Awash in Sound:
Sound Meditation and Healing Discourse in the Northeastern United States

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Abstract

Sound meditation, a form of holistic healing, has grown in popularity over the past decade yet. Yet, the field remains understudied with this research being the first of its kind. This thesis intends to serve as a starting point for academic inquiry into the practice of sound healing. It focuses on how past alternative spiritual and social movements inform the contemporary culture practice of sound meditation and positions its practice and therapeutic use within debates about healing in the field of psychology. This thesis begins by tracing the history of sound meditation back to spiritual movements of the late 19th century and the New Age movement of the 1960s and 70s. Then, I describe the experience of a sound meditation, providing observations and analysis. Finally, I exam healing discourse, taking a critical approach to Western conceptions of health and medicine. I position sound meditation in this discourse and consider it within a psychoanalytic framework. My work is informed by ethnographic fieldwork conducted between September 2017 and May 2018 in New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. Data collected includes descriptive field notes from I attended sound meditations and took fieldnotes describing my experiences. To further support my arguments, I conducted interviews with both practitioners and participants in sound meditations.

Keywords: sound healing, sound meditation, spirituality, holistic health, psychology, psychoanalysis
Chapter 1: Introduction

Sound healing is a form of holistic healing which grew out of the New Age movement of the 1960s. This project is an examination of sound healing, its history, and the social movements surrounding it. Close examination of this topic reveals an eclectic language and view of health, though beneath its discourse is a dearth of information. There are personal accounts of sound healing and some news stories which discuss its observed effects, but there has been little academic research to date. My purpose in this project is to better understand sound healing and its history, to explore the topic using a psychoanalytic and ethnographic analysis, and to establish a basis for discussion in academia about sound healing.

Entry Point

My first experience with sound healing was a gong bath I attended in Woodstock, New York. I was unfamiliar with sound healing at the time, so I had few expectations going in. During the gong bath, I had an experience of losing myself, similar to what others have described as travelling or being transported elsewhere. I was transported into nothingness, the void. I felt awake and conscious, but unable to orient myself in time or space. I was unsure how much time had passed and, for a fleeting moment, forgot where I was. I regained awareness by the conclusion of the gong bath, but I still remembered the feeling vividly, as though it had been packaged away within me rather than disappearing.

Intrigued, I began to read other accounts of experiences during sound baths, in the hope to find something similar to my own. In the course of this, I found message boards and forums that recounted a variety of experiences: some of these were similar to mine, and others were
significantly different; some were steeped in vivid imagery, and several claimed that sound meditation had healed an illness.

There was a notable lack of salient academic literature. When I realized this was a largely untouched topic, I felt compelled to begin breaking ground on the subject: who does sound healing? Why do they do it? In what manner is it “healing” and how do sounders and participants understand it to be? Both the experience of and the culture surrounding sound healing interested me. The connections to my fields of study, music therapy and ethnomusicology, were obvious to me: sound healing uses sounds in an analogous way that music therapy uses music; Both have therapeutic aims, both seek to make whole a participant’s wellbeing. And the sound healing movement claims to draw from various cultures and traditions and has fashioned a discourse around healing that warrants examination.

Core Elements of Sound Meditation

Sound meditation is a form of holistic healing, so its purported effects are scientifically unproven or unprovable. According to travel writer Stephanie Rosenbloom, sound healing (also known as vibrational medicine) employs vibrations of the human voice and resonant instruments, such as singing bowls and gongs to heal (Rosenbloom, 2005). Sound healers, also called “sounders,” regard sound as a medium through which to heal the human body, mind, and spirit. In a sound healing session, a client meets with a sounder to discuss what they want to work on. The sounder then decides how to carry out the session. For example, if a client reports that they have back pain, a sounder may place metal singing bowls, a resonating bowl-shaped instrument commonly used in sound meditations, on their back and play them using a baton.
Sound meditations, sometimes called sound baths, are group sound healing sessions. In sound meditations, participants lie on yoga mats, sit in chairs, or choose a position that is most comfortable for them. Though mostly hosted by yoga centers, sound meditations also take place in cathedrals\(^1\) and community centers.\(^2\) Sounders play instruments culled from various music cultures including singing bowls, gongs, and didgeridoos. Sound healers, participants, and some researchers consider the specific sounds that these instruments create to be healing, or otherwise aid in healing, though mechanical explanations for these phenomena vary. This study focuses solely on sound meditations.

**Theoretical Underpinnings/Literature Review**

There is very little academic research on sound healing. In particular, studies that consider the contemporary field in relation to past religious movements are almost absent from any social, historical, or ethnographic literature. Existing research includes theoretical approaches to the instruments used in sound baths as well as discussions of the context and purpose of each instrument within sound healing. Other researchers have approached the conceptualization of “healing” within the topic, though there is a split between those researchers who take a scientific approach and those who take a psychoanalytic approach, which many don’t consider to be scientific. The former, more often scientific researchers, have contributed to a scant but growing body of scientific research focusing on the effects of sound healing on the brain and body. The latter, more often music therapists, have begun to piece together a psychoanalytic frame as to how sound can facilitate healing through the unconscious. There is

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\(^1\) Grace Cathedral, [https://www.gracecathedral.org/events/the-sound-healing-symphony-3/](https://www.gracecathedral.org/events/the-sound-healing-symphony-3/); accessed April 25, 2018

also literature from the 1990s examining the theoretical underpinnings of sound healing and outlining the use of music and sound for healing.

Sound Healing History

In tracing the history of sound healing, I draw on the work of Lisa Summer and Joseph Summer. Lisa Summer, a music therapist, and Joseph Summer, an opera composer, consider sound healing to have begun with the New Age movement of the 1960s and 70s. In *Music: The New Age Elixir*, Summer and Summer (1996) draw connections between sound healing and Theosophy, a spiritual movement that began in 1875 and drew on Eastern philosophy. The authors critique both movements, locating sound healing in relation to Madame Blavatsky, the founder of Theosophy, citing her as a fraud (Summer and Summer 1996: 18). My research traces sound healing back further: while it certainly developed during the New Age movement of the 1960s, it appears to have begun as a germ in the New Thought movement, a spiritual philosophy that emphasized positive thinking to shape reality.

I focus on the concept of shaping reality by changing thought processes espoused by New Thought, a movement that began at least five years earlier than Theosophy. Historian Molly McClain (2017) lays out the philosophy of the New Thought movement (82). The concept of being able to shape one’s own reality proved influential for New Agers and holistic healers, including sound healers. While the Theosophists played a major role in the formation of sound healing philosophy, New Thought marked its beginnings.
Biological, Psychological, and Spiritual Healing

I delineate three forms of healing: biological, psychological, and spiritual. In doing so, I am taking the historical and social constructionist approach of psychologist Philip Cushman. In his book, *Constructing the Self, Constructing America*, Cushman (1995) posits that the Enlightenment philosopher Renee Descartes formulated “two distinct and separate worlds,” (also referred to as the “mind-body split”) referring to the material world and the immaterial, or spiritual, world (30-31). This splitting of the material and immaterial forms the basis for modern conceptions of science and religion. Science studies the material while religion contemplates the immaterial. Establishing psychological healing as a separate entity, I argue it exists as a middle-ground, possibly a mediator, between the material and immaterial.

Although the psychological may be considered separate from the biological and spiritual, historically it has been intertwined with both. Cushman provides a historical understanding of psychology reflecting this fact in *History of Psychotherapy: A Century of Change*. Cushman (1995) explains that the first distinct form of psychotherapy was mesmerism (30), a practice that was influential to the development of New Thought and Christian Science. Although mesmerism was a secular movement, its practitioners used religious texts, gave spiritual advice, and emphasized a spiritualism that was separate from the religious movements of the time. This early form of psychotherapy fell in the spiritual realm, yet it was considered a scientific field (Cushman 1995: 31). Although contemporary psychology is far removed from mesmerism, it still deals with the immaterial: Mind, self, and the unconscious are studied and considered by contemporary psychologists yet cannot be located biologically. With the advent of neuroscience, psychologists have begun to consider the biological - the material - as intimately connected with these immaterial concepts, helping psychology bridge the gap between these two poles.
Music, Trauma, and the Unconscious

Expanding on psychological healing in the context of sound healing, I take a psychoanalytic approach, specifically considering the unconscious and its relation to trauma. Here, I use the term “trauma” to refer to repressed, unconscious material as understood by Sigmund Freud (1914) in “Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through.” In this essay, Freud refers to the process of repression: “shutting out” past experiences (392). Experiences are repressed and acted out instead of being remembered because of the trauma (Freud 1914: 394).

While considering the relationship of music to the unconscious, I utilize the theory of psychoanalyst Theodor Reik. Psychologist Kyle Arnold explains Reik’s views on music and the unconscious in his 2007 article, “The Creative Unconscious, The Unknown Self, and the Haunting Melody: Notes on Reik’s Theory of Inspiration.” According to Arnold, Reik saw the unconscious as a creative force, containing repressed material that is later expressed through creative impulses (Arnold 2007: 433). Reik situates music as a creation of the unconscious which allows repressed material to come out in the form of melody. In 1953, Reik developed his theory of the haunting melody, in which he posited that “earworms,” a melody that is lodged in one’s head, can reveal unconscious material (Arnold 2007: 438). Reik’s consideration of music in the context of analysis marked a split with Freud, who largely avoided analysis of the arts.

Following Reik, psychologists were interested in synthesizing psychoanalytic theory and music. In 1975, music therapist Mary Priestley developed a form of therapy called Analytical Music Therapy (AMT). AMT incorporated improvised music playing into analytic practice: patients select a title for their improvisation, improvise with their therapist, then discuss images and associations that arose while playing (Priestley 1980: 11). Music, taking the place of language, serves as the primary conduit for unconscious material in AMT. This practice informs
my thinking on accessing the unconscious through music, and on how music and imagery can be used to work through repressed experiences.

Methodology & Positionality

The research presented in this Division III is interdisciplinary, intersecting ethnomusicology, psychology, and some exploration of physics (soundwaves). This leaves two sets of methodologies to choose from: qualitative methods commonly used in social science (e.g. interviews, participant observation, oral histories, etc.), or quantitative methods commonly used in natural science (e.g. controlled experimentation, multiple choice surveys, questionnaires, etc.). Each methodology is value-laden, containing assumptions about the human experience to make it more accessible to research. In choosing a methodology, I also choose a value system to fit my project. Were I to choose scientific measures, I would be monitoring heart rates, pulses, and examining brain scans. I could also gather subjective measures, asking how participants feel before a sound meditation and after, but my focus would be on empirical data from self-report. This methodological approach and the data generated from it would focus my project on the material body - reality as understood by Western science. This methodology would be insufficient to address the immaterial focus of my questions going into this project.

