“New Sounds to Imagine”: Coalition, Coltrane, and Mediating Personhood in San Francisco’s Fillmore District

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The Velvet Light Trap, Number 95, Spring 2025, pp. 27-38 (Article)

Published by University of Texas Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/vlt.00005

"NEW SOUNDS TO IMAGINE"

Coalition, Coltrane, and Mediating Personhood in San Francisco's Fillmore District

BY **ADRIANE PONTECORVO**

ABSTRACT

Processes of displacement and gentrification, often framed as projects of urban renewal and preservation, have long shaped the demographics of San Francisco in often drastic and inequitable ways. Once known as the Harlem of the West and today commemorated as the city's historic Jazz Preservation District, the city's Fillmore neighborhood has long been saddled with racialized narratives of blight and poverty related to its palimpsestic histories of primarily Japanese and Black communities, even as it continues to hold space for specifically coalitional institutions and services. This article examines two of those bodies, the Saint John Will-I-Am Coltrane African Orthodox Church and the community radio station KPOO, as interconnected mediative nodes in a network of sound, place, and personhood that work together in the generation of aural imaginaries that make possible anti-hegemonic reinterpretations of what it means to belong in San Francisco. Working with sources in human geography, cultural studies, sound studies, and public history, I contextualize and analyze a broadcast of the devotional program *Uplift* to better understand the existential value of these nonprofit organizations for San Franciscans facing large-scale erasure and their capabilities to generate new geographic possibilities that counter reductive, top-down narratives of local identity.

> When you begin to see the possibilities of music, you desire to do something really good for people, to help humanity free itself from its hangups. I think music can make the world better, and if I'm qualified, I want to do it. I'd like to point out to people the Divine in a musical language that transcends words. I want to speak to their souls.
>
> —John Coltrane[1]

DURING HER TENURE AS THE HOST OF THE RADIO SHOW *UPLIFT*, PASTOR WANIKA STEPHENS would often open her broadcasts with the above quote before greeting her listeners and pressing play on "Acknowledgement," the first movement of Coltrane's spiritually inspired 1965 suite *A Love Supreme*. For the next four hours, Stephens would present jazz music, public service announcements, and more of the words and wisdom of Saint John Will-I-Am Coltrane to listeners of the San Francisco community station KPOO. Broadcasting on 89.5 FM, a frequency in the band of the radio spectrum officially set aside in the United States for organizations serving the public good, KPOO's call letters reference its founders' conceptualization of it as Poor People's Radio.[2] Hosted by William Palmer at the time of this writing, *Uplift* is a project of Saint John Will-I-Am Coltrane African Orthodox Church (also called the Coltrane Church), whose history, like that of the station, is inextricable from the city's Fillmore District, an area of the city long shaped by racialized spatial narratives of blight and projects of alleged urban

DOI: 10.1353/vlt.00005

renewal within the continuously gentrifying landscape of San Francisco.

In this article, I argue that *Uplift* stands as an example of how community radio can serve as a space for performing counterhegemonic senses of belonging, resisting top-down projects of place like those that constitute urban renewal and gentrification. As a space, community radio is always in process, its participants generating power through behind-the-scenes choices that shape the layers of sound going out over the airwaves. Pastor Stephens and other KPOO programmers attune to their audiences by sonically invoking the spatiotemporal context they share with their primarily geographically local listeners. In doing so, they affirm the presences of individuals and groups that are often erased or displaced in mainstream discourse. To analyze *Uplift*, I begin to explore the institutional layers of city, district, church, and radio station between and within which the program operates before listening to a specific example to understand the performances that take place against this complex backdrop. I begin by laying a foundation of literature from the broad field of human geographies that offers possibilities for critical reimagination of space and place narratives and thus resistance to the hegemonies imposed through them. From there, I present the aural imaginary as a concept that helps illuminate the specific potentials of sound to shape these narratives, specifically invoking case studies of radiophonic mediation and mediated devotions that draw connections between community and spiritual practice. Equipped with this framework, I navigate the palimpsestic histories of place and displacement in San Francisco, with a focus on tensions between grassroots coalitional politics and top-down multiculturalist initiatives in the Fillmore District. The Fillmore serves as the backdrop for both the Coltrane Church, which I investigate with the help of a large body of scholarship surrounding John Coltrane as a spiritual artist, and KPOO.

