

The Materiality of Media and the Vanishing Medium

Among Mauritian Muslims, *mahfil-e mawlud* are long-established, religious speech events that have become thoroughly integrated with sound reproduction. Those who create these speech events are predisposed to use sound reproduction technology, since Mauritian Muslim assumptions about the authentic transmission of authoritative religious discourse have become identified with and materialized in such technology. First, such assumptions cast sound reproduction technology as supportive of a key element in the process of spiritual intercession that practitioners seek as the performative effect of reciting devotional poetry. In terms of the *mahfil-e mawlud* as speech event, transposition as a particular strategy of entextualization and organization of participant roles is just such a key element. Transposition is the inserting of a text in an unfolding speech event in a way indicating the text's origins in another spatial and temporal context. This strategy is in turn located in a deictic field constituted in performance (Hanks 2005).

A second force responsible for the adoption of sound reproduction in devotional practices of Mauritian Muslims is practitioners' desire for personal and immediate relationships with spiritual authorities, such as the Prophet Muhammad, as they strive for faithful and conventionalized repetition of devotional poetry. According to some Mauritian Muslims, sound reproduction technology fulfills such desires both by facilitating perceived immediacy in spiritual interactions and by sustaining the authentic transmission of conventionalized religious discourse on multiple dimensions. Outlining the role that sound reproduction plays in such instances, I also discuss how the desire for immediacy in spiritual interactions revolves around the dialectics of semiotic tones, tokens, and types, and finally, I relate this dynamic to the problem of repetition and change, in which the modalities

of storing performed signs play a crucial role. The process of domestication of a media technology (Silverstone and Hirsch 1992) that I describe is primarily motivated by actors' folk models of how the performance of the devotional genre works as a means of spiritual intercession, and how electronic sound reproduction as a technology becomes part of religious and linguistic performance. In more general terms, this suggests that linguistic or, more broadly, semiotic ideologies predispose certain kinds of change rather than others; and in some instances such changes may include how different media are valued with respect to each other. In my examples, the kind of change achieved appears to be in line with the linguistic and semiotic ideology of recitational logocentrism widespread in some Islamic traditions, and with the links between wishes for immediacy and electronic media technology.

In the previous two chapters, I described how Mauritian Muslims have recently come to treat sound reproduction as enhancing and authorizing the transnational circulation of devotional discourse and poetry. In this chapter, I investigate sound reproduction as the alternation between the storing of signs through media and their performative recontextualization, showing how the media-supported devotional practices that are the focus of this book testify to the intertwining of signification and the materiality of media. A sense of immediacy between religious performers and spiritual authorities emerges though the combination of sound reproduction informed by a semiotic ideology of recitational logocentrism with the deployment of particular deictic markers in discourse. Deictic markers are textual and grammatical elements that establish links between discourse and persons, objects, and spatial and temporal frames. Examples include personal pronouns, possessives, and temporal and spatial markers—like *then*, *now*, *here*, and *there*—that require knowledge of a particular context for understanding what they refer to. In order to demonstrate the interlocking of media and performative practice, I provide a detailed analysis of devotional recitals of *na't* poetry.

Uses of new media technology have long been held responsible for deep socio-cultural transformations (Deutsch 1953, Anderson 1991). Often new technologies of this type are portrayed as exerting a powerful impact on the settings where they are widely used, raising questions about the interface between new technologies and the settings in which they are adopted. However, the notion of a boundary between media technology and its new social and cultural settings, on which such an investigation depends, is itself problematic. This is because media ideologies, ideas, and background assumptions about media and mediation that circulate in a certain sociocultural context may not only condition the adoption of new technologies in profound ways but also may become an integral part of the technology itself (Boyer 2007, Eisenlohr 2004: 25, Gershon 2010). Linguistic anthropological approaches can facilitate a better understanding of how uses of sound reproduction have shaped the recitation of devotional poetry, which this book is about. In recent years, linguistic anthropologists have analyzed the transformation of publics through uses of new media technology (Barker 2008, Spitulnik

1996), the migration of strategies of voice representation from oral discourse to written online interaction (Jones and Schieffelin 2009, Jones, Semel, and Le 2015), the creation of new identities and selves through new forms of enregisterment on television (Goebel 2008) and radio (Swinehart 2012), the technological reproduction of voice (Kunreuther 2014, Weidman 2006), and new forms of language standardization in online communication (Brink-Danan 2011, Handman 2013). Linguistic anthropological theory and methods can also provide insights into how uses of new media technology become part of religious practices, a topic that has become the subject of a steadily growing literature in social and cultural anthropology. They can suggest, too, alternative accounts of the adoption of new media in sociocultural contexts by pinpointing how particular assumptions and expectations about media drive and condition this process. Media ideologies are so much an integral part of media technology that the formal and material properties of technologies can sometimes be understood as the crystallization of often long-standing assumptions and desires regarding mediation as a process of interaction between human and divine actors.

While analyzing Mauritian Muslims' performance of *na't* in greater detail and showing how uses of electronic media have become a key part of this devotional practice, I seek to specify the discursive and textual strategies that media practices support. The latter are, in turn, essential to this religious performance in its diasporic setting. Mauritian Muslims' engagement with sound reproduction is motivated by wishes for the immediate presence of the divine. In this, media technology enables a sense of relative immediacy among Mauritian Muslims that can be traced to particular semiotic ideologies, "basic assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world" (Keane 2003: 419). Studying how Mauritian Muslims have made sound reproduction part of practices of spiritual mediation therefore requires an investigation of the semiotic and, more specifically, media ideologies that enable these Muslims to treat sound reproduction as a way to circulate and transmit devotional discourse that authenticates the latter.

