or to witness them in a multisensorial way even though one
25 did not participate in them at the time and place of recording. This also includes
26 their atmospheric qualities that can be conveyed to some extent, especially in their
27 sonic dimensions.

28 The undeniable presence of an urban atmosphere like the one created by the
29 Muharram processions cannot be argued away, because it operates on the nondis-
30 cursive level of somatic evidence. It therefore constitutes a powerful register for
31 making claims to the city, alongside the affirmation of Shi'i belonging to the city
32 through discourse and imagery. Such emotional and felt aspects of belonging are
33 often highly consequential, even as they are difficult to describe in a precise way.
34 Despite the fact that such atmospheres can be created, recreated, and manufac-
35 tured, and even reproduced through media practices (Eisenlohr 2018), there is an
36 air of facticity and givenness about them. They constitute a kind of evidence for
37 belonging that is felt in the flesh and that is largely immune to discursive critique.
38

The Atmosphere of Muharram Processions

Muharram ritual in Mumbai, as elsewhere, is geared to the production of pious emotions. Its spectacular and sometimes also bloody dimensions have long been the focus of controversy, with Twelver Shi'i Muslims disagreeing about the ways and extent to which the mourning for and the memory of the tragic events at Karbala should find expression in ritual practice. My interlocutors in Mumbai often spoke about a contrast between "rational" and "emotional" ways to commemorate the tragedy of Karbala. This is related to changes in the interpretation of Karbala since the Iranian Revolution, when an earlier quietist emphasis of traditional mourning practices was complemented and sometimes replaced by an activist commitment to political and social improvement in the here and now (cf. Deeb 2009). Among Mumbai Twelver Shi'i Muslims, both tendencies persist; however, many among the younger generation are often attracted to bringing about reform in the field of education and social reform that they view as modern and progressive. As Abbas, a young man in his twenties, told me, "To be a Shia does no longer mean to cry and be a victim. We can make life in the community better, such as through efforts in education and health care." This newer sense of agency and mastery over one's own fate so typical of the post-revolutionary and activist interpretation of the message of Karbala was also central to local Twelver Shi'i media activism (Eisenlohr 2015a: 696–97). In fact, several of my interlocutors linked the emergence of activist engagement with the memory of Karbala to the influence of the Iranian Revolution. In particular, a local media center known as World Islamic Network seeks to balance the prevalence of established forms ritual commemoration in its programming with "modern, rational" television programs geared to a younger audience. These include news programs in a sleek studio setting commenting on world news from an Islamic perspective, or talk show and call-in programs such as *Masael-e zindagi*, where a maulana answers from a Shi'i perspective a broad range of questions posed by viewers calling in or sending messages via online chat and email. As the director of WIN stressed, "Young people are more educated and they want to be given reasons. They will ask [a maulana], 'Why are you saying this, where is your reference?'"

Others continued to defend the established ritual practices, such as the Muharram processions and the dramatic displays of mourning that played on the emotions of everyone present. When I debated differences among Twelver Shi'i customs during Muharram worldwide with Parvez, a middle-aged businessman, I mentioned that the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran as well as Hezbollah in Lebanon had banned bloodletting during Muharram processions, urging people to

