TRAVELING SOUNDS
Haitian vodou, Michael Jackson, and the Fisk Jubilee Singers

Sabine Kim

Introduction: Traveling sounds
Despite the best intentions of record companies to limit and protect songs as legal entities tied to one particular legal subject, music, singing, and sounds as such have the propensity to stray across boundaries of all kinds. When Michael Jackson’s dance routines are taken up by Filipino prisoners in tribute to the artist after his death, for example, and become a tourist attraction for visitors from all over the world, the cultural meaning of Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* becomes much broader than purely an *American* product consumed globally. At the least, it is also a Filipino global cultural good, circulated as a YouTube video that has received more than 50 million hits, with a Filipino performance context, an ensemble featuring the openly gay Filipino Wenjiel Resane playing the role of the girl, and uploaded by the warden of the maximum-security prison in Cebu. The reform aims of the prison warden draw on a Jacksonian history of artistic rebelliousness, intense self-discipline, and a rags-to-riches narrative to position the penitentiary’s mandatory exercise program as an innovative way to reduce tension between inmates, maintain their health, and facilitate a feeling of community. Warden Byron Garcia introduced mandatory exercise reportedly as a way to keep prisoners occupied in a pleasant manner while increasing their fitness levels. Pop music, and Michael Jackson’s music in particular, was a way of making dance acceptable to the male inmates (Mangaoang 2013, 47). More importantly, however, Jackson’s place in cultural memory had been bolstered by his sold-out concert in the Philippines in 1996, and his celebrity status (even diminished as it was by the time of his death in 2009) became a means for the warden to bring international attention to his prison’s unique reform measure. Jackson’s fame as an innovator of American pop, in other words, made him available as cultural leverage to internationalize the Filipino prisoners’ activity. This marks a point whereby Michael Jackson is no longer or not only American but rather has a transnational American status, infringing upon Filipino cultural identity and being infringed upon it in turn, as suggested by the existence of the posthumous Michael Jackson Fan Club of the Philippines, founded in 2009 on what would have been the artist’s 51st birthday.

On the one hand, the rehearsals and the dance practice at the Cebu Provincial Detention and Rehabilitation Centre (CPDRC) are a clever marketing strategy of the Philippine...
disciplinary apparatus, masking the prison surveillance and mistreatment of inmates within the format of pop cultural entertainment (see Mangaoang 2013, 52; Perillo 2011, 615–616). On the other hand, there is a dimension of defamiliarization of national identity that, although it may not necessarily have a positive effect for individual prisoners may nevertheless bring the fixity of state boundaries into question and allow existence outside the state’s authority to be imagined.

On the screen, a mass of men identically dressed in orange ill-fitting prison garb stumble across the CPDRC courtyard with the blind, inexorable movements of the living dead, visually echoing the menace of Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*. Inmates of Cebu Province’s maximum-security penitentiary in the Philippines, the men in this 2007 YouTube video are at the same time prisoners getting their mandatory exercise as well as performers creating their own version of Jackson’s short film. After the video went viral, the Dancing Inmates, as they came to be known, were seen on news channels across the United States following Jackson’s death in 2009, in a new version they performed as a tribute to the artist. Framed as evidence of Jackson’s global fan base, implying the putative power and reach of American pop culture, the news clips of the prisoners’ video were presented in a way that emphasized the performance’s mimicry as something derivative. Yet, as Homi Bhabha has shown in his seminal postcolonial analyses, mimicry in a colonial context is not straightforward copying by the colonial subjects of the supposedly superlative colonizers but rather very much a double-sided phenomenon, producing ambivalent effects (Bhabha 1994, 85–92). My contention is that the Filipino prisoners “re-enacting” a scene from Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* video grasp American culture and reflect it back in ways that defamiliarize—recasting race relations as zombie wars and suggesting the cage-like quality of all-consuming desire, despite its being sold to shoppers as their ultimate exercise in freedom. Significantly, the vehicle for this transnational exchange of cultural critique is a video shared on YouTube. The nature of performance, and in particular of sound, as a phenomenon that travels across borders, is often celebrated as something inherently liberatory. Yet, following the critiques of sound studies scholar Jennifer Lynn Stoever concerning the disciplinary aspects of sound (Stoever 2016; Stoever-Ackerman 2011) and power’s association with control of cultural archives (Attali 1985), I argue that paying attention to cultural practices involving sound enables us to examine invisible modes of social power. Sound under slavery, for example, had a close relationship to confinement and constraint (e.g. forced to sing and dance on the slave ship’s deck and the auction block to demonstrate the vigor that would drive up the sale price) and it is this tension between being confined by boundaries and being able to cross them that makes sound powerful as a transnational vehicle, carrying cultural memory across borders and intermingling the worlds of the living and the dead. In what follows, I analyse three instances in which performances of sound expose these power relations and social hierarchies and push back against their containment, namely, prison inmates compelled to dance; vodou recordings that remind diasporic Haitians of their obligations and ties to Haiti; and the gospel performances by freedmen and former slaves from America for nineteenth-century European audiences.