I am interested in the subjective experience and belief systems of those involved in sound meditation. For this reason, I utilize an ethnographic approach: interviews, fieldnotes, and participant observation. Using these methods, I capture the experience of a sound bath: what is a sound bath? What happens at a sound bath? Who participates? How does one participate? In understanding this experience from my own perspective and the perspectives of my participants, I construct a sound bath for the reader. Similarly, I use these methods for inquiry into healing
discourse: what is healing to a sounder? To a participant? What does it mean to heal or to be healed? How does this fit into the larger narrative of healing in psychology? In psychoanalysis? In the sound healing movement? In learning about and inquiring into healing narratives, I contextualize sound meditation in a larger discourse of healing.

In doing so, however, I have to be aware that I am inherently taking something away from the experiences of others. By contextualizing sound healing in what I deem important, I use data to serve a certain narrative of the movement. Though interpreting raw data is necessary for constructing an argument in academic work, it is important to note that reported experience only represents lived experience. Even in putting an experience into words something is lost: Language is an attempt to express the ineffable as mental processes render pieces of experience missing. Every methodology falls short of accurately capturing the uniqueness of individual subjective experience. So, I am left with a methodology that can only capture a piece of each. What I can construct is a fragmented sound healing - an interpretation of an interpretation of something ineffable.

I conducted fieldwork at a variety of venues that specialize in sound meditations, including the Conduit Center in Hartford, Connecticut; Green River Yoga & Movement in Greenfield, Massachusetts; and Sapphire Holistic Center in Bradley Beach, New Jersey. From September 2017 to May 2018, I attended sound meditations at each of these locations, observing meditations and taking fieldnotes on structure, participants’ actions, sounders’ actions, and my own experience throughout. I also interviewed sound healers and participants about their experiences. I asked about them as individuals, how they got involved with sound healing, and if/how it has been healing for them. Although I went into each interview with a prepared set of questions, I allowed conversations to deviate from my list and flow more naturally. This allowed
me to delve into the language my participants were using and learn more about what they consider important in the field. Immersing myself in the culture of sound healing, I came to understand the worldviews of many sound healers and longtime sound meditators.

**Researcher’s Assumptions**

All research requires navigating existing social structures and power dynamics, especially those that I and my participants belong to and interact with. The selection of research participants also limits the scope of my study: Class, race, gender identity, ability, and other structural groupings are largely unexplored, which affects both the context of experiences recorded and my relationship with my own observations. However, I can note that sound healing is borne from a significantly white movement in the United States. All of the sounders I interviewed are white cis-men and, excluding one, are from the United States. Similarly, all but one of the interviewed meditators are white.

I rely on individuals to explain sound healing to me. Yet, these explanations are also interpretations. Sound healers believe their work to be ancient tradition. Sounder Jeff Nickell calls sound healing an “ancient technology” (Nickell, interview, 11/30/17). The belief that this work is part of a long lineage of healing from indigenous cultures around the world influences how sounders talk about their work. They are not necessarily just providing their views about sound healing, but a set of prescribed beliefs embedded in contemporary sound healing culture in the United States. Sounders interpret what they see as an ancient belief system rather than explaining their own beliefs about sound healing.

My questions do not necessarily reflect this either. In asking if people feel they have been healed by sound healing, I make certain assumptions about healing: that we have all agreed on a
definition of healing. Yet, as my analysis reflects, definitions of healing differ depending on belief system. When asking about healing, I am looking for answers that express experiences of biological and psychological healing: Did sound healing alleviate pain? Did it help with depression? Did it make you feel tired? This understanding of healing is shaped by inscribed Western values that determine that these are the only two legitimate forms of healing. As my interviews demonstrate, I discounted other beliefs about healing and was surprised to hear accounts of spiritual healing - accounts that I never would have asked for had they not come up.

Other researcher bias occurred as a result of institutional expectations. Forming this project, I was uninterested in scientific studies demonstrating the potential effects of sound healing on the human brain and body. I had never considered including these studies in my research, except as a reference point to demonstrate the current popularity of the field. However, in searching for grant funding, these scientific studies became more of a priority. Consideration of scientific data was required to receive grant funding, so that data plays a larger role in my analysis than previously expected. This changed the nature of my research as I grappled with questions of putting ethnographic data next to scientific data, which is often considered a more legitimate form of data than so-called subjective data, a term used pejoratively and that implicitly questions the legitimacy of social science research.

**Organization of Division III**

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter One is an introduction and outline of the paper. Chapter Two is an examination of the history of sound meditation, drawing connections between current sound healing and spiritual movements of the 19th and 20th centuries. I trace its history from New Thought in the 1870s to the New Age one century later,
then through Fabien Maman and his 1981 sound/cellular experiments and his 2008 book *The Tao of Sound*, which lays out a theoretical framework for sound healing, and brings us to the modern sound healing movement.

Chapter Three provides a description and analysis of a sound bath. Using my observations and interviews with both sounders and meditators, I explore the qualitative aspect of sound meditation and attempt to create an abstracted experience to aid in communicating my analysis. I move chronologically through the process, using this as a frame to describe the instruments used in sound meditation and the historical context for each.

In Chapter Four, I position sound meditation in contemporary discourses of healing. I delineate three types of healing: biological (material), spiritual (immaterial), and psychological (both material and immaterial). I consider sound healing in relation to these three forms of healing and provide scientific data as well as a presentation of interviews to locate beliefs about sound healing in these three discourses.

Chapter Five reviews the core issues and poses additional questions unaddressed by my research. Chapter Five also considers what my work means in the context of a larger academic study of sound healing and suggests directions for future research based on my findings.
Chapter 2: History of Sound Healing in the United States

Sound healing in the United States has seen a growth in popularity in recent years. Yoga centers around the country have begun holding sound meditations. Marketed as an ancient healing method, these meditations incorporate instruments that can be traced to various Asian, African, Indigenous Australian, and Native American traditions. As a movement, however, sound healing is a recent phenomenon that is part of a lineage of spiritual healing movements beginning in the 1870s. This chapter will trace the history of those movements and their philosophies and will examine their contributions to contemporary sound healing.

Origin of Species

Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, published in 1859 in Britain, shocked Western religious and scientific communities with bold claims of nature’s indifference to life and humanity’s modest, indivine origins. The theory of evolution sundered a sober understanding of the material world and a romantic ideation of a Biblical God creating man from dust and woman from man: the gradual development of species, not a wholly new idea, was postulated to be incidental rather than designed, guided not by a god, but by the fitness of an organism to survive its surroundings. Observable and eminently plausible, the extension of this idea to humans was inevitable. According to historian Molly McClain (2017), the dissonance between the emerging scientific understanding of nature’s relationship to humanity, and the religious doctrine of man’s unique dominion over the world, led many to reject mainstream Christianity (80).
The Bible's supernatural explanations for human creation did not agree with the revelations of Darwin's research, and the realities of wars, famines, and other disasters complicated the notion that humans had any dominion over nature. However, religious conceptions were deeply rooted in society and scientific understanding was still limited. Theology did not wither to irreligiosity, but rather "alternative spirituality" arose to reconcile metaphysical beliefs with scientific discoveries (McClain 2017: 80). In the 1800s, three such movements emerged that would lay the groundwork for sound meditation: New Thought, Christian Science, and Theosophy.

New Thought

The first of these movements, New Thought, began in the late 1800s, arriving in the wake of the *Origin of Species*. Though undoubtedly influential to alternative spirituality, the exact magnitude and timing of New Thought’s popularity is contested. In 1934, historian Alfred Whitney Griswold wrote about the then popular New Thought movement, claiming it had not been formally organized until about 1890 (310). However, according to Molly McClain (2017), the New Thought movement was popularized in 1870 and continued growing into the twentieth century (82).

The substance of New Thought philosophy was based on the work of Phineas Quimby, a clock and watchmaker from Belfast, Maine. He was interested in the ability of the mind to affect the body. Eventually, he left his clock-making work to study mesmerism, an alternative medicine predicated on the belief that all living things contain an invisible force and that this force can be used for healing. While working as a mesmeric hypnotist, Quimby experimented on

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3 Named after German doctor Franz Mesmer.
an uneducated youth named Lucius Burkmar. Quimby toured with Burkmar, demonstrating mesmerism to large crowds and claiming he could cure ailments that medical doctors could not.

Quimby's study of mesmerism influenced his Christianity: He saw an analogy to God's relationship with man in the mind's connection to the body. For Quimby, the traditional Christian God was a being, separate from humanity, who continued to watch over His creation. Contrary to the personal conception of God in Christianity, Quimby claimed that God is an “impersonal universal mind or creative intelligence” that is present throughout the universe (Ibid.). Since God is everywhere and in everything, the metaphysical and spiritual are considered to both transcend and intersect material reality. Therefore, affirmations, meditation, and prayer are considered the most effective methods for changing or “shaping” an individual’s reality (Ibid.). Healing, in New Thought, can be done by changing thinking, thereby changing the spiritual reality.

Similarly, the concept of salvation had been carried over from Christianity, though its meaning was changed. Instead of occurring through devotion to God or atonement of sins, salvation in New Thought was achieved through the “realization of oneness with a universal spirit” (Ibid.). New Thought suggested that becoming part of the universal mind would be the ultimate salvation. There was also the implication that love was a major part of this universal mind. Abbey Perkins Cheney, wife of poet John Vance Cheney, taught New Thought classes that emphasized creative powers of the individual mind and domination of the self. She emphasized “becoming love” to be a more spiritually enlightened person (McClain 2017: 83). This emphasis on love and domination of the self was, perhaps, a response to the restrictive culture of the late 1800s and the fire and brimstone language of Christianity. Quimby’s work contributed to the growing alternative spirituality movement that brought these concepts into the mainstream in a specifically Western and Christian context.
Christian Science

Phineas Quimby’s influence on alternative spirituality was solidified by Mary Baker Eddy. Born in 1821 in Bow, New Hampshire, Eddy wrote for various newspapers and publications, worked as a substitute teacher in the New Hampshire Conference Seminary, and ran a kindergarten throughout the 1840s. After suffering from various illnesses, Eddy became a patient and student of Phineas Quimby in 1862. Quimby taught her how to cure ailments without medicine. For example, after being severely injured from slipping on ice, Eddy claimed to have cured herself by meditating on the experience and on stories of healing presented in the Bible. She became interested in the healing emphasis of early Christianity, leading to the publication of her book, *Science and Health*. This book, along with the Bible, would become a central text of Eddy’s newly developed religion, Christian Science.

Christian Science formally began in 1879 when Mary Baker Eddy founded the Church of Christ (Scientist) in Boston, Massachusetts. Church of Christ (Scientist) worship services are held on Sundays and based on readings from the Bible and Eddy’s *Science and Health*. There are also mid-week meetings where members of the church recount their experiences with healing, all based on Eddy’s experiences with Quimby and the philosophy of the religion.

Healing in Christian Science is similar to healing in New Thought, but with more emphasis on the Christian elements of spiritual-mental healing. According to Molly McClain (2017), Christian Science argues that the mental world is true reality and that physical world is just a product of our mental world (89). If ailments occur at the mental/spiritual level, then successful cures must be utilized at that level as well. These cures include changing negative thinking to spiritual thinking and changing life practices to align with God. This realigns the
individual at the spiritual level with the divine. When one is in harmony with God, physical and emotional ailments are cured because their underlying spiritual-mental cause is healed.