Finally, and most importantly, I listen to a 2021 broadcast of *Uplift*, a show produced by the Coltrane Church that airs on KPOO. While I initially listened to this broadcast live on the station's web stream (at the time of airing, I was out of the state), I also recorded it on my computer using Audacity for purposes of listening to the program in detail after its initial synchronous broadcast. Alexandra T. Vazquez describes details as "those fugitive and essential living components that contribute, in very specific ways, to an event and its aftermath . . . things you might first dismiss as idiosyncrasies."[3] Attending to the details of *Uplift* reveals ways that Pastor Stephens generates counterhegemonic aural imaginaries of the Fillmore throughout her broadcast. Informing my analysis of these is my positionality as a born and raised San Franciscan with family still living in and near the city. Like others listening in the KPOO signal range, I bring my own intimate knowledge of San Francisco to my interpretation of *Uplift*, having grown up knowing and navigating its spaces and social dynamics as a matter of everyday life. Also inflecting my thoughts is my involvement for more than a decade with a community radio station outside of California, an experience that has shaped my understanding of how programmers relate to their listeners and the significance of these relationships to constituting ideas of community.

This positionality is integral to my interpretation. Vazquez writes, "There is no way to know the intention, to get under or to demystify [sonic details], but they can be engaged in creative work."[4] As I listen to *Uplift* with an understanding of the geographic and local historical context of both the show and its grassroots platform, I hear the transformative potential of each sonic texture and detail. It is ultimately from these pieces and the relationships between them that new and productive imaginaries of San Franciscan spaces and inhabitants emerge. Through my listening and analysis, I argue that *Uplift* exemplifies KPOO's mission to "open the airwaves to the disenfranchised and underserved" by expressing values of coalition and accessibility that work against racialized processes of exclusion espoused in dominant local projects and discourses.[5]

PLACE AND PERSONHOOD

In spaces claimed as American, geography and cartography have dehumanizing and deadly histories. In her poem "They Don't Love You Like I Love You," Natalie Diaz offers a succinct and poignant analysis of the situation:

> America is *Maps*—
>
> Maps are ghosts: white and
> layered with people and places I see through.[6]

In this section, I look to scholars who, like Diaz, problematize dominant understandings of space, place, and personhood to understand some of the forces behind racialized processes

of displacement in the Americas broadly and San Francisco specifically. The authors I cite here intervene into Eurocentric spatial epistemologies and call for reimagining relations between people and places through practices and performances such as, I argue, the sounds mediated over KPOO's radio broadcasts, which are produced in San Francisco's Fillmore District and transmitted across the city.

Maps and other dominant inscriptions of the Americas as named and defined by colonists reflect those settlers' perspectives and biases. Katherine McKittrick notes a history of "white masculine European mappings, explorations, conquests [that] is interlaced with a different sense of place," imbued with colonial domination and concealing spatial experiences outside of this narrow demographic band.[7] She suggests an intervention: "The relationship between Black populations and geography—and here I am referring to geography as space, place, and location in their physical materiality and imaginative configurations—allows us to engage with a narrative that locates and draws on Black histories and Black subjects in order to make visible social lives which are often displaced, rendered ungeographic."[8] Insisting on the visibility of these narratives, she continues, is not a matter of discovering something lost but of recognizing how "space and place give Black lives meaning" through overlapping material and discursive processes and understanding how "Blackness is integral to the production of space" throughout the diaspora.[9] McKittrick's work is an intervention against the centering of whiteness in what she terms "'traditional geography,' which points to formulations that assume we can view, assess, and ethically organize the world from a stable (white, patriarchal, Eurocentric, heterosexual, classed) vantage point."[10] Fundamental to this is an understanding of imaginative spatial processes in producing senses of place, including those mediated by community media such as KPOO.

Conceptually inextricable, place and space nonetheless diverge in politically critical ways. For Michel de Certeau, place "implies an indication of stability," whereas space "is composed of intersections of mobile elements" as "a practiced place."[11] Place is defined from the top down, its purpose prescribed and enforced through various material and discursive aspects. These, though, do not specifically determine everything that can or will happen in a space where place has been defined. Space is always in production, shaped by everyday processes and experiences with the parameters of a place. As McKittrick writes, though, not everyone's spatial productions are regarded and reified equally, with dominant social narratives typically giving preference to "seemingly predetermined stabilities, such as boundaries, color-lines, 'proper' places, fixed and settled infrastructures and streets, oceanic containers."[12] These too, though, are geographic imaginaries, albeit ones produced from relatively powerful social positions.

