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Soundscapes of Disaster and Humanitarianism: Survival Singing, Relief Telethons, and the Haiti Earthquake

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Soundscapes of Disaster and Humanitarianism: Survival Singing, Relief Telethons, and the Haiti Earthquake

Elizabeth McAlister

Everybody says the earthquake started with sound. For thirty-five seconds a deafening roar filled the air. It sounded as if a plane was landing on the roof. It pounded like somebody was using a jackhammer inside the house. The ground shook and buildings collapsed. Millions of people screamed at once. “The clamor of thousands of loud screams of terror and cries of pain arise as if from a single stomach,” Yanick Lahens would write.¹

I stood at an anguished remove as the worst disaster in the Americas struck the center of Haiti on 12 January 2010. As an American, I was reduced to watching and listening from a distance with my Haitian partner and our children. It is a surreal perspective, as many know. It is also one that is made possible by digital technology. Susan Sontag writes that “being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience, the cumulative offering by more than a century and a half’s worth of those professional,

¹ Yanick Lahens, “Haiti, or The Health of Misery,” in Martin Munro, ed., *Haiti Rising: Haitian History, Culture and the Earthquake of 2010* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 9.

specialized tourists known as journalists.”² But what can we know if we listen to the sounds of disaster?

This news report on NBC stunned me: a woman named Janette, who had been trapped alone in the dark for five days, was brought out from the rubble *singing*. The journalist reporting the story focused on the romantic, dramatic perspective of Janette’s husband, who, despite the evidence of a flattened building, was sure his beloved wife was alive. He would not leave the site. It was a tale of enduring love and loyalty, as well as a parable about foreign (American) rescue workers who cut Janette free. The segment was a human-interest story of a single rescue, filmed for a North American audience who themselves might be familiar with the cultural frames of Americans as both romantic and rescuers. But for me, the segment was a powerful story about a sensory orientation to singing and its relationship to self-preservation and survival in Haiti.³

Janette sang, in French: “Ne pas avoir peur de la mort” (“Do not be afraid of death”). She was singing a hymn commonly heard at funerals and in Masonic temples in Haiti.⁴ Before she could finish, a journalist bent over her stretcher and interrupted the singing message Janette was delivering to the assembled crowd. He asked her, “Did you think you would live?” Too polite not to answer, Janette responded “Yes,” and turned her face, and the question, around to him. “Why not?”

I felt awe and respect for this brave survivor of a horrific ordeal, singing a message of strength and certitude. Yet the narrative arc of the news story focused on other things—on love, rescue, and the sensationalist drive of so much journalism: “How awful did it feel?” Interrupting Janette’s song to interrogate her denied her the opportunity to fully express her triumph over this harrowing experience, just as it refused to allow the listening viewer to linger in hearing her sound, her song. The moment illustrates what Allen Feldman calls “the inadmissibility of alien sensory experience,” in what he terms “cultural anesthesia.” He calls attention to the editing out of “disconcerting, discordant, and anarchic sensory presences” that would disrupt the unspoken rules governing public life.⁵ In the genre of the human-interest rescue story, letting a survivor sing for too long seemed not to fit the script, predetermined as it was to stick to a familiar story about disaster, rescue, romance, and spoken testimony. I still wonder, What would Janette’s song tell us if they had let her continue singing?

Yet as one form of music was silenced, another would be promoted, in an interrelated process of muting and amplifying the soundscapes of disaster that I wish to consider in this essay. The “Hope for Haiti Now: A Global Benefit for Earthquake Relief” telethon of 22 January was the most widely broadcast telethon in history. It ran according to a familiar model that has

2 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 18.

3 NBC News, Port-au-Prince, “Janette Haiti Rescue, Singing,” 17 January 2010, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ShKG8MNvydo&feature=related (accessed 1 February 2010). A second report of someone brought from the rubble singing is recounted by the *Sidney Morning Herald* at www.smh.com.au/world/one-week-on-alive-and-singing-in-quake-rubble-20100120-mkvh.html and www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/us_and_americas/article6994649.ece.

4 Erol Josué, interview by author, Miami, Florida, 15 July 2010.

5 Allen Feldman, “On Cultural Anesthesia: From Desert Storm to Rodney King,” *American Ethnologist* 21, no. 2 (1994): 405.

by now become a scripted ritual: it was an aestheticized spectacle of celebrities performing emotionally evocative music, juxtaposed against stories and images of survivors undergoing extreme suffering. The telethon is an American innovation (although now many countries produce them) and a hybrid form: part variety show, part disaster journalism, and part humanitarian fundraising. It is widely broadcast and preempts usually scheduled programming. In this case the entire mediasphere paused to air this single event.