Quimby and Baker’s philosophies about healing would in turn influence New Age beliefs and holistic healing, which includes sound healing. Phineas Quimby and Mary Baker Eddy’s belief that ailments occur at a spiritual-mental level and can be healed by working there is echoed in the language of energy healing, utilized by sound healers. Healing through the mind, intention, and positive thinking are essential to the work of sound healers, as the individual is expected to focus on a physical or emotional ailment that they would like to heal.

Theosophy

Concurrent to Christian Science, the religious movement of Theosophy grew as a response to Western Christianity. In 1875, the Theosophical Society was founded in New York City. Its founders, Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, Henry Steel Olcott, and William Quan Judge sought to synthesize Eastern religious beliefs, Western Christianity, and modern science into a cohesive esoteric belief system. Musician and cultural historian Gary Lachman (2012) pinpoints the founding of the Theosophical Society as the “starting point of the ‘modern spiritual revival’” (ix). According to religious scholar Stephen Prothero (1993), one of the Theosophical Society’s three aims was to “promote the study of Aryan and other Eastern literature, religions and sciences, and vindicate its importance” (197–98). This aim to promote the “ancient wisdom,” as Lachman (2012) calls it (ix), of Eastern culture would later become a part of the

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4 Prothero’s argument is that the “three objects” or aims of Theosophy were established in 1879 after Helena Blavatsky and Henry Olcott travelled to India. These aims were not present in Theosophy’s early works.
work of sound healing. Of the three founders, Helena Blavatsky is the most well-known and influential.

Blavatsky was born in 1831 in Ekaterinoslav, Russia. She spent much of her life travelling and, in 1873 arrived in New York City. Beyond this, Madame Blavatsky’s life is not clearly documented: various authors and Blavatsky herself present contradictory or improbable accounts of her travels and experiences. However, of particular interest is Blavatsky’s claim that she went to Tibet. Blavatsky wrote of her frequent dreams of a Mahatma, named Master Morya. According to Lachman (2012), Blavatsky supposedly received word from Master Morya to come to Constantinople and proceed to Tibet in 1867 (52). While there, she met Master Morya’s colleague, Master Koot Hoomi, and the two Mahatmas together taught Blavatsky how to control her psychic powers. According to music therapist Lisa Summer and opera composer Joseph Summer (1996), Masters Morya and Koot Hoomi later dictated to Blavatsky two works that outlined her Theosophical beliefs: *Isis Unveiled* (1877)\(^5\) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) (18). Lachman (2012) notes that Tibet was highly inaccessible at the time and since there is no record of Blavatsky having been there, many of her critics doubt that she ever made it to Tibet (2). Even so, the story provided a mythology for followers of Theosophy to see their work as extensions of ancient Dharmatic traditions, and the two supposed Ascended Masters would appear in the works of composers, who were influential in the development of sound healing.

\(^5\) Summer and Summer (1996) incorrectly cite the publication year of *Isis Unveiled* as 1887 (18).
Composers Influenced by Theosophy

While typically associated with the occult and modern spirituality movements in the West, Helena Blavatsky’s influence also extended to some late 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} century composers. For example, English composer Cyril Scott was “profoundly affected” by Theosophy and Rudolf Steiner, an Austrian philosopher and educator, developed a philosophical system called anthroposophy, which Summer and Summer (1996) describe as a “theosophical offshoot” (21). Both of these Blavatsky acolytes contributed to the genesis of sound healing and would become important figures in its development.

Scott, as a composer and Theosophist, influenced later sound healers with his spiritually-inspired music. Scott claimed that healing could be experienced through the synthesis of sound and color but that the lighting of concert halls was not conducive to this process (Scott via Summer and Summer 1996: 25-26). According to Summer and Summer (1996), Scott also believed that his friend Nelsea Chaplin, a self-described clairvoyant, “channeled music for the theosophical spectre Master Koot Hoomi” and that “she was directly involved in healing through this music” (27). Scott and Chaplin utilized their Theosophical beliefs for supposed musical healing purposes. Putting their spirituality into practice to create a healing music laid the groundwork for sound healing as a practice. Chaplin’s channeling of Master Koot Hoomi is echoed in the work of some modern sound healers, who feel that they are intuitively channeling healing spirits as they play their instruments.

Meanwhile, Steiner’s influence on sound healing can be located in his theory of eurhythm, which developed from Anthroposophy. According to social anthropologist Andrew Spiegel and eurhythmist Silke Sponheuer (2008), eurhythm is a movement art that attempts to understand “the world that associates tones, pitch and other sound-related phenomena with both
cosmic processes and human soul experiences” (181). Eurythmists seek to embody sounds associated with cosmic processes and their “soul (mood) experiences” (Ibid.). Although sound healing does not necessarily involve bodily movement, the concept of connecting cosmic processes and soul/mood experiences to sound plays a role in how some sound healers conceive of their work.

Spiegel and Sponheuer (2008), explain that “[Steiner] sought to develop a science that might use the experiential human capacities of soul and spirit to comprehend the spiritual in all of nature and the cosmos (including the human being)” (180). Steiner’s beliefs influenced New Age thinking and what Summer and Summer (1996) refer to as “today’s ‘Steiner influenced’ music healers” (27).

New Age

New Thought, Christian Science, and Theosophy led to the establishment of another esoteric Western movement called the New Age movement. Historian Ted Ownby traces the term New Age to “1960s Britain, where groups dissatisfied with institutional religion” began to use the term to describe their wide range of spiritual practices and beliefs. In the United States, Baby Boomers adopted the term in the 1960s as they began to form their own spiritual philosophies by drawing on the beliefs of various religions. Ownby (2006) identifies Eastern, Western, African, and American Indian religions as sources for New Agers’ belief systems (104-105). According to Robert Choquette, the term itself refers to the astrological Age of Aquarius, which follows the Age of Pisces. Astrologers disagree on the exact date when Earth will enter the Age of Aquarius, so there is debate as to whether it is currently in Pisces or in Aquarius.

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6 Robert Choquette considers the American New Age movement to have begun in the 1970s, peaking in the 1980s.
Each of these astrological periods hold meaning for New Agers: the Age of Pisces is defined by industrialism and Christianity; while the Age of Aquarius will move the world in a “psychological, social, and spiritual direction” (Choquette 2004: 423). The power afforded to the cosmos in the New Age movement recalls Steiner’s belief that the individual is affected by cosmic processes.

Healing in the New Age

The New Age movement developed theories of healing similar to earlier alternative spiritualties. Many New Agers believe that illnesses are spiritual, or energy-based. Therefore, healing must be performed on the soul or energy system of the individual to cure ailments. Choquette (2004) summarizes New Age healing belief, explaining, New Age medicine teaches that spiritual and mystical energy regulates good health, the latter being a condition where one’s body, mind, and spirit are well-integrated and balanced” (426). Working from this belief, New Age healers apply holistic healing methods that include diets, homeopathy, hydropathy, acupuncture, acupressure, psychic healing, chiropractic healing, Christian Science, music/sound healing, etc. According to Choquette (2004), Zen, yoga, channeling, neo-shamanism, and Amerindian practices were popular “fads” in the New Age movement that were introduced during various decades (427). These healing methods utilized by New Agers are drawn from Eastern religions and belief systems. Although they may not claim the New Age label, sound healers draw on these New Age beliefs as they position themselves in the field of holistic healing. Sound healing may also be done in combination with other holistic healing, such as acupuncture.
New Age Music

The New Age movement also produced New Age Music in the late 1960s. New Age Music emerged when many composers were experimenting with electronics and challenging the conventions of Western classical music. In 1983, while New Age Music was still a new genre, musician and composer, Dr. Robert C. Ehle explained that it is a highly tonal and consonant electronic music. Aesthetically, New Age Music is characterized by its “spacey” sound and use of electronic effects such as phasers, echo, and reverberation. Unlike most other Western music, New Age composers do not seek to create tension in the works. Rather, a lack of tension and “pure” sound is idealized. New Age Music could also include natural sounds, such as rain or wind sounds. This was intended to create relaxing pieces of music that could lower blood pressure and tension (Ehle 1983: 36-37). New Age Music’s influence on sound healing lies in both its aesthetics and intent. Although sound healing and New Age Music may utilize different instruments they both create a sound lacking in tension with the intention to heal.

Sound/Cellular Experiments

In 1981, new research paved the way for modern sound healing. Musician, composer, and acupuncturist Fabien Maman conducted experiments that put New Age beliefs to the test. Entitled the sound/cellular experiments, Maman researched the energy fields of cells when exposed to sound. Studying acupuncture, Aikido, and energy in the human body, Maman posited that sound and vibration could influence the energy of the physical being. He studied the effect of sound by taking pictures of energy fields of cells when exposed to acoustic sound.\(^7\) To

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\(^7\) Maman claimed that electronic sound could not influence energy in the same way as acoustic sound because it has no natural overtones.
examine these energy fields, Maman used technique called Kirlian photography, which is used to capture electrical discharges. With this technique and a microscope, Maman found that certain frequencies could change the shape of cells, similar to the changing shape of sand on a speaker in cymatics\(^8\) research (Maman and Unsoeld 2008). This supported the theory that music and sound could affect the physical body and be used for healing.

Maman also researched what he called the “Fundamental Note.” The “Fundamental Note” is the pitch at which an individual’s cells are most affected when the pitch is played. The “Note” differs between each individual and causes cells to form a “mandala shape of vibrant colors.” Maman claims that the individual “tunes with [the Fundamental Note]” and “harmony can be achieved within the body’s cells, the person’s energy field and the environment.” He considers the Fundamental Note essential for regeneration at the cellular level and accessing ancestral memory (Maman and Unsoeld 2008: 38). This research reports a link between sound and healing. It suggests that sound connects the individual to larger metaphysical systems, heals cells, and provides special access to inaccessible memories.

Fabien Maman also brought together various belief systems that were employed in Theosophy and the New Age movements. Maman incorporated the so-called “five element theory,”\(^9\) the “Energetic Clock,”\(^10\) and chakras\(^11\) into his own beliefs about sound (Maman and Unsoeld 2008). Maman mapped his own work onto these systems, claiming that he found notes

\(^8\) Cymatics is a vibrational phenomenon where substances such as sand, dust, or fluids form symmetrical shapes when vibrated at certain frequencies.

\(^9\) Five element theory states that there are five elements that compose nature and humans: fire, wood, earth, water, and metal. Each of the five elements has a particular quality (i.e. wood = creativity, etc.), color (i.e. earth = red), and season (i.e. metal = autumn). They also each correspond to two organs in the body (i.e. water = kidney/bladder).

\(^10\) Maman claimed the Energetic Clock came from Chinese medicine. The Energetic Clock, according to Maman demonstrates the flow of energy through the human body according to a twenty-four-hour cycle.