US history is rife with examples of these unequal imaginaries of place and people's relationships to it. Unpacking specific narratives of diversity throughout the nation can reveal convoluted tangles of social injustice. Ana-Maurine Lara uses the term "arrivant state" to refer to "the unique dilemmas of non-Indigenous peoples on Indigenous lands who themselves are subject to racial, colonial subjugation," particularly in broadly construed American spaces.[13] "On the mainland," Lara writes, "Indigenous and arrivant people are often pitted against each other in obscuring the colonial settler state through discourses and policies based on blood logics (for example), like mestizaje or multiculturalism."[14] Nancy Raquel Mirabal notes that in San Francisco, processes of gentrification and displacement are among those that hide behind such guises of multiculturalism while relegating certain categories of personhood to the past or erasing them altogether. "There are no memorials to the Filipino, Latina/o, artist, and working-class communities that have been forced to relocate," she writes, while at the same time, "signs hang in different neighborhoods renaming them as Little Saigon or Polk Village, and . . . the Fillmore Jazz District."[15] Such commemorations divide whole groups of people from an imagined mainstream and leave them either unmentioned or frozen in local pasts. At the same time, Black San Franciscans are disproportionately affected by rising costs of living in San Francisco. The 2020 US Census notes that as the overall population of San Francisco grew by 8.5 percent since 2010, the city's Black population dropped from 5.8 percent to 5.2 percent, continuing a trend human geographer Rachel Brahinsky traces back to the 1970s and attributes to unaffordable housing and other economic pressures.[16]

The remappings inherent in gentrification are driven by and reinforce white domination. Mirabal writes,

> For it to be successful, whiteness has to be embedded within a language of space that is rarely articulated as part of a larger revitalization strategy. There is also an acknowledgment, unspoken or otherwise, that the displacement of populations

> of color will eventually lead to the redefinition of communities and neighborhoods on the basis of whiteness. In other words, creating spaces where white bodies and desires and, most importantly, consumption, dominate and shape the neighborhood.[17]

Here, Mirabal underscores the presence of narratives and imaginaries in gentrifying geography, necessitating a return to Lara, who proposes that "imagining different geographies of personhood, of being, of consciousness, and of solidarity supersedes the limits and the problems produced by the arrivant state in questions of queer freedom: Black sovereignty."[18] I read Lara's work as a critical, performance-based intervention into the field of human geography that offers a way to counter the discursive displacements inherent in acts of commemoration and silence. Lara asks us to recognize the pervasiveness of colonization in the frameworks of sex, race, gender, and religion that are accepted throughout broadly American social orders, and, through recognizing them, to denaturalize and interrogate them. In Lara's work, identification of the taken-for-granted speaks specifically to the questioning of colonialist spatial formations. Like McKittrick, Lara seeks new and counterhegemonic imaginaries. As a radio station, KPOO facilitates primarily sonic modalities of performance over the San Franciscan ether. It is within the context of a San Franciscan phenomenon of gentrification and racialized displacement, and specifically the Fillmore District, a neighborhood that has been particularly fraught with such processes (the specifics of which I will discuss later), that these performances give rise to what Roshanak Kheshti calls aural imaginaries.

AURAL IMAGINARIES AND MEDIATING DEVOTION

The aural imaginary, according to Kheshti, "is our entry point to alternate temporalities and spaces, where our moving body meets our still body."[19] This is not always for the general good, Kheshti notes; aural imaginaries depend on hearing difference and distinction and from those deriving understandings about the world. Different entities may mobilize sound toward exoticizing or familiarizing ends, depending on relationships between performer, imaginary, medium, and receiver. In her studies of radio, Kristine Ringsager sees voices and music as working in tandem with broadcast contexts to produce multifaceted aural imaginaries. "Radiophonically mediated vocal expressions," she writes, "are inseparable from, and formed by, particular institutional practices, technologies and materials by which radio sounds are produced . . . as well as embedded within larger social, political and historical contexts."[20] While many radio scholars and practitioners frame the model of community radio as an antidote to media inequities, it demarcates difference in its own ways. Broadly, community radio is one of a number of community media that are understood "as independent, civil society based media that operate for social benefit and not for profit . . . an alternative both to national public broadcasters, which are often under government control, and to private commercial media."[21] United by guiding principles of accessibility and democratization, community media focuses on generating hyperlocal content for an audience usually "rooted in a specific geographic locale, which may also cultivate subcommunities based on shared interests and identities."[22] By discursively framing a broadcast context as community specific, it becomes capable of communicating community imaginaries within the material conduits and spaces of said community, including those of devotional practice. The presence of *Uplift* as a production of San Francisco's Coltrane Church on the local community station KPOO is one example of many.