1 donate blood instead. He said that he thought that Indian Shi'is were very emo-
2 tional. "They will become angry if you tell them not to do this, they will say, you
3 have no right, you are a Wahhabi. You do not know if Imam Hussain will accept it
4 or not, so why do you interfere?" He told me that his own son had engaged in self-
5 flagellation with blades in a procession in the suburb of Bandra, which has a small
6 middle-class Twelver Shi'i population. "He had to have fifty stitches on his head,"
7 Parvez said, and from the way he told me about his son's participation in these con-
8 troversial ritual activities, his disapproval was evident. For others, however, there
9 was no doubt about their beneficial and pious nature, it was an important way to
10 show empathy and emotional intensity in the face of injustice, according to a logic
11 of witnessing (see also Eisenlohr 2015b: 293). The "message" of Karbala was to be
12 reenacted through ritual practice, bringing about a purifying effect through experi-
13 encing and provoking overwhelming emotions. To most of my interlocutors, how-
14 ever, the way in which this provoking of emotions unfolds was difficult to put in
15 words. Talking about the broadcast devotional poetry such as dirges for the martyrs
16 of Karbala, Afsar, who worked in a bakery business, told me that "not only the words
17 of the poetry, but the sound of it makes you cry. The sound of it causes crying."
18 But, like others, he found the precise ways in which such sonic events cause strong
19 emotions that make one cry hard to render into discourse. The seeming ineffability
20 of the nexus of sound, emotions, and their pious and purifying effects from a Shi'i
21 perspective was also evident in conversations with ritual specialists. At the fringes
22 of the main afternoon procession on Muharram 10, which that year fell into Decem-
23 ber 2010, I joined Baqer, a young aspiring maulana whose parents had migrated from
24 Azamgarh in North India to Mumbai before he was born. He had spent two years
25 studying at a Twelver Shi'i seminary in the Iranian holy city of Qom and spoke to
26 me about how much he missed Iran, where two of his children were born, and espe-
27 cially his visits to the shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad. From Iran, he was also able
28 to go on pilgrimages to Karbala and Najaf. The sound of the devotional poetry, he
29 said, reminded him of his pilgrimages. With these sounds recreating an atmosphere
30 of both the pilgrimage and the events at Karbala, he said that he could not find
31 words to describe the feelings they provoked. With eyes wide open and emotion in
32 his voice, he told me how he had always wanted to travel to these Iraqi holy cities,
33 and was barely able to believe it when he finally reached them. Also for Baqer, the
34 felt aspects of these experiences in which sounds, memory of the pilgrimage, the
35 tragic events of Karbala, and their commemoration and partial reenactment that
36 we were witnessing blended into each other, giving the situation an overarching
37 feel, and seeming to evade discourse.

38 The main procession on the afternoon of Muharram 10 moves through Dongri,

1 the historic heart of Twelver Twelver Shi'i Bombay/Mumbai, and also from Don-
2 gri to the Rahmatabad cemetery in Mazagaon. Dongri is not an exclusively Shi'i
3 neighborhood; the neighborhood and its adjacent areas are home to a great diver-
4 sity of other people such as Sunni Muslims and Hindus of different backgrounds.
5 The tense sharing of streets and other urban space that characterizes the procession
6 is iconic of the situation of Twelver Shi'i Muslims in the city at large, where they
7 face an array of contesting claims of belonging (Gupta 2015). As far as the proces-
8 sion is concerned, some Sunni Muslims have strong anti-Shi'i tendencies and reject
9 the massive public ritual spectacles in commemoration of the events at Karbala in
10 the month of Muharram. Added to this, there is the internal fragmentation of Shi'i
11 Muslims in the city, with distinctions of sect, ethnicity, and class separating Bohra
12 and Khoja Ismaeli communities of Gujarati trader background from the Twelver
13 Shi'i, who are in their majority of North Indian origin and overwhelmingly poor.
14 However, there is also marked diversity and stratification among Twelver Shi'i Mus-
15 lims, as two trader communities among them, the Ithna Ashari Khojas of Gujarati
16 origin and the "Mughals," whose ancestors migrated to Bombay from Qajar Persia in
17 the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, play the role of social and economic
18 elites who also control most Twelver Shi'i institutions in the city. This contested
19 and fragmented quality of the urban terrain only heightens the stakes for perform-
20 ing claims to belong to the city through the Muharram processions, including their
21 sensory and atmospheric dimensions. In fact, the sidelining of such ordinary social
22 boundaries and the downplaying of conventional discourses of citizenship that the
23 sensory and atmospheric aspects of the ritual spectacle bring about crucially enables
24 the staging of such claims to the city.

25 Among the participants, many express their mourning by wearing black clothes.
26 The processions are an exercise in sensory intensity, for which acoustemologies, ways
27 of knowing and engaging with human and environmental worlds through sound
28 and sounding (Feld 1996), are central. On the morning of the procession, the harsh
29 sounds of pedal-powered grindstones sharpening the long razor blades fastened to
30 chains to be used for ritual and rhythmic self-flagellation can be heard in the street
31 in front of the Mughal Masjid, a main Twelver Shi'i mosque originally built by Ira-
32 nian traders in the heart of Dongri. Together with the smell of metal dust in the air,
33 they emit a visceral feel of expected events and actions in the afternoon. Groups
34 of devout Shi'is, often organized in clubs and guilds named for the places of origin
35 from where their families migrated to Mumbai, carry highly decorated tazia, along
36 with tall, ornate alam. Often, blood-smeared shrouds are fastened to the standards
37 as a dramatic sign of the mourning, suffering, and martyrdom at Karbala. Groups of
38 men with bare upper bodies engage in bloody and spectacular acts of self-flagellation

FIGURE 1 Blades for sale in Dongri on the morning of Ashura. Photograph by the author.