\(^11\) Chakras are part of what Hindus call the “subtle body,” which is the psychological and emotional, non-physical body. Chakras are places in the human body where energy is particularly concentrated. Generally, people believe that there are seven chakras: Muladhara (Root), Svadhistana (Sacral), Nabhi-Manipura (Solar), Anahata (Heart), Vishuddhi (Throat), Ajna (Third eye), and Sahasrara (Crown).
that correspond to each of the five elements as well as the organs and times presented by the Energetic Clock (which he links to the twelve acupuncture meridians), and each of the chakras. This means that the note C is related to the element fire and the heart in five element theory, the small intestine and 1-3 PM on the Energetic Clock, and the Tantien, or Sacral, chakra (Maman and Unsoeld 2008: 158–60, 163, 166, 175, 177).

Maman’s research into these healing techniques reflected the interest of people involved with New Age philosophy in non-Western and holistic healing. Drawing on the concept of a healing music that traces back to Cyril Scott, Nelsea Chaplin, and New Age Music composers from the 1970s, Fabien Maman synthesized these components and laid the groundwork for what we now call sound healing. Many current sound healers still utilize Maman’s findings in their work, using crystal or metal bowls tuned to each Chakra and drawing on the five elements for their sounds.

**Contemporary Sound Meditation**

Sound healing is currently experiencing mainstream recognition. Previously reserved for Theosophists, New Agers, and holistic healers, sound healing has gained popularity among the American public. News organizations have published articles about sound meditation and its potential for healing (Kercher 2015; MacVean 2016; Purtill and Purtill 2016; Rosenbloom 2005). Writing for the *New York Times*, Sophia Kercher (2015) suggests that sound meditation has moved into the mainstream because the yoga community has spread awareness about it. Sound healing is now being practiced all over the world. The International Academy of Sound Healing
(IASH) is located in India and offers sound healing training around the world. Members of the IASH are located in Canada, China, Ecuador, France, India, Taiwan, and the U.S.\textsuperscript{12}

In the United States, some yoga centers have begun holding sound meditations particularly in the northeast and California.\textsuperscript{13} Institutions such as the Conduit Center in Hartford, CT have a space dedicated to sound meditation. The Conduit Center opened in 2007 and has a staff of musicians who provide the community with sound meditations once or twice a week. Although they also offer yoga, the staff’s main focus is on sound healing.

Conclusion

Though based on Dharmatic belief systems, the sound healing movement in the United States is a germ of the religious/spiritual response to Origin of Species. New Thought and Christian Science also provide sound healers a holistic, spiritual understanding of healing. Theosophy marked the introduction of ancient wisdom and Eastern religious beliefs into Western spirituality, while Theosophist composers focused on spiritually healing music; a concept that was expanded on by New Age composers. Research by Maman into the physical healing properties of vibration and different pitches led to the modern sound healing movement. Its expansion into the mainstream in the 2000s has led to more frequent sound meditation events in the northeast and western U.S.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{12} International Academy of Sound Healing, \url{http://iash.in/}; accessed April 26, 2018
\textsuperscript{13} Catskills Yoga House, \url{http://www.catskillsvyoga.com/workshops/}; accessed April 25, 2018; Green River Yoga & Movement, \url{http://greenrivervoga.com/our-teachers/}; accessed April 25, 2018; Inner Sounds Yoga, \url{https://www.innersoundsyoga.com/}; accessed April 25, 2018
\textsuperscript{14} The Conduit Center, \url{https://theconduitcenter.com/}; accessed April 25, 2018
Chapter 3: The Contemporary Sound Bath

It’s a cool autumn evening and I am driving on a Connecticut highway. “Arrived.” My GPS tells me that I am here, but I do not see the lone rustic building surrounded by houses that I was expecting. Instead, I am in the parking lot of a strip mall. In front of me is a lit white sign on an awning that reads “The Conduit” in bold black font across the top, and beneath, the words “Meditation & Wellness Center: Sound Healing, Yoga, Private Counseling, Far East Imports.”

When I consider the name and the service they provide at The Conduit, my imagination takes over: a lone, Victorian-style house, surrounded by lush green grass and Autumnal reds, yellows, and oranges; the landscape set against a starry night sky holding up a full moon, soft, not too imposing. The name, “The Conduit,” invokes the mysterious and spiritual. For me, the imagined imagery is a perfect representation of these qualities. Jeff Nickell, a sounder and part owner of the Conduit Center, explains the name:

The Conduit is… a term to mean a channel. We feel that as sound guides, we are simply just a channel of...energy…[Sound and music] transcend different boundaries of communication or culture…[They] communicate freely and we…are just a channel of what they are doing (Nickell, interview, 11/30/17).

Nickell alludes to a spiritual energy carried by the sound – an energy that he channels. However, there is no defining this energy beyond the spiritual. Some researchers and even followers of the New Age movement, like Fabien Maman, have attempted to quantify this energy force and explain its nature, but there is no complete framework to provide a clear understanding of what this energy is or if it exists. This mysterious element, evoked in the name of the Conduit Center, is part of the larger draw of sound healing: There is an unexplained or unexplainable force which connects the spiritual and biological realms using exotic instruments. It is a practice that is
separate from popular culture, yet it can be intimately represented by an individual’s imagination.

Psychoanalytically, sound healing appeals to a sense of the uncanny. Freud (1919) defined the “uncanny” as something known yet unknown. Humans feel the uncanny when they encounter something that is strangely familiar to them, yet unsettling or eerie (124-125). In Freud’s (1919) definition, the uncanny may either come from repressed childhood impulses or from primitive beliefs (155). Sound healing falls into the latter category. While we may be familiar with music – it is part of our everyday lives, ever-present at the supermarket, in elevators, cafes, restaurants, etc. – sounders use unfamiliar instruments and melodies to practice their beliefs about energy healing and higher beings. These beliefs, with roots in Dharmatic religious traditions and alternative spiritual philosophies, are too only vaguely familiar to American culture, invoking the uncanny yet again in the course of sound healing.

Payment

On entering the Conduit Center, I am greeted by a woman standing behind a desk in the back corner of the lobby. I approach the glass desk and notice a white tablet, ostensibly used for ticket payments. I tell her that I preregistered for the event and paid the advance ticket price online. She finds my name on a list, sandwiched between the names of others who have also prepaid.

The Conduit Center requires a prepaid ticket to participate, a common mode of payment collecting for a range of services. However, other sounders, like those that run Green River Yoga and Sapphire Holistic Health, use donation baskets. The baskets are placed at the entrance of the
meditation room and payment is voluntary, but there is often a suggested donation amount. John Eustor explains why he uses a donation basket for his sound meditations:

There is a $10 suggested donation for the classes. That’s really to pay the center. I mean we have rent here. It’s really to pay for what I’m doing here and then give me a little extra money. But other than that, I’m doing this to really help the community - to bring something to the community that it doesn’t have (Eustor, interview, 1/17/18).

Eustor’s language is community-centric. He sees traditional methods of payment, such as requiring purchase of tickets, as getting in the way of his goal, which is to bring sound meditation to the community. Models of payment also change depending on the type of sound healing being offered. For example, if a sounder is hosting a group sound meditation, they may use a donation basket, but if it’s an individual sound healing session, payment may be required, and it may cost more than the sound meditation.

Shoes

I walk to the sound meditation room. On my left there is a wall with stacks of cubbies. Some already have shoes in them and more people are shuffling in to take their shoes off and claim their cubby. On my right there is a coat rack. I hang up my coat, take off my shoes, and stuff my personal belongings into a cubby.

At every sound meditation that I have been to there has been a place to leave shoes during the meditation. With those areas comes the expectation that meditators will remove their shoes for the meditation, reinforcing sound meditation as a form of religious or spiritual experience. Various religious traditions require that individuals remove their shoes before entering a sacred space. For example, in an interview with Huffington Post, Sherri Silverman, a “sacred space consultant,” suggests that people remove their shoes before entering their sacred space because it keeps the space clean and sacred (Kuruvilla 2016). By having participants
remove their shoes, sounders and yoga center owners are positioning themselves in the realm of the spiritual and reinforcing the idea of the meditation room as sacred.

The Return of the “Uncanny” in the Meditation Room

I enter sound meditation room. The walls are painted a relaxing blue. Their earth and jewel tones accent the walls, contributing to the calming effect of the room. There are several windows, but all are covered by curtains to keep the ambient light of the street and strip mall out of this introspective space. Paintings hang on a few of the walls. I find myself staring deeply at one of the paintings.

In the sound meditation room, I have another encounter with the uncanny. The paintings and dimly-lit ambience of the room invoke feelings of the unknown and spiritual. I recognize the color scheme of the paintings – blues, greens, browns, and grays – as earth and jewel tones, colors associated with the outside world and nature. There is also the shape of the image – human-like, but without the qualities of a human. The shape and the natural colors that form it speak to something familiar. Yet that familiarity is abstracted by the lighting of the room and the lack of defined lines. The feeling of the uncanny invoked by the name of the center returns and I am reminded of the mysterious element of sound healing.

Vulnerability

Beneath the paintings are spots setup for participants. They consist of a microfiber mat on the bottom, a pillow at the wall end of each mat, a blanket at the other end, and an eye mask with a tissue. There are also reclining chairs set up with a blanket and eye mask. Known as
gravity chairs, these are set up across the back wall and door-side wall, next to the mats and tightly packed to fit as many people into the room as possible. I choose a spot.

Not everybody chooses to setup this way. Many pull the blanket up over their body to keep warm as they go into their meditative states. Some lay their heads toward the center of the room, so that they are closer to the sound. There is no ‘right’ way to setup a sound meditation spot, but the bare setup of each that I have attended has included some type of mat (usually a yoga mat), a blanket large enough for one person, a pillow, and an eye mask. Some meditation centers lay all of this out, but other places like Green River Yoga in Greenfield, MA have racks with these items on them and meditators setup their own spots.

During the sound meditation, participants lie on the mats (or sit in the chairs) with their eyes closed and often covered. According to sound meditator Ella Josephine, this position, while relaxing, is also vulnerable because participants are surrounded by others who may be strangers:

I was a little nervous because they turned off the lights. We're all in this room with these strangers and everyone's under blankets. It was very intimate...There were only like six people in the room and it was dark and we were all laying down and I think that's a very vulnerable position to be in...It was a little disarming (Josephine, interview, 11/30/17).

Experiencing conflicting feelings when faced with the dark room and vulnerability, Ella Josephine on the one hand, feels a closeness with the other participants, alluding to the trust required to be in such a vulnerable position. On the other hand, this intimacy is tied to discomfort and fear that her trust may be broken.

Instruments

Sounders may use a variety of instruments in sound healing, including singing bowls, didgeridoos, and gongs. Singing water bowls, commonly referred to as singing bowls, are Asian instruments chiefly associated with Tibet where they are used for meditation. True to their name,
singing bowls are bowl-shaped and made of non-ferrous metal. The word “water” is included in
the name because they are often partially filled with water to create a certain pitch. Singing
bowls are played with a baton often wrapped in leather. They can be struck or rubbed with the
baton, generating an audible pitch (“Singing Water Bowl” 2015: 1). Jeff Nickell considers
singing bowls to be the “center instrument” for sound meditation (Nickell, interview, 11/30/17).

