8 Transduction in Religious Discourse: Vocalization and Sound Reproduction in Mauritian Muslim Devotional Practices

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In this chapter, I engage with issues of vocalization and transduction as one of the key dimensions of the materiality of language. The transformation of discourse from one material state to another through the use of transducers that are at the core of all types of media technology is a ubiquitous phenomenon. Here I focus on how the processes of transduction at the heart of sound reproduction technology generate the sonic presence of a reciting voice in another setting. At the same time, such transductions are also the subject of complex social and cultural valuations that are closely tied to assumptions about the nature of the media apparatuses in question. In this chapter I address the issue of religious language, with an emphasis on the vocalization of religious discourse. I pay attention to the ways in which discourse in settings taken to be religious can shift between different modalities of materiality through the work of transducers. Such shifts in turn can become central to the spiritual practices involved. Here, the work of transducing discourse is inseparable from religiously grounded notions about language, especially the dimension of voice and its role in particular processes of religious interaction and mediation. The analysis shows that transduction is not just an important issue for language-related issues of media anthropology in a narrower sense. More broadly, the question of the materiality of language is intrinsically tied to the issue of transduction, because of its pivotal role in the social circulation of discourse.

The theme of materiality has drawn increasing attention across a broader spectrum of the social sciences and the humanities in recent years (Hull 2012; Ingold 2007; Keane 2005; Latour 2005; Miller 1987, 2005). An important source of this interest is a growing intellectual dissatisfaction with the paradigm of hylomorphism, also among anthropologists (Ingold 2007, 2012). The hylomorphic model has dominated European thinking about the material since Aristotle and has tended to relegate it to passive, inert roles. According to this metaphysics, the universe contains an opposition between matter (*hyle*) and form (*morphe*). Entities and objects in the universe are the result of the bringing together of matter and form. Form needs matter to become actualized, while

matter is essentially passive and noncreative, molded into definite shapes from the outside, by the imposition of preexisting forms. More specifically, humans create objects, things, and other entities with material dimensions by subjecting “raw,” “brute” materiality to the agency of often abstract and mental forms that account for the shape and organization of what is being created. The hylomorphic model of creation has been enormously influential in the scholarly understanding of many fields of human activity, such as material culture and the making of artifacts, where human agency has often been located in the application of such mental forms to inert matter. According to this model, materiality is ultimately of little consequence for cultural creativity (see Ingold 2012 for a critical discussion).

More recently, alternative accounts of the creation of new entities, according to which forms are ever emergent in processes of creation, rather than the result of the imposition of preexisting mental forms, have drawn attention in the humanities. Perhaps the most significant instance of such a reconsideration of how processes of creation unfold is the systematic critique of hylomorphism formulated by Gilbert Simondon (1924–1989), first elaborated in his 1964 thesis. According to Simondon, processes of creation should not be taken to be the result of “raw” matter being shaped by preexisting forms, mental or otherwise, but as processes of “individuation” in which forms arise out of transformations of materials that occur when two or more elements in an inchoate, “pre-individual” milieu interact (Simondon 1992 [1964]). Such a “pre-individual” milieu is also what Simondon calls “metastable,” because it contains unresolved tensions and therefore at the same time energy (ibid.: 302). The emergence of new entities from such a milieu is a way to temporally resolve these tensions, in a process that Simondon calls “transduction” (ibid.: 313). One example of this is the appearance and growth of a crystal in its mother-water, but Simondon extends this model of ontogenesis to account for the emergence of new entities or “individuals” from interactions within “pre-individual” milieus across a broad range of physical, biological, and human domains, including social and psychological phenomena. For example, for Simondon the appearance and growth of social groups can be understood as a process of individuation effected by transduction.

For any discussion of the materiality of language it is highly relevant that the logic of hylomorphism has also profoundly shaped the analysis of language. One result has been the frequent denial of the significance of materiality in language as one of the key human activities. This is evident in the notion that language comes about by the imposition of mental forms on matter, in this case perceived variations of air pressure (sound waves). In the modern study of language, and of semiotics more generally, this assumption is most prominent in Saussure’s formulation of the arbitrary sign, where the particularities of the sonic material of linguistic signs are ultimately of no consequence for the

meanings expressed. In the Saussurean tradition of semiology, semiotics and materiality appear to be distinct domains, because the structures and systems that it takes to be the core of language are considered to be mental phenomena (for a related discussion, see Irvine, this volume).