Analyzing the performance of *na't*, I show how electronic mediation has become an integral part of the "deictic field" in which it is situated. The latter consists of linguistic acts of deictic reference in a particular context of interaction as part of a wider, historically constituted social field of power relations and positions that transcends the immediate setting of performance.¹ I then address the question of sound reproduction and illustrate how Mauritian Muslims' uses of this media technology can be seen as a response to a more widespread dilemma surrounding the tension between spiritual immediacy and religious mediation through typified forms of discourse and performance. Integrating linguistic anthropological theories and methods with those of media studies, I investigate the alternation between storing signs and their performative recontextualization. In doing so, I treat discourse circulation as a mediatic practice that demonstrates the interlocking of signification and materiality.

Because na't is best understood as a transformative practice, its performative aspects are especially important. Reciting na't not only establishes a special relationship to the Prophet Muhammad by praising him profusely and invoking his spiritual presence, but it also fills reciters and their listeners with love and affection for the Prophet and turns them into more pious Muslims. Several of my respondents explained that by opening one's heart to the Prophet, one builds a personal relationship to him and, therefore, "becomes a better person." Na't is a performative technique that creates a pious disposition, as well as certain affective stances, especially deep affection and love for the Prophet, resulting in a sense of visceral closeness to him. As na't is a fundamentally performative practice, there was a perceived need for a technology that, to many, appears to be a medium of storage for the correct Urdu pronunciation and the appropriate recitational style.

DEVOTIONAL GENRES IN A DEICTIC FIELD

In this section I describe how na't unfolds as a speech event and then indicate how participants of such speech events treat electronic sound reproduction as an enhancement of the performance. Listening to na't on, previously, cassettes and then CDs, as well as to na't recordings circulated as mp3 files, also frequently influences performance of the genre at mahfil-e mawlud. My interlocutors told me that listening to these recordings modeled their sense of how na't should be recited. Anwar said after a mahfil-e mawlud he had organized with other relatives:

Writing na't is very difficult, and only learned scholars can do it. It is easy to exaggerate, and so we have to rely on those who know what is correct and what is not permissible. Also, those reciting need to have a good voice, one that touches the heart of those listening. There are very few people in Mauritius who can do that, but we use cassettes as guidance when we do mawlud. A good voice can make you feel the love for our Prophet inside you. The reciter can make you feel sad, or can make you joyful when you feel close to the Prophet. The best reciters move people that way, so they can feel the same way as the one reading na't.

According to Anwar, the textual authenticity of na't, and the production of pious affects, are brought together through performance. Reciting the "correct" text in the appropriate performative style produces strong emotions in those participating, which ultimately turns them into more pious persons. Ultimately, the success of the performance also depends on the receptiveness of the audience. Some of my informants described the ability to hear in a sensitive way as "hearing with the heart" (*dil se*).

Most of the mahfil-e mawlud I attended were held just before weddings. Several days before the two mahfil-e mawlud from which I took the excerpts discussed below, which were held to celebrate weddings taking place at the family homes of the respective brides in a town in the north of Mauritius, groups of



FIGURE 5. Still from a video recording of a mahfil-e mawlud. Photograph and video by the author.

relatives gathered to listen to na't recordings and decide on a "program" for the mahfils, which would occur two days before each wedding. When I asked Anwar how he and his friends plan for a mahfil he said, "Sometimes it is spontaneous, right before an event. At other times—like a mahfil for an 'urs—it has to be well planned. Good planning is necessary, because once you get into reciting na't, you can't get out. I am ambitious and I enjoy reciting, and I cannot stop once I start. But for a mahfil one also needs control, because one also needs a *diskur* [a formal address related to the occasion that has brought about the mahfil, usually delivered in Mauritian Creole]."

On both occasions, men and women were in separate rooms, and the event opened with a Qur'an recital (*khatam Qur'an*), concluded by *darud sharif*, an invocation of blessings on the Prophet, the uttering of which is considered to accrue spiritual merit (*sawab*), followed by prayers to God (*du'a*). The main part of the events consisted in the collective recital of Urdu na't. Each time, the recital was led by two young men who had received training in na't khwani by Indian imams residing in Mauritius; these young men were locally known for their voices and their accomplished performative style. Others present for the mahfil-e mawlud joined in to repeat lines and to recite na't or parts of na't that are very popular and which they knew by heart based on their cassette and CD experience.

In an analysis of a mahfil-e mawlad as a speech event, the religious discourse performed falls into three categories: (1) recitation of scripture or of formulaic, easily replicable utterances, (2) contextualizing comment by single participants, and (3) performance of na't poetry itself. These different types of discourse in the speech event are additionally set off from each other because they entail three different linguistic codes available in very different degrees of proficiency in the local linguistic repertoire of the Mauritian Muslim community. These include Arabic; Mauritian Creole, the predominant vernacular language of not only Mauritian Muslims but also nearly all Mauritians; and, commonly, Urdu.

Here I focus on how, especially with regard to the first and third types of discourse, the efficaciousness of the speech event rests on particular strategies of entextualization and on the performers' shifts between particular participant roles. By *entextualization*, a term coined by Briggs and Bauman (1992), I mean the process by which performed discourse acquires textual qualities—that is, it becomes a relatively bounded, recognizable, and replicable chunk of discourse we call text, which can be detached from one discursive context and fit and grafted into others. In linguistic performance, texts are transported from context to context—that is, they are decontextualized from prior contexts and recontextualized in a new discursive context, a different social and temporal setting in which language is used. By *entextualization*, or *text-building*, I mean potentially limitless sequences of de- and recontextualization of discourse. This perspective emphasizes texts as ongoing processes rather than as fixed products. An analysis of this process of textuality shows that a text exhibits accumulated traces of the social relationships leading to its production while also indicating the anticipated moral and political futures that the ongoing process of textuality is directed to.