The “Hope for Haiti Now” telethon was a snapshot of mainstream media representations of Haiti in the context of the quake and a chance to observe underlying logics of American (and other) attitudes toward Haiti and its people as they responded to the disaster. I argue here that this taken-for-granted formula, whereby entertainment is offered in return for donations toward relief aid, has an acoustic dimension that reveals its character as an artifact of current neoliberal economic logic. In this cultural arena shaped by neoliberalism, individuals are called on in the private sphere, using emotional appeals, to relieve suffering through privatized humanitarian aid. And since the targeted listeners are potential donors, it is the most popular mainstream music that is featured, sung by best-selling artists. But in the course of producing relief concerts, disaster survivors’ own voices, laments, and songs are muted, even as images of their faces and bodies are highlighted. My analysis attunes itself to audiospheres as they are played against the visual register—the way that Haitian quake survivors and international celebrities were recorded aurally and represented visually in order to raise money for disaster relief. On the one hand, I tune in to music made by Haitians, for Haitians, close to the epicenter, in the direct aftermath of the quake, such as in the case of Janette. On the other hand, I listen to music made by (mostly) North Americans for (mostly) other Americans, in telethon performances far away in New York and Los Angeles (and London), weeks after the event. Juxtaposing two soundscapes—the Haitian streets and the telethon—presents the opportunity to bring together recent scholarship on the visibility of suffering with work on music and emotion in order to explore the links between singing and meaning making, between humanitarianism and culture, between American civil religion and neoliberalism, and between the photojournalism of disaster and the musicology of the disaster-relief telethon.

Singing for Life in Haiti

Singing turned out to be anything but an anomalous reaction by a quake survivor named Janette. People began to sing alone and in groups the very evening of the earthquake. My friends who live in Port-au-Prince tweeted the evening after the quake that people were singing in groups after the sun went down, as they faced an uncertain future outdoors. All the intimacies of life were thrust into rubble-strewn public spaces; musician Richard Morse tweeted, “The streets are Haiti’s livingroom [and] bedroom.”⁶ Foreign journalists began to report on

6 Richard Morse, Twitter post, 17 January 2010, 9:57 P.M., twitter.com/RAMhaiti.

Haitians' use of music to hold themselves together through the trauma. The broadcasts featured people singing Catholic and Protestant hymns. The distinctive songs of the Afro-Creole religion of the majority (known as Vodou) were not widely audible in downtown public spaces, a telling piece of evidence for the ongoing stigma attached to that tradition.

On 16 January, just four days after the disaster, CNN ran a “developing story” that featured a large group of people singing hymns and walking through Port-au-Prince.⁷ “Tout bagay déjà byen,” they sang. “Everything is already fine.” It was an evangelical Protestant hymn that asserted that because they were saved, with Jesus sitting on his throne and in control, all was well. In declaring that things were fine, even in the midst of devastation and chaos, the group broadcast an unshakable Christian faith. The procession was remarkable enough that CNN deemed it a “developing story,” yet nobody interviewed the marchers, and Wolf Blitzer seemed unable to interpret the situation. Reporters everywhere commented on the “resilience of the Haitian people,” a phrase that would become ubiquitous, but they would rarely elaborate on why and under what historical conditions Haitians have had to be resilient.

My later conversations with numerous quake survivors about the widespread public singing revealed to me a sensory capacity for singing that Haitians possessed (speaking generally) even in the quake's aftershocks, to which foreigners seemed not entirely sensitized. External observers (including, arguably, myself) cultivate an aural *attunement* adjusted toward certain codes and habits that renders other soundways incomprehensible. Repeatedly, survivors told me that their distress during the quake was so intense that they had to transform it into a song in order to withstand it. “Ou chante pwoblem-lan” (“You sing the problem”). “If you don't have this reaction instilled in you, you cannot understand it; it's inexplicable,” said a man known as a song leader in his community. Even the nickname Haitians gave to the quake—*goudougoudou*—reproduces its sensory quality in a rhythmic register.