Such an opposition between materiality and semiotics would be rejected by many contemporary linguistic anthropologists, who tend to follow Peirce's perspective that there is no semiotics without materiality (Keane 2003; Nakassis 2013: 400–401). This is clearly evident in the Peircean categories of iconicity and indexicality, which refer to sign relationships based on qualitative similarity, and contiguity or causality, respectively. But also Peirce's semiotics draws hylomorphic metaphysical distinctions. Peirce distinguished between what he called *Firstness*, pure qualities in themselves (tones or qualisigns), and *Secondness*, actual, concretely existing phenomena with their physical forces located in space and time (the instances of which he called sinsigns or tokens). *Firstness* (such as the quality of being red) needs a *Second* (e.g., the substance of a particular berry) to actually come into existence; that is, *Firstness* needs materialization in a *Second* to exist.¹ In another distinction recalling the separation of matter and form, relationships between instances of *Secondness* (tokens) are mediated by *Thirdness*; that is, regularities, laws, and mental representations (instances of which Peirce referred to as legisigns or types) (Peirce 1932b: 142–143 [2.243–2.246]).²

The mediation of concretely existing tokens through more abstract, conceptual types is also central to my discussion of entextualization and media ideologies in this chapter, because Mauritian Muslims evaluate particular poetic performances and the uses of sound reproduction technology by drawing on preexisting and widely circulating expectations and ideas about the poetic genres and the functioning of sound reproduction in question. The analysis of language in its sociocultural context often requires taking account of circulating categories of mediation that can be relatively autonomous from particular instances of linguistic performance, such as linguistic types, models of textuality, register, and genre, as well as language and semiotic ideologies, thereby committing the analyst to some measure of hylomorphic reasoning.

I therefore do not claim that the Simondonian critique of hylomorphism usefully applies to language in its entirety. However, my argument is that doing justice to the material transformations in language I seek to capture with the notion of transduction requires a thorough rethinking of materiality, away from the familiar and pervasive dualism of matter and form. The processes of transduction I discuss in this chapter are perceptible phenomena that generate certain effects. These effects lie in making a domain that is normally removed from the experiential context in which the actors find themselves present. Transduction then brings about presence. Such presences provide above all an example of materiality that already has transformative effects without the imposition of

mental forms. As I show, the effects of such presences more specifically lie in a rearrangement of the relationships between different domains, such as performative contexts of origin and the target context of performance, between divine and mundane realm, and in the Mauritian setting, between religious authorities located in other parts of the world and the Mauritian diaspora.

Examining vocalization in an Islamic setting centered on the performance of devotional poetry, in this chapter I draw on the notion of transduction to demonstrate materiality as a creative and deeply consequential dimension of language. This goes beyond the familiar observation that language is inseparable from the material. Not even Saussure denied that linguistic signs needed to include material existence. The point is that, at least for some dimensions of language, language as a human activity does not operate through the imposition of mental forms on sonic matter, but material transformations linked to processes of transduction can themselves be generative of linguistic interaction with their attendant social consequences.

Islam and Devotional Genres

Among Mauritian Muslims, *na't* is a popular genre of devotional poetry in honor of the Prophet Muhammad. These are verses and hymns of praise performed on important dates in the Islamic ritual calendar, as well as during auspicious events in people's lives. They are the central component of religious speech events known as *mahfil-e mawlud* held on such occasions. *Na't* has come to play an important role in sectarian differentiation among Mauritian Muslims. Mauritian Muslims are of Indian origin, comprising 17 percent of a total population of 1.2 million. The position of the genre in the production of sectarian differences closely resembles those found in similar debates in South Asia. In Mauritius, however, these debates are also connected to questions of religious authority in a diasporic location, where religious authenticity helps legitimize the place of Mauritians in the nation. Ever since independence in 1968, Mauritius has opted for a nation-building strategy eschewing homogenizing tendencies, officially emphasizing the origins of Mauritians in different parts of the world instead.

Devotional practices such as *na't* have a double character in Mauritius. On one hand, they are one of the manifestations of what in Mauritius is officially known as "ancestral culture," where in the discourse on "ancestral culture" the terms *culture* and *religion* are often used interchangeably. Mauritius never had a precolonial population, and in its strategy of nation-building the nation is officially conceived as a diasporic mosaic. Consequently, the origins of Mauritians in other parts of the world are officially highlighted, and membership in the nation is best demonstrated through the cultivation of diasporic "ancestral cultures." For Muslims, Islamic traditions are officially recognized as their

"ancestral culture" and, by extension, their claim to full cultural citizenship. Thus, the perceived authenticity of Islamic traditions pointing to origins and sources of authority outside Mauritius are of crucial importance in Mauritian multicultural politics, as is the question of who speaks for authentic Islam in Mauritius.

