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Haitian Vodou and Migrating Voices[1]

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This article looks at the relationship between Haitian vodou, sound recording, and migration. I argue that Haitian vodou has a special relationship with technologies of sound, understood in Jonathan Sterne's sense of media as embodiments of social desire. There is a parallel between vodou possession and the practice of pwen *(throwing verbal insults), on the one hand, and, on the other, the tape recorder's ability to manifest a person through the sound of his or her voice, making him or her present both in Haiti for the Haitian vodou congregation and in the diasporic land, thus bridging the separation across oceans and time. This transnational character underscores how Haitian vodou, which has been much maligned and often misunderstood, is an incredibly flexible and adaptive religion, necessary as a means of cultural survival for citizens of one of most economically disadvantaged nations, harshly subject to insertion in global neo-liberal labour markets.*

This article explores Haitian vodou as a nexus of the spiritual and the technological in light of Haiti's high mobility.[2] One in five Haitians works abroad, making Haiti one of the most transnational countries in the world. Specifically, I examine a development of Haitian vodou in the 1970s to 1990s when the practice of 'writing letters' using tape cassette recorders became widespread as a means for Haitians in Florida who had fled the Duvalier dictatorship to communicate with those still in Haiti. I will analyse these practices through the anthropological fieldwork of Karen Richman, as described in her book *Migration and Vodou* (2005), and use this to think through the role of sound, in its ability to cross borders and transmit cultural memory. As I will argue, the ties that defy the barriers of borders, the distance of time, and the separation from kin and congregation are effected through vodou's performance of community. This is made possible because of what I argue is vodou's special relationship with technologies of recording and reproduction. The belief in possession and the concept of being able to travel without the physical body find a symbolic resonance in media such as boomboxes that can move sounds around, taking voices recorded in one place and recontextualizing them in another. As a belief system that mediates between the worlds of the living and the dead, vodou can be understood as in itself technological – embodying the extension of human abilities beyond 'natural' limits.[3] Before analysing this, I will briefly describe the historical conditions under which vodou emerged in Haiti.

In the eighteenth century, Haiti, then called St Domingue, was France's highest-wealth-producing colonial possession. Vodou developed in the crucible of plantation slavery, adapting the millennia-old traditional beliefs of the Yoruba in

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Nigeria and the Fon- and Ewe-speaking people of what is now Benin and Togo.[4] Emerging as a response to the violence and repression of slavery, Afro-diasporan faiths 'have provided practitioners with a way to ideologically order the world … and challenge the exercise of white power in and over their lives'.[5] Vodouisants believe in an invisible world that interacts with this one, inhabited by the souls of the dead, who do not vanish but rather join this spirit realm underneath the ocean. The spiritual world of vodou encompasses the everyday as well as philosophy and politics. As the religion of the landless and the disenfranchised it carries a subversive potential against power. This does not prevent it from becoming entangled in oppressive politics, as when, for example, Haitian heads of state have manipulated vodou's symbolism to undergird their own political power.[6] The popular saying that Haiti is two-thirds Catholic, one-third Protestant and 100 per cent vodou suggests the syncretic nature of this belief system and its cultural importance.[7] Concerned with relations between parties, and by turns protective, combative, healing, adjudicative, vodou has been a means of integration into different cultural contexts. Ceremonies contain elements of the Roman Catholicism of the French and Spanish colonizers, such as liturgy, chromolithographs, and saint names, as well as folklore from Brittany and Normandy.[8] More recently, as an accommodation of the transnational neo-liberal labour market, vodouisants are increasingly converting to Protestantism.[9]

Historically, vodou has been a convenient scapegoat for demonizing rebellion. Ever since its popular association with St Domingue's successful slave revolution of 1791–1803, resulting in the establishment of Haiti as the first black republic in the West, vodou adherents have been persecuted by both church and state until as recently as 2012. Postbellum US white newspapers helped legitimate calls for military occupation of Haiti (1915–34) by propagating rumours of rituals involving child sacrifice and cannibalism. In 2010–11, vodouisants in Port-au-Prince were the target of lynchings that occurred in the wake of the US religious right blaming Haiti's 'pact with the devil' for the devastating earthquake.

Beginning in the 1970s, Haitian migrants frequently resorted to fishing boats, a precarious transport which necessitated aiming for the nearest US mainland – the coastal area surrounding Miami, Florida – rather than the traditional destination of New York.[10] In these small towns, they adapted the boomboxes being marketed to African Americans to implement a tape correspondence with those left behind in Haiti, while the latter in turn 'wrote' back with recordings of ceremonies, allowing those in exile in Florida to continue to participate in important ritual life. Unlike the older New York diaspora, those who fled Haiti's murderous dictatorship in the late 1970s and early 1980s were drawn from the economically most vulnerable classes and were most in need of the protective powers of the vodou spirits. Another difference was the less urban setting: Unlike New York, where vodou priests and priestesses turned their homes into temporary places of worship, congregations in Florida reiterated the spiritual importance of Haiti as the connection to *Ginen* (Africa) and the place of the ancestor spirits.