The didgeridoo is a wind instrument that was developed by Australian Aboriginal people.
Originally formed by termites from the trunks of trees, didgeridoos are wooden tubes. They are
blown into from one end that is typically about thirty to forty millimeters in diameter. The other
end is flared. Didgeridoos are characterized by their low-pitched droning sound. The Binaural
Beat Brothers, a duo of sounders Chris Sturk and Casey Attebery, use this instrument for its
intense sound:

I’ll oftentimes start with the didgeridoo since...it can be so loud and so powerful (Sturk,
interview, 11/3/17)

Gongs are percussion instruments in the shape of a circular metal alloy plaque. The name
“gong” has its origins in Java, Indonesia, but according to percussionist James Blades,
percussionist James Holland, and ethnomusicologist Alan R. Thrasher (2001), “gongs may have
existed in the biblical era” (3). These instruments come in various shapes and sizes. Gong’s are
played by striking the face with a beater with wool or felt covering (Blades, Holland, and
Thrasher 2001: 2-3). They are also common to sound meditations with some meditations
consisting of mostly gongs, often called gong baths

Though these, along with drums or prerecorded are sounds, are common, there is no
uniform instrumentation for sound meditations. For example, sounder John Eustor of Bradley
Beach, NJ uses wooden chimes and a crystal pyramid along with a singing bowl and gong (see
Fig. 1). Meanwhile, the Binaural Beat Brothers use a frame drum and didgeridoos, along with
prerecorded compositions and field recordings. The instruments played by sounders are culled from various world music cultures. Their perceived healing properties and status as “ancient technology” is important to sounders. Jeff Nickell explains

Singing bowls are used in monasteries even to this day. The Buddhist monks will play the sound and I’ve visited many different Buddhist centers, Tibetan and Chinese. Both use the singing bowl during the practice and it’s just to, I believe, find peace” (Nickell, interview, 11/30/17).

It is significant to Nickell that these singing bowls have a spiritual history to them. Nickell also alludes to the mysterious quality of the instruments as a result of this history when he asks, “How do you even put science to [the sound of singing bowls] when it’s this ancient?” The sounds used in sound meditation fall outside the realm of science and represent a foray into the unknown.

Summer and Summer (1996) explain that adherents to the New Age Movement adopted the religions of the East because of its mysterious nature. Followers of New Age pushed back against scientific understanding, preferring to keep nature partially in the realm of the unknown (Summer and Summer 1996: 20). The instruments used in sound meditation act as a continuation of this foray into the unknown. Sounders attribute mystical qualities to their instruments because of their ancientness and origins in religions untampered by Western science.
Choosing Instruments

Sounders decide what instruments to use based on intention, cost, and what they are guided to purchase. Binaural Beat Brother and mathematician Casey Attebery chooses instruments based on the aim of each meditation:

If we’re aiming for a more restorative, calm, relaxing thing we’re going to choose instruments that [are] lower pitched...softer sounds...It’s...the intention that we’re aiming for. Are we going for relaxation? Are we going for stimulation? Or are we going for stress release? (Attebery, interview, 12/6/17).
Attebery focuses on how the sounds will make people feel. He implies that each sound corresponds to a feeling (e.g. lower pitches are calming) and influences how participants feel. In contrast, John Eustor believes that he is guided to choose an instrument based on aesthetic appeal and divine guidance:

You listen. And you see what’s missing. I didn’t use chimes for the longest time. Now…I cannot do these without the chimes because the chimes add something in there between the bowls that just help the energy flow into the body. That’s what I’m feeling. That’s the messages that I’m getting. Everything that I bought, I bought because it was time to buy it. Something told me it’s like I need to add something else…It’s just divine guidance (Eustor, interview, 1/17/18).

Eustor fits sounds together like puzzle pieces, referring to how he adds chimes between the singing bowls because they produce appealing sounds together. The chimes also allow for more energy flow, aiding in healing. Eustor believes that there is something divine sending him messages to purchase certain instruments. By guiding his instrument choice, the divine element is also assisting in healing by telling him to choose sounds that will be the most healing.

Sounders also choose instruments based on their personal preference or the cost of the instrument. Sounder, Alvaro Romao of Saugerties, NY takes both of these into account when crafting his instrumentation:

It’s what I can afford. It’s what has come into my path over years of accumulating different instruments. I may be in another country or in a store or wherever and I just see something. And I’m like ‘Oh my God, that’s an amazing instrument,’ and I just buy it. Sometimes I’ve had dreams or just out of the blue I’ll be like I [have] to have this instrument. It’s not really thought out…like a map being put together. It’s…what comes into my existence and what I can afford because a lot of these instruments are expensive (Romao, interview, 2/9/18).

**Sound Bath**

_The woman from the front desk begins the meditation with a soft-spoken introduction. In a near-whisper, she talks about the tumultuous holiday season (November and December) and letting us relax. She tells us to enter the sound and see where it takes us. There is a silence after_
she is finished. I close my eyes, cover them with the eye-pillow, and wait for the sound to carry me away.

I hear the soft resonance of metal singing bowls. The sound swells as the sounders strike the bowls harder. Drones resonate through me. The sound waves bounce off the wall behind my head. My thoughts and fears about my research into sound meditation are gone and my mind is empty. I hear a new sound: rain. It’s a clear night with every star visible. It is raining inside the room, but there is no water. What produces this sound? The sound of rain gets closer and closer to me until it is over me. Moving from ear to ear, the sound is intense. Are there speakers hidden on either side of my head? I store this moment in the back of my mind to ask about after. More instruments come in. The gongs, in particular, stand out to me. The sounders strike the gongs lightly, creating a full metallic sound that carries throughout the room. As they strike the gongs harder, the unique almost-distorted sound comes out. The meditation ends with the sound of singing bowls fading out as sound waves die.

While some sound meditations have a set structure, others change the structure for each meditation. John Eustor uses the same structure for each of his crystal bowl meditations:

It’s 45 minutes of playing the bowls, 15 minutes of gongs, and then walking around at the end with the crystal pyramid and playing it over your body (Eustor, interview, 1/17/18).

The Binaural Beat Brothers, on the other hand, improvise over various binaural beat compositions, so the structure changes for each meditation.

We continue to lay in silence. Across the room I hear the rustling of arms and legs. The rustling moves around the room until I am rustling. I move my fingers, turn my wrists. My body is waking up from a nap that my mind never took. I move my arms and my legs. They feel heavier than usual. The sounders tell us to take our time getting up. Eventually, we all muster the strength to sit up and look at each other. The lights brighten enough so that we can all see each
other. The sounders allow people to share their experiences. One participant says that the sound of the gong made him think of being in a womb. After others have spoken, the sounders invite people to stay and talk and have tea. A few of us wait around to talk to them.

Recounting experiences is another common element of sound baths. The act of sharing the experience of a sound meditation creates a sense of community that allows meditators to identify with one another’s experiences and brings the personal into the social realm. The feeling of vulnerability expressed by Ella Josephine is important in this recounting of experience:

He mentioned the sensation of feeling like you're in the womb. I thought that was so spot-on because it just feels like this warm sensation of like the vibrating. And you can't really make out any specific sounds, but it's all just like buzzy and loud outside in the outside world and you're just in your little cocoon in your mat. That was really cool especially to hear that coming from like a college-aged guy… I was like oh nice! That's so nice! (Josephine, interview, 11/21/17).

Josephine comments on the vulnerability of the college-aged guy and feels an affinity for him despite only knowing him from his comments. She takes note of him because of how he described experience and his openness. Sharing after meditations allows participants to connect through common experience and vulnerability with one another.

Becoming a Sounder

Sounders often find sound healing through personal experience. Each of the sounders that I interviewed feel that their exposure to sound healing changed them in some way. Some are self-taught on sound healing instruments; others trained with teachers. Still others, like Jeff Nickell, believe that sound healing “found” them:

A friend of mine introduced me to another friend and he had a set of singing bowls…He was like hey you got to check these out and lay down. I’ll place some of them on you, place them around you, and he started to play the sounds. That’s when my body just melted.
Before I knew it, I was at a gathering and they said, “Here’s a gong mallet. Do you want to play?” And I go, “Oh my God. I don’t know if I can do this.” But I started to play, and I took a singing bowl and played it for the first time over somebody…It was…amazing to see somebody’s feelings or reactions afterwards (Nickell, interview, 11/30/17).

Nickell became a sounder because of his emotional response to singing bowls and seeing others’ reactions when he played.

Chris Sturk also had personal experiences with sound that led to him becoming a sounder. Sturk began as a rock and jazz musician, but after attending a gong bath decided to focus on sound and ambient music:

I’ve been a musician for most of my life and there was a moment maybe a decade ago when I…experienced a gong bath. I was very intrigued by the experience, the feelings that I felt within it, and how I recognized it changed my consciousness in some fashion. Shortly after that, I was playing my guitar one day and I had been in a negative mood. After a while, I just recognized how my consciousness completely shifted and went from being in kind of a low state to just a much happier, more desirable state. I recognized that something…was helping to affect how I was feeling…That was the starting point. I had been very heavily music focused and then it turned to more of this aspect of just looking at sound or ambient mode music (Sturk, interview, 11/3/17).

After experiencing a gong bath, Sturk paid closer attention to how music and sound effects his emotional state. Sturk also states that the gong bath “changed [his] consciousness,” alluding to a fundamental, yet unquantifiable change in the self. Both sounders recognized that the sound changed them in some way but could not express exactly how. Nickell remarks that the experience was “strange and odd” for him at that point. The mystery of how sound could change them was also part of the decision to become sounders.

Other practitioners have had physically healing experiences that led them to becoming sound healers. John Eustor began as a musician and computer programmer who left the corporate world to become a sounder after he was healed:

About 6 years ago, I got diagnosed with a condition called Guillain-Barré syndrome…[It] landed me in the hospital for 18 days [and] destroyed my immune system.…When I left the hospital, [they told me] ‘Your immune system has been compromised by the
virus…[recovery] is going to take 6 months to a couple years’ Now I had been into yoga, meditation, and kundalini meditation since my 20s…But at that point my body was so distraught that I couldn’t even do yoga. I couldn’t do anything really…I [started going to a sound healer]…twice a week for a month. At the end of the month, I started feeling so much better…I ended up buying the whole set of bowls…for the healing of my own body (Eustor, interview, 1/17/18).

Like Nickell and Sturk, John Eustor’s personal experience was the catalyst for his career change, but whereas the other two sounders aimed for increased happiness, Eustor’s reliance on sounding offered tangible way to cope with his illness.