One the other hand, na't as a devotional genre is emblematic of the Ahl-e Sunnat wa Jama'at or Barelwi tradition, which probably still commands the following of most Mauritian Muslims, as well as the majority of Muslims in India and Pakistan. This reformist tradition originating in a late nineteenth-century colonial context distinguishes itself through its synthesis of Sufism and "ulema-based Islam" (Sanyal 1996). It emphasizes practices of intercession in which the Prophet or another Islamic authority such as a major Sufi saint is directly addressed for assistance and in order to accumulate spiritual merit (*sawab*). Opponents of the Ahl-e Sunnat tradition, such as the more purist school of Deoband or the Salafi-oriented Ahl-e hadith, generally reject such practices, arguing that they dilute the unicity of God, dangerously elevating human beings next to him. As such, the practice of na't has come to be contested, and its proponents, being part of an increasingly well-informed Muslim public in Mauritius, have become ever more aware of the need to defend its legitimacy.

Mauritian Muslims favoring the performance of na't acknowledge that it is a delicate genre because of the danger that the exuberant praise showered on the Prophet may elevate him to a Godlike figure. Mauritian Muslims often consider themselves as living on the periphery of the Muslim world and are especially mindful of the authenticity and legitimacy of their ritual practices in their diasporic context. They are therefore concerned about reciting the "right" texts composed by important scholar-saints. But the textual content is not the only element Mauritian Muslims are mindful of in the recitation of na't. The performative dimensions are equally important. That is, in the eyes of those Mauritian Muslims in favor of cultivating na't, the style and vocalization of the recitation are of key significance for the practice to work as a means of spiritual intercession. The aesthetic qualities of the performance, especially its vocal dimensions, are crucial for distinguishing a successful from a failed performance. The concern about authentic Islamic practice in the diaspora also extends to the qualities of the reciting voice, which is a sensibility that can be traced to the paradigm of Qur'anic recitation.

Sound reproduction technologies, in turn, are widely regarded as a means to safeguard and transmit correct recitational style, in a way that printed manuals of na't text cannot. The latter have long been circulating widely in Mauritius. Since the 1980s, however, listening first to cassette tapes, later to audio CDs, and now also to sound files downloaded from the internet has become very popular. Recordings of na't performances by accomplished na't khwan (performers of na't) from India and Pakistan, and also those of a few locally trained

Mauritian na't khwan, are widely treated as examples to emulate when holding a mahfil-e mawlud. My interlocutors often mentioned the model character of performative styles and vocal qualities of well-known na't khwan when preparing for a mahfil-e mawlud on occasions such as the Prophet's birthday or the birth or death anniversaries of major Sufi saints, weddings, moving into a new house, birth of a child, or passing important school exams.

Discursive Devotion: Entextualization, Transposition, and Vocalization

The performance of na't can be understood as a process of entextualization, in which chunks of discourse are continuously lifted out of one context and reinserted in another. This perspective stresses the processual nature of textuality as a constant alternation between de- and recontextualization of discourse (Briggs and Bauman 1992). In the performance of na't, Mauritian Muslims appropriate texts from previous contexts of performance and reinsert them in the performative context at hand. In the recitation of na't, the goal is to reproduce tokens of a type (the authorized na't genre) in new performative contexts, so they can be recognized as replications of previous tokens. The tokens are felt to be the "same" in relation to the semiotic type in question, despite the irreducible singularity of each performative event. There are two points in this process of entextualization that are particularly important for the success of the performance.

First, the recontextualization of na't involves a process of transposition. This means that the text is recontextualized in a way that points to its origins in another context elsewhere, thereby resulting in an authorizing effect. I hereby refer to Karl Bühler's use of the term "transposition" (*Versetzung*), describing the creative insertion of a text into a new context in a way indicating the former's origin in another spatial and temporal setting (Bühler 1965 [1934]: 134–140; Haviland 1996; Shoaps 2002). The target text features numerous deictic markers that point to a projected context of composition of the poetry by revered saint-scholars located in the past. These are primarily first-person personal deictics and verb forms agreeing with them, personal pronouns, and temporal deictics. In addition, there are numerous evidentials and locutives that have the effect of further personalizing the devotional discourse (see Eisenlohr, 2010, for a detailed analysis), indicating the stance of the poetry-composing saint-scholars and their religious authority. At the same time, the deictics and other personalization markers of the text are also ambiguous, precisely because na't texts are often highly personal expressions of affection and attachment for the Prophet and are often personally addressed to him. In the act of recitation in a mahfil-e mawlud, the Mauritian performers therefore also take personal responsibility for the discourse uttered. The "I" of the devotional discourse