Spirituality has long been a part of broadcast soundscapes and the aural imaginaries they generate. Tona J. Hangen traces the first religious radio programming in the United States to 1921, when KDKA, the nation's first radio station, broadcast a Sunday service from Pittsburgh's Calvary Episcopal Church.[23] In spite of some congregants' worries about the unholiness of the airwaves, Christian devotional broadcasting quickly became a mainstay of American radio. In 1938, James M. Gillis extolled radio as "a mechanical miracle" for preaching, though he was wary of its capabilities for shortening sermons.[24] Dorothea Schulz takes a more productive view of the medium, examining "how radio broadcasting, as a relatively new technology of 'mediating religion' . . . inflects the message it publicizes, and circumscribes the ways in which listeners engage with it. Such dynamics reconfigure public debate by fostering new imaginations of religious community."[25] Indeed, terrestrial and digital radio broadcasts of religious content have drastically reshaped devotional practices and soundscapes, especially within private spheres, for many

over the last century. In facilitating participation in devotional practices across large distances, radio and other mass media aid in the maintenance of what Benedict Anderson famously termed imagined communities.[26] The affective nature of aural imaginaries is powerful in connecting sound, space, and place even across a wide broadcast region. Inderjit N. Kaur writes that "alignments of sentiments and feelings, to those in sacred song-texts and associated practices and places," or affective attunements, link dispersed audiences of devotional media to senses of place memory specific to in-person devotional practices.[27] Experiencing such media in private spheres, writes Rachel Harris, "provides a particular intimacy and frisson to the listening experience and, paradoxically, a sense of companionship and community created in that act of listening. . . . Audio media like this impel us to pay attention to the affective power of the voice and the particularities of the voice."[28] Like the gospel go-go venues Alisha Lola Jones writes about, radio, as a medium with specific spatial dimensions, can create "alternative locations [for worship], somewhere between church and the streets."[29] It is from combinations of these alternative locations of broadcast and reception, human voices, music, and devotional content that aural imaginaries of place and personhood emerge.

As both a site and a technology of sonic mediation, contemporary community radio stations like KPOO offer numerous possibilities for connecting place and personhood through devotional practice. They circulate aural imaginaries attached to a strong sense of locality, aiding in the maintenance of imagined communities, whether across state borders or within a single city. Reaching into private spheres (e.g., cars and houses), often over both airwaves and internet streams, adds a dimension of intimacy to sounds of worship that affectively attunes individuals to a presenter and a broader, unseen listening audience conceived of as belonging to a shared community rooted in a particular space. To understand exactly what space KPOO activates, I next offer historical context for San Francisco's Fillmore District.

SAN FRANCISCO: A PALIMPSEST

In an article musing on typical San Franciscan speech patterns, writer Carl Nolte takes a martyred pride in being a native San Franciscan, bemoaning the onset of "newcomers" from elsewhere in the country and offering a tongue-in-cheek set of linguistic tells and place-based knowledge that he claims indicate whether someone is truly local. "No book tells you how to act like a native San Franciscan," writes Nolte, "because it is widely assumed that the breed, if it ever existed, is extinct."[30] Semisatirical, Nolte's article touches on a very real fear of displacement that has, in my experience as a born and raised San Franciscan, only grown over time for many San Franciscans as economic inequities worsen and gentrification drives up housing prices and costs of living beyond what most can afford; in 2022, the median rent reached $2,308, over $1,000 more than the national average.[31] Many demographers attribute a citywide population decline since 2019 to a decades-long housing shortage coinciding with a sharp increase in well-paying job opportunities in advanced technologies and thus allowing for high rents and costs of living to favor tech workers, many of whom come from outside of the region.[32] As Nolte's quote suggests, this makes it seemingly less likely to find San Franciscans with San Franciscan roots in a sense that implies native birth or a long family lineage.

But this is not a recent phenomenon. San Francisco has been a space of constant movement—voluntary or otherwise—for centuries. Its landscapes were important to the Ramaytush Ohlone who originally inhabited the land now termed the San Francisco Bay Area. By the time Spanish colonists reached the area in the eighteenth century, the "social position [of an Ohlone individual] depended in part upon his or her geographic location," stratifications that would incorporate Spanish missions over time and continue to be integral to Ohlone communities.[33] Some members of Ohlone tribes can still trace their lineage to the spaces on which colonists commissioned the Mission Dolores complex—and to the laborers who built it—yet the city often excludes them from decision-making processes about use of their land.[34]