*They Don’t Care About Us* as a Filipino cultural product

The men in the prison courtyard form three masses. There is a group on the left, on the right, and at the front, each comprised of orderly rows. It is the Cebu maximum-security inmates performing a new choreography of Michael Jackson’s *They Don’t Care About Us*. The rhythmic beats, spaced widely apart, mimic the sound of heavy footsteps marching on concrete. The military evocation of this sound is visually amplified in Michael Jackson’s concert.
version played in Munich (1997), where the performers are dressed in shimmery metallic army boots and gold or silver uniforms. The corporeal language of abrupt turns, stiff legs, arms and hands fused in military salute seems to recall Germany’s fascist past in an uncritical way. But in the CPDRC, although the penitentiary context might be expected to reinforce the sense of surveillance through orderliness—the uniform lines of inmates who must display their conformity with the prison rules through the discipline they exercise over their own bodies—the choreography of surveillance is somewhat altered by the nature of the act of performing for a double audience. That is, the prisoners perform the desired docility for the prison officials and the media, but the prisoners are also actually dancing and there is nevertheless simultaneously a theatrical performance taking place, with all its possibilities for ambiguous interpretation.

The music, which has so many valences, enables these two contradictory elements of freedom and confinement, desire and dehumanization, to reside ambiguously in the selfsame gesture, vocalization, even the silence of what is unspoken. Áine Mangaoang has criticized the effectiveness of the rehabilitation-through-dance program, arguing that the skills learned do not equip inmates for re-entering social life after being released (Mangaoang 2013, 53). It is certainly true that the Philippine state benefits most directly from the performances, which are consumed globally and have shone a bright light on the CPDRC as a world-leading penitentiary (the warden was awarded a US prize for innovation in 2008). I agree with Mangaoang’s critique but would add that, in its separation of prison and non-prison life, the critique overlooks a certain continuity between the penitentiary and the workplace as common sites of neoliberal “docility.” The veiled coercion at CPDRC, with prisoners being offered special treats for participation, or with rumours of privileges being suspended for non-participating inmates (Senojan 2008) bears a resemblance to the forced voluntarism that Frédéric Lordon sees in the neoliberalized workplace, in which employees “happily” participate in their own exploitation in the form of unpaid overtime or agreement with unsociable shift hours (Lordon 2014 [2010], xii). With this modification, I am not trying to equate the conditions of prison and workplace, since that would be to downplay the rights violations in prisons that involve deprivation of food, overcrowding, psychological and physical abuse, and the use of torture to obtain confessions. Rather, I am suggesting that one of the reasons for the success of the dance program—which, after the CPDRC Thriller video went viral, was copied at eight other prisons in the Philippines, the government implementing a policy making exercise mandatory for prisoners—lies in the manner in which it succeeded in identifying this affective similarity between the happy domination of the workplace and the “big smiles” of the CPDRC inmates participating in the dance program (Senojan 2008).