simultaneously points to the person of the composer in the assumed context of origin and his religious authority, as well as to the reciting performers in the Mauritian target contexts at hand. In Goffmanian terms, the performers of the target text inhabit the participant roles of animators of the text composed by scholar-saints of a higher religious authority (who inhabit the role of the composer or “ghostor”); however, because the performers at hand also take personal responsibility for the devotional discourse they recite, they also shift into the participant role of the sponsor or originator who is held accountable for what is being said (Goffman 1974: 517–520). The replication of the deictic structure of the origin text into the target text underlines the personal commitment to the spiritual authority that the saint-scholars stand for and that is also claimed by the Ahl-e Sunnat tradition. This replication also constitutes a diagrammatic enactment of the continuity of the spiritual tradition concerned, in which the authentic and faithful transmission of devotional discourse plays a signal role. Here, materiality as it is evident in the iconic and indexical dimensions of language turns out to be central for the efficacy of the recitation.

Second, the qualitative regimentation of the recontextualized devotional discourse is significant because it additionally reinforces the commitment to religious authority, as well as the continuity of its tradition. This concerns especially the vocalization of devotional discourse. Mauritian Muslims consider qualities of the voice to be particularly important in the process of entextualizing na’t, which revolves not only around the transmission and repetition of “correct” texts but also around the reproduction of sonic tokens that in their perceived qualities conform to the desired and authorized generic type of na’t. My interlocutors frequently described the highly valued emotional vocal tone stirring others as a “clean” (*prop*) and beautiful (*zoli*) voice that “opens the heart” and that a na’t khwan should have in order to move the listeners toward deep feelings of love and attachment for the Prophet Muhammad in his performance. In the words of one of my informants, na’t performers should have a “soft voice that naturally comes from the heart of those who love the Prophet.” The link my informants drew between perceived qualities of the vocalization of discourse and a particular form of piety centered on being filled with love for the Prophet illustrates a more widespread phenomenon of linking qualities of the voice to subject positions or stances, described by linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists as “voice registers” (Mendoza-Denton 2011; Sicoli 2014; see also Harkness 2013). The importance of this voice-induced stance of piety for Mauritian Muslims who follow the Ahl-e Sunnat tradition explains their concern to preserve the singular qualities – or tones/qualisigns in semiotic terms (Peirce 1932b: 142) – of particular voices in the circulation and entextualization of na’t. This is in turn a chief reason for the eager adoption and domestication of sound reproduction technologies in the practice of na’t. Among Mauritian Muslims, the notion that sound reproduction technology –

formerly audio cassettes and later audio CD and MP3 files downloaded from the internet – is uniquely suited for safeguarding qualities of the voice is very widespread. For many, such technologies have a unique capacity for the maintenance of sonic tokens across a chain of performative contexts. Authoritative recordings of na’t performances provide Mauritian Muslims who favor the cultivation of na’t with models to emulate, not just in terms of textual continuity but also of performative and vocal style. This concern is in alignment with a dominant Qur’anic paradigm in Islamic tradition, according to which recitation of scripture summons the divine presence, and as a consequence, the reciting voice is taken to be the site where God reveals himself (Messick 1993, 1997; Gade 2006).

Sound Reproduction: Transduction and Remediation

The mediated circulation of na’t with its sound reproduction-assisted process of entextualization of devotional discourse demonstrates the importance of embodied linguistic practice for devotional life among Mauritian Muslims. But beyond this general observation, the domestication of sound reproduction technologies into Mauritian Muslim religious practices raises the question of the materiality of language in more specific ways, especially by bringing up the issue of voice and its aesthetics (Shankar and Cavanaugh 2012: 358–359; Harkness 2013). Above all, materiality appears as the issue of transduction from one material state to another (see Feld, Chapter 7, this volume). I here draw on Webb Keane’s recent discussion of “spirit writing” as a means of transducing discourse into different material modalities (Keane 2013). Keane is influenced by Silverstein’s formulation of transduction (Silverstein 2003), but in contrast to Silverstein, who deploys the term to describe the rendering of indexical relationships in another language, Keane focuses on material transformations of religious discourse. In a related way, the notion of transduction has also been recently taken up in anthropological work on religion and media (Engelke 2011). Above all, my use of the term is inspired by its long-standing currency in media studies, from the insight that the workings of media are based on the operations of transducers, devices that convert variations in energy in a physical medium into corresponding variations in another physical medium (compare Helmreich 2007). Sound has an especially close relationship with transduction. In the performance of na’t, transduction appears to be relevant in at least two ways.

