

# Giving it a good listen

Amy DeRogatis and Isaac Weiner:  
Creating a digital soundmap  
of religion in the Midwest



**Amy DeRogatis**, associate professor in the MSU Department of Religious Studies, and **Isaac Weiner**, assistant professor of comparative studies at The Ohio State University, are using a \$30,000 Humanities Without Walls Consortium\* grant for their Religious Soundmap Project of the Global Midwest to create a digital sound map of religion in Midwestern cities. The project team includes faculty and students from MSU and OSU in the areas of religious studies, digital humanities, American studies, ethnomusicology and multimedia graphic design.

For the 18-month project, teams are collecting, mapping, and creating a website for audio recordings of sounds that are connected in some way to religion and/or spirituality. Interviews, visual images, and textual explanations are being integrated with the recordings onto a publicly accessible online mapping platform that will also function as a valuable research tool and pedagogical resource.

Lead undergraduate researcher and senior MSU religious studies and anthropology double major Josh Schnell says, "Many religious studies students have had minimal exposure to the digital humanities. This project offers the chance to gain valuable hands-on experience. I strongly support using new technologies and incorporating them into research, and the soundmap project provides excellent practice."

DeRogatis says that, initially, the project will only include sounds from Michigan and Ohio, but she hopes other Midwestern institutions will add recordings to it as well.

Weiner agrees, saying, "Until now, most research has focused on religious diversity in coastal cities and emphasized doctrines, practices and institutions. So the project is filling a void in the study of Midwestern religions while also inviting new ways of thinking about religion.

"I published a book last year (2014) titled *Religion Out Loud*. It's a study of religious pluralism in America, told through disputes about public sound and public noise. So, things like the Islamic call to prayer and church bells. For me, the soundmap project is a logical extension."

DeRogatis and Weiner say that, given the diversity inherent in religious pluralism, the project team's definition of religious sound is also wide-ranging. It includes most any sound that can provide spiritual context or value, from a high school graduation, tolling church bells, or a call to prayer, to the sounds of a Jewish Seder, a Catholic Mass, or the crowd and other sounds of a baseball or football game.

"The public-facing component, the website, will enable users not only to listen to sounds, but combine and use sounds for their own study or research," DeRogatis says. "The religious soundmap will be of interest to multiple audiences, including scholars, teachers, students, writers, artists, theologians, historians and community activists." DeRogatis and Weiner hope it will serve as a portal connecting other digital projects on Midwestern diversity as well as religious sound mapping projects in other regions.

In addition to creating a searchable map, the team will archive its recordings at OSU's library. After the map launches next spring, there will be museum installations and traveling exhibitions. Listeners will be able to upload their own recordings as well, and the researchers eventually hope to develop a smartphone app and a teaching template for professors and K-12 educators.

DeRogatis and Weiner note that research shows the Midwest is becoming more religiously diverse, and as that occurs, new sounds can shape communities.

"We're aware of how the Midwest's diversification has been and continues to be shaped by various structural forces such as the economy, political landscapes, shifting industries, race relations and more," DeRogatis says. "By helping to understand how certain religious practices actually come to be audible, we believe we can provide a powerful interpretive tool to explore the complicated dynamics and effects of globalization locally."

By paying attention to sound, DeRogatis, Weiner, Schnell and the rest of their teams hope to investigate what constitutes religious practices, specifically as religion in everyday lives.

Says DeRogatis, "Sound invites more expansive thought about where religion happens, and spurs us to move beyond traditional religious institutions. My hope is that when people listen to the sound map archives, they will hear and respond to the religious diversity of their own communities."

For more on the Religious Soundmap Project, visit: <http://sites.cal.msu.edu/soundmap/>

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