In 1858, San Francisco annexed the land that now comprises the Fillmore District. Though it is today northeast of the city's center, it was at the time the city's westernmost edge. A "white middle-class neighborhood" left "relatively unscathed" by the 1906 earthquake, it quickly became home to a quake-displaced population of "working-class ethnic whites and people of color," particularly Japanese migrants and other Japanese Americans who were at the time ineligible for citizenship and could not own land.[35] "As a concentrated space of alterity within the formerly white

neighborhood," Clement Lai notes, "Japantown and the surrounding Fillmore became stigmatized," and that alienation would come to a head in the World War II era, as the US government forced Japanese and Japanese American residents out of the Fillmore and into inland internment camps.[36] Throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, meanwhile, "the immediate availability of jobs in defense industries provided the major impetus for the large Black in-migration into the Bay Area."[37] The city's Black population increased almost tenfold as workers, many from the American South, joined the newly burgeoning shipbuilding industry, which was one of the relatively few that allowed the hiring of Black workers. Facing widespread housing discrimination in most neighborhoods, many Black San Franciscans settled in the now-empty houses of the Fillmore. After World War II, San Franciscans of Japanese descent who returned would either come back to the Fillmore or find themselves siloed into other specific parts of the city.[38]

Wartime changes led to an increase in "willingness to form interracial alliances to fight for racial progress" by already active local antidiscrimination movements.[39] In the Fillmore District, the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, "the first 'fully integrated' church in America," exemplified coalition building in the neighborhood's religious sector upon its founding in 1944.[40] Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the district became known as the Harlem of the West and as a hot spot for musicians like Billie Holiday and T-Bone Walker.[41]

Other bodies mobilized imaginaries of the Fillmore's diversity to materially oppressive ends. Lai notes that "slippage between place and inhabitants" in racialized narratives of the Fillmore often linked blight to especially Black and foreign resident bodies and "operated effectively to justify urban renewal."[42] Lai traces a history of planned development projects for the neighborhood in the postwar era that fetishized the historic Japanese presence while leaving Black residents unacknowledged, noting that representatives of both groups "were excluded from the planning process and were substantively erased from early redevelopment projects beyond the salvage of existing community institutions, like churches."[43] Even churches, though, were not always stable neighborhood landmarks. Concerned about "racial balance" in its congregation, the Fellowship Church left the Fillmore District, apparently for fear of becoming predominantly Black, even though its congregation "was most often identified as 60% Caucasian and 40% non-Caucasian."[44] A planned Black cultural center failed to garner funding from the city government.[45] The essayist Conyus calls the 1970s Fillmore "a ghetto full of dope, frustration, alcohol, and a bleak path for the young Black jobless."[46] Local urban renewal projects have persisted into the twenty-first century in the form of the establishment of the Fillmore Jazz Preservation District and the Fillmore Community Benefit District, both designations serving to promote local shops and events like the Fillmore Jazz Festival. The latter of these "opens up a space for financially secure whites on Fillmore Street to enjoy Black culture and especially jazz music," which many Black Fillmore residents understand as "oriented toward drawing the city's white community and newcomers to the neighborhood."[47] Once made up of newcomers drawn to economic opportunity, the Fillmore District has become subject to commemoration, its Black population rendered historic in top-down projects aimed at attracting a different profile of newcomer. In 2016, after forty-five years of being pushed from location to location in the Fillmore District, the Saint John Will-I-Am Coltrane African Orthodox Church had its own well-publicized brush with historicization as it faced eviction from the area.[48] To survive, the ministry started holding services at Saint Cyprian's Episcopal Church, on the edge of the neighborhood in which Archbishop Franzo King and Supreme Mother Marina King founded and grew their Coltrane-centered ministry.

"SOUND BAPTISMS": COLTRANE AND COALITION

When the Kings saw John Coltrane play live at the Fillmore's Jazz Workshop in 1965, it was "an awakening . . . their 'sound baptism.'"[49] It inspired them to found the Saint John Will-I-Am Coltrane African Orthodox Church, guided both by their individual backgrounds in Pentecostal and Episcopal traditions, a "fluid spirituality" they attribute to the eclecticism of 1960s San Francisco, and by Coltrane's 1965 album *A Love Supreme*.[50] In 1971, two years after its founding, the Coltrane Church became one of the first Fillmore District organizations to host a show on the airwaves of the new community station KPOO, also rooted in neighborhood initiatives. *Uplift* features jazz music, primarily works by Coltrane and collaborators, interwoven with social and spiritual commentary. In this section, I connect Coltrane and the Coltrane Church through sonic, social, and spiritual

processes of building coalition to set the stage for *Uplift* as a collaboration between the church and KPOO.