In Willing Slaves of Capital: Spinoza and Marx on Desire, Lordon notes that past critiques of workers consenting to their exploitation have relied on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, “whose concept of symbolic violence aimed precisely at thinking through the intersections of domination and consent” (Lordon 2014 [2010], xii). However, the potential for critique remains “open” (Lordon 2014 [2010], xii) due to what Lordon sees as a “conceptual impoverishment” (Lordon 2014 [2010], xiii) concerning the idea of consent, too often reduced to the notion of voluntary servitude.

Rather, Lordon suggests we should focus on the curious operation of triangulation whereby one person’s desire is harnessed in the service of another’s power to act, resulting in particular affects, feelings of being “mobilized,” “reluctant,” “even rebellious” (Lordon 2014 [2010], xiii). How is it that we are coerced, persuaded, “made to” aid and abet a plan that is not of our own devising (Lordon 2014[2010], xii)? Lordon’s analysis of this “mystery of being recruited in another person’s service” (Lordon 2014[2010], xiii) sheds light on the

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familiarity of Filipinos with the coercions of overseas work. The deep structures of disenfranchisement make it far more economically viable for Filipino citizens to endure the risks, financial cost, and other tribulations of migrating in pursuit of work elsewhere. Roughly one in ten Filipinos works abroad and sends remittances home, making the country one of the most transnational nations in the world (Rodriguez 2010, 12).

In arguing that the CPDRC version of *They Don’t Care About Us* is a Filipino cultural product, and not a Filipino imitation of a US American pop hit, I am also arguing that the meaning of Michael Jackson’s artistic work has been altered not just for Filipino audiences but for an American public as well. The original’s audio sample of Martin Luther King, Jr., becomes the new focus of the Cebu version; where the Munich concert featured the Stars and Stripes unfurling from the stage in a gesture that, ironically, separates Michael Jackson visually from the audio track sample of King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, in the CPDRC choreography, a performer marches with a placard showing the iconic news photo of MLK addressing the thousands of demonstrators during his “I Have a Dream” speech, which draws attention to the moment when we can hear King. Here sound and sight work together. In other words, the Philippine *They Don’t Care About Us* uses King to insert the “King of Pop” into a new genealogy of black American cultural production that positions the latter’s aesthetic work as politicized and progressive. Where musician and journalist Bob Stanley could consider *Bad* as the artist’s response to accusations of “selling out to whitey” (Stanley 2013, 553), as an album that foregrounds elements of disco and machine soul, the musical lineage represented in the CPDRC performances align his signature moves with the dance language of hip hop, a cultural form with deeply transnational affiliations (Chang 2005; Rose 1994). The Michael Jackson who emerges in the Philippine dance videos is one who is implicitly heroic, as King was, and a fighter against injustice and an oppressive system.

**Haitian vodou: Maintaining the bonds of religious community in the diaspora**

Vodou, “the African-based spiritual world of the people of Haiti carried to the Caribbean by slaves” (Tippett and Bellgarde-Smith 2008, 145), is deeply embedded in the everyday practices of Haitians but is not always openly observed because of its long history of being maligned. Ordering the relationships among and between the living and the dead, vodou is a belief system that encompasses not only religion but also philosophy, politics, medicine, and the arts in Haiti. The common association of vodou with witch doctors sticking pins into puppet surrogates is false but very persistent. Stereotyped images of vodou as black magic were widely circulated in movies such as *White Zombie* (1932), with Bela Lugosi playing the evil sorcerer, and other Hollywood films of the 1920s and 1930s and were echoed in rumor-mongering newspaper reports about vodou ceremonies that putatively involved child sacrifices and cannibalism; these fantastic accounts were prevalent at a time when the US government was attempting to undermine Haiti’s success as the first black republic and to justify the ongoing US military occupation of Haiti (Gordon 2012). Although given official recognition in the early 2000s by then President Aristide,

[v]odou has come to reside in the Western category of religion, but still does so uneasily. It is made to oscillate between being the mark of alterity (for Euro-Americans) and the threat of rural popular political power (for the Haitian political elite). In 2003, it was made to occupy the space of “cultural heritage,” but since the
2010 earthquake, it has been pushed once again into the place of primitivism and anti-progressivism.