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Certain vodou rituals must take place on inherited family land in order to be efficacious. This is because vodouisants believe that relationships with the spirits are inherited along with the land and in Haiti,

> in contrast to other former slave colonies in the New World, many farmers own the land they work … But for many contemporary Haitians … [p]overty, drought, soil erosion, and overpopulation have placed large numbers of people in a position similar to that of their slave forebears … forced away from their land and away from the extended families that sustain life and give identity.[11]

Thus handheld cassette recorders that can be present at ceremonies not only bring the ritual to the one in exile but also sonically transport the diasporic worshipper to the ritual space.

Ceremonies themselves involve frequent movement.[12] Dancing, drumming, singing and the recitation of prayers invite the presence of the ancestors to become manifest. Cornmeal drawings (called *vévé*) invoke the spirits, who are offered food in a feast that is constantly refreshed and refurbished. Cassette recordings thus help to capture the perpetually transforming sights, sounds, smells and hapticity. The sender walks about, recording the incantations and drums, and adding a commentary; describing the various dishes, tallying who is present and generally conveying the visual and olfactory details for the one who is in exile. Those present – including spirits who have possessed someone – might also speak into the microphone, directly addressing the recipient in Florida. The recording also captures ambient sounds, the inadvertent documentation of details that do not carry content in themselves but transmit, for instance, the creaking of a chair or the noise of bracelets sliding down an arm. These moments contribute to the theatricality of the event, creating an intimate co-presence of listener and performer. In these various ways, the two spaces of the ceremony – as it is taking place and as it is witnessed by the diasporic subject – mingle in a new transnational performative space. As one of the few things that captive Africans carried with them to the New World, vodou has provided a basis for reviving collective memory and enabling contact with a realm of existence other than the one immediately present to fingers and eyes.

Voice has a particular status within vodou belief. Whereas in African Methodist belief personhood is equated with corporeal presence and the disembodied voice marks the absence of a person, possession within Haitian vodou practice ascribes power to the voice. In the moment of the spirit entering a person, the spirit announces itself through an altered manner of speaking, which is suddenly nasal (a peculiarity which François Duvalier reportedly mimicked to underscore an association with vodou spirits).[13] A voice speaking without a body is not considered a deficient stand-in but a presence in itself.[14]

The recording machines themselves contributed to this play of performative presence/absence. The portability of the boomboxes and their ubiquity at that time in the US correspond with the logic of vodou. Because of their mobility and their ambiguous use (for music/entertainment or religious practice), boomboxes lend themselves to the covert ways in which vodou was often practised at temporary sites.

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As 'Catholicism was the official religion of the colonizers', there was a necessary degree of secrecy in which '[s]laves and common people hid the spirits they knew inside their veneration of saints'.[15] Ceremonies still often take place at night, in secluded areas to which worshippers travel. The ease with which boomboxes could be moved suggests the ease with which spirits traverse the borders between their world and the material world. The popularity of boomboxes may also have coded mobility with allure, a view which diasporic Haitians might find comforting.

Recordings attained a cachet not only through the boombox trend, which allowed owners to discreetly exhibit their economic well-being as well as their ties to the US and the American dream, but also because cassette 'letters' fit well into the oral public culture of Haiti, which prizes verbal prowess. Recordings also had the advantage, as Richman argues, for those with little or no literacy, of not requiring a scribe and (being in the everyday language of Creole) of not requiring French, with its overtones of colonial hegemony.[16]

The practice of recording and sending cassette letters, which became so common that, according to Terry Rey and Richman, 'for many Haitians the verb "to write (a letter)" (*ekri*) means recording a cassette',[17] evokes an older performative practice called throwing *pwen*. To throw, send, or shoot *pwen* is a verbal tactic for conveying a message indirectly but in such a way that the intended recipient will understand the pointed message only if he or she admits guilt, fault or complicity. In Richman's words, *pwen* 'crystallize difficult interpersonal situations; they bare truths through elegantly clear and simplified imagery'. Richman recounts the example a Haitian gave her: 'You are passing by a place where you stole a cow. Two people see you and one says to the other loudly enough for you to hear, "man, this place doesn't lack for thieves!"'[18] The structure involves sender, (sham) audience and (intended) hearer. Set in the context of migration, *pwen* address the inequality introduced by capitalism; specifically, the global economy in which Haitians labour exhaustively to earn profits for wealthy owners of capital.