The relationship between Coltrane and spirituality is a topic many scholars have explored in much greater detail than I am equipped to do here. It is, though, crucial to understand a few of the many perspectives that have already been explored, particularly surrounding the four-part suite *A Love Supreme*, established as a spiritual work from the start of the liner notes:

> Dear listener: All praise be to God to whom all praise is due. Let us pursue Him in the righteous path. Yes it is true; "seek and ye shall find." Only through Him can we know the most wondrous bequeathal.
>
> During the year 1957, I experienced, by the grace of God, a spiritual awakening which was to lead me to a richer, fuller, more productive life. At that time, in gratitude, I humbly asked to be given the means and privilege to make others happy through music. I feel this has been granted through His grace. All praise to God.

Though Coltrane was not the first jazz musician to occupy a spiritual sonic space, writes Franya J. Berkman, his "spiritual impact was singular; he imbued modal and avant-garde improvisation with spiritual significance, and, in many respects, succeeded in creating a new religion for jazz musicians based on what Ms. [Alice] Coltrane described as, 'the entire experience of the expressive self.'"[51] Berkman goes on to explore the incorporation of understandings of Eastern spirituality into avant-garde jazz, especially Coltrane's, as counterhegemonic work embracing a "notion of universality [that] welcomes, accepts, and even produces plurality."[52] E. Taylor Atkins takes a theomusicological approach informed specifically by Bahá'í practices, noting that the faith's framework of unity in diversity makes for a fruitful reading of the sacralization of jazz, particularly in cases of music that has "explicitly evoked Asian mysticism and spiritual practice."[53] Elliott H. Powell argues that *A Love Supreme* does just that. He argues for not only the personal significance of such evocations but the intertwined political significance. Powell situates Coltrane in a longer history of exchanges between African, South Asian, and their respective diasporic musical practices. He notes that Coltrane, critical of singular religion, "was most drawn to Indian spirituality" and that he engenders a "queer Black utopic space . . . of political immediacy that articulates with Indian spirituality and sound," alluding to how the music of *A Love Supreme* falls outside of white cisheteronormative masculine aesthetics.[54] Powell tracks interlocking sounds, allusions to Vedic chants, lyrical repetitions some scholars have connected to Sufi dhikr practices, and improvisational playing that "mirrors the vocal performance of an African American male pastor."[55] He concludes that "*A Love Supreme* gestures toward an Afro–South Asian utopic space," and it does so in ways worth understanding as inseparably individually spiritual and collectively political.[56]

Within Powell's framework, the Coltrane Church becomes legible as a space of coalition especially significant against the spatiohistorical backdrop of the Fillmore District's displacement narratives. Anastasia Tsioulcas's interview with the Kings provides some insight into the multiplicity of traditions they drew upon as they worked to establish the church:

> They practiced *japa*, writing sacred words over and over again as a means of meditation in the Hindu tradition. They pored over the teachings of Hazrat Inayat Khan, a Sufi Muslim mystic. They fasted and prayed for long periods. "When we first started out, our religion was Haqqism," [Franzo] King says. "*Haqq* is Arabic for 'truth.' 'Ism' puts it into practice. That was our religion. The truth is above labels."[57]

Today, the Coltrane Church is officially part of the African Orthodox Christian denomination, an institution sometimes attributed to Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association, though Byron Rushing attributes it singularly to Bishop George Alexander McGuire, who founded it with an insistence "on the independence of his new Black denomination" and with the belief that "Black Christians should have Black religious symbols."[58] By canonizing John Coltrane as the church's patron saint, the Coltrane Church situates him as a religious figure who stands as an alternative to white spatial, sonic, and spiritual domination.

SOUNDS AND RHYTHMS

Three blocks east and two and a half blocks north of Saint Cyprian's, where the Coltrane Church continued to hold services through 2020, sit the studios of KPOO, on Divisadero Street between Ellis and O'Farrell. In this section, I offer a short history of KPOO that situates it in relation to the Fillmore District and the Kings' church. From there, I detail my own experience listening live to a broadcast of *Uplift* and

analyze some of the sonic performances therein as critical community-shaping moves within the broadcast context.

Rochelle Metcalfe describes KPOO as "the first Black-owned, noncommercial radio station west of the Mississippi" and notes that it began not in the Fillmore but in downtown San Francisco, "in a garage in the alley of Natoma off 6th Street."[59] Helping give the station its start was broadcaster Lorenzo Milam, whom William Barlow calls "the 'Johnny Appleseed' of the community radio movement."[60] It was initially a very different project:

> [Milam and associates] founded KPOO in 1972 to serve San Francisco's inner-city Black population in the Fillmore District, but the station started out with a staff of white community radio activists allied with Milam. The conflicts that arose between the white staff and Black volunteers came to a head in the mid-1970s. Protests by African American volunteers and listeners forced Milam and his allies to turn the station over to a board of directors controlled by the local Black community.[61]

Indeed, some press pieces elide Milam's involvement altogether, focusing—rightly—on the work of the community members whose involvement was critical to the shaping of KPOO as the "first multicultural [community] radio station,"[62] with a broad target audience in terms of race that suggests a diversity in aural imaginaries. Pastor Wanika Stephens's *Uplift* broadcasts in particular work within a nexus of spatiality, spirituality, and politics of personhood that perpetuate coalitional aural imaginaries. In listening to a broadcast on November 30, 2021, via the synchronous KPOO web stream (a necessity for me while working many states away from San Francisco), I heard place emerge in numerous ways, some of which I explore in the next section.