Looking at the first type of discourse that constitutes the mahfil-e mawlad as a speech event, such as in Qur'anic recitation, the performing participants orient themselves to the text as animators, whose agency is clearly different from that of the assumed composers and sponsors of the text. Here I draw on Goffman's conceptualization of the speaker role as comprising different components—the composer or “ghostor” (a term inspired by *ghostwriter*); the sponsor or originator, who takes responsibility for what is said; and the animator or relayer, who is actually uttering the words (Irvine 1996, Levinson 1988, drawing on Goffman 1974: 517–520)—that is, different agentive roles a speaker can inhabit with respect to the performed discourse. Recitation of scripture constitutes a strategy of entextualization that one might call replication (Urban 1996, Shoaps 2002). The ideal is to reproduce a more or less precise token of the text in the setting of the mahfil-e mawlad, while making it clear that the performers uttering it are by no means either the composers or the originators responsible for the text. Instead, the performers are dealing with divine scripture or with formulaic utterances such as the ritualized Arabic benedictions in honor of the Prophet that are known as darud, which frequently precede and follow the recitation of na't. Generally, this strategy

of entextualization suppresses the deictic origins of the discourse, as it cannot be attributed to any particular person, social, or spatiotemporal setting. Darud, like many other ritualized and formulaic religious utterances, such as the Lord's Prayer in the Christian tradition, do not have recoverable authors or originators. Uttering them places one in the role of an animator.

This maximally contrasts with the second text-building strategy, the contextualizing comments by single participants in Mauritian Creole. An example from a performance on the occasion of a wedding is the short speech by a single speaker wishing the future couple well, and which often also connects the wedding and the couple to the theme of marriage as a *sunna* (recommended and customary practice) of the Prophet. Here the participant roles of composer, originator, and animator are unified, because the speaker takes full responsibility for what is said. He does not pretend to animate someone else's words or utter some scripted discourse already performed somewhere else. That is, the discourse is fully grounded in the individual's performance and does not point to a deictic origin elsewhere.

The third strategy of entextualization, and the one I am mainly concerned with, is what the psychologist and linguist Karl Bühler called transposition (*Versetzung*; Bühler 1965 [1934]: 134–140, Haviland 1996, Shoaps 2002). It involves the creative insertion of a text into the speech event at hand in a way that points to the former's origins in another spatial and temporal setting. In other words, the text has recoverable authorial origins somewhere beyond the speech event, and its recontextualization in a speech event unfolds in a way indicating these origins. I suggest that the performance of na't poetry, the central component of mahfil-e mawlud as a devotional speech event, effects such a transposition. Composing appropriate na't poetry is considered a difficult task best left to qualified scholar-poets. Na't are often attributed to such prominent scholar-poets as Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi (1856–1921), the founder of the Barelwi tradition, who was known as an accomplished composer of na't (Khan Barelwi n.d.). Na't is therefore deictically grounded, because its performance involves textual and grammatical elements pointing to its authorial origin: its composition and original recitation by a qualified scholar-poet. This assumed origin is important because many Muslims in South Asia and Mauritius consider some compositions, especially those by Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi, to be at least partly divinely inspired. The elements pointing to this authorial origin include the respective deictic markers.

The deictics of attributing na't to particular agents are highly ambiguous. If the performance is an act of transformative devotion, the reciters need to take personal responsibility for the praise poetry in honor of the Prophet. Indeed, numerous na't are directly and personally addressed to the Prophet. Many of the deictic markers, therefore, are ambiguous, because the "I" of the devotional discourse can be simultaneously attributed to prominent scholar-poets recognized as or otherwise assumed to be their authors—thus pointing to the context of composition—and appropriated by the performers as the actual mahfil-e mawlud unfolds. This

kind of transposition is, as a result, markedly heteroglossic in a Bakhtinian sense, but very different from the recitation and replication of scripture or other formulaic utterances. Let us consider the following na't excerpts, which the performers adopted from a locally produced audiocassette and one CD (Chady 2000b, 2001). Example 4.1 expresses in exuberant terms the devotee's encounter with Madina, often considered the Prophet Muhammad's favorite city and a common metaphor for the presence of the Prophet in na't poetry. It also features a sample of deictic makers that play a key role in the process of transposition.

EXAMPLE 4.1

Phir karam ho gayā		Once more [he has] favored me with a
main madīne calā		gift of Madina
Main madīne calā , main madīne calā		Here I go to Madina, to Madina
Kyā batāun milī dil ko kaisī khūshī		How could I describe [my] heart's joy
Kyā batāun milī dil ko kaisī khūshī	5	How could I describe [my] heart's joy
Jab yeh muzdah sunā		When I heard the good news
main madīne calā		that I am to go to Madina
Jab yeh muzdah sunā		When I heard the good news
main madīne calā		that I am to go to Madina
Gunbad-e sabz par jab paṛegī nazar	10	When [my] glance falls on the green
		dome [of the resting place of the Prophet
		in Madina]
Unke minār par jab paṛegī nazar		When [my] glance falls on its minaret [of
		the resting place of the Prophet in
	15	Madina]
Kyā surūr āegā		What joy this will bring [to me],
main madīne calā		here I go to Madina
Kyā surūr āegā		What joy this will bring [to me],
main madīne calā		here I go to Madina
Mere gande qadam aur unka karam	20	My impure feet on such divine ground
		[Madina]
Mere gande qadam aur unka karam		My impure feet on such divine ground
Lāj rakhnā khudā, main madīne calā		God, preserve [my] honor, [let] me go to
		Madina
Lāj rakhnā khudā, main madīne calā	25	God, preserve [my] honor, [let] me go to
		Madina