*(Lowe 2014)*

The US evangelist Pat Robertson notoriously claimed Haiti’s catastrophic earthquake in 2010 was a result of vodou’s “pact with the devil” (Wall and Clerici 2015), and during the elder Duvalier’s dictatorship, vodou was alternately used to intimidate opponents by claiming an association with vodou powers and to accuse others of being vodouisants in order to delegitimize them.

Vodou was traditionally the religion of the Fon and Ewe-speaking people for hundreds of years when it was carried by slaves from Dahomey (present-day Benin, Nigeria, Togo) to Haiti in the eighteenth century. Haiti, then named Saint-Domingue, was stripped of its forests and turned into a vast system of sugar plantations that was divided between Spanish and French colonial control. Haitian vodou emerged from the cruelty of plantation slavery, being one of the ways in which resistance to enslavement was articulated and it continues to be practised as a general form of resistance to oppression, its interventions creating space for queer identities, for example (Urbistondo 2013). The form of vodou, with communal gatherings, lent itself to political council as well. In both its philosophy, history of resistance to slavery, and social form, this belief system contributed to the Haitian Revolution and the slaves successfully overthrowing the slave masters and French military forces in the Independence War.

In this section, I argue that vodou is a transnational phenomenon both in its form, being located in multiple nations without any single nation having the right to claim it exclusively without narrowing its definition, and also, because of its social functions, in its contents, connecting persons across oceans and vast passages of time in a bond of spiritual community. Vodou not only circulates via relationships between persons in the community but also, and more importantly, creates those social ties itself. In this sense, as a performative act that draws together the material and the immaterial, the seen and the unseen, vodou can be thought of as an exemplary diasporic religion, through its potential to forge cultural memory and overcome physical distances and the barriers of the passage of time imposed by migration. More broadly, by looking at a specific development of vodou in the 1990s, when Haitians emigrating to the US continued to remain active in the vodou ceremonies taking place in Haiti via tape recordings transported back and forth between the two countries, certain similarities between spirituality and mobility, and between religion and sound technology, might be mapped.

**Vodou as transnational technological medium**

By looking at Haitian vodou as it developed from the 1970s to the 1990s, when Haitians began using cassette recorders to “correspond” with each other over the long distances separating the island nation from diasporic communities in the US, I am suggesting that parallels exist between vodou practice, which affirms the ability of a person to manifest in multiple places simultaneously, and the practice of exchanging “letters” by cassette tape, which is a different but analogous kind of “calling up” of someone’s presence while they are far away. In other words, whereas cassette correspondence relies on the physical operations of a cassette recorder and playback machine, vodou fulfils a similar media function—but without a material technological apparatus. I am not making an argument of technological determinism, in which the cassette recorder would be seen as an advancement—technological progress—that “improves” vodou. On the contrary, my point is rather that Haitian vodou...
lends itself to being practiced via cassette tape precisely because it is already contains the conceptual framework by which recordings are understood as an authentic representation of voice. As a communication medium without a material technological apparatus, vodou is itself a media network for sharing an expressive culture that is a crossroads intersecting the spiritual practices, social beliefs, and shared geopolitical histories of Haiti, West Africa, and the United States.

Approximately one in five Haitians have left Haiti to pursue work elsewhere. The incorporation of the Caribbean nation into this neoliberal transnational flow of capital has led to a separation of families and communities. Miami and New York are the contemporary key sites of Haitian migration in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Haitians forcibly impoverished in the late 1970s by the collapse of the agriculture industry—a problem linked to the extensive deforestation that took place in the colonial period, when land was cleared for sugarcane fields—emigrated to the US to work as migrant farm workers and then—after being punished by the industry for successfully suing growers for infringement of health and safety laws—were forced to other sectors such as tourism, construction, hospitality, cleaning services. This was the period when tens of thousands fled the terror and death threats of “Baby Doc” Duvalier’s regime and migrated to Florida.

