

To: Center for Teaching and Learning Steering Committee
From: Jason Pribilsky, Department of Anthropology
Date: 29 January 2020
RE: Pedagogical Inquiry Grant to overhaul Soundscapes course

Project Overview

In 2008, Professor Rogers Miles and I taught a 300-level special topics course titled “Spiritual Soundscapes.” The new agey title aside, the course promised to be “a thoughtful consideration of the multiple roles of aurality in the shaping of religious practice and meaning,” as we described on the syllabus. We accomplished this goal by combining a traditional reading seminar – exploring various studies in the anthropology of sound (and ethnomusicology) and religious studies approaches to the role of sound and music in spiritual experience – with a hands-on workshop. In the workshop component of the class, students carried out field projects with different communities of faith around the region (from a Greek Orthodox church with a strong emphasis placed on bells and their crafting to music therapy at Tri-Cities Kadlec Hospital to a Buddhist meditation group with specific breathing practices). During their fieldwork, students were trained to pay attention to the sonic dimensions of spiritual practice. In addition to interviews and participant observation, students learned to make high-quality field recordings of their chosen community’s aural ecology and to evaluate the multiple meanings and functions sound plays in religious and spiritual experience. Project-wise, students penned research papers about their “spiritual soundscapes” that included hyperlinked audio clips. At the end of the course, they developed short 5-10 minute podcasts distilled from their research papers and pitched to non-scholarly audiences. To facilitate the workshop component, we hired Whitman alum and local videographer Sarah Koenigsberg. Sarah was our main tech, walking us through recording techniques, the capture of sounds, and editing. She also aided with the process of storyboarding podcasts and developing narrative.

I am applying for a Pedagogical Inquiry Grant in order to reprise this course (alone in Spring or Fall 2021) and to revamp its teaching in two main regards: 1) a greater emphasis on the practice and experience of listening; and 2) being able to personally work more closely with students in their recording and editing practice. Below, I elaborate on these goals using the questions from call for proposals as prompts.

What is it about your students' performance that you would like to improve and why?

Regarding listening, my main goal is to incorporate into the class a greater emphasis on “how” to listen, explorations of the factors that shape listening within cultural fields (what sound studies scholar Brandon Labelle calls “social acoustics”) and the various issues related to the politics of listening (e.g., who gets to listen). In the 2008 class, students were given a few focused listening activities, usually in conjunction with particular readings and during a couple of orchestrated soundwalks and fieldtrips. In the next iteration, I hope to bring in a more intentional listening practice and more focused discussions (and readings) on listening. Thankfully, the entire field of sound studies has grown considerably since we taught “Spiritual

Soundscapes." A portion of my activities for this grant will to be devoted to reading widely about listening practices and "social acoustics." I will also spend some time hunting down specific listening assignments borrowed from the many available sound studies syllabi that are on the internet.

The second goal – to double down on my own recording and editing skills so as to not have to rely solely on an outside tech for the future iteration of the class – will help me translate for students the tasks of capturing sounds, logging, and editing from the realm of "skills" to ones of intellectual and representational choices. Ultimately, I want students to be able to see ways that editing is a form of representation. I'll need to have these skills developed in order to really make this point. In general, per the call for proposal's prompt, I am motivated to "go beyond the "what" of content to the "how.""

I propose to deepen my sound skills by attending two workshops at the Jack Straw Cultural Center in Seattle over the course of a single weekend in late February. (One workshop focuses on recording techniques; the other addresses editing sound files using the common platform Audacity. See course descriptions at the end of this proposal.) In addition to the training, I will also spend time this spring and summer to further develop two of my own sound projects that I hope to make into modules for teaching. The first, conducted this past summer in a slum settlement in Lima, Peru experiencing intense water shortage, explores climate change adaptation through a sonic register. Titled "What Does Water Scarcity Sound Like?", the project inverts the usual auditory association made with water (of abundance – cascading waterfall, gurgling brooks, rushing rivers, etc.) to explore a different set of sounds: filling cisterns, rain capture, transferring water from water trucks to buckets and barrels, to strategies of washing with minimal water. The second project was the result of attendance at a hands-on workshop called Anthropocene Campus Parallax in Lisbon, Portugal earlier this month. With a group of other scholars and sound artists, we produced a preliminary soundwalk in Lisbon pitched to the sonic ecology of tourism in the city.

Thinking about what you hope to see improved a year after your project has ended, describe what you envision will have changed about students' performance in your course.

In general, I hope that these additions will make this course a bit more seamless between the seminar side and workshop side of things. Student performance also will be enhanced if they understand:

- a. That listening is not a passive exercise and that one can develop skills to be a stronger and discerning listener;
- b. That listening is not an ahistorical skill but a constructed act (in different societies) with distinct histories and politics; and
- c. That the methods and practices of digital recording and editing are related to making arguments and forms of representation.

What resources on teaching and learning might guide your work? Please include several titles you might include as a point of departure.

Obviously, the main resource for this project is the set of two workshops that I would like to attend in Seattle. There are also a number of syllabi (from sound studies and cognate fields) that I have identified that I will consult. In some instances, I will contact the authors to solicit listening assignment ideas. And finally, some newish books: *Remapping Sound Studies* (edited volume); LaBelle, *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance*; *Sonic Thinking: A Media Philosophical Approach*.

Proposal Budget

Faculty Stipend	\$1500
Workshop TOTAL	\$956.25
<i>Workshop budget breakdown:</i>	
Workshop registration	\$255.00
Travel: roundtrip Portland-Seattle: (57.5 cents x 350 miles)	\$201.25
Meals	\$150.00
Lodging: 2 nights (@ \$150.00+ tax) near Jack Straw Center	\$350.00
PROPOSAL TOTAL	\$2,456.25

Description of courses offered at the Jack Straw Cultural Center (<http://www.jackstraw.org/>)

[Intro to Digital Audio Editing](#)

Thursday, February 20, 6-10pm

\$70 member; \$95 non-member (Limit 6)

Learn the basic skills of recording and editing sound with audio editing software. We'll learn two different programs, Audacity and GarageBand, and see the advantages and disadvantages of each.

[Basic Field Recording](#)

Saturday, February 22, 9am-5pm

\$135 member; \$160 non-member; \$80 visually impaired (Limit 6).

Learn techniques for high quality field recording of music, ambience, sound effects, and voice with portable equipment.