Haitian quake survivors sang to reconstitute themselves as individuals, and to reconstitute the groups—families, neighborhoods, congregations, and communities—to which they belong. For individuals, singing is synonymous with deep breathing and a technique for refocusing a distressed psyche. “The air you use in singing is the air that lets you feel what's going on inside you. It's a tool that lets you focus your mind,” said Haitian traditional singer Mimerose Beaubrun. “Sound is a form of energy. Singing is a tool we use to manipulate energy. It's a way of controlling the energy around you, to be able to control the energy in yourself.”⁸

Baubrun points us to the idea that Haitian quake survivors used the embodied technique of singing to orient themselves in the face of sudden and violent rupture. Ethnomusicologists write about how for some societies, music making allows a group to form together in a special relationship mediated by rhythm, creating “a special world of time” in which all the participants are synchronized in breath, movement, and voice. Group singing engages the sensory

7 CNN, “developing story” of people singing in the streets of Port-au-Prince, 16 January 2010; see www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yh1RGGbdlM&feature=related (accessed 2 July 2012).

8 Mimerose Beaubrun, interview by the author, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, 1992.

experience of the individual and synchronizes the individual with the group.⁹ Assembled people sing to breathe energy through the body: the individual body and the collective body. They sing to rebalance themselves.

Singing works spatially as well. Musical processions through downtown Port-au-Prince sang life back into space and helped to make the territory inhabitable. Singing together oriented individuals as a collective, creating and occupying a shared place. Thus nightly singing in many encampments in the quake zone, and marches through public areas, helped groups to mark out space together and take ownership of that space. Through singing, Haitian people incorporated the city back into their lives.¹⁰

A common thought was that the quake was the beginning of the apocalypse. Wrote one friend in an e-mail, “The people in my neighborhood are saying this is the second coming—it feels like the apocalypse.” In several of the recordings people sent to me, I heard singers evoking biblical images of destruction and placing themselves as actors in an ancient story. In an “audio postcard” that NPR broadcast on 20 January, women and girls sang a well-known hymn in the Haitian repertoire: “Jericho, miray-la kraze” (“Jericho, the Walls Are Crumbling”).¹¹ In the biblical story, Jericho is the first city the Israelites come to when they enter the promised land of Canaan. God helps Joshua and the Israelites tear down its high walls so they can conquer the city and possess the land. They do this by blowing trumpets and giving a loud shout; they do this through sound, through the human voice. Several millennia later, evangelical Christians in Port-au-Prince reached for this image and sang the ancient city of Jericho into their city. Port-au-Prince became the biblical city, and its destruction was the will of God. The singers performed the role of a righteous and sanctified people, singing and chanting down the walls of the city so that their God could possess it. The Creole lyrics went on to name other troubles—hunger, poverty, and sickness—but then declared, “There is nothing Jesus cannot crumble.” In the face of this devastating catastrophe, quake survivors produced their own religious music to fashion a cosmic meaning out of the disaster, and to connect themselves to the biblical story as the now-chosen people of God.

Vodou congregations also sang, but less audibly. They would later say that evangelicals camping near them attempted to “sing them down” and drown out their Vodou songs with Protestant hymns. Reverting to age-old tactics of covert practices developed during slavery and post-slavery repression, Vodou congregations felt safer singing the Catholic hymns that are also part of their liturgy. They sang the simple version of “Ave Maria” common to Haitian Catholic masses. It tells us a lot that the members of the majority religion of the nation felt vulnerable and stifled. The Catholic and French-identified elites have long waged campaigns

9 John Blacking, *How Musical Is Man?* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973), 58.

10 I thank Bernice Johnson Reagon for her insight that singing helps control space, saying that when American civil rights protestors broke into song during sit-ins, they took ownership of the space and counteracted the aggressions of sheriffs.