This was also the age of boom boxes. Equipped with the ability to both play back and record sound, these portable cassette machines were affordable and easily obtained, being sold at almost every corner store. This ease of access to the technology was important, because it circumvented the lacking infrastructure and formal conditions necessary for a phone line (fixed address, proof of identity, credit worthiness, etc.). Those who have left Haiti stay in touch with those back home through an informal courier service—“[i]ndependent entrepreneurs … specialize in the business of ’coming and going’” and allow the safe and efficient delivery of money, correspondence and gifts (Richman 2005). For example, the rural village of Ti Rivyè has parcel service delivered by a man who makes biweekly trips between there and Palm Beach (Richman 2002, 120). The boom box is “an appropriate gift to send back home, best if the price tag is still conspicuously attached” (Richman 2002, 121). The enduring popularity of cassette recordings for facilitating vodou communities abroad and at home in Haiti to remain bound together had several reasons.

Audio and video recordings have been a means for the subjugated poor in Haiti to engage with family who have migrated to the US and elsewhere. Popular because they enable a kind of oral “writing” of letters in Creole and thus overcome the barrier for the illiterate poor, as well as avoiding French as the language of the colonial past, cassette recordings were in increasingly wide circulation in the 1980s and 1990s.

As a sign of their popularity, the anthropologist Karen Richman comments “[c]orresponding by cassette became so normal that for many Haitians the verb ‘to write (a letter)’ (ekni) means recording a cassette rather than putting pen to paper or typing an email” (Richman and Rey 2009, 151–152). Cassette letters are a special form of correspondence, with characteristics that are unique to the genre: “formulaic greetings, salutations, routines for posing questions to a range of listeners, and patterns for talking about accompanying or forthcoming remittances, even patterned ways of interaction with the ‘writer’s’ voice while listening to his or her tape” (Richman 2002, 120–121). However, even after the advent of cell phones, for vodou practitioners who no longer lived in Haiti, cassette recordings of rituals remained the best means of attending the ceremonies in absentia. Certain ritual ceremonies can only take place on family land, which is why the cassette recordings of these events fulfill an important function by allowing worshippers who have migrated away to vicariously participate in the communal gatherings.
Here I am trying to argue that there is a certain affinity between vodou as a belief system and the exchange of cassette recordings across the diaspora as a communications system. Cassette recording has certain qualities, and the portability of the boom boxes which in themselves are a material symbol of the “portability” of religious faith, tie in well with vodou practices.

Tapes were venues for extending an oral culture that prizes proverbs, figurative, indirect language, antiphony and fluid shifting between speech and song, especially verses drawn from the sacred song repertoire. ‘Persons of words’ exploited the medium to maintain and advance their vocal reputations across the vast distances separating members of their communities.

(Richman and Rey 2009, 152)

Moreover, it was the very manner in which cassette correspondence proceeded that also lent it the feel of a ritual. Both the composing of a cassette (ekri) and the event of receiving and listening to a recording took place in public and had thus a collective nature by default. Family gathered around, and if something on the recording was said that provoked a reaction, the speaker on the tape was addressed as if he or she were present and able to answer. Recipients of the cassette letters “frequently interact antiphonally with the voice as if the speaker were present, interjecting ‘yes,’ ‘no’, ‘oh my’ and the like” (Richman 2002, 121).