FIGURE 2 Tazia in Dongri. Photograph by the author.



1 known as *zanjiri matam*, with knives or sharp razor blades fastened to chains with
2 which they keep hitting their backs. In some locations, participants restage the
3 events at Karbala, literally reliving and positioning themselves as witnesses of the
4 tragic events. The rhythmic, amplified chanting of devotional poetry can be heard
5 throughout, expressing grief and pain and sometimes narrating the traumatic events
6 at Karbala and the suffering of the family of the Prophet in heartrending detail. The
7 sounds of large groups of men beating their breasts in unison while chanting dirges
8 in a show of bereavement mingle with the sounds of drummers that move through
9 the streets (cf. Wolf 2000), heightening the emotional intensity of the spectacle. As a
10 whole, the processions are a highly dynamic event; they are an expression of rhythm
11 and bodily movement, a point to which I will return.

12 Consider the sequences and layering of sounds in a recording I made of the main
13 procession on the afternoon of Muharram 10 from Dongri to Mazagaon in December
14 2010. The recording starts with rhythmic chants of “ya Hussain” by men carry-
15 ing decorated alam with shrouds fastened to them, walking through a side street
16 en route to the main procession. This is followed by a scene of a group of young
17 men and adolescents with bare upper bodies engaging in *zanjiri matam*. The metallic
18 sounds of chains and blades merge with the thumping sounds of the metal imple-
19 ments hitting the bleeding backs of the devotees in unison, as they are egged on by
20 calls from the bystanders surrounding them on the street. Another signature sound
21 of the procession by bodily acts of mourning is the clapping sound of men rhythm-
22 ically beating their breasts with their hands or fists in a show of bereavement, driven
23 on by calls of “Ali, Ali” (Hussain’s father and the son-in-law of the Prophet). A cart
24 with a sound system passes by, blaring out the refrain of a dirge in a lamenting voice:
25 “sham ho gayi, sham ho gayi” (evening has come). The lament evokes the mood of
26 the evening of the day of the battle of Karbala (*sham-e ghariban*), when the martyrs
27 had been slain and darkness and despair descended on the survivors among the fam-
28 ily of the Prophet. This poetically and sonically evoked scene is a long-established
29 and frequently recurring focus of emotions in Shi’i commemorations of the tragic
30 events at Karbala. Interlayered with the recited lament are the sounds of ambu-
31 lances’ horns and the loud whistles blown by paramedics as they try to clear a way
32 for the emergency vehicles through the crowd. Not all, but many of the patients in
33 the ambulances are injured mourners who, having fainted, are on the way to the
34 hospital, adding to the feel of drama and tragic urgency that the spectacular acts
35 of the bereavement and their vocal poetic renderings literally spread through the
36 streets. The scene then shifts again to a collective act of self-flagellation, with their
37 telltale metallic sounds of the chains’ and blades’ impacting each other, mingled
38 with the audible hitting of sharp metal instruments on flesh.

Periodically recurring religious processions like the Muharram processions in Mumbai achieve the production of urban places and forms of belonging connected to them, not just because of the movement of bodies through streets and other public locations, but also through the creation of particular sonic atmospheres that convey impressions of one neighborhood having the “feel” of belonging to a certain community rather than others. The Muharram procession is central to a “process of acoustic *territorialization*” (Labelle 2010: xxiii), making a Mumbai neighborhood Shi’i. The rhythmic beating of breasts and the chanting of various slogans and genres of poetry lamenting the martyrdom of Hussain; the broadcasting, mediatic recirculation and public amplification of sermons, intermingled with the sound of ambulances catering to fainted mourners engaging in bloody forms of self-flagellation; the sound of hundreds of razor blades being ground and sharpened beforehand; and the metallic sound of the chains they are fastened to during flagellation, comprise some of the key sonic components marking the south central neighborhood of Dongri and surrounding areas as specifically “Shia.” This shows how urban places such as neighborhoods are both produced and known through experiences that bring about urbanity as a felt quality, here in particular the creation of sonic atmospheres as feelings.