11 National Public Radio Audio Postcard, 20 January 2010, www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=122755214. Wyclef Jean inserted this hymn's lyric in his track “Ghetto Racine,” from the *Masquerade* album in 2002.

of repression against Vodou. Evangelical congregations that view Vodou congregations as adversaries to be silenced are also internationally connected and well organized, and more aid was flowing to them.¹²

Singing for Haiti on TV

Immediately after the quake hit, Wyclef Jean, George Clooney, and MTV executives envisioned a telethon to support disaster relief in Haiti, and the production came together quickly. Broadcast live ten days after the quake, “Hope for Haiti Now” was the most widely viewed telethon in history. It effectively took over the mediasphere and was aired commercial-free on every major network and cable channel, including ABC, NBC, Fox, CNN, BET, the CW, CMT, HBO, and VH1, as well as MTV Networks Worldwide, which reaches 640 million households, and CNN International, which reaches 260 million. It was the first US-based telethon to air on MTV in China.¹³ It was also broadcast over the Internet on YouTube, MySpace, Hulu, and AOL, and on the *Huffington Post*, which compiled updated tweets from organizations in Haiti. In Haiti, survivors could listen in on the radio—if they had one. Like “Live Aid” twenty-five years earlier, it was a multiveneue event, with George Clooney hosting in Los Angeles, Wyclef Jean hosting in New York, Jay-Z and Bono performing in London, and CNN’s Anderson Cooper reporting live from downtown Port-au-Prince. Of the eighteen musical numbers, just two were by Haitian artists: Wyclef Jean and chanteuse Emmeline Michel.

The “Hope for Haiti Now” telethon unfolded in a formulaic pattern that interspersed musical performances with celebrities reading stories about the courage of survivors and with short segments by CNN’s Anderson Cooper in Haiti (putting CNN in the ambiguous position of helping raise money for organizations they were covering). The beneficiaries were all nongovernmental relief organizations: the Red Cross, UNICEF, United Nations World Food Program, Yéle Haiti Foundation, Oxfam America, Partners in Health, and the newly formed Clinton Bush Haiti Fund. Just one organization was Haitian: Yéle, the charity Wyclef Jean and his cousin Jerry Duplessis had founded in 2005. Cash was what was called for; virtually all aid and rescue organizations were pleading for money and not clothes, goods, or even volunteer assistance. Indeed, the telethon raised a record amount: US\$58 million by the day after the broadcast, largely through new technologies—text-messaged donations and downloaded musical performances for 99 cents (or, later, US\$7.99 for the whole album from iTunes, Rhapsody, and others). The album from the telethon was released soon after to a number-one slot on the pop music charts in eighteen countries. Between this and other telethons, supermarket

12 For an analysis of the antagonism of Haitian evangelicals toward Vodou, see Elizabeth McAlister, “From Slave Revolt to a Blood Pact with Satan: The Evangelical Rewriting of Haitian History,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 41, no. 2 (2012): 187–215.

13 Gil Kaufman, “Jay-Z, Justin Timberlake, Bono, to Headline MTV’s ‘Hope for Haiti’ Telethon,” www.mtv.com/news/articles/1630013/jay-z-justin-timberlake-bono-headline-mtvs-hope-haiti-telethon.jhtml (accessed 2 July 2012).

drives, and other campaigns, an estimated half of all households in the United States made a donation to the Haiti relief effort.¹⁴

The “Hope for Haiti Now” telethon was arguably an important event, in that the entire television industry devoted itself to demonstrating concern and compassion for quake survivors by raising funds for their relief. It allowed ordinary citizens throughout the viewing public sphere a means to help. In the critique that follows, I by no means want to say that this and other telethons should not have been staged, that people should not have contributed, or that efforts at humanitarian relief should not have been made. But I do wish to contribute to the ongoing interrogation, from many disciplinary perspectives, of humanitarianism and its contradictions, at this cultural site that forms a nexus of popular music consumption, celebrity humanitarianism, and American civil religion: the disaster relief telethon.

Humanitarian organizations exist precisely to rush to the aid of suffering populations. The telethon viewer who is not a professional humanitarian can act to alleviate suffering by contributing money, thus fulfilling their moral obligation to respond. The telethon was designed to funnel compassion into material relief, to provide a way for a global public to respond supportively during an overwhelming tragedy. This logic has become fundamental to what Keith Tester calls “common-sense humanitarianism.”¹⁵ Its logic is premised on the idea that disasters are a fact of life (earthquakes, volcanoes, floods, drought and famine, war, and so on) and that when disaster strikes, professional humanitarian agencies step in with relief. By virtue of this intervention, an emergency situation can be resolved and a society can be returned to “normal.”¹⁶ Ordinary people, in turn, can contribute to the cause through charitable donations. The telethon seems the perfect vehicle to present a plea for support and to collect contributions quickly; large and small donors alike can meet their felt responsibilities to help. To both inspire and thank the donors, celebrities perform and make appeals. Yet this seemingly obvious relationship between entertainment and humanitarianism is not inevitable; it has a specific history and has developed in response to economic market conditions.

