The Religious Soundmap Project: Mapping the Midwest’s religious diversity through sound

About the Project
The Religious Soundmap Project uses audio recording and digital mapping technology to study the religious diversity of American cities. Student researchers will produce audio recordings of religious practices across a wide range of local sites. These recordings will be integrated, along with interviews, visual images, and explanatory texts, onto a publicly accessible online mapping platform, which will provide a valuable research tool and pedagogical resource for specialists and non-specialists alike. As part of a pilot grant awarded by Humanities Without Walls, during this past summer semester, I attended several religious services in the Lansing area to audio record them for integration into a test run of the mapping software that will be used if the full grant is approved in Fall 2014.

Materials and Methods
- TASCOM DR-100 MKII Recorder
- Adobe Audition

The nature of this research required very little in the way of materials, just a high-quality audio recorder, all of its accoutrements, and audio editing software for post-recording editing.

Prior to attending a service, I contacted the leader(s) of the institution, explaining the research project, the goal of the larger project, and asked if they would allow me to attend the service I was inquiring about to audio record it. I would then arrive on the day of the service, usually accompanied by at least one other faculty researcher and coordinate with my prior contact so that the congregation knew what to expect from me. Following each service, I spent time going through the captured audio to make a brief one minute clip that adequately captured the service. These clips were then placed on the mapping platform to form the basis for the full grant.

For the work done under this pilot grant, we were IRB-certified, however we were not allowed any visual data (video recordings, photos, etc.) and we could not record the isolated voice of anyone under the age of 18.

Throughout the summer, I attended a Buddhist all-day chanting retreat, a Korean Presbyterian Service, a Nepali service infused with Hindu cultural elements, an Islamic Friday morning prayer service, and a Hindu Havam (Fire) Puja. One of our faculty researchers, Dr. David Stowe, also went to record a Sacred Harp choral singing session which I then edited.

Results and Conclusions
By the end of the summer, we had visited six different religious services and I produced six one-minute clips simultaneously capturing the essence, variety, and purpose of the service. These clips were uploaded and geospatially archived using a beta version of our mapping platform and used as a model for the full Mellon Foundation grant proposal. The data collection methods I was testing proved to be quite effective and easy to follow for future student researchers. They can be easily implemented as a group project for Religious Studies classes. I will act as a peer mentor for REL 220: Religion in America next Spring to facilitate the first round of student data collection.

The Future of the Religious Soundmap Project
If we are awarded the larger grant from the Mellon Foundation, the Religious Soundmap Project will move fully into development with the work conducted this past summer serving as a template for future data collection efforts. At both Michigan State University (by Dr. Amy DeRogatis) and at the Ohio State University (by Dr. Isaac Weiner), data collection will be achieved through undergraduate students enrolled in introductory religious studies courses who, working in groups led by an experienced undergraduate researcher, will contact local religious centers, record a service, and condense it into a short clip as part of the course requirements. Not only will this serve as a rewarding experience for the students, but it will also facilitate the expansion of an ever-growing soundmap of the religious Midwest.

Acknowledgments
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- Amitabha Village Retreat Center (Perry, MI)
- Islamic Center of East Lansing (East Lansing, MI)
- Bharatiya Temple (Haslett, MI)
- Korean Presbyterian Church of East Lansing (East Lansing, MI)
- Central Free Methodist Church, Nepal Fellowship (Lansing, MI)
- FaSoLa Michigan (Kalamazoo, MI)

Contact Info
Summer fieldwork was made possible by a pilot grant awarded by Humanities Without Walls.

Beta site: http://sites.cal.msu.edu/soundmap/

Contacts
Joshua T Schnell
Antropology and Religious Studies
Dr. Amy DeRogatis
Professor of Religious Studies
schne111@msu.edu
derogat1@msu.edu
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