First, the theme of the qualitative integrity of discourse across different instances of entextualization of na’t that appears to be so important for indexing personal commitment to and continuity of the religious tradition in question brings into play the opposition of vocal performance and writing. As I have explained, the attraction of sound reproduction technology lies in its

perceived ability to faithfully reproduce sonic tokens that help maintain the desired forms of vocalization of na't in performance. From the perspective of Mauritian Muslims who advocate the performance of na't, written na't texts do not afford this possibility. That is, those engaged in the practice of na't tend to avoid the transduction of the sonic dimensions of discourse to writing, because they consider the sonic dimensions as essential to the success of the performance. The transduction to a visually perceivable medium such as writing would reduce the vocal performance mainly to its textual content, which is insufficient for the task of religious mediation and intercession aimed at in the performance of na't. Although written collections of na't have long been in circulation and use in Mauritius, from such a perspective, writing should be used as an aide memoire only, and otherwise bypassed as much as possible in the process of transmission and entextualization.

Second, sound reproduction as a medium also involves the transduction of sound waves – that is, variations in air pressure – into a different material modality: “modern technologies of sound reproduction use devices called *transducers*, which turn sound into something else and that something else back into sound. All sound reproduction technologies work through the use of transducers” (Sterne 2003: 22, emphasis in original). That is, the variations in air pressure comprising the sonic tokens of the vocal performances recorded are transduced into variations in electrical voltage or current by a microphone, then into a sequence of numbers, and eventually into tiny plastic bumps of different sizes on a CD; those bumps then are read by an optical device emitting electronic signals encoding the sequence of numbers. These signals in turn undergo a process of decoding and digital-to-analog conversion, producing variations in electrical current or voltage from which a more or less accurate replication of a sonic token is reproduced. While transduction as a physical process, of course, applies to all sonic manifestations of language such as speaking and hearing – the production of vocal sound through the lungs and the laryngeal tract, as well as the perception of sound through the hearing apparatus and other parts of the body all function through processes of transduction – my concern here is transduction that involves the use of sound reproduction technology.

Let us look at the sequence of transductions that enable the conversion of sound into variations in electrical voltage or current through a microphone, with an analog-to-digital converter transducing the electrical signal into sequences of zeros and ones, the conversion of those numbers into tiny plastic bumps on a polycarbonate disc, reflections of a laser beam reading the bumps whose modulations read off by a photodiode reveal the sequence of zeros and ones, and digital-to-analog conversion producing variations in electrical voltage or current that are finally turned into sound waves again. We are confronted with a stunning complexity of material transformations of voice that in turn depend on a large infrastructure of electricity generation and transport, institutions of

knowledge production, and manufacturing networks for all components of the technical system of sound reproduction that involve the use of audio CDs.

How do these complex transductions from one material state to another feature in Mauritian Muslims' uses of sound reproduction in devotional context? First of all, they bring about the perceptible presence of a voice in a setting that is often at a considerable remove from both the setting of the vocal performance and its divinely inspired context. More to the point, this presence is a direct result of the processes of transduction at work here. In a Simondonian sense, such transduction is also an individuation that brings together material objects and forces in such a way that the generation of something new is the result – namely, the perceived presence of the voice with its social consequences. Since the complex sequences of transduction at play here create the presence of a voice in another spatiotemporal context, they have the potential to support particular notions about what sound reproduction is and does. In other words, the transducently effected vocal presence comes along with certain affordances for media ideologies or politically and culturally charged notions of what certain media are and do (Gershon 2010; Eisenlohr 2004: 25), which are very consequential for religious practices such as the recitation of devotional poetry in honor of the Prophet Muhammad. Mauritian Muslims often regard sound reproduction as the most faithful means of preserving and storing devotional performances in their richness and qualitative complexity.

However, the issue of faithful continuity that religious practitioners often stress across a range of domains, such as the reciting voice, the religious tradition in question, and their personal commitment to that tradition, appears to be in tension with the multiple and drastic material transformations and transductions that sound reproduction actually involves. This poses the question of how this tension is addressed. How does this tension feature in uses of sound reproduction in circulating the na't genre and for the modeling of new performances? Interestingly, Mauritian Muslims engaged in the practice of na't sideline the material complexity of the medium when pinning their hopes for the seamless transmission of vocalization of devotional discourse on sound reproduction technologies. This raises the role of underlying assumptions about particular media, here in a religious context, and of questions such as how such media work, who controls its channels, and what is being done and delivered by them. My Mauritian interlocutors emphasized that sound reproduction technologies convey, if working properly, a sense of witnessing a performance as if “live and direct,” which in turn enabled them to derive guidance from it. In the words of a teacher in his late twenties, “it is like the experience of being there, and listen to na't directly.” It appears that such a notion of sound reproduction as a perfectly functioning, and therefore “vanishing,” medium (Sterne 2003) elides the multiple material transductions and their dependence on a large and multifaceted social and technological infrastructure. Transduction's