Marking the break between the previous program (*Grown Folks Music* with Barbara Gainer) and *Uplift* were several brief prerecorded spots. In one, an older masculine voice with languid enunciation warmly identified the station: "KPOO San Francisco. Best station ever." A clearer call for fund drive donations followed. The sound quality of a promotional spot for the Fillmore Farmers' Market was significantly lower in fidelity, its lines edited together with little space in between. This gave it less of the cadence of casual speech and instead a higher energy: "We love the Fillmore Farmers' Market / Every Saturday it's popping at O'Farrell and Fillmore with the best seasonal fruits and veggies / Did you know you can use your EBT card at the market? / Yes, your food stamps. . . ." The spot ended with an entreaty: "Keep our money in our community at the Fillmore Farmers' Market!" A public service announcement for the local organization Senior and Disability Action led into one more station identification, in a child's voice: "This is KPOO, San Francisco, baby baby!" The many sonic textures here indicated a plurality of participants involved in voicing, editing, and otherwise assembling these messages, as crucial as the locally focused messaging in conveying through sound a sense of community.

With these prerecorded announcements finished, a few seconds of sedate instrumental music led into Pastor Stephens calmly offering her usual introductory quote from Coltrane. She welcomed her listeners to *Uplift* and informed them that they were about to listen to the music of Saint John Coltrane: "You know, that's the music to uplift and to inspire us all to realize more and more of our capacities for living richer, fuller, more productive and meaningful lives, because as Saint John Coltrane said, 'There certainly is meaning to life.'" The show began, as usual, with *A Love Supreme*'s first movement, "Acknowledgement."

Following "Acknowledgement," Pastor Stephens presented a brief introduction to *A Love Supreme* for those who might be unfamiliar, listing personnel and again quoting Coltrane:

> There is never any end; there are always new sounds to imagine, new feelings to get at, and always, there is the need to keep purifying these feelings and sounds so we can really see what we've discovered in its pure state, so we can see more clearly what we are, and that way, we can give to those who listen an essence: the best of what we are. But to do that, at each stage, we have to keep cleaning the mirror.

Pastor Stephens cited *John Coltrane Speaks*, the 1993 quote compilation self-published by the Coltrane Church, as the source of each quotation. As the show continued, her musical selections were not limited to Coltrane, likely at least in part because there are legal limits to how many pieces of music from a single artist or album can be played in one hour, as set out in the Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998. This show included selections from Sonny Rollins, Thelonious Monk, Alice Coltrane, Miles Davis, Wes Montgomery, Ella Fitzgerald, Tito Puente, and many other artists, often still featuring John Coltrane.

In her final break, Pastor Stephens made moves to situate the Coltrane Church, its congregation, music, and space in

relation to one another. First, she quoted the musicologist and Sufi practitioner Hazrat Inayat Khan: "Music is sound and rhythm, and if sound and rhythm were understood in their nature and character, then music would not only be used as a pastime, but would become a source of healing and upliftment." Immediately, she followed this with another quote from Coltrane: "I hear a sound. It's like putting a seashell to your ear, or like New York at four thirty or five in the morning." She thanked her listeners and sent "a shout out and . . . much love out to brother Michael, who listens every week as well," acknowledging her understanding that he missed in-person services, since the church was then holding services online because of COVID-19. "Certainly," said Pastor Stephens, "we all do miss being in one space, in one physical space." This allowed her to describe the Coltrane Church's Sunday services, during which she alluded to the precarity of the church's spatial situation: "As soon as we are allowed, we will be back at Saint Cyprian's . . . or wherever the universe shall call us, that's where we'll be." Finally, she explained to listeners how to access the Zoom services, thanked the local establishment City Lights Bookstore,[63] and gave her listeners a farewell before closing the show with "Psalm," the last movement of *A Love Supreme*.