Sonically induced suggestions of motion are the somatic end of a continuum of motion that generate territoriality and belonging through repeated movement. At the other end are the observable movements of bodies and ritual objects through the streets of South Central Mumbai, tracing an established route from Dongri to the Rahmatabad cemetery in Mazagaon (Masoudi Nejad 2015), marking and reconstituting this part of the city as a focus of Shi’i Muslim belonging. Such belonging is reinforced and most powerfully emerges in the interplay between different modes of motion and mobility, such as recurring travel and pilgrimage of persons, the movement of people and sacred objects through the streets, and finally the subtle suggestions of motion that sonic atmospheres exude. The Muharram processions in Mumbai show us how this entire spectrum from transnational travel and pilgrimage down to palpable sonic suggestions of motion is involved in making territories, places, and sites of belonging. These acts of motion in turn vitally contribute to the nondiscursive constitution of citizenship. Their atmospheric dimensions give such belonging an air of somatic facticity.

Urban Atmospheres

Atmospheres as “ecstasies of the thing” have become a theme in scholarship on cities. Those interested in the aesthetic and affective dimensions of urban places have



FIGURE 3 Afternoon procession on Ashura, moving from Dongri to Mazagaon. Photograph by the author.



FIGURE 4 Afternoon procession on Ashura, moving from Dongri to Mazagaon. Photograph by the author.

1 been spurred by the suggestion that “urbanity has an atmospheric core” (Hasse
2 2014: 185; my translation). Atmospheres as feelings extended in space profoundly
3 affect persons, just as being in warmth or darkness does, shaping a sense of being in
4 the city. In cities, a plurality of atmospheres coexist and overlap, in often contradic-
5 tory and complex ways. Urbanity is palpable through immersion in atmospheres,
6 and the very literal felt-bodily encounter with them. Architecture (Böhme 2006),
7 sets of illumination (Edensor 2012), smells, the movement of people and vehicles,
8 and also urban sounds can all exude feelings of urbanity as atmospheres. Accord-
9 ing to Schmitz, atmospheres are “half-things,” phenomena that are fleeting and
10 immersive, such as sounds and rainstorms that disappear and return (Schmitz 2014:
11 74–75). Frequently, those affected by an atmosphere resort to synesthetic descrip-
12 tors to report their experience, such as when describing a city as “lively.” Further-
13 more, residents can identify and locate particular neighborhoods of a city through
14 their atmosphere, while contemporary urban planners also deploy the atmospheric
15 character of a neighborhood in marketing strategies and even aim at manufac-
16 turing atmospheres in the construction of new neighborhoods, as in Hamburg’s
17 “HafenCity,” a new part of the city built on the site of former port warehouses dat-
18 ing from the nineteenth century (Hasse 2014: 257–58). This line of work on urban
19 atmospheres in philosophy and geography is highly relevant for my discussion of
20 the atmospheric dimensions of the Shi’i character of Dongri as a distinct Mum-
21 bai neighborhood. In contrast to most previous studies of urban atmospheres, my
22 investigation focuses on the sonic rather than architecture and illumination as gen-
23 erators of atmospheres. I suggest that the sonic creation of a specific character of
24 Dongri tied to its Shi’i history mainly becomes palpable in two ways, or steps, the
25 first more general, the second more specific.

26 First, the sounds that emerge from the procession, whether the repetition of slo-
27 gans, the sound of rhythmic breast-beating, the devotional genres of recited poetry
28 commemorating the events of Karbala, or the sounds of metal chains and blades
29 used during flagellation have one quality in common: they are sounds of rhythmic
30 movement, they comprise an alternation between strong and weak elements on
31 multiple dimensions. This is plainly obvious in the case of breast-beating, the rep-
32 etition of slogans, and the flagellation with metal implements. But also the musi-
33 cal rendering of commemorative and mournful poetry of the nauha genre shares
34 this quality of rhythmic, here musical, vocal movement. These sonic manifesta-
35 tions are ecstasies of the procession, which itself is a movement of bodies and rit-
36 ual objects through the city. The sounds of collective movement emanating from
37 the procession have a capacity to seize and affect those exposed to them. Return-
38 ing to the theme of sonically generated atmospheres, in this context it is useful to