material complexity of enormous extent literally disappears from awareness in the desire to find a technical solution for the problem of qualitative integrity of devotional recitation that plays such a great role in performances of commitment and continuity in this religious tradition. The fact that using sound reproduction technology makes a voice present and perceptible to all, regardless of how this process is interpreted, supports the elision of transduction's complexity. As perception is directed at the presence of the voice, such presence then easily occludes other material dimensions of sound reproduction, such as the technical apparatus and infrastructure generating such sonic presence.

The question of the materiality of language is thus closely linked to the question of transduction. My focus on language materiality as transduction, whether in the relationship between written and spoken language or in uses of sound reproduction, highlights that the circulation of discourse is a media question, inseparably tied to the materiality of language making such circulation possible. We could say that language as a medium of sociocultural life involves the work of transduction of one material modality to another. What is being made of these transductions? What is their significance? To begin to answer the question one needs to reiterate that transduction is foremost about material presence and its perception. However, it is clear that Mauritian Muslims do interpret uses of sound reproduction, including the transductions they involve in particular ways, drawing on semiotic ideologies (Keane 2003), such as in my earlier example of the logocentric notion that voice is a superior and more authentic means of transmitting devotional discourse than writing. Also, more specifically, media ideologies appear to be of great relevance for understanding the work of transduction. Here, the sense that the complex material transductions and vast infrastructure that sound reproduction technology involves become invisible, in the search for a "vanishing medium" that erases its own traces, is integral to the domestication of sound reproduction technology into the religious practices of Mauritian Muslims.

Gaps, Media, and Transductions

It is important to consider the various kinds of gaps that transduction and technological mediation help bridge. By mediation, I mean the objects or processes that link persons, concepts, or different social formations across qualitative, temporal, or spatial gaps. Language as a form of embodied interaction is one of the foremost forms of social mediation in this general sense. Its work of mediation involves processes of material transduction that in my example bring about the sonic presence of a voice. In this context, it is worthwhile to examine more closely the nature of the gaps being bridged by language as a practice of social mediation and by its material dimensions, including transductively produced sonic presence.

In my example of the media-assisted circulation of devotional poetry among Mauritian Muslims, both "live" performative events and listening to na't recordings on audio CDs address the absence of the original recitation and its divinely inspired context. The generated presence of the recitation then rearranges the relationships between this divinely loaded setting and the context of the performance at hand. This perceptible presence also becomes subject to interpretation, acquiring semiotic values that build on the affordances of the sonic presence of the voice. Sonic presence itself, in combination with the significance it acquires, brings about a narrowing of the gap between the two domains. That is, in my example, sonic transduction works as a form of mediating such gaps in a double way: by generating sonic presence that provides a ground for communicative processes and by providing affordances for interpreting the very act of transduction in ways that connect to larger religious contexts and cosmologies.

Given that the performance of na't revolves around the tension between absence and presence of the original recitation, what else can be said about the nature of this gap in the performance of na't? First, the stark difference in agentive qualities is one of the central characteristics of the gap. Na't poetry is most prestigious and authoritative if it can be traced back to revered saint-poets who composed the texts in moments of divine presence and inspiration. The agentive capacities of the performers of the target text are of a different kind, lacking the same privileged capabilities of interaction with the divine (compare Keane 2013). As I indicated earlier, in the act of performance they inhabit the participant roles of animators, who nevertheless also take personal responsibility for the poetic discourse uttered, because it often personally addresses the Prophet. That is, the effectiveness of the performance as an act of intercession with the divine also hinges on the provisional merging of the participant roles of animator and sponsor or originator and, by implication, also that of composer. This merger of participant roles is enabled by a key feature of the semiotic dimension of this overcoming of a gap: the fact that the text the recitation enounces displays the deictic structure of the target text performed. As I pointed out, the latter is regimented in such a way that it appears as an iconic replication of the divinely inspired context of the poetry's origin. The text features the semiotic structure of an indexical icon (the image-like replication of the structure of deictic marking) of this highly valued divine context, which works as a means to bridge the gap that opens up in the absence of the text of origin and its divine dimensions. The replication of the deictic structure of the text of origin and the qualitative integrity of its vocal reanimation in the target text regulate the event's participant roles in such a way that they mitigate the stark differences in agentive capacity that constitute the gap to be overcome.