In this excerpt, I have highlighted deictic particles, locutives, and evidentials. As the act of transposition unfolds in performance, it also recalculates the values of the deictic elements, as they now point not only to the context of author/formulator of the poetry but also to the animator in the present performance, who is now taking responsibility for the discourse. These are first-person personal deictics, and verb forms agreeing with them, throughout the excerpt: *main* ("I"), and verb forms *calā*

and *sunā*, and the first-person possessive pronoun *mere* (“my,” lines 20 and 22). There is also use of the temporal deictic *phir* (“then, afterward, another time”) on line 1. A further way of grounding devotional poetry in the context of the present performance, in maximal contrast to the recitation of scripture, is the use of the evidential *kyā batāun* (“how could I describe/tell”) on lines 4 and 5. Evidentials are functional linguistic devices that indicate a mode of knowing and, especially, the speaker’s attitude toward the knowledge. In many languages, evidentials are grammaticalized. The use of evidentials directs attention to the speaker’s own stance and therefore individualizes and personalizes the speech, while the ambiguous participant role this evidential points to can also be attributed to both the formulator and the animator.²

Similarly, in the following example (4.2), in addition to the first-person possessive pronoun *merā/mere* the temporal deictics *kal* and *āj* play similar roles in bridging the context of composition or formulation of the poetry and the context of the performance at hand, because they point simultaneously to the “yesterday” and “today” of the scholar-poet uttering the poetry for the first time, and to the individual performers who recite in the present context.

EXAMPLE 4.2

Lab pe na't-e pāk kā naghmah		Sweet and pure na't have adorned [my]
kal bhī thā aur āj bhī hai		lips in the past , and are also manifest
		today
Mere nabī se merā rishtā		My relationship to my Prophet has been
kal bhī thā aur āj bhī hai	5	there in the past , and is also manifest
		today
Aur kisī jānib kyon jāen		Why turn anywhere else
aur kisī ko kyon dekhen		why approach anybody else
Apnā sab kucch gunbad-e khazrā		If your source of favors has been there in
kal bhī thā aur āj bhī hai	10	Madina in the past , and is also there
		today
Apnā sab kucch gunbad-e khazrā		If your source of favors has been there in
kal bhī thā aur āj bhī hai		Madina in the past , and is also there
		today
Lab pe na't-e pāk kā naghmah	15	Sweet and pure na't have adorned [my]
kal bhī thā aur āj bhī hai		lips in the past , and are also manifest
		today
Mere nabī se merā rishtā		My relationship to my Prophet has been
kal bhī thā aur āj bhī hai		there in the past , and is also manifest
	20	today

Another way to anchor the poetry in the present context of performance is the use of the vocative case to underline personal spontaneous appeals to friends, as in *dosto* (“O friends”) on lines 4 and 5 of the following example. Strongly resembling Shi'ite traditions, it eulogizes the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson Husayn, whom

the performer also adopts as “my imam.” Alongside the use of first-person personal deictics (*merā*, ‘my,’ on lines 3, 7, 10, 12), as in the previous example, this has the effect of further personalizing the discourse. Therefore, it deictically grounds it in the particular context of the performance, while the words also remain in their role as pointers to the world of the poet-scholar in the original context of composition.

EXAMPLE 4.3

Bāgh-e nabī ke phūl hain	In the garden of the Prophet, you are the
A'la maqām hai	most beautiful flower
Hazrat Husayn, āp ko merā salām hai	O Husayn, my salutations to you
Us kī namāz kitnī hasintar hai dosto	Friends , how beautiful is his [last] prayer
Us kī namāz kitnī hasintar hai dosto	5 Friends , how beautiful is his [last] prayer
Sajde men zir-e teigh bhī	Prostrating himself before his creator
Merā imām hai	even under the enemy's blade, this is my
	imam
Sajde men zir-e teigh bhī	Prostrating himself before his creator
Merā imām hai	10 even under the enemy's blade, this is my
	Imam
Hazrat Husayn, āp ko merā salām hai	O Husayn, my salutations to you

Example 4.4 features yet another formal means for establishing links between the recited discourse and the context of performance: the use of the locutive verb *pūcho* (imperative of “ask”) on lines 2 and 4, which is a way of attributing personal responsibility for the word, here, for future discourse, among those present in the actual performance.³

EXAMPLE 4.4

Us kī a'zmat ko	1 If you want to have an idea of his [the
farishton kī nazar pūcho	Prophet's] greatness, ask the angels
Us kī a'zmat ko	If you want to have an idea of his
farishton kī nazar pūcho	greatness, ask the angels
Jis ne sarkār kī pehlon men	5 Who have found their place at the side of
jagah pāyī hain	the Prophet

To sum up, among the textual and grammatical forms grounding the poetry both in the authorial context and in the present act of performance are, above all, deictic elements, such as personal deictic markers. These include possessives and temporal—and in many na't, also spatial—deictic markers, use of the vocative case, and use of locutives and evidentials.

We can now also identify additional devices that specifically point to the authorial origins of the na't beyond the frame of the present performance. These are the

use of a ritual, “ancestral” linguistic code—that is, Urdu in the Mauritian context—extensive metrical, phonetic, and semantic parallelism characteristic of this devotional genre; the extensive use of metaphors marking the discourse as scripted poetry; and in many na’t the mentioning of the pen name of the poet (*takhallus*) in the last or penultimate line of the poem (*makta’*). The latter is a frequently recurring generic convention, as in the following excerpt:

EXAMPLE 4.5

Sab qātilān-e āhl-e Muhammad ke wāste	1	For the sake of the progeny of Muhammad
Sab qātilān-e āhl-e Muhammad ke wāste		For the sake of the progeny of Muhammad
Ehsān qassam khudā kī wo jannat harām hai	5	O Ehsan , may their murderers be strictly banned from paradise
Ehsān qassam khudā kī wo jannat harām hai		O Ehsan , may their murderers be strictly banned from paradise

Comparing the alignment of participant roles in performing na’t with the recitation of scripture, we can see that there is much more overlap between the participant roles of composer, responsible sponsor or originator, and animator in the performance of na’t than in the recitation of scripture. In the latter, the roles of formulator and originator are always clearly separated from the role of animator, which the performers in a mahfil-e mawlud play, not bearing any responsibility for the uttered discourse.