In the work of Pastor Wanika Stephens as both KPOO host and Coltrane Church leader, a number of aural imaginaries emerge, mediated through broadcast technologies with distinct sonic qualities. These are evident even from the prerecorded start of the broadcast, when a range of contrasts in rhythm, voice, and texture calls to mind Olly Wilson's heterogeneous sound ideal, which presents an aesthetic "that contains a combination of diverse timbres" as desirable in African and African diasporic sonic contexts.[64] It may also indicate the accessibility inherent to the community radio ethos in prioritizing multivocality over standardization. Both interpretations bring the geographies of personhood commemorated in Fillmore urban renewal projects out of an imagined stasis through the liveness of radio. Throughout, Pastor Stephens does important work in community building and placemaking by bringing into conversation the institution of the church, the broader listening audience, Coltrane's music and words and wisdom, and other spiritual and musical figures. These sounds may come to listeners' private and domestic spheres, creating intimacy and, for regular church congregants, evoking place memory through the radio medium or through the online stream. They bring the Coltrane Church and all its interwoven spiritual practices, jazz fans, and other KPOO listeners into an unseen fold, the unity in diversity that Atkins discusses activated by the first sound of Coltrane's horn at the very opening of "Acknowledgement." In her work, Pastor Stephens invokes the coalitional histories, politics, and spiritual practices of the Fillmore and one of its most unique churches as she builds the radiophonic soundscape and thus sends forth aural imaginaries of community onto airwaves and online streams that cross and even exceed the city, countering geographic narratives of displacement, erasure, and commemoration with reminders that she, her congregants, and her fellow programmers, many of them belonging to groups considered locally historic, are still here, their coalitional community a vital part of San Francisco, still broadcasting live on the air.

CONCLUSION: STILL HERE

In an interview with the local online publication *SFGate*, KPOO disc jockey Adam Tadesse praises KPOO as representing "the old San Francisco, the real San Francisco."[65] Of conceptualizing Black San Francisco, Pastor Wanika Stephens tells National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*, "The people that you used to know for the most part are not here. They're just gone, they can't afford to live here. I don't even know how I'm still here, honestly."[66] This is not new or unique to one city or neighborhood, though San Francisco's patterns are especially glaring. Over the centuries, colonial governments, discriminatory policies, and late-stage capitalism have mapped and remapped what is today San Francisco through acts of displacement and gentrification. Savannah Shange draws on speculative Afrofuturist fiction in depicting San Francisco as a progressive dystopia. "But," she qualifies, "Frisco ain't fiction—it's a steel-and-soot city filled with flesh-and-blood folks. What does it mean to read and write it as a dystopia, traditionally understood as an imagined rather than 'real' place?"[67] She argues for understanding the city as a concrete dystopia, again suggesting the inextricability of materiality and discourse from each other and place.

Today, the Coltrane Church meets at San Francisco's Fort Mason Center for Arts and Culture, a nonprofit compound on land managed by the US National Park Service. Over three miles north of Saint Cyprian's, the services no longer take place in the Fillmore District. In the Coltrane Church's successful application for inclusion in San Francisco's Legacy

Business Registry, though, its continued connections to the Fillmore District and Black San Franciscans are explicit:

> For the last half century, Coltrane Church has been a hub of spiritual life, chronicler of jazz history, and advocate for justice in the Fillmore district. . . . The organization has provided free vegetarian meals to low-income and elderly residents, and held classes on health, social justice, and inclusion. It has also been a vocal advocate on issues that impact the Black community in San Francisco, including environmental racism, illegal foreclosures, and police relations. Although Coltrane Church has been displaced several times due to the impacts of redevelopment and gentrification in the Western Addition, it is currently transitioning to a new space in District 2 and remains the city's oldest Black jazz organization.[68]

In this article, I have argued for community media as providing tools for radically reimagining San Francisco's geographies of personhood through the mediation of the Coltrane Church's devotional practices. These mediations sonically evoke a coalitional spirituality that maps onto the Fillmore District's own histories of coalitional politics, which have often emerged in resistance to spatial domination. In bringing together Coltrane's music, his spirituality, and messages about local events and organizations on the community radio airwaves of KPOO, Pastor Wanika Stephens constructs and transmits aural imaginaries that work against the racialized blight narratives that have fueled urban renewal projects, reductive commemoration practices, and erasure. Her *Uplift* broadcasts make use of KPOO's framing as a hyperlocal platform, claiming belonging for Black San Franciscans by sounding a spiritual space for grassroots coalition instead of settler-driven, top-down multiculturalism. Community radio stations and live streams may be small parts of the metropolitan mediascape of San Francisco, but they make for potent alternative spaces laden with specific discursive values in terms of place and personhood, and are thus capable of generating new geographic possibilities through music, media, and devotion.

About the Author

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