1 draw a link to Hermann Schmitz's (2014: 85) suggestion that atmospheres are not
2 just feelings poured into a pre-dimensional space, but also suggestions of motion,
3 an insight that resonates with Böhme's (2000: 16) point that sound as atmosphere
4 acts through modifying space as it is experienced by the body. In other words, those
5 affected by sounds like those emerging from the procession do not just hear move-
6 ment, but their felt-bodies are also touched and immersed in a way suggesting or
7 driving toward analogous motion. Through sound, suggestions of motion work on
8 the felt-bodies of those witnessing the performance. These sonic movements are
9 a chief means of making the specific urban atmosphere of Dongri as a Shi'i neigh-
10 borhood perceivable as a socially shared experience, as a mode of intercorporeal-
11 ity (Csordas 2008). Atmospheres become shared and social through processes of
12 encorporation, which is how I translate Hermann Schmitz's (2014: 59) term *Einlei-*
13 *bung*. Especially in the case of sonic atmospheres acting out the same suggestions
14 of movement on a multitude of felt-bodies, the felt-bodies that encounter such an
15 atmosphere can temporarily become part of a larger collective entity in which the
16 boundaries between them become permeable, so that they constitute a supra-felt-
17 body or *we-Leib*. Atmospheres therefore are able to create a collective feeling of
18 being in and being part of a shared emotionally charged space.

19 But the sonic atmospheres generated in the procession also produce the shared
20 experiential Shi'i character of Dongri in a second, more specific way. The sounds
21 of breast-beating, flagellation, the slogans invoking members of the family of the
22 Prophet, along with the amplified recitation of devotional poetry, bring together
23 those familiar with the narrative of Karbala as a community of witnesses. In other
24 words, the shared emotional space that the process of atmospheric encorporation I
25 just mentioned creates, and that is atmospheric in its diffuse meaningfulness, is in
26 this second step further qualified as specifically Shi'i. Witnessing, in both Islamic
27 as well as Christian traditions, is intimately linked to martyrdom. This entangle-
28 ment of witnessing and martyrdom is to a large extent based on assumed inner con-
29 nections between pain, death, and truth that also provide the background to the
30 history of judicial uses of torture in Europe (Peters 2001: 711–15), while in Islamic
31 traditions, *shahid* refers to both martyr and witness. The restaging of events that
32 happened at Karbala during the procession, where sonic and visual reminders of
33 Karbala are thickly present, summons those receptive to the Karbala paradigm as
34 witnesses of the events, thus collectively tying them to the unfolding spectacle. As
35 John Durham Peters (2001: 708) has put it in his discussion of media and witnessing:
36 "to witness an event is to be responsible in some way to it." Witnessing and reliving
37 the mournful events of Karbala is the common theme of many ritual practices of
38 Shi'ism, and it features prominently among my interlocutors as signs of what they

referred to as a “good Shia.” Witnessing is an inherently social act and, elaborated as a religious performance, can be constitutive of community. Sonic atmospheres proceeding from the procession help to achieve a rapprochement of a collective of listeners—that is, those affected by the sonic events in the knowledge that the sounds of the events also affect others at the same time—with a Shi‘i community of pious witnesses of Karbala. It is through the body and sensations felt through it, such as sorrow and pain, that witnessing occurs: “The body is authenticity’s last refuge in situations of structural doubt” (Peters 2001: 717).

As sonic atmospheres affect the body through its suggestions of motion, they play a powerful role in positioning listeners in the role of witnesses. They thus reinforce the memory and narrative of Karbala by giving the impression of firsthand experience through their affection of bodies. They thereby affirm the moral truths the events have come to stand for among Shi‘is, and sometimes even non-Shi‘is, including also some non-Muslims. To a large extent this involves sounds coming from painful and mournful events and acts such as breast-beating, flagellation with sharp metal implements, and amplified, sorrowful poetry. In a very literal way, these sounds constitute an atmosphere, and therefore a feel of the events and the narrative of Karbala. As periodically recurring urban atmospheres, they contribute to giving the urban setting a specifically Shi‘i feel that is both diffuse as it is powerful. The hailing and summoning of listeners as witnesses through the sounds of the performance establishes a connection between the atmosphere of the urban locale and specifically Shi‘i narratives and moral stances.