However, even though the na’t performance textually highlights the deictic origins of the na’t poetry beyond the frame of the actual event—this is what constitutes its reportive marking as a representation of a prior speech event—this does not mean that Mauritian Muslims who take part in a mahfil-e mawlud bear no responsibility for the performed discourse. On the contrary, an identification of the performers with the “I” of discourse in na’t is in fact crucial to this devotional genre as a means of pious transformation and discipline. What is most characteristic of how na’t is entextualized in the devotional speech event is the tension between na’t as texts that were composed by respectable and identifiable poet-scholars who might also be seen as their originators, and the relayers or animators who recite the poetry, but who seek to perform in a way that piously transforms themselves and others listening by spontaneously mobilizing certain emotions. I suggest that this tension between relatively scripted, iterable poetry, and personal enactment of highly emotional devotional discourse, is momentarily resolved by an unstable overlap between the poet-scholars’ roles as originators and the roles of the Mauritian Muslim performers in the devotional event. Performers have to draw on authorized poetry presumably composed by prominent scholar-poets,

but they also need to highlight their own agency in and responsibility for the performed poetry. The replication of the deictic structure of the original text in the target text performed in the devotional event aligns the performers' selves with those of the poet-scholars, and this merging of stance and agency results in the experience of pious affect. The provisional unity of composer, originator, and animator as effected by the deictic devices employed in foregrounding the affective dimensions of the performance is central to the particular project of religious discipline at hand, as it establishes relationships between the performer's self and the states of affairs described in the poetic text.

SOUND REPRODUCTION AS DEICTIC GROUNDING

Sound reproduction intervenes in the process of entextualization that is central to the practice of *na't*. The circulation of *na't* through electronic media, as in *na't* recorded on CDs, does not suppress its deictic origins but instead, in the eyes of many Mauritian Muslims, actually helps secure them as sources of authority and authenticity. Electronic mediation of *na't* supports the process of deictic grounding that not only distinguishes *na't* from the recitation of scripture but also is, in fact, indispensable to its success as a technique of intercession and subject making. As mentioned in chapter 2, the attribution of *na't* to authoritative scholars and poets functions in much the same way as other forms of genealogical authority in other Islamic traditions. In those, the authenticity of religious discourse is reckoned by tracing its transmission through long chains of reliable interlocutors (*isnad*), the chief example of which is the study and transmission of *hadith*.

The specific point at which use of the electronic medium enters the practice of devotional Islam in Mauritius is the process of entextualization that I have called transposition. The electronic medium accomplishes this by supporting the provisional merging between the agency of the performers in the *mahfil-e mawlud* and the agency and responsibility of authoritative scholar-poets. This merging is unstable and needs constant support, and it is possible only when the origin of the *na't* is deemed to be authentic—that is, when the authorship of a respected scholar-poet can be assumed. Electronically circulated *na't* is often treated as especially well authenticated, since many Mauritian Muslims believe that the process of reliably transmitting the poetry is greatly enhanced by the use of sound reproduction.

For many Mauritian Muslims, the electronic circulation of *na't* not only projects a presupposed context of past authentic transmission of discourse but also entails the effect of authenticity in future performances, such as in the authentication of *na't* performances modeled on or otherwise informed by authoritative *na't* recordings. As explained before, many Mauritian Muslims consult and listen to these recordings as models for “live” performances, and several of my respondents, such as Mohamed, a former school principal, saw them as guides to safeguarding against inappropriate performances. He stressed that *na't* recorded on

cassettes and CDs play an important role in distinguishing a correct recitational style from *filmi* (resembling the Hindi popular cinema) performances: "Reading na't should not be done in a dramatic, exaggerated way as in the films but should be from the heart: sentimental, with a soft voice. This comes naturally for those who love the Prophet, and in this way they can create an impact on the listeners."

Even though he argued that the right way of performing comes naturally through affection for the prophet, a few moments later he added that sound reproduction in fact provides important guidance in arriving at the performative style he advocates. "The influence of the films is so strong that the na't cassettes and CDs are necessary to give the right example of how to read na't. It is because of them that na't has become more popular, and that people pay more attention to reading in the right way, and not with exaggeration."

That is, according to Mohamed, affection for the prophet alone is, after all, not fully reliable as a means to bring about the right performative style: media technology plays a key role in guiding local performers toward the right recitational technique. Thus, the recordings, too, play a key role, in ensuring that the perceived authenticity of the performed poetry is maintained in their future transmission and circulation. For Mohamed, the recordings address this necessity of maintaining qualitative integrity across performances and across the chain of transmission of na't.

The use of electronic sound reproduction supports deictically grounded transposition through the projection of a past authoritative origin, which can, in principle, be recovered. That is, sound reproduction becomes part of the indexical ground of deictic reference to such authoritative origins (Hanks 1992). Mauritian Muslims' use of sound reproduction therefore condenses the social process of de- and recontextualizing discourse via long chains of reliable interlocutors, because the ideology that this medium is transparent brings about the sense of an immediate connection between the discourse of scholar-poets and the discourse of the Mauritian performers. It is important to realize that such a projection of past and future authentic transmission of discourse is ultimately inseparable from the material qualities of the medium of circulation.