Cassette recordings have allowed Haitian vodou to be practised among the diaspora, a practice that continues now mostly via video recordings and mobile phones.[19] If the performance of vodou initially permitted the spirits to migrate to and from our world, then the practice of recording rituals took this interplay of the material and immaterial and transposed it to a performance context in which migration is actually taking place, in precarious and dangerous ways. The cassettes were couriered by family and friends, were listened to in the presence of a congregation or family, and were a reminder of the responsibilities and bonds of community that persist despite the enormous distances and difficulties of migration. The sonic performance of vodou thus partakes in a larger migration of sounds from Africa and the Caribbean – including, for instance, the cultural expressions of dub poetry and reggae – that enables transnational communities to emerge and carries with it the cultural memory of slavery. Through the use of *pwen*'s pointed messages, the cassettes also allowed a moral economy to be enacted, with the spirit deities voicing indirect criticism whenever it appeared that the bounds of community had been overstepped. If cassette recordings seem much more transient and ephemeral

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than written documents, that seems appropriate for a spiritual practice which has had to be creatively adaptive and fully flexible in order to negotiate the routes of neo-liberal transnationalism in the interests of maintaining just social relations.

NOTES

1 I would like to thank David Donkor and members of IFTR's African and Caribbean Theatre and Performance Working Group, from whose comments this work has immensely benefited.

2 The term 'vodou' is usually reserved for Haiti, whereas 'voodoo' indicates a related but distinct development in New Orleans. See Ina J. Fandrich, 'Yorùbá Influences on Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Voodoo', *Journal of Black Studies*, 37, 5 (2007), pp. 775–91.

3 I am adapting Marshall McLuhan's concept of media in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), but part ways with his technological determinism. Like Jonathan Sterne I understand media as embodiments of social desires; see his *The Audible Past* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

4 Reflecting the adaptation are the warlike Petwo spirits, who first emerged in the New World.

5 Michelle Y. Gordon, '"Midnight Scenes and Orgies": Public Narratives of Voodoo in New Orleans and Nineteenth-Century Discourses of White Supremacy', *American Quarterly*, 64, 4 (2012), pp. 767–86, here p. 772.

6 François Duvalier was said to dress and speak in ways that evoked Bawon Samdi, the spirit of the dead. Vodou is entangled with Haitian politics both indirectly and more openly, with vodou priests and priestesses as members of government (see Claudine Michel, 'Of Worlds Seen and Unseen', in Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel, eds., *Haitian Vodou: Spirit Myth and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), pp. 32–45, here p. 44); candidates might court vodou shamans during elections (see Alfred Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, trans. Hugo Charteris (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), p. 55). Under Duvalier the elder, an informal system of vodou priests and priestesses who acted as police informers became formalized as the brutal paramilitary force Tonton Macoutes.

7 Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 5.

8 Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, pp. 4–5.

9 See Elizabeth McAlister and Karen Richman's research on Haitians converting as an act of rebellion against the demands of the vodou spirits, whose messages conjure the moral economy limiting individual greed and aimed at redistributing accumulated capital. Elizabeth McAlister and Karen Richman, 'Catholic, Vodou, and Protestant: Being Haitian, Becoming American – Religious Pluralism, Immigrant Incorporation, and Transnationalism', in Richard Alba, Albert J. Raboteau and Joshua DeWind, eds., *Immigration and Religion in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), pp. 319–52.

10 Concentrated in the Florida counties of Palm Beach, St Lucie, and Broward.

11 Brown, *Mama Lola*, p. 36.

12 For a description of ceremonies see vodouisant Patrick Bellgarde-Smith and Krista Tippet, 'Speaking of Faith: Living Vodou', *Journal of Haitian Studies*, 14, 2 (2008), pp. 144–56; the anthropological work of French anthropologist Métraux, e.g. *Voodoo in Haiti*, pp. 233–46; Brown, e.g. *Mama Lola*, pp. 49–68.

13 Brown, *Mama Lola*, p. 185 n. 5.

14 In contrast, Michel Chion's influential concept of *acousmatic* voice attributes an uncanny effect to cinematic voices whose bodies are not locatable on-screen, connected to an 'interdiction against looking', which reserves immateriality for the divine and or the powerful. Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 19. For an important critique of Chion's concept of the maternal voice see Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror* (Bloomington: Indiana

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University Press, 1988), esp. chap. 3, 'The Fantasy of the Maternal Voice: Paranoia and Compensation', pp. 72–100.

15 Bellegarde and Tippet, 'Speaking of Faith', p. 147.

16 Karen E. Richman, *Migration and Vodou* (Gainsville: University of Florida Press, 2006), pp. 215–16.

17 Karen E. Richman and Terry Rey, 'Congregating by Cassette', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 12, 2 (2009), pp. 149–66, here p. 152.

18 Richman, *Migration and Vodou*, pp. 247, 219.

19 Richman and Rey, 'Congregating by Cassette', p. 152.

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