It turns out that mass media has played a central role in the history of humanitarianism, especially in the United States. In a study of the *American Red Cross Magazine* and other sources, Kevin Rozario shows how in the early twentieth century “the mass media itself played a crucial role in reshaping American ways of seeing, feeling, and responding to suffering by treating violence and pain as pleasure-producing commodities.”¹⁷ Charities such as the Red

14 Charity Navigator, “Haiti Earthquake: One Year Later,” 2011, www.charitynavigator.org/index.cfm?bay=content.view&cpid=1194 (accessed 2 July 2012).

15 Keith Tester, *Humanitarianism and Modern Culture* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), ix. On the complexity of humanitarian processes, see David Reiff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003).

16 Craig Calhoun, “A World of Emergencies: Fear, Intervention, and the Limits of Cosmopolitan Order,” *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 41, no. 4 (2004): 373–95. Here Calhoun elaborates on the premises that make up the “social imaginary” (377) of emergencies and points out the ways global processes both exacerbate and make invisible distant troubles deemed emergencies.

17 Kevin Rozario, “‘Delicious Horrors’: Mass Culture, the Red Cross, and the Appeal of Modern American Humanitarianism,” *American Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (2003): 426.

Cross borrowed narrative and visual strategies from movies and pulp magazines when they found themselves competing with these new commercial products for the attention of the public. “From this point on,” Rozario continues, “fundraisers would have to devote as much attention to advertising as to ethics, and to ‘entertainment’ as to education.” This modern humanitarianism became a widespread phenomenon “at the very moment that a sensationalistic mass media began to dominate American culture,” and the telethon is its current, neoliberal iteration.¹⁸

In this complex and contradictory terrain in which entertainment serves as a central catalyst encouraging the public to shoulder the responsibility of financing the relief of mass suffering, popular media such as the telethon serve to set the narrative, visual, and auditory terms that motivate giving. “The media defines the moral space in which the other appears to us, and at the same time invites (claims, constrains) an equivalent moral response from us, the audience,” writes Roger Silverstone.¹⁹ After the earthquake, the Haiti of CNN, presented throughout the telethon, was the moral framework for Haiti in the mainstream American response to the quake. The moral imperative was articulated most succinctly by George Clooney, who said, “The Haitian people need our help. . . . It’s a big world out there and we all have a lot of responsibility to look out for people who can’t look after themselves.”²⁰

At first, Clooney’s words seem obviously true—the Haitian people need “our” help, and “we” have a moral responsibility to help them. We can also observe that, as Clooney articulated, the moral content was framed in distinctly paternalistic terms: to look out for those who cannot look after themselves. The viewer, the American, would provide “the looking after.” The suggestion that Americans have both the capacity and responsibility to act, even through sacrifice, by virtue of a grand historic mission of being a “light to the nations” is a long-standing one and forms the core of American civil religion. In the logic of the telethon, the emergency and its suffering is happening somewhere else, and Americans at home should meet their responsibility to help.

Through these implied logics, telethons tend to present a stark divide between the viewer and the people surviving a catastrophic event, between the victim and the star on stage, between the afflicted and the saved, the unfortunate and the fortunate. When a disaster hits a historically oppressed or colonized population, the clear divide echoes older colonialist tropes of poor, powerless, natural victims who cannot help themselves and require rescue by the strong. Americans have long represented Haiti as a chaotic and violent nation of unruly and ungovernable masses trapped in entrenched poverty (as “the poorest country in the Western hemisphere”). The telethon wrote the tropes of violence out of the script and focused on the

18 Ibid., 429.

19 Roger Silverstone, *Media and Morality: On the Rise of the Mediapolis* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 7; cited in Tester, *Humanitarianism and Modern Culture*, 43.

20 George Clooney, “The Story Behind ‘Hope for Haiti Now,’” MTV News, www.mtv.com/videos/news/474534/george-clooney-wants-to-help-those-who-cant-help-themselves.jhtml#id=1630203 (accessed 15 July 2011).

innocence and blamelessness of Haitians. Still, the country became once again the site of suffering, helpless incompetence, and need, free of historical context.