ENTEXTUALIZATION AND TECHNOLOGY: STORAGE, REPETITION, IMMEDIACY

The mediatic dimensions of discourse circulation provide an interesting perspective on the issue of social and cultural change often associated with uses of new technology, because both themes revolve around the problem of repetition. *Repetition* here means the possibility of performing signs and performing social acts more than once in such a way that they can be experienced as "the same" as in the previous instances. Thus, the issue of technological mediation is not central to my analysis just because Mauritian Muslims have begun to use techniques of

sound reproduction in their cultivation of na't. Regardless of any use of contemporary electronic technology, the process of de- and recontextualization of discourse is always a mediatic process, because discourse circulation raises the issues of storage and repetition of signs, which enable their travel between different contexts.⁴ Storage and repetition therefore also constitute the condition of possibility for subsequent acts of appropriation or rejection of circulated discourse, such as parody, imitation, comment, refutation, elaboration, or translation. Entextualization as a mediatic practice simultaneously enacts two interlinked processes—on one hand, storage and repetition, and on the other hand, the reinscription of singular dimensions of particular performances into their more conventionalized aspects.

In order to be available for repetition in different contexts, traces of performed signs have to be materially deposited in some storage medium, such as the human body, writing, or an electronic technology such as sound reproduction. Discourse circulation then consists of potentially limitless sequences of storage and repetition. Here Charles Sanders Peirce's distinction between semiotic tokens and types is useful for an analysis of how such sequences of storage and repetition of signs unfold. While *token* refers to the singular and material presence of a sign in each context of occurrence, *types* refers to the conventionalized dimensions of a sign that enable us to recognize the fifteen token realizations of "the" on a single page as instances of the same word (Peirce 1932: 141–142). This recognition of tokens as realizations of types has become commonplace in linguistic analysis, and it is doubtless the predominant approach to the problem of repetition of signs among scholars of language. But it is important to realize that repetition of signs also involves the reinscription of performed semiotic tokens into existing semiotic types, or their cumulative condensation into new or altered semiotic types. Taking a Peircean perspective, these types comprise not only the Saussurean symbols constituting a linguistic code but also presupposed aspects of indexical and iconic sign relations that produce the likeness between token realizations of a performative event.⁵

In the performance of na't, these are the multiple sign relations that constitute na't as a typified speech genre, such as the dense semantic, phonetic, and rhythmic parallelisms that build and characterize the poetic text; the relations of presupposed co-occurrence between the poetic text; the use of Urdu as a linguistic code; the social identities of the performers; and the expected setting of the performance constituting the mahfil-e mawlad as a speech event. Finally, the performance as a whole stands in an indexical relation to authorizing prior events, of which the actually unfolding performance is presumably only a replica. Given this complex layering of sign relationships, the claims of some authors that there are no objective repetitions of signs and performative acts seem to be especially plausible here (Derrida 1991, Weber 2001). Nevertheless, Peirce's concept of the semiotic type seems indispensable for the very possibility of repetition, which is of central importance to those practicing na't in their concerns about

the authenticity and efficacy of the performed poetry. Even though it is valid to stress the difference between semiotic tokens, such as in the differences evident between performances of the “same” na’t, the notion of the semiotic type is fundamental to the iterability of the sign, as it distinguishes what kind of difference in language and other kinds of performance still counts as a repetition, and what from a particular perspective already appears to be something entirely new. In other words, in order to be available for new performances in new contexts, traces of semiotic tokens not only have to be deposited in some form of material storage but also must be reinscribed in a broad range of semiotic types, which these traces may also potentially rewrite.

The important point is that different kinds of material storage may have different consequences for the ongoing circulation of discourse. They may affect the dialectics of storage and repetition of signs in ways not only conditioned by their material or formal properties but also shaped by the sociocultural evaluations of such forms of storage by their users. As Sabir, a young man in his twenties, put it after a na’t performance: “Cassettes and CDs bring to us the voice of the na’t khwan in perfection. It is as if you were actually present when he is reading na’t; it is almost like the entire emotional experience of being there. The old books cannot do that. You hear not only the correct words but also the correct way of reading na’t. It is a more direct way to learn about na’t and to be touched by it.”

For Farhad, the young aspiring na’t khwan, it was important to re-create during a na’t performance the divinely inspired context in which learned scholar-poets composed their best na’t. “Take for example *Mustafa-e jān-e rahmat pe lakhon salām*. The Prophet was present when Al’a Hazrat [Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi] wrote this na’t. Al’a Hazrat saw the Prophet in front of him, and in this state he composed the poem.”

He pointed at one of the written collections in booklet form that are often sold together with na’t CDs. “In this booklet you find the correct text, but the emotional tone that stirs others and that tells them in what state Al’a Hazrat composed the na’t is in the voice. And for most people, listening to a CD is the only way to feel this; and that is why there is so much benefit in making and distributing CDs.”

That is, reciting na’t appropriately and effectively is not just a matter of repeating the correct text that can be credibly linked to an authoritative source, but is also about creating the affective context and pious emotions of love for the Prophet in oneself and the listeners in the particular act of performance. The performance of a particular na’t involves the re-creation of a divinely inspired affective context among the listeners and performers that, according to those cultivating the poetry, was part of its original composition. For Farhad, sound reproduction can safeguard the qualitative integrity of the poetry, ensuring that the emotions Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi felt when the Prophet appeared before him are maintained and accessible across successive performances and can, therefore, be re-created in pious performers of the na’t. In this way, partaking in such a qualitative continuity

across performances also indexes the participants' commitment to, and the continuity of the spiritual tradition and authority of, Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi.