In a somewhat less salient way, the gap also involves ontological differences between the performative context of origin and the target text. While

the assumed composers of authoritative na't poetry and the poetry's reciters in present-day Mauritius are both human beings in this world, the former are scholar-saints who are in a much closer relationship with the divine, this being the condition of possibility for their composition of the most accomplished na't. Actually, according to the Ahl-e Sunnat tradition, its founder Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi (1856–1921) composed his most powerful na't in moments when the Prophet appeared before him, in a setting marked and saturated by divine presence. Unlike in the examples of "spirit writing" discussed by Webb Keane where the materialization of language helps mediate the gap between this world and a clearly separate, spiritual and imperceptible world (Keane 2013), the ontological difference is more of a gradual kind, but nevertheless clearly relevant. The entextualization of na't in the target context also helps establish a link to a context of origin marked by the presence of the divine.

Another gap to be bridged in the successful performance of na't is the diasporic gap that separates Mauritian Muslims not just from the Indian lands of their immigrating ancestors but above all from sites of religious authority located in India and elsewhere. The latter also, of course, include the sites of the divinely inspired contexts of origin of the poetry, such as those found in the life of Ahmad Reza Khan Barelwi. The replication of the deictic structure of the text of origin and the qualitative regimentation of its vocalization – that is, the indexical iconic structure of the target text – also contribute to a closing of the gap between Mauritian Muslims of Indian origin and South Asian sites of religious authority. This is very significant in a diasporic context where Mauritian Muslims often consider themselves to be inhabiting the periphery of the Muslim world and are especially sensitive to the authenticity and correctness of their ritual practices (Eisenlohr 2006b). As mentioned earlier, the diasporic gap is not just relevant for questions of religious authority in a narrower sense but also is one of the chief themes of Mauritian multicultural politics and nation-building, in which the claiming of a diasporic origin outside Mauritius on primarily religious grounds is one of the principal means of legitimizing membership in the nation. Other religious groups in Mauritius, such as Hindus, have also developed ritual practices to address this gap, in a process of "diasporic calibration" (Eisenlohr 2006a: 245–265).

Turning to the circulation of na't through sound reproduction technologies, Mauritian Muslims value sound recordings of the poetry mainly because of the model character of the vocalization of the devotional discourse they can listen to on audio CDs. Uses of sound reproduction technology therefore assist in the task of maintaining qualitative integrity of the performed discourse, thus helping authenticate the target texts. That is, using sound reproduction brings about sonic presences, but the social actors involved treat these presences not as neutral, but rather as value laden. Given the importance of tracing na't to an authoritative source, this media technology is also deployed in the attempt to

bridge the various kinds of gaps between origin and target text as a perceived means of faithful transmission of na't across a wide range of entextualizations. It circulates authoritative recordings of accomplished na't khwan from context to context, across temporal and spatial gaps, and across national and regional borders. In reproducing prior authoritative performances with model character while using sound reproduction technologies, Mauritian Muslims support the process of deictically grounding the target performance in the text of origin, pointing to its divinely inspired creators, and appropriate the latter's devotional discourse for personally addressing the Prophet. It thus appears that sound reproduction technology assists in bridging the multiple gaps of agentive capacity, ontological status, and diasporic remove that the performance of na't seeks to overcome.

But the same material qualities that make sound reproduction technology attractive to Mauritian Muslims as it enables the seemingly faithful reproduction of voice qualities also make the technological mediation of na't subject to uncertainties. Because sound reproduction technology facilitates the circulation of devotional discourse with its "correct" modes of vocalization across a broad range of contexts, it also opens up the possibility of inappropriate recontextualizations. It may thus encourage the insertion of na't into contexts that stand in a problematic relationship with the ideas of embodied piety that the proponents of na't seek to achieve through its performance. One example often mentioned by my Mauritian Muslim interlocutors is the performance of na't in Hindi films, such as the classic *Mughal-e azam* (Asif 2005; cf. Asani 1995: 182). Here, the devotional poetry that often expresses feelings of longing and affection for the Prophet is reinserted in plots that center on romantic love. The perceived dangers of the Hindi cinema are not only present in the media-enabled traveling of the poetry into morally inappropriate contexts. In addition, the musical styles and aesthetics of Hindi film entertainment can affect the way na't is recited in mahfil-e mawlid. Even though the recitation of na't also clearly follows what musicologists would describe as musical movements and dynamics, including the use of melody, most Mauritian Muslims do not include such performances in their understanding of the category "music."³ The observation that some Mauritian Muslims are led to recite na't to the tunes of films songs they frequently listen to is of great concern to established na't khwan and others who have advocated the use of sound recordings of performances by accomplished na't khwan as a means of guidance on these grounds. Nevertheless, others have no objections to reciting na't "film style" (*filmi taraz*) and even advocate its accompaniment by musical instruments such as the *daf*, a drum that also resembles the *ravan*. The latter plays an emblematic role in Mauritian séga music whose performance is closely linked to the Mauritian Creole identity of Christians predominantly tracing their ancestry to African and Malagasy slaves. In Mauritius, as in many other places, uses of sound reproduction