The success of the formula—measured in donations collected—hinges precisely on the dehistoricization of the victims and the depoliticization of the disaster. The telethon flattened the Haiti quake into *just* a natural disaster, yet many point out that the Haiti quake was not so simple. Telethon segments explained nothing of the structural causes of the high death tolls. These causes lie most directly in Haiti's inadequate housing, a result of poverty largely tied to international debt and inequitable trade deals. The overcrowding that proved so lethal during the quake is a direct consequence of international banking institutions' neoliberal structural adjustment programs, and the subsequent collapse of the Haitian agricultural sector that stemmed from US imports, both of which causes enormous rural to urban migration. Haitian poverty is also a direct legacy of the policies of the François and Jean-Claude Duvalier dictatorships, which the United States actively supported as a bulwark against Fidel Castro's Cuba. The telethon script, which might have worked to educate the public about Haitian history, stuck to the simple, common-sense frame of natural disaster. Presumably, delving into long-term problems for which the United States bears responsibility might make potential contributors feel less noble in their roles in "the looking after." But as Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods argue about Hurricane Katrina, presenting a crisis in terms of natural disaster "only served to naturalize poor and black agony, distress and death."²¹ In the absence of historical explanation, black and poor people seem to be perpetually in need, and whites and Americans their natural rescuers.

For all of its positive accomplishments, the "Hope for Haiti Now" telethon also reproduced many of the symbolic degradations that have been discerned by others who write about both disaster photojournalism and disease cure telethons. Disability rights advocates have critiqued annual telethons for childhood disease patients for reinforcing stereotypes of the "pitiable poster child" or "inspirational disabled person."²² The earthquake relief telethon likewise moves back and forth between images of survivors as objects of pity (such as a child's bandaged face) and of survivors or rescuers as sources of inspiration (such as Janette). What is more, segments on news broadcasts and telethons typically focus on rescues and the heroic American or European rescuers. The thousands of Haitians who dug loved ones from rubble were passed over in favor of foreign rescue professionals, such as the Los Angeles firefighters whose infrared cameras and specialized tools allowed them to free Janette and others. These heroic volunteers gave profoundly of themselves and their stories are worthy of attention; yet so are the stories of the countless Haitians who performed rescue operations with fewer specialized tools and less formal training. The viewer, most likely a non-Haitian,

21 Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, "No One Knows the Mysteries at the Bottom of the Ocean," in Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, eds., *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place* (Cambridge, MA: South End, 2007), 2.

22 Joseph P. Shapiro, *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Times, 1993), 16.

is invited to share the perspective, excitement, and triumph of the rescuer, and to add to the momentum with a contribution.

In relief telethons, the suffering body is figured not a site of self-determination but rather as a sign: the body indexes active and residual meanings of injury, victimhood, or need.²³ The studio backdrop for many of the “Hope for Haiti Now” telethon’s musical acts featured larger-than-life portraits of single faces, mostly women or children. Each face was either injured or streaked with tears, or was that of a small child looking in an upward gaze. As Liisa Malkki writes, women and children are represented as innocents in humanitarian representations, and without historical or political context, they become pure, mute, and speechless “exemplary victims.”²⁴ The images reduce the victims to faces with large, haunting eyes, the effect of which is to instantiate the relationship between the victim and the spectator.²⁵

The bodies and voices that are given overwhelmingly more telethon exposure are those of the celebrities, safely removed from the disaster. In the “Hope for Haiti Now” telethon the celebrities’ bodies and faces were highlighted in the performance studio as aglow, healthy, and beautiful, especially striking when juxtaposed with images of injured quake victims. The pleasure of viewing and hearing the beauty of an artist like Beyonce juxtaposed against the bloodied faces of the earthquake survivors produces the “cultural anesthesia” whereby disaster victims or refugees become “generalities of bodies, bounded, starving . . . [,] pressed against the television screen.” These figures of misfortune become the moral opposite of the American viewer, who is offered the opportunity for endless physical reforms and renewals through the commercialized messages about exercise, diet, cosmetics, and travel. Feldman points out that this “visual polarity between the reformable bodies of the observer and the determined, deformed, and reduced bodies of the observed” creates the very relations of power that, in turn, essentialize the televised sufferer into a natural victim without agency, knowledge, or history.²⁶ The soundtrack, in turn, reinforces this polarity, since the disaster victims’ own voices and songs are absent from the broadcast.