Territorialization, Travel, and Sonic Movement

As much as the sonic movements discussed here contribute to Shi‘i belonging in the urban setting of Mumbai, they also have important translocal aspects that interact with other, more visual reminders of the battle of Karbala around whose memory the procession revolves. The commemorative processions contain elements of reenacting the events at Karbala, in a sense transporting the devotees to this sacred site in present-day Iraq. It is well known that the events of the battle of Karbala in 680 CE play a pivotal role in Shi‘i self-understanding and religious orientation. Scholars have referred to the “Karbala paradigm” (Fischer 1980; Korom 2002), centered on a narrative and images of resistance, just struggle, and sacrifice against overwhelming odds, as a template of Shi‘ism. Karbala in present-day Iraq, where the pivotal events took place and which is also the site of Hussain’s magnificent tomb, has long been a site of pilgrimage, as is Najaf, a city of Shi‘ite learning and the site of the tomb of Ali, Hussain’s father and son-in-law of the Prophet. Karbala is literally holy ground

1 for Shi'i Muslims. Karbala and other places of pilgrimage and associated centers of
2 Islamic learning such as Damascus in Syria, and Qum and Mashhad in Iran, have
3 long featured as places of longing and favored destinations of pilgrimage in Shi'i
4 imaginations; material objects from these sites and the experience of being present
5 there evoke deep emotions and feelings of attachment.

6 But Shi'i Muslims do not just link themselves to Middle Eastern sacred sites in
7 memory of the family of the Prophet; they also perpetuate a tradition of attachment
8 to India as a holy land. For example, among Shi'i Muslims in Mumbai there are
9 discourses of aligning Imam Hussain's example at Karbala with Gandhi's freedom
10 struggle in India (see Hyder 2006), suggesting that the latter was directly inspired
11 by the former. In 2007 a religious advertising campaign by the Mumbai Twelver
12 Shi'i media center World Islamic Network (WIN), announced under the name
13 "Muharram Awareness Campaign" in the sacred month of Muharram, prominently
14 showcased an alleged quote by Gandhi, "If India ever desires to be a great nation,
15 it should follow the example of Imam Hussain." Also, longstanding discourses cir-
16 culate among Shi'i Muslims according to which Hussain intended to go and settle
17 in India, emphasizing the great respect accorded to India as a site of learning and
18 wisdom in Islamic traditions and sayings of members of the family of the Prophet
19 (Eisenlohr 2015a: 699–701).

20 In the specific Shi'i ritual context I have described, sonically enacted movements
21 affect listeners in such a way that both the making of an urban neighborhood as dis-
22 tinctly Shi'i as well as forms of transoceanic belonging are strengthened in deeply
23 emotional ways. Here, the surrogate character of the procession as a pilgrimage is
24 centrally important. The ability to recognize and locate such sounds, an acoustemo-
25 logic in Feld's sense, are not only an important means of navigating the city in
26 its great diversity, because such sounds also contains specific pointers to locations
27 beyond its boundaries. In the ritual setting, the sounds evoking the tragedy of Kar-
28 bala evoke not just profound sorrow and grieving, reinforcing a Shi'i claim on a part
29 of Mumbai, but also momentarily transport attuned listeners to a witness position
30 in a distant location in nondiscursive ways, going beyond the narrative construction
31 of Shi'i tradition. The performative establishment of links to places in other parts of
32 the world, far beyond the city's boundaries, does not contradict the efforts of acous-
33 tic territorialization that support a Shi'i belonging in Mumbai. On the contrary, the
34 evocation of Karbala and other places in present-day Iraq, Iran, and Syria reinforces
35 such a project, as "acoustic territories should not be exclusively read as places or sites
36 but more as *itineraries*, as points of departure as well as arrival" (Labelle 2010: xxv).
37 The notion of territorialization as travel, including its sonic dimensions, plays a
38 crucial role in positioning those present at the procession as witnesses of the events