Some sounders began as other types of healers and incorporated sound. Alvaro Romao began as a shaman. According to historian of religion, fiction writer, and philosopher Mircea Eliade and folklorist, linguist, and ethnographer Vilmos Dioszegi (2017), shamans are “believed to achieve various powers through trance or ecstatic religious experience.” They are also believed to possess the ability to heal the sick and communicate with the spirit world. After an experience with sound, Alvaro Romao became a shamanic sound healer:

I was attending this weekend [workshop where] we worked with an altar. [The workshop organizer] said bring your favorite instrument... I bring [my handpan]. [He tells me to] sit in the center of the mesa with [my handpan and] just play. So, during this experience I have a room full of people supporting me, chanting...With this altar being activated and me sitting on top of it playing this drum it just transcended me into a place that I never accessed before. And something within that ceremony, it really kind of clicked…[I had] to understand how to combine shamanism and sound. Rather than just playing or performing for people, how to actually heal them with this gift (Romao, interview, 2/9/18).

Sounders are also drawn to sound healing through the physics of sound. These practitioners study cymatics, examining how soundwaves can affect matter. Casey Attebery describes how his interest in mathematics and physics led him to become a sounder:

I began by studying the physics of sound. I have a degree in mathematics and part of my degree is that I do a lot of teaching of alternative mathematics and I study cymatics, which is the study of how soundwaves can manipulate matter and how matter, in certain arrangements, like a drumhead or a steel plate or glass can resonate at certain frequencies (Attebery, interview, 12/6/17).
Attebery makes the connection between his field of study and sound, explaining how it could be used to heal:

In terms of healing, well we’ve got organs and we’ve got a nervous system that, as modern science is showing, operates at certain frequencies in terms of the relationship of the nerve signal impulses and the rhythms of these systems in our bodies. We can see how instruments can reach certain frequencies and overtones that can stimulate resonance in the human body, either physically or non-physically (Attebery, 12/6/17).

Conclusion

Sound meditations vary in practice and structure yet contain common elements. While instrumentation, structure, payment options, and setup are left up to meditation organizers, there are commonalities between meditations. This suggests that there is general consensus on what a sound meditation should be. Multiple people enter a room and get comfortable. Then, the sounder(s) play singing bowls, gongs, and other instruments culled from various cultures. This is what sound meditations are at their most fundamental level. Yet, this does not capture the complexities of the experience.

Despite the communal aspect of sound meditations, they are often experienced individually. My experiences of the uncanny, Josephine’s feeling of vulnerability, and the other meditator’s experience of the “womb-like” sounds do not necessarily reflect common experience. Rather, personal experience can provide differing perspectives on what it means to be part of a sound meditation. Likewise, sounders’ experiences with sound differ, causing them to rationalize their instrumentation and structure in various ways. The fieldnotes and interviews presented here provide insight into the common understanding, yet differing experiences of sound meditation.
Chapter 4: Healing Discourse in Sound Meditation

This chapter will examine the concept of healing in sound meditation. Through an examination of scientific data, the philosophies of various sounders, and theories of the unconscious, I consider three different perspectives on what it means to heal in the context of sound meditation. I begin with an overview of what it means to heal, creating the foundation for a topic that recurs throughout the chapter. I then consider psychological data on meditation and sound healing, explain healing in the context of sound meditation, and apply a psychoanalytic framework to sound healing. Finally, I provide an overview of the way sound healing may or may not be considered legitimate healing by scientists, sounders, and psychoanalysts.

The word “healing” holds a variety of meanings in the West. Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines healing as “to make free from injury or disease, to make sound or whole;” or, “to make well again, to restore health.” While the first definition implies material healing, the act of treating an ailment in the physical body, the second definition leaves room for immaterial interpretations. While material healing is currently the dominant model of medicine in the United States, immaterial healing, historically, has played a major role in the lives of many Americans.

Healing in the 19th century was defined by spirituality. New Thought and Christian Science created a program of healing that encompassed the mind, body, and spirit, relieving disease through positive thinking, meditation, and relationship with a higher power. These

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15 Merriam-Webster Dictionary, [https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/healing](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/healing); accessed April 26, 2018

16 The hyphenated “dis-ease” means “lack of ease” and is used more in alternative medicine than the term “disease” (Desy, n.d.). Disease, meanwhile, is commonly used as a synonym for illness or sickness (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, [https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disease](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disease); accessed April 26, 2018). It is a medicalized term and is biological in nature. Adherents to New Thought and Christian Science see disease as dis-ease.
spiritualities developed their healing methods from the work of Franz Mesmer, who is considered an early influence on psychotherapy by some (see Cushman 1992: 30). Until the early 20th century, psychological and spiritual healing were intertwined in the U.S. But in 1909, when Sigmund Freud spoke at Clark University in Worcester, MA, the American psychology community embraced Freud’s system of psychoanalysis, which separated psychological from spiritual healing. According to psychologist Philip Cushman (1992), psychoanalysis was considered a more legitimate and scientific medical theory than the mind cure and positive thinking of New Thought and Christian Science (38). This marked the beginning of psychology’s entrance into the field of mainstream psychiatry.

Medicine in the U.S. has traditionally been considered separate from both spiritual/religious and psychological healing. It is differentiated from the others through its physical interventions and biological science framework. Whereas spiritual healing involves a higher power and psychological healing involves introspection and talk therapy, medical healing consists of locating a biological ailment and curing it with medication or surgery. Something is added (medication) or removed (the ailment) from the material body to heal dysfunctional or diseased biological processes. Psychology, although originally distinct from physical medicine, in recent years has become subsumed under the medical model. Behavioral and cognitive scientists sought to further the scientific legitimacy of psychology, while neuroscience has firmly located psychology in the realm of the biological. Today, medication is commonly used, and sometimes traditional talk therapy, to cure mental illness. Psychology now incorporates both psychological healing and medical/biological healing.

Research into sound healing has been conducted that considers it from a biological (material) perspective (e.g. What are the physiological (measurable) effects of having a metal
singing bowl played over your body for an hour?). These studies are meant to examine the legitimacy of sound healing from the perspective of medical/biological healing. Many sounders consider their work to be spiritually healing which then contributes to biological and psychological health. This chapter will examine perspectives in biological healing (from physical medicine), spiritual healing (from within the field of sound healing), and psychological healing (in the form of psychoanalysis).

Material (Biological) Healing

Sound healing and the discourse surrounding its practice often involves claims that sound meditation can prevent or even cure various ailments. Alexandre Tannous, a musician, educator, and ethnomusicologist runs the website soundmeditation.com. Here, he presents his research and argues that sound healing can manage depression and end the need for antidepressants, diminish anxiety and panic attacks, release trauma, and manage insomnia (Tannous 2017). Travel writer, Stephanie Rosenbloom, in a 2005 New York Times article on a sound meditator, interviewed a sound meditator who had been diagnosed with stage four cancer. When exposed to the vibrations from the metal singing bowls, the meditator claimed that she could feel her thoughts of death and the cancer cells breaking up (Rosenbloom 2005).

Research into Meditation

As a result of the popularity of holistic approaches to health sciences, meditation has become part of a program of wellness for many Americans. Many doctors and psychologists have begun to incorporate meditation or mindfulness into their work. A calm and mentally clear meditative state is one component of the perceived healing aspect of the practice. There are many
different forms and methods of meditation that help participants enter a calm state. Sound
meditation uses sound and entrainment, while Acem Meditation uses repeating mantras. Many of
the following studies demonstrate the effect of the meditative state.

Physiological Effects of Sound Meditation

Meditation has been shown to create a relaxed state through physiological changes to
various systems throughout the body. Psychologist Michael West summarized the findings on
the physiological changes associated with meditation in a 1980 article in the *Journal of
Psychosomatic Research*. He describes seven physical changes caused by meditation: decreases
in heart rate, oxygen consumption, carbon dioxide elimination, respiratory rate, skin conductance
(of electricity), arterial blood lactate, and muscle tone (continuous contraction of the muscles).
These physiological responses suggest that meditation causes lower arousal associated with
relaxation (West 1980: 268).

Cognitive/Psychological Effects

Research on the psychological and cognitive effects of meditation suggests that
meditation can help decrease anxiety and insomnia and improve cognitive functioning. For
example, West (1980) summarizes two studies on the effect of meditation on anxiety (270). The
first study found that 74% of the members of the experimental group, who had practiced yoga
and meditation for one hour every day for six weeks, had improved anxiety compared to 43% of
the control group (Williams et al. as cited in West 1980: 270). The second study found that
meditation and self-hypnosis improved anxiety compared to no treatment (Benson et al. as cited
in West 1980: 270). These two studies suggest that meditation (and other forms of relaxation)
can reduce anxiety. West also cites a study that examines the effect of meditation on insomnia (Woolfolk et al. as cited in West 1980: 271). The experiment tested the effect of meditation and progressive relaxation on insomnia. Researchers found that both meditation and progressive relaxation were more effective at treating insomnia than no intervention. Research also suggests that meditation can improve cognitive functioning. In a study of mind sound resonance, the effect of meditation on cognitive function in medical students, researchers found that meditation can enhance cognitive functioning from a single session (Apar Saoji, Sriloy Mohanty, and Suhas A. Vinchurkar 2016: 146).

Effects on the Brain

With the development of neuroscience technology researchers have been able to study how meditation affects the brains of humans. Researchers Francois Vialatte, Hovagim Bakardjian, Rajkishore Prasad, and Andrzej Cichocki (2008) studied brainwaves during Bhramari Pranayama, a yoga breathing technique that induces a meditative state. The researchers found an increase in theta range activity, which is subjectively reported as corresponding to the meditative state. Thoughts are absent, but the individual is conscious (Vialatte et al. 2008: 985). The researchers also found gamma range activity that can be interpreted in three ways: epileptic activity, anti-epileptic activity, and hyperphasic-meditation wave. While epileptic activity is the least likely, anti-epileptic activity provides a better interpretation because yoga has been shown to reduce seizures in people with epilepsy. Hyperphasic-meditation wave is the

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17 Theta brainwave (4-7 Hz) production increased.
18 Gamma waves are brainwaves with a frequency between 25 and 100 Hz.
name given to the high-frequency, high-amplitude gamma waves that have been found in other studies on meditation (Vialatte et al. 2008: 986).

Meditation has also been found to activate certain areas of the brain. In a 2017 study, Gundel et al. examined hemodynamic\textsuperscript{19} responses in meditation experts, who had previous experience meditating, in a mindfulness condition. The results of the study showed no significant increase in hemodynamic responses in the control group (non-expert meditators) and a significant increase in hemodynamic responses in the expert meditators group when participating in a mindfulness task in which a singing bowl was struck, and participants were asked to focus on the tone in a “mindful” manner (Gundel et al. 2017: 2). Expert meditators at rest showed more widespread activation in the auditory cortex than the control group. While participating in mindfulness meditation, the control group showed a decrease in activity in higher auditory areas and the expert meditators showed a significant increase in activity in those areas. Further, their research suggests that long-term meditation can cause changes in the brain and increase empathy, meta cognitive skills, and health (Gundel et al. 2017: 6-8). Although these forms of meditation were not specifically sound meditation, they nevertheless provide insight into the potential benefits of the meditative state that is central to all meditation including sound healing. The results provide some insight into the potential of sound healing given that participants enter a similar meditative state.