Here I suggest that Mauritian Muslims' use of sound reproduction also testifies to a utopian wish to overcome the tension between affectively loaded immediacy such as that lived in the creative, radically contextual quality of situated real-time discourse, and the stereotyping patterning that corresponds to the semiotic types in language and other forms of semiosis, such as in the faithful repetition of poetic texts.⁶ According to the semiotic ideology of recitational logocentrism that informs *na't* as a devotional practice among Mauritian Muslims, the dissatisfaction with the written text as a medium between the poet-scholars and *na't* performers centers on a disjuncture between the pious performance, with its transformative qualities, and the written text. In this context, treating sound reproduction as an authenticating technique is, above all, founded on the wish to find a medium that erases its own traces, a "vanishing mediator" (Sterne 2003: 218, cf. Bolter and Grusin 1999) that promises relative immediacy in seeming to minimize the multiple steps of transmission and mediation between the divinely inspired context of composition and the listener's experience.

Technical media have a tendency to withdraw in the act of mediation. The functioning of such media is tied to their capability to relegate their own materiality and technicity to the background in order to convey what they are supposed to mediate. Media are supposed to give presence to the images, discourses, and sounds they mediate and not to unduly distract from them by calling attention to their own material and formal features. The latter happens when the act of mediation is disturbed by a technical failure, through, for example, a dropped cell phone call, a scratch on a record or CD, or a failing computer screen. When technical media operate in expected ways, they have a tendency toward self-erasure that seems to be a condition of possibility for their proper functioning (Krämer 2008: 273–275, Mersch 2002: 65–66). This helps explain why "new" digital media have become the latest focus of fantasies for immediacy, as their users wish to enter into "live and direct" contact with others. Such wishes for a "vanishing mediator" that have accompanied the history of sound reproduction for a long time are deeply paradoxical, because the search for a technical solution to do away with layers of mediation eventually results in the deployment of ever more complex media apparatuses and networks (Eisenlohr 2009).⁷

An important characteristic of sound reproduction reinforces desires for a "vanishing mediator" that appears to provide immediate access to what it conveys. This is the lack of phenomenal difference between a voice and its reproduction. Whether produced by a body or technologically reproduced, the sonic event remains the same in kind. The fact that we are here dealing with same physical event has led media theorist Wolfgang Ernst to describe the relationship between sounds and their technical reproduction as *gleichursprünglich*, or "equally original": "The phonographically recorded voice is therefore not merely its illustration

or representation [*Abbildung*], but that voice itself, *gleichursprünglich*, reproduced every time it is played” (Ernst 2012: 44). Sounds and their technical reproductions thus command the same kind of presence, which has the potential to powerfully distract from the technological artifice of sound reproduction.

Another key feature of sound reproduction technology distinguishes it from writing and gives rise to hopes for a “transparent” or vanishing medium: sound reproduction does not require recourse to semiotic types in the process of storing performed signs. While storage through writing involves the interaction of performed tokens with semiotic types to make storage possible, sound reproduction allows for the possibility to store traces of tokens without mediation through types. The latter occurs only when listeners retrieve signs from storage, but it is not part of the act of storage itself, such as in writing. While there is no storage of tokens as such, only a storage of their *traces*, the fact that semiotic types are not involved in the act of storage easily encourages just such an impression of tokens, with their singular qualities, being stored directly. Surely, the conversion of sound waves into digitized plastic bumps on a CD, and the reassembling of a similar acoustic signal through an optical reading of such bumps, is not an act of directly depositing a token for storage and retrieving it, but a depositing and reading of its traces. Alluding to Derrida’s notion of the trace as *ur-writing* (*archi-écriture*),⁸ Friedrich Kittler writes, “All concepts of trace, up to and including Derrida’s grammatological *ur-writing*, are based on Edison’s simple idea. The trace preceding all writing, the trace of pure difference still open between reading and writing, is simply a gramophone needle” (Kittler 1999 [1986]: 33). The medium of storage of a particular technology of sound reproduction codetermines the formats and characteristics of recorded traces, whether recorded and stored via Edison’s gramophone needle or CD technology. In contrast to writing, such as in the case of written booklets that accompany collections of na’t poetry, sound reproduction does allow for greater possibilities to retrieve signs along with their iconic and material qualities that Peirce referred to as “tones” or “qualisigns” (Peirce 1932: 142, Munn 1992: 16–17), here in particular the singular qualities of a specific voice.⁹

This reinforces a sense of immediacy and transparency. “As if there were no distance between the recorded voice and listening ears, as if voices traveled along the transmitting bones of acoustic self-perception directly from the mouth into the ear’s labyrinth, hallucinations become real” (Kittler 1999 [1986]: 37). Moreover, the qualitative integrity of the poetry across performances supported through sound reproduction re-creates pious feelings in the performers while reinforcing their commitment to a spiritual tradition and authority. For many of the Mauritian Muslims cultivating na’t, sound reproduction technology seems to hold out the promise of immediacy in that it appears to be a vanishing mediator.

It is important to note that the impression of a vanishing medium is situational, present in some Mauritian Muslims and absent in others. This becomes evident when we compare the ways in which sound reproduction functions as

a presumably vanishing technical medium for many Mauritian Muslims as they listen to recorded *na't*, with the ways in which the genre's language operates as a medium. Sound reproduction as a technical medium is, of course, not the only component of the larger process of mediation between Muslims and the divine that the recitation of *na't* seeks to bring about. It supports the circulation of religious language, especially concerning what Mauritian Muslims consider its proper vocalization. Looking at the language of the *na't* genre, it at first appears to be the very opposite of a vanishing medium. This is because of its foregrounding of the poetic function of language (Jakobson 1960). The poetry is powerful precisely because it saliently highlights the formal and aesthetic properties of its language, its crafted beauty and extensive metric, and its semantic and phonetic parallelisms. In other words, the poetic language of *na't* seems to successfully operate as a mediator between Muslims and the divine precisely because it strongly draws attention to perceptible characteristics of language such as these. Viewing religious language as a medium, it is hard to imagine how it could ever seemingly disappear in the act of mediation. On the contrary, its successful operation as a mediator in religious settings involves making itself more perceptible.