In a complicated triangulation, the listening viewer is consuming both the abject bodies of the injured and the hyper-aestheticized bodies and songs of the celebrities, while being encouraged to join the stars in giving to the sufferers. The calculus of viewing injury and pain alongside visual beauty and auditory pleasure is a delicate one that the telethon maximized to financial success. Visual and aural registers worked together with the emotional to spur the public to give more.

23 On the body as site and sign, see Angela Zito, “Body,” *Material Religion* 7, no. 1 (2011): 18–25.

24 Liisa H. Malkki, “Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization,” *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 3 (1996): 384.

25 See also Jo Ellen Fair and Lisa Parks, “Africa on Camera: Television News Coverage and Aerial Imaging of Rwandan Refugees,” *Africa Today* 48, no. 2 (2001): 41.

26 Feldman, “On Cultural Anesthesia,” 407.

There is an affective politics at work in broadcasting images of disasters in this neoliberal period when the alleviation of mass suffering depends largely on private sector resources. Here we can see that the US neoliberal logics that connect the personal and the political extend into the global sphere in what Lauren Berlant calls “the compression of national life into apparatuses of intimacy.”²⁷ Telethons invite the listening viewer to donate to international relief while consuming emotionally evocative songs and images of disaster. The telethon’s executive producer, Joel Gallen, said he worked with the artists to find songs that would fit the event’s tone. “They’ll be singing songs that they have an emotional connection to and that best reflect their feelings about this tragic situation,” he said.²⁸

Music carries numerous emotional associations that can be conveyed through harmony, rhythm, melody, timbre, and tonality. Such emotionality is socially conditioned and associational.²⁹ Music, like odors, can bring memories flooding to mind (as cognitive science demonstrates empirically).³⁰ Celebrity artists who perform during telethons generally sing their own popular songs that they consider appropriate to the situation (such as Madonna, who sang “Like a Prayer”), or they sing another well-known song (or medley) suitable for the occasion (such as Bruce Springsteen, who sang Pete Seeger’s civil rights anthem “We Shall Overcome”). In the only song composed for the occasion, and the only one to include French lyrics, Jay-Z, Rihanna, Bono, and the Edge sang “Stranded (Haiti, Mon Amour),” which ranked first in iTunes downloads by the next morning.

The listening viewer is at once consuming a popular song in the moment and associating it nostalgically with previous memories. Of course, music’s meaning is polyvalent and can conjure different associations to many people at different times. This nostalgia is precisely what drives the affective momentum of performances. When Justin Timberlake sang Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah,” he allowed young viewers to thrill at his presence, while older viewers reminisced with a familiar song, and many found meaning in the many biblical references throughout the lyrics.

Likewise, many Americans I spoke with reported a powerful reaction of nostalgia, sadness, and poignancy while watching Stevie Wonder perform Paul Simon’s 1970 hit “Bridge over Troubled Water,” with a gospel choir backing him. Wonder’s participation in particular lent itself to numerous associations for American and other viewers: the 1960s and 1970s eras, civil rights struggles, and the strength of the black church, mixed in with decades of personal memories of life and love listening to Stevie Wonder. Paul Simon performed “Bridge over Troubled Water” for the “Tribute to Heroes” telethon after 9/11; now the viewing listener

27 Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 1.

28 Denise Martin and Matea Gold, “Stars to Turn Out for Haiti Telethon Friday,” *Los Angeles Times*, 22 January 2010.

29 Annabel J. Cohen, “Music as a Source of Emotion in Film,” in Patrik N. Juslin and John A. Sloboda, eds., *Music and Emotion: Theory and Research* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 267.

30 Klaus R. Scherer and Marcel R. Zentner, “Emotional Effects of Music: Production Rules,” in Juslin and Sloboda, *Music and Emotion*, 369.

might connect Wonder's performance with other moments in their own history. Like Wonder's, most of the musical performances were emotionally meaningful songs with simple, stripped-down arrangements. The acoustic register that the arrangements achieved lent solemnity to the event (and made the production simpler).

Music also works to influence emotion through empathy with the affect performed by the artist (in slowed, acoustic, arrangement; in facial expression; in vocal timbre and cadence). Take, for example, the beautiful performance of "Halo" by Beyonce. Her 2009 release had been a love song, "Baby, I Can See Your Halo." She later changed the lyric as a tribute to Michael Jackson: "Michael, I can see your Halo." Similarly, at "Hope for Haiti Now" she sang, "Haiti, I can see your Halo. You know you're my saving grace." Drawing on Christian imagery, Haiti becomes an angel or saint, and the Haitian people are sanctified through their innocent suffering. Givers to Haiti relief, in turn, are redeemed through sacrifice for Haiti. In this slowed down, acoustic version (with Coldplay's Chris Martin on piano), Beyonce's performance triggered a kind of emotional contagion: the listener could identify with the singer and respond empathetically, according to the timbre and message of the song.