This shared relationship could be seen as an extension of the shared ritual space of vodou. “At rituals unfolding on family land back home, worshippers and spirits who appear ‘in person’ at ceremonies personally address far-off migrants” (Richman 2002, 121). When a ceremony was being recorded on audio tape, the prayers, songs, and spoken words formed an important content but, equally vital for the person far away in Miami or New Orleans, was the ability to hear the ambient sounds of the ceremony, the chattering among the worshippers, the rustle of someone’s dress as they walked past the microphone, the rumble of the drums. All of these noises, which have no narrative content of their own, nevertheless add to the dramaturgy of the event. They function to create a theatrical situation and to create the co-presence of performer and spectator. Another layer of audition consisted of a running commentary by the person recording the ritual, who would describe the food and other offerings, the rich visual feast of the constantly moving things, persons, spirits. Through this murmured commentary and the direct address implied, the recipient of the tape would feel the bond of religious community.

The transatlantic tours of the Fisk Jubilee Singers

Touring in the years following emancipation, the Fisk Jubilee Singers were the first black professional ensemble to perform Negro spirituals in public concerts. Starting from the 1870s in the United States and moving abroad to Europe, India, Australia and New Zealand, and South Africa, their songs were in a sense partially travelling the same transnational circuits of the Middle Passage but with a different exchange being effected. On the one hand, the Fisk performers called slavery into the remembrance of their audiences, performing cultural memory within a sacred, serious sphere that spoke back to the racializing and appropriative constructions of the minstrel shows, which were also popular at the time (Gilroy 1993, 89). On the other hand, through their adaptation for public performance of the spirituals—which were historically sung in the cotton fields and other sites of the slave plantation, and which often spoke in coded terms of escape to freedom—in concert halls, churches, and private
homes, the Jubilee Singers opened a self-reflexive relation to slavery, a space from which to ponder and act upon the aftermath of slavery and the reconciliation work ahead (Stoever 2016). The choir’s formal evening dress and dignified bearing underscored the professionalism of the singers, who negotiated a new form of black subjectivity through their performances (Brooks 2006, 311). Through this sonic performance of memory and history, the Fisk choir also, I would argue, created a form of “moral capital,” in which their presence affirmed the social justice of the abolitionist movement but also subtly suggested that the moral debt created by the slave trade, Middle Passage, and slavery remained to be redressed.

Part of the power of the Jubilee performance style, which attracted European audiences in the thousands (Metzelaar 2005, 76), lay in the singers’ development of the spiritual, itself already a syncretic form. African American spirituals were “powerful freedom songs” (Newman 1998, 25), being created under the conditions of slavery originally by Africans, who preserved African cultural forms in the musical structures of the typical call-and-response construction but adapted Bible verse for the texts that testify to suffering and also refer in open and covert ways to liberation, constituting a more private and autonomous relationship to God than the one imposed in the slaveholder’s church (Shuker 2012, 458).[3] Spirituals have a claim to being the first African American musical cultural form indigenous to the United States (Newman 1998, 18), but in 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois had already gone one step further by asserting that America cannot be imagined without the history and experience of African Americans as testified to in spirituals. The totality of American music (and not only African American music) is expressed in those “sorrow songs,” which constitute “the sole American music” (Du Bois 2008, 62).

The Jubilee Singers, though Du Bois seems to have had them in mind when he praises the spiritual as a quintessential form, introduced a new style, however, which was responsive to the changing listening practices of nineteenth-century transatlantic audiences. Under the influence of abolitionists, both black and white, whose political work engaged a discourse of sentimentalism, white observers of black music-making were encouraged to attach emotion to the performances (Cruz 1999, 3–4). To support the didactic effect, the Jubilee performers strove for crisp enunciation so that the song texts could be clearly heard and the suffering fully grasped. The expressive gestures of swaying body and the stamping of feet which often accompanied early spirituals were also minimalized or done away with altogether. Yet although these changes may seem to suggest that the African American spiritual was diluted for a European performance context, I argue that many other performance elements underscored the history of African American slavery—including not only the group’s refusal to sing before segregated audiences (Ward 2000, xiii–xiv) but also the choice of repertoire and the decision to travel to Europe, with its colonial history of slavery.