The role of such religious language as a mediator between Muslims and the divine cannot be traced to particular linguistic forms of the genre. It would be futile to try to identify presumably "disappearing" elements of poetic language in a successful performance of *na't*. Nevertheless, the dialectics of salience and withdrawal also obtain for language as a religious medium, but in a slightly different way (Eisenlohr 2011b). In the case of *na't* recitation, the role of poetic language as a religious medium more closely relates to perceived faithfulness relative to the conventions of the *na't* genre. It is in relation to such conventional expectations that poetic language can problematically be salient or recede into the background, giving way to the encounter with the divine it is supposed to produce. In semiotic terms, these generic conventions can be described as presupposed indexical relations (Silverstein 1995 [1976]: 204–206)—that is, normative expectations about what signs, linguistic and nonlinguistic, should co-occur. The latter include identities and participant roles of performers and audience members, the qualities of the spatial setting, and of course, the language uttered and the vocal style in which the poetry is performed. When all these come together in expected ways, conforming to the norms of the *na't* genre and its established modalities of performance, *na't* as a form of religious mediation unfolds smoothly and normally.

In this state, *na't* can function as a medium, not because of the phenomenological disappearance of its materiality, but because the forms and elements it consists of do not become problematically salient for the time being. However, reciting *na't* in such a way is always a delicate performative achievement subject to failure. This became clear to me through my Mauritian Muslim interlocutors' concerns about qualities of the voice in recitation as well as worries about overall recitational style. When, for example, the recitational style of a performance reminded listeners too

much of film songs, they perceived this as a break with the established conventions of the na't genre and its performance. The recited language of the genre suddenly became problematically salient, interrupting its smooth functioning as a medium. It did not recede into the background in the face of what it is supposed to mediate or bring about—namely, the personal encounter with the Prophet. Instead, the departure from what are considered proper norms of the genre rudely dashed any hopes for a pious encounter, foregrounding the material forms of the language instead, in ways that listeners considered problematic. For Farhad, who saw in na't a means to re-create the divinely inspired atmosphere in which he assumed that Islamic authorities such as Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi had composed the poetry, sound reproduction was a means to ensure that a recitational mode clearly distant from “film style” (*filmi taraz*) would be safeguarded. For him, one had to strike a careful balance that expressed the emotionally overwhelming encounter with the Prophet, but which steered clear of the agitation and perceived excess of film style, with its unwelcome associations of romantic love and sensual dance. In order for this to happen, Farhad stressed, the proper style of recitation had to be carefully invited—or literally, “be seated”—into the na't (*na't men taraz baiṭhana*).

But others among my interlocutors had a different perspective. For example, Nazeer, a tailor in his sixties who is also known as a na't khwan, fondly remembered the days when Muslims in Mauritius listened to na't performed in Indian films, such as by the late Mohammed Rafi (1924–1980), one of the most famous male playback singers of the Hindi cinema at the time. For this na't khwan of an older generation, there was nothing wrong with reciting na't in “film style.” He also had no objections to na't accompanied by instruments such as the *daf*, a drum that resembles the *ravan*. The latter is the emblematic instrument of *sega* music closely associated with Mauritian Creoles and their dance traditions. Nazeer also told me that, when preparing for a na't performance, he listened to *qawwali* devotional music—popular in South Asian Sufism—for inspiration. Returning to our discussion of na't as a religious medium, Nazeer stated that the same vocal “film” style that Farhad would strongly deplore for spoiling the divine encounter that the performance is intended to bring about did not at all constitute breaking generic conventions. From Nazeer's perspective, even when a na't khwan performed in film style, the presupposed indexical relations between the different constituent components of the na't performance remained intact. For Farhad, this would constitute a scandalous departure from the na't performance he expected. In other words, the recitation of the poetic language of na't as a medium of the divine can function as a presumably transparent or problematically salient medium simultaneously, depending on perspective.

To conclude, sound reproduction has become integrated into previously established religious practices. I have argued that this process is primarily driven by Mauritian Muslim assumptions about this technology. Islamic traditions regarding the reciting voice and the transmission of authoritative religious discourse strongly

influence these assumptions. More particularly, two notions about sound reproduction play a prominent role. First, that sound reproduction supports a particular form of entextualization central to the practice of *na't*, allowing a merger of the agency of the genre's performers with that of revered poet-saints. The second key assumption is that sound reproduction supports immediacy in relationships with spiritual authorities, that it provides a range of affordances that allow listeners to project onto it their desire for a "vanishing" medium. The most important of these affordances is that sound reproduction enables qualitative integrity in the authoritative transmission of voice. This is made possible by the circumstance that a voice and its technical reproduction result in the same kind of sonic event. Following Wolfgang Ernst, a reproduced voice is not simply a representation but that voice itself. This confluence of technological affordances and theological assumptions about the voice in Islamic traditions ultimately accounts for the enthusiastic adoption of sound reproduction in Mauritian Muslims' devotional practices. Nevertheless, the performative realization of an encounter with the Prophet through *na't* recitals is always a delicate achievement that may also result in failure. Moreover, Mauritian Muslims disagree over what exactly counts as a good, successful performance. Therefore, the success of such performances in bringing about a rapprochement between Muslims and the divine is situational, and a *na't* recital may simultaneously fail and succeed as a process of religious mediation.