\textsuperscript{19} The term “hemodynamic” refers to the flow of blood within organs and tissue in the body.
Sound Meditation Research

Sound meditation differs from other forms of meditation because sound is used to bring participants into a meditative state. Three studies on sound meditation will focus on a specific musical instrument used in sound healing.

In a study conducted in 2013, Milbury et al. tested the effect of Tibetan Sound Meditation (TSM), which relies strictly on chanting and other vocalization, on cognitive functioning in breast cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy treatment. Chemotherapy has been shown to reduce cognitive functioning in patients (Milbury et al. 2013: 2354). The researchers found that breast cancer patients in the TSM group performed better on the verbal memory test and short-term memory and processing speed task than the control group. The TSM group also reported improved cognitive function, cognitive abilities, mental health, and spiritual well-being after the TSM treatment compared to the control group. However, it is important to note that the p-values of each result were greater than or equal to 0.05, except for the mental health report (p=0.04). This suggests that there was no significant difference between the experimental and control groups, except in the mental health category.

A 2015 study on sound meditation in Slovenia involved a survey of 129 users of sound baths with gongs (Pesek and Bratina 2016). Participants reported feeling relaxed and/or healed by sound meditation. They also reported positive effects from sound meditations, including achieving a lasting inner peace, better physical and mental wellbeing, new energy for work, and desire for personal growth (Pesek and Bratina 2016: 157-158). This study provides insight into the subjective effects of sound meditation.

Researchers have also begun to examine the effects of singing bowl meditation on mood and anxiety. Goldsby et al. (2017) considered the effects of Tibetan singing bowl meditation on
mood, tension, and well-being. Using a variety of questionnaires to assess tension, anger, confusion, depressed mood, anxiety, and spiritual well-being, the researchers found that sound meditation participants reported significantly less tension, anger, fatigue, and depressed mood and greater feeling of spiritual well-being. The results also showed that participants who were new to sound meditation had a significantly greater reduction in tension compared to experienced sound meditators. These results suggest that sound healing may promote greater psychological and spiritual health in the aforementioned areas.

The results of each of these studies on sound meditation suggest that sound healing may be beneficial to cognitive function. It may also reduce anxiety, as well as depression, anger, and fatigue. There is evidence that sound meditation can increase feelings of spirituality and help participants enter a relaxed state. While this research provides some insight into the effects of sound meditation, more studies need to be done for a fuller picture of how sound meditation effects the psychological, physical, and spiritual health of individuals. The discourse of healing utilized by this research also does not touch on the language used by individuals in the sound healing community. To gain a full understanding of what healing means in sound healing, I will also examine ideas about healing utilized by sounders and some long-term participants.

On the Term “Sound Healing”

Sounders have a variety of perspectives on using the term “sound healing” because of the implication of the word “healing.” Not all sounders claim that sound meditation can heal; many prefer the word “therapeutic,” suggesting that it can be healing. For example, Jeff Nickell, a sounder at the Conduit Center in Hartford, CT, does not assign healing properties to his sound work:
Calling it healing - to say sound healing is - it’s presumptuous. It’s like well I’m going to heal you. We don’t know what the sound is going to do overall. We can tell you what the results are of practice and trial and error (Nickell, interview, 11/30/17).

In deciding what to call the Conduit Center’s sound events, Nickell distinguishes what he and the Center does from therapy and targeted medicine. According to Nickell, calling the sound events healing is disingenuous because he cannot be sure that his sound will heal. He also believes that the word “therapy” implies a more targeted medical healing modality that he does not feel sound meditation would fit into.

Healing versus Therapeutic

Some sounders do not use healing to describe their work, but still assign it healing properties. For example, Binaural Beat Brother Chris Sturk prefers the word “therapeutic:”

I’ll oftentimes call them “sound meditations,” sometimes “therapeutic sound meditations.” I personally don’t use the sound healing term very much. I shy away from that. I think for some people they can think, “Oh, sound healing. I’m going to go there, and all my problems are going to be healed.” Whereas, sound healing is very much about the client. The sound creat[es] a sound-space for people to do their own work. It’s less of a like, “Oh I’m going to go to this thing and be healed.” It’s more of like, “I could go to this thing and work on some of my whatever I want to work one” (Sturk, interview, 11/3/17).

Sturk calls his work therapeutic rather than healing, further explaining that he is creating a space for his participants to work on a psycho-emotional issue. He does not claim that his sound-space, as he calls it, will heal participants, but implies that they may introspect more on an issue affecting their lives. If participants have something that they need to work on and choose to do so in the sound meditation, the event can help them heal what they choose. The word therapeutic in this statement still implies healing, but it is not a focused treatment.
Physical Effects of Sound

Some sounders take the physical effects of the sound into account when describing the healing potential of their music. Fabien Maman theorized that the physical structure of the soundwaves could alter cells and induce healing (Maman and Unsoeld 2008). Maman’s claims have been influential in sound healing along with the cymatics research that preceded it. Casey Attebery explains how he uses the concept of cymatics to vibrate organs:

By definition, cymatics is the study of soundwaves or waves - any waves - and so we study soundwaves. If you see how a steel plate can resonate to certain frequencies and will show the wells in which sand will fall into, it’s very geometric and so we can see sound induces highly geometric form in matter. If you take that to a higher level, you can manipulate matter to break as with a glass and a singer or a higher frequency/tone. In terms of healing, well we’ve got organs and we’ve got a nervous system that, as modern science is showing, operates at certain frequencies in terms of the relationship of the nerve signal impulses and the rhythms of these systems in our bodies. We can see how instruments can reach certain frequencies and overtones that can stimulate resonance in the human body, either physically or non-physically (Attebery, interview, 12/6/17).

Attebery implies that different frequencies can resonate with different organs, potentially to heal them. Specifically, he uses the term resonance to describe the type of healing. Resonance here implies that the body can be non-resonant causing issues. By bringing the body back into resonance, sounders can heal participants.

Attebery also brings up the concept of entrainment:

There is this concept of entrainment…an oscillator…can…entrain something else to it. That’s kind of where people utilize the concepts of binaural beats. I’m going to listen to this binaural beat that has a 1 Hz binaural beat…which correlates to, potentially, the delta range of brainwave activity. And they say, “Well the delta range is associated with things like sleeping. It’s helping the brain to create these types of patterns in them, so that some of those potential values can be experienced” (Attebery, interview, 12/6/17).

Attebery is referring to the ability of sound meditation to stimulate certain brainwaves, similar to the research on enhanced gamma wave activity during meditation. Attebery suggests that by stimulating delta waves, binaural beats, which are present in his music, change brain functioning.
Attebery also explains that his meditations include ultrasonic waves produced by digeridoos:

I’ll oftentimes start with the digeridoo since it’s so loud...and so powerful. It helps to pull people into the state of consciousness that we’re looking for - getting them out of their normal place and bringing them down and then working with gongs. [The digeridoo] creates very low tones. I believe the term is ultrasonic – soundwaves that are lower than we can audibly hear. If you’re ever in a room with someone playing digeridoo and they’re walking around it and you’re hearing all these different harmonics based off where they are and just these different low tones. It’s the low frequencies [that] have the ability to relieve energy from the brain. It’s that kind of low powerful droning tone [that] is really good at pulling energy out of the brain so that there is this more ability to relax (Attebery, interview, 12/6/17).

According to Attebery, ultrasonic waves are part of the meditation process, which facilitates healing. Sound works on the material body and the soundwaves and their effect on the biological system is the focus rather than the psychological or spiritual effects.

**Energy and Chakra Healing**

Other sounders utilize spiritual or religious language to describe the effects they report to see in sound healing. Sounder John Eustor of Bradley Beach, NJ gives metaphysical explanations of sound healing in a frame influenced by Dharmatic faiths. Eustor uses crystal singing bowls and gongs, which he refers to as “sound healing tools,” for their spiritual healing properties. He explains how these instruments are used to produce change to the energy system (i.e. chakras and meridian lines) of the body:

Each chakra itself has a musical note and a frequency associated with it...[that] can then determine which chakra that [crystal singing] bowl is going to help to open. The root chakra – the color is red – the note is C. If I test that bowl with a tuner, I’ll determine that that note is a C. When I play that note, it opens and clears that chakra (Eustor, interview, 1/17/18).

John Eustor sees his work as physically healing through spiritual means: by balancing energy blockages, he argues that he clears physical ailments. He describes his process:
I play the bowls for forty-five minutes to really clear and balance the chakras and then I play the gongs at the end: fifteen to twenty minutes to really flush out anything else that’s stuck in there - not just in the chakras, but in the meridian lines, anywhere else in the body, past traumas. If you’ve had a knee injury or a back injury that injury has blocked energy in there. And I find that the gongs really help release that blocked energy (Eustor, interview, 1/17/18).

Though stylistically distinct, the concepts are reminiscent of the work of Fabien Maman. Maman provides various spiritual explanations for sound healing, including note-chakra correspondence. For Maman, physical and emotional health are attained through spiritual health. This connection between the material, the psychological, and the spiritual is shared by sound healers. They view their work through this holistic lens, drawing on Eastern religions and a Western conception of health – a synthesis of ideologies that began with New Thought. This view also extends to those who participate in sound healing, giving a way for the participant to narrate their experience in meditation. For example, Lisa Arcoleo is a long-time yogini who attended a sound meditation run by John Eustor. Arcoleo describes her physical and emotional experience of the sound with regards to chakra healing, beginning with an explanation about how the chakras relate, metaphorically and spiritually, to overall wellness:

The chakra centers…are energy centers in the body and they relate to different things in the body. There’s a process of growth over the course of life that kind of moves through the chakras. The very base chakra is at the base of the spine and that is grounding. So that sort of relates to where we start out in life. We start with the basics and learning how to be physically in the world. Then, the chakras move up through the body…Ultimately, leading to the highest level, which is the crown chakra, which is when we are most in line with the divine (Arcoleo, interview, 12/24/17).

Each chakra, as she conceives it, corresponds to a different piece of wellness: when a particular chakra is not balanced, then an individual has a deficit of wellness. Many healers use metaphor to describe chakras. Arcoleo refers to the root chakra, for example, as “grounding” in that it

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20 A yogini is a woman who practices yoga.
suggests healing the “ground” of the body, meaning the base of the spine and mental/emotional stabilization.

Arcoleo describes her subjective physical experience during the sound meditation, relating each vibration of sound to a correlating vibration of a chakra:

[During the sound meditation] I could feel the vibration in the chakra corresponding to the frequency of the bowl… As the frequency of the bowls came up I could feel the vibration coming up in my body also. It corresponded to where the chakras sit in the body. It was very easy for me to feel that and it was very healing for me because it just brought me to a really peaceful place (Arcoleo, interview, 12/24/18).

Chakra healing is twofold for Arcoleo, representing mind and body healing. The physical experience of soundwaves, relaxation, and spiritual/metaphorical descriptions contribute to the experience of healing.