Though frequently confronted by racism, whether in the form of being refused accommodation in hotels or more subtly through exoticizing praise, the choir negotiated a transnational space for their work of cultural memory and moral settling of the debts of slavery. For one thing, the concerts in the Netherlands would usually begin with “Steal Away to Jesus” and often included “John Brown’s Body” for the encore (Metzelaar 2005, 71). The first spiritual was one that, during slavery, was traditionally sung as a signal that there would be a religious gathering in secret that night (Raboteau 1992). As Albert Raboteau explains, “[t]he religion of the slaves was both visible and invisible, formally organized and spontaneously adapted. Regular Sunday worship in the local church was paralleled by illicit, or at least informal, prayer meetings on weeknights in the slave cabins” (Raboteau 1992). By framing their concert performances with this song, the Jubilee Singers inserted another dimension of time and space into the European concert hall. This space was doubly magical, since it relied on knowledge of the song’s significance as a notice of the secret prayer
meeting. The choice of song marked the nature of the performance as both commercial—aiming to raise funds for Fisk University, a HBCU—and also spiritual. Finally, “Steal Away to Jesus” could be interpreted as a potential directive for white members of the audience with reformist leanings; whereas the revivalist style of hymns often featured salvation by divine intervention, African American spirituals generally emphasized the agency of the slave, who relies on his or her own mobility to flee oppression (Stowe 105–106, quoted in Shuker 2012, 459).

Closing with “John Brown’s Body,” a tribute to the abolitionist who died at the failed Harpers Ferry insurrection, the Jubilee Singers might again be directing a message to white abolitionists, reminding them that the fight against racial injustice is not yet finished. In other ways, too, the black choral group framed their performances as an exchange of perspectives, refusing to be subjected to the one-way gaze at exotic songsters. Helen Metzelaar notes, for instance, of the choir’s reception in the Netherlands that “[t]heir Dutch hosts preferred to concentrate on slavery in the United States” (Metzelaar 2005, 79). In fact, it was the Jubilee Singers themselves who prompted such reflection, “through donating the proceedings of their farewell concert … to the recently freed slaves in the Dutch colony Surinam.” In contrast, “[t]heir Dutch hosts preferred to concentrate on slavery in the United States” (Metzelaar 2005, 79). This response shows the contradiction of intimate song, which may bring the subject of the spirituals into close focus but yet leave self-reflexive criticism, and implications of complicity, open. For the Jubilee Singers, taking the African American spiritual to Europe, and symbolically reversing the Middle Passage, was a way of interacting with the past as a living history. The singing of spirituals was both an indirect message made through the coded and signifying texts and also a vehicle for activism insofar as gathering for song has the potential to create community because of the proximity and scale of many bodies assembled in one place (cf. Henriques 2003; Veal 2013).

Notes

1 The spelling variants vodou versus voodoo indicate the separate developments of the religion in Haiti and in Louisiana respectively. Fandrich notes that “voodoo” is also commonly used by English speakers as a catch-all term for everything they imagine, rightly or wrongly, to be associated with it. See Fandrich (2007, 776–779, esp. 779), for an explanation and discussion of the historical developments of the word, also including “vodun” and “voudou.”

2 See Sterne (2003) for the argument that technological media are manifestations of social desires and beliefs; he maps a cultural history of sound reproduction technologies in the Victorian period.

3 See McGinley for an argument that John and Alan Lomax’s collecting of the songs sung by African Americans as they worked in fields and prisons comprises a means of staging music as a vehicle of mobility that stood in connection with and contrast to the historical immobility of captive African Americans. Although I part ways with McGinley when she contends that “song’s ‘magic’ became a passage to African-American freedom” (McGinley 2011, 129), the symbolic nexus between social mobility and sonic mobility is worth exploring further.

4 See Anae on the Fisk Jubilee Singers in Australia and New Zealand and the reception of their music by Maori and Aboriginal performers; see Thurman for a discussion of the way German audiences relied on a cultural understanding of song which framed their response to the Jubilees’ virtuosity within the framework of a “civilizing mission.”

Bibliography

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