at Karbala, thereby supporting a specifically Shi'i historical memory. It also speaks to the position of Twelver Shi'i Muslims as people whose lives are organized around intersections of various forms of mobility, as a prime example of the social processes and organizations that have been discussed in the recent literature on a "mobilities paradigm" (Adey 2010; Sheller and Urry 2006; Urry 2007). My point is that these mobilities do not just comprise actual migration within India, as the great majority of Twelver Shi'i Muslims in Mumbai are migrants or the descendants of migrants from North India who continue to maintain close links to their places of ancestral origin they often refer to as *vatan* (homeland) (Eisenlohr 2015c). Associations (*anjuman*) of those sharing a *vatan* elsewhere in India play a major role in organizing Muharram ritual in Mumbai, including the commemorative processions. Nor are these mobilities limited to circuits of labor migration to countries of the Persian Gulf, that Shi'is are engaged in along with other Muslims in Mumbai (Hansen 2001). They also go beyond actual pilgrimages to the sacred sites of Twelver Shi'ism in Iraq and Iran. Muharram processions in Mumbai do not just build on and point to all these forms of mobility and fold them together with movement of bodies and ritual objects through urban streets; they also interweave them with the somatically felt motion of the procession's sounds. That is, they enact a large complex of interlaced motion on a cline stretching from transnational migration and pilgrimage, migration, and travel within India, via recurring forms of travel through an urban setting, to the atmospheric suggestions of motion that the sonic aspects of ritual processions enact on felt-bodies.⁷ These atmospheric suggestions of motion provide somatic evidence for both far-flung connections and the making of urban places as "Shia," thereby undergirding claims of belonging to the city.

In this way, religious networks and traditions play a key role in sustaining a sense of attachment across the Indian Ocean, with both India and particular religions and sites in the Middle East as foci of belonging and emotionally charged affiliation, highlighting the sensory and material dimensions of belonging that constitute "emotional geographies" (Anderson and Smith 2001). Certainly, long traditions of narration provide a key foundation for translocal Shi'i attachments to holy lands and places in India and beyond, resulting in transoceanic forms of belonging. However, especially in pilgrimage and commemorative rituals, such attachments

7. This resonates with Tim Cresswell's (2006: 123–45) call for an integrated account of human mobilities ranging from long-distance migration, transport infrastructures, to the politics of bodily mobility, which in his research also involve the regimentation and policing of dance steps traveling across the Atlantic. "My aim, then, is to provide a way of thinking that traces some of the processes that run through the different accounts of human mobility at different scales, and ties them into a single logic without negating the very important differences between them" (7).

also emerge as the result of exposure to material sites and environments that affect pious Shi'i Muslims in bodily ways that involve, but cannot be reduced to, the workings of discourse. Sonic atmospheres can be a chief mode for the creation of such attachments.

Conclusion

In this essay I have tried to make a case for the centrality of sonic atmospheres in the constitution of cultural citizenship. Trying to show how sonic practices and performances help to produce the feel of a Mumbai neighborhood as belonging to Twelver Shi'is, I have highlighted the somatic dimensions of belonging to certain places. If cultural citizenship "refers to the right to be different . . . with respect to the dominant national community, without compromising one's right to belong" (Rosaldo 1994: 57), the articulation of such claims does not merely involve atmospheric and felt aspects. Atmospheres, including sonic atmospheres, can be of critical importance in contexts where the conventional boundaries of citizenship discourse and powerful counterclaims over contested urban space make the successful articulation of such rights for inclusion and belonging highly challenging. At the same time, Mumbai Twelver Shi'i place-bound belonging is intertwined and produced by an array of mobilities including migration, pilgrimage, and ritual processions that also include sonic movement. The sonic is a privileged avenue for investigating such nondiscursive and bodily felt aspects of citizenship and belonging because of its intimate relationship with felt-bodies. In exerting collectively felt suggestions of motion, sonic events and performances produce feelings, thereby bringing about an atmospheric, prediscursive sense of place. The sonic dimensions of a regularly recurring religious procession are a vital component of such making of place, interacting with other kinds of mobility. Their bodily felt character invests such place-bound belonging with an air of facticity, foregrounding nondiscursive, somatic evidence for claims of citizenship with far-reaching consequences.

Patrick Eisenlohr is Professor of Anthropology with a chair in Society and Culture in Modern India at the Centre for Modern Indian Studies at the University of Göttingen. His latest book is *Sounding Islam: Voice, Media, and Sonic Atmospheres in an Indian Ocean World* (2018). His work examines the relationships between religion, language, and media, the sonic dimensions of religion, as well as the links between media practices and citizenship.

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