Guides and Traveling

Traveling, or journeying, is another common metaphor used to describe the spiritual experience expressed by sounders and meditators. At the beginning of sound meditations, some sound healers tell participants that they may “go” somewhere. The implication is that they will travel, either physiologically, spiritually, or mentally, to a place other than their physical surrounding. They may associate certain sounds with images and feel as if they have left the room. This is further explained by the language some sounders use to describe themselves. Chris Sturk, for example, considers himself a guide:

I think my relationship [to participants] is…like a guide. Even if I’m not guiding them specifically through my words, I’m guiding through the soundscape, and there is always a sense of guiding through my words. I’ll always say something, I may not talk for a half hour but there’ll be some form of that. I like to think of [myself in] a supportive guide type role (Sturk, 11/3/17).
Sturk uses the term soundscape, implying that he is creating an acoustic environment for people to enter.

Similarly, Jeff Nickell sees himself as a guide and explains that his music creates an environment for healing:

As sound musicians - as sound guides - we are simply just a channel of this energy...It’s creating an environment for self-healing. It’s allowing the body to kind of reach this state of homeostasis or equilibrium and reset things to a level that the...you get things like the relaxation response. Herbert Benson - psychologist from the 60s...came up with relaxation response which is just basically once we do reach that state of relaxation our body...I believe it’s the parasympathetic nervous system is activated, and the heart rate slows down. Our breathing slows down, and our immune systems are boosted or it’s an environment for our immune system to boost (Nickell, interview, 11/30/17).

Nickell creates a sound environment conducive to healing.

After participating in her first sound meditation, Karen Goldsmith describes the experience:

I think it’s a way to put yourself in a different zone. It’s incredibly relaxing and uplifting and you feel almost like you’re somewhere else. It’s kind of out of body. You don’t think. Well not too much. I’m a big, big thinker, so I kind of think a lot. But it really was very helpful to me because it almost transcends you into a different world, so you lose a lot of that thinking about things (Goldsmith, interview, 12/10/17).

Goldsmith describes how she associates imagery with sound:

I remember thinking about different sounds. I remember thinking oh there’s...sleigh bells and rainforests - a lot of rain, a lot of thunder, a lot of storms. Then, a lot of lightness. And like those chimes - kind of wind chimes. Really peaceful...peace after the storm. But the storm wasn’t scary. The storm wasn’t dark. It was really beautiful and powerful...It felt very safe and just very powerful (Goldsmith, interview, 12/10/17).

Goldsmith expresses her experience through imagery and emotions which are drawn from the sounds. Traveling into the “different zone” created by the imagery – into the storm, in a sense – was relaxing for her. The relaxation that comes with escape into another world is the most healing aspect of sound meditation for Goldsmith. Traveling is viewed as metaphor to refer to

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21 Name changed for anonymity.
the emotional healing of the participant. Goldsmith imagines another world and feels that she is there, bringing her peace, relaxation, and freedom from thoughts for the duration of the sound bath. These components form the meditative state.

Shamanic Healing

While some sounders see themselves as guides facilitating traveling, others see themselves as channels between the material world and spirit world. Shamanic sound healers, like Alvaro Romao, access the spirit world to heal clients. Romao explains his method of sound healing:

I’m using instruments. I’m using a plethora of different sounds…But I also start off…connecting to helping spirits that I work with, the spirit of sound, and channeling and merging - embodying the spirit to work through me. I also use a lot of indigenous types of chants and song and when I’m doing group sound healing, I’m actually doing healing. I’m not just sitting there playing. I walk up to people. I drum over them. I maybe place crystals over them. I’m rattling. I incorporate actual physical healing within the sound healing rather than people just kind of lying there having their own separate experience. I integrate more power for the person into the person. Rather than them just kind of meditating (Romao, interview, 2/9/18).

Romao describes the spirits that he is working with in the healing process:

I’m working with compassionate, safe, beautiful ancestral spirits... The person [being healed] is the recipient - the receptacle - of this work. I’m pretty much what we call a “hollow bone.” I am just the vessel between the spirit world and the person so the sound - the healing - just travels through me to that recipient (Romao, interview, 2/9/18).

The sound, for Romao, works as a channel for communication with spirits. Healing energy moves through Romao to the clients, coming directly from spirits. Sound healing is tied to spiritual beliefs in shamanic sound healing. Whereas other sounders describe their work as healing through the effect of soundwaves, the therapeutic soundscape, or the clearing and balancing of chakras, shamanic sound healers focus on a higher power found in ancestral spirits.
Psychoanalysis and Sound Healing

Psychoanalysts take yet another approach to sound healing that attempts to translate subjective experience into the analytic frame of reference. This alternative approach provides another perspective on why sound may be healing, focusing on the unconscious. The term “unconscious” here refers to a system of mental processes that are automatic and inaccessible and includes traumatic memories and childhood memories. The spiritual healing that some experience during sound meditation may be understood as sounders providing access to the unconscious to facilitate healing. This interpretation serves as a middle ground between scientific explanation and the spiritual explanations utilized by some sound healers.

According to music therapist, Joseph Moreno, the aim of music therapy is to induce an altered state of consciousness through music. This altered state consists of imagery that reflects repressed emotional issues (Moreno 1995: 331). The meditative state – an altered state of consciousness – allows the individual to travel into the world of symbols. Imagery takes the place of memory and emotion and provides a translation of unconscious material that may become conscious in retrospect. Music therapist Rebecca McClary (2007) explains, “Music acts as a symbolic representation for that which is inexpressible...[providing] for a direct pathway to the emotions and to the unconscious” by bypassing defenses (159). In the music therapy session, patients express personal stories/myths are symbolically through music performance. Patient and therapist then process the music together, allowing the patient to bring unconscious material into conscious awareness (Ibid). Sound healing acts in the same way according to Casey Attebery:

The most common...response is always that something happens to people and it has happened where we’ve been at...yoga classes. And we’ve had...attendees just run out of the room in tears. They...told the yoga teacher later on that they were just brought to a place of experiencing dark wounds from their past and memories that they had put under the rug and just started coming out and they weren’t prepared to address those things (Attebery, interview, 12/6/17).
Sound healing clients in these instances become aware of that had previously been inaccessible. The experience of being guided through these emotions can be healing.\textsuperscript{22} Although in this story relayed by Attebery, it may have been more painful for the participants. Memories do not always arise as imagery during a sound meditation. They can take a rawer form, expressed as emotion and flashbacks to a traumatic experience. Sarah Silverstein\textsuperscript{23} describes her experience during a sound meditation:

> Halfway through [the sound meditation] I was like I want to leave…It was just really loud, and it was making me feel really anxious and sad. My head was starting to hurt. I felt like I was getting a migraine. I felt…complete sensory overload, so at that point I like curled up in the fetal position under the blanket…They gave us eye-pillows, but I put the blanket over my head because I…just wanted to be hiding. Then, I had this weird experience where…as soon as I did that I was…outside my body. I just passed out. And I woke up - I think it was about 10 minutes later - just feeling fine and very refreshed. It was bizarre. It was so weird (Silverstein, interview, 12/15/17).

Silverstein’s emotions did not come in the symbolic form of images as described by Moreno or McClary, but in a pure emotional response. These emotions would later trigger a traumatic memory into conscious awareness:

> The panic attack that I had during the sound bath tonight was quite similar to the sense of panic that I’ve had in the past during violent or traumatic events in my life, but this was a very different type of panic… My panic attack was even more exacerbated because the other main time that I’ve been assaulted in my childhood that was how I reacted. I had this flashback to this…vivid memory of myself as a seven-year-old like curling up and hiding under the blanket like hiding from like the person who was assaulting me…It’s almost like I blocked it out of my memory and didn’t remember it until like an hour after the fact (Silverstein, interview, 12/15/17).

In providing access to unconscious material, sound healing may be a useful tool for psychoanalysts. Patients can experience sound meditation in a private setting (similar to

\textsuperscript{22} Attebery interprets this experience as a physical response to the sound:
We do hold our emotions in our bodies quite often and so if we are exposed to a way to trigger release in those muscles it does have a way to release memories that [we] might not be consciously [choose] to experience (Attebery, interview, 12/6/17).

\textsuperscript{23} Name changed for anonymity.
individual sound healing sessions) and discuss what they experienced with their therapist. Providing sound healing in the context of the psychoanalytic session can facilitate patient access to the unconscious while providing a safe space to express associations.

## Conclusion

Healing is separated into three categories: material (biological), immaterial (religious/spiritual), and psycho-emotional. Scientists, sound healers, and psychoanalysts all approach sound healing from different healing perspectives. Scientists study the quantifiable effect of sound healing – usually the physiological or psychological. However, this method of inquiry fails to account for the subjective experience of sounders and meditators. Sounders consider the physiological, psycho-emotional, and spiritual effects of their work. Casey Attebery for example, notes that sound healing works through entrainment and cell vibration. Chris Sturk and Jeff Nickell believe that sound healing is therapeutic. It creates a safe sound-space for individuals to work through issues. John Eustor and Alvaro Romao argue that sound healing transcends the physical and psychological. They attribute a mythology to sound healing, believing that the healing occurs through a higher power and energy system that humans do not fully understand. These perspectives form a belief system of physiological, psycho-emotional, and spiritual health that are connected to mythologized systems. This triad of mind-body-spirit forms the basis of sounders’ beliefs.
Epilogue

In the past century, modernization has rapidly changed the landscape of U.S. medicine. The medical field continues to grow as scientists develop new technologies and cures to help Americans live longer. No longer tied to its spiritual and philosophical origins, the field of psychology has been institutionalized by mainstream medical science. Psychologists are tasked with curing mental illness rather than helping patients learn more about their experiences. All of this is supposed to lead to a happier public, free of depression, anxiety, anger, and chronic illness. Despite these advancements, according to wellness editor, Lindsay Holmes, writing for Huffington Post, mental illness rates are increasing with 3.4 percent of adult Americans currently suffering from a serious mental health issue (Holmes 2017). Many are seeking alternatives to the dominant healing paradigm. Among other alternatives, some are turning to music and holistic healing.

Sound meditation is part of a lineage of what Molly McClain (2017) calls “alternative spirituality” (80) which emerged in response to the mainstream religions of the late 19th century. For example, Quimby, founder of New Thought; Baker, founder of Christian Science; and Blavatsky, founder of Theosophy all sought belief systems that cohered with the theory of evolution and offered spiritual healing. Today, in the 2010s, sounders uphold the belief systems of these spiritualities and continues the search for new healing philosophies. Like the Theosophists, they draw on Eastern philosophies to shape their system of healing.

Sound meditation provides something established medicine has been unable to. Whereas medicine targets the material body, sound healing targets the immaterial - mind and spirit. Meditators introspect, travel, relax, and heal in the soundscape. These experiences can be life-
changing: indeed, some claim to have been cured by sound and through sound meditations, which suggests that sound meditations can be personally therapeutic. They afford people the opportunity to enter a different state of mind - a state so far unreachable through medicalized material healing methods.
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**Interviews**