technology in their everyday contexts are closely linked to musical and dance entertainment, which some Muslims regard as a danger, even though they do not deny the beneficial uses of sound reproduction technology in circulating devotional poetry. This shows how in the case of na't performances, the boundary between legitimate religion and nonreligion is not so much a matter of doctrine and preexisting beliefs, but is largely shaped by the aesthetics of performance (compare Tambar 2010). These in turn are inseparable from the materiality of the circulation of discourse. The ambivalent attitudes to uses of sound reproduction in the circulation of na't stem from the perceived danger that styles of performance influenced by "Bollywood" entertainment undermine the pious performance and its hoped-for benefits, and ultimately point to the vicissitudes that the materiality of its circulation brings about.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented a semiotic analysis of religious performance that takes seriously the sonic transductions that the performance involves. The focus here was on transduction as a material and generative process that brings separate realms into relation with each other. I argued that properly accounting for this process requires a rethinking of materiality, overcoming the deep-seated dualism of matter and form. I also sought to show that the materiality of language is a media question as well, involving at least two different modalities (see also Cavanaugh, Chapter 6, this volume). On the one hand, media – sound reproduction in my example – work as machines of transduction, enabling the social circulation of discourse, converting discursive tokens into different material states, and creating sonic presences in new settings. Closely connected to the dynamics of sonic transduction and its presences, we are also confronted with the account of media as being "in the middle" or "in-between" something and the question of their perceptible presence. This in turn draws attention to the dialectics between mediation and immediacy; that is, the oscillation of the medium between states of high perceptibility and its disappearance in states of expected and smooth functioning (Bolter and Grusin 1999; Eisenlohr 2009). In my discussion of Mauritian Muslim devotional practices and their medial circulation, the latter state appears in the assessment of sound reproduction technology as a "vanishing medium," seemingly providing "direct" access to valued stylistic renderings of na't and the qualitative regimentation of their vocalization. This perspective stands in stark contrast to the actual sequences of material transductions that enable the effect of witnessing authoritative performances as "live and direct." Rather than a vanishing medium yielding to desires for immediacy, the apparatus of mediation reveals itself to be highly complex and based on a vast material and technical infrastructure, revolving around relationships of transduction of energy from one material state to another. Nevertheless, a

perceptual focus on the presences generated by media that reproduce sound often encourages the occlusion and withdrawal of media apparatuses.

Materiality as transduction as the generation of sonic presence is the core of the media-enabled processes of social circulation of language I discussed. But it seems that such materiality of discourse, irreducible as it is, is nevertheless subject to very different states of awareness (compare Silverstein 2001[1981]) and that there are contexts where its presence is sidelined. More precisely, some aspects of language materiality may overshadow others to such a degree that the latter may seemingly disappear. Such is often the case when the sonic presence of a voice occludes the technical apparatuses and infrastructures where such transduction occurs.

NOTES

- 1 "The mode of being of the quality is that of Firstness. That is to say, it is a possibility. It is related to the matter accidentally; and this relation does not change the quality at all, except that it imparts existence, that is to say, this very relation of inherence, to it. But the matter, on the other hand, has no being at all except the being a subject of qualities. This relation of really having qualities constitutes its existence" (Peirce 1932a:279 [1.527]).
- 2 According to Peirce, not only qualisigns but also sinsigns and legisigns necessarily contain firstness, because the latter two need to involve one or more qualisigns. In addition, legisigns also require sinsigns, in this case replicas, because they usually occur in the form of an instance of their application (Peirce 1932b:142–143 [2.243–2.246]).
- 3 Such a normatively loaded distinction between music and nonmusic is also well known from Muslim debates about the recitation of the Qur'an. An important example of this is the long-standing "sama" polemic about the relationship between musical arts and Qur'an recitation, driven by a "strong suspicion on the part of many Muslims that the recognized power of music is somehow antithetical to the ideals of Islam" (Nelson 2001:32). See the commentary by Faudree in this volume for a broader discussion of this relationship.

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