Like Beyonce's "Halo," many telethon songs were love songs in which some aspects of the lyrics were thought to be appropriate in addressing the tragedy. The simple chorus of Cohen's "Hallelujah" presumably compensated for the sexual bondage imagery in the verses, and the substituting of *Haiti* for *baby* in Beyonce's song allowed her to repurpose her lyrics for the occasion. But what does it mean that nostalgic love songs have become a primary mode of entertainment through which it is appropriate to raise funds for disaster relief? The emotional charge of a love song is a way of knowing, located in the private realm of affect and the intimacies of biography. Such songs usually evoke a pair of lovers, not a collective movement, and when the listener identifies with the music, he or she identifies with a fleeting cause. The telethon's moral imperative toward responsibility for suffering global neighbors is so often couched in the idiom of nostalgia and romantic love. This makes sense when we consider that the neoliberal economic structure presently governing the United States and, by extension, the Americas, is fundamentally a process of privatizing public life—of social services, of institutions, of citizenship. Affective life is articulated with this process. As Anna McCarthy argues, "Emotion is a truth effect produced along with liberalism's ideal of bounded individualism."³¹ An individual can give to disaster relief in part through a triangulation of imagined relations: the suffering of the victim relates to the giver's private, intimate suffering over romance. Others have argued that this kind of emotivism is the primary moral discourse of the age, one that collapses moral judgments into expressions of preference and feeling, and thus is more concerned to influence attitudes (through emotion) than beliefs (with argument).³² "Keep Haiti in your hearts," said a text message from Kansas, crossing the telethon screen.

31 Anna McCarthy, "Reality Television: A Neoliberal Theater of Suffering," *Social Text* 25, no. 4 (2007): 27.

32 Tester, *Humanitarianism and Modern Culture*, 88.

To be sure, other emotions are at work besides romantic love. A viewer's giving also pivots on a complicated form of compassion, one that echoes evangelical calls for charitable giving. This call carries the longing for "genuine community," and giving together with "a haunted sense of othering."³³ Telethon performances are designed to activate our compassion and mobilize relief capital. But, as Elizabeth Spelman argues, "Compassionate people [are] able to keep the sufferers dangling at a delicious and cruel distance." There is always the danger of "muting the sufferer, of making him or her an 'object' of compassion."³⁴ In the relief telethon, the sufferers were quite literally muted, and their voices overdubbed with those of music industry superstars.

When the image of suffering is accompanied by music, emotion is intensified, and the resolution to the surge of emotionality is to call or text a donation. "There is shame as well as shock in looking at the close-up of a real horror," writes Sontag.³⁵ The only way to reconcile the shame is to do something to alleviate it. Yet shame may be the inverse of another emotion that inspires donations. If Americans are "looking after" those "who cannot look after themselves," it is a classic sense of American responsibility that animates many givers. Paul Longmore makes the point that telethons are rituals of American civil religion. He writes that "telethon donation is a collective rite designed to enable Americans to demonstrate to themselves that they still belong to a moral community, that they have not succumbed to materialism, that they are givers who fulfill their obligations to their neighbors." He goes on to say that "the ceremonial counterimage to conspicuous consumption is conspicuous contribution." During the Haiti telethon, it was announced that George Clooney and Sandra Bullock had each given a million dollars to the cause, as had Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie. These moments underscore the way fundraisers are nationalist rituals in which ordinary citizens perform their moral standing and their public virtue.³⁶ Civil-minded and compassionate Americans give to the relief effort, and the proper authorities do their job to help. Meanwhile, the mediator-priests who connect the suffering victims, the relief agencies, and the individual American donors are the quasi-deities of American civil life: the celebrities.

Wyclef Jean, Sound Rebel, Celebrity Haitian Humanitarian

Wyclef Jean occupies several positions simultaneously that are usually distinct, and this allowed his involvement in the telethon to depart from the paternalistic aspects of the script. Born and raised until the age of ten in a district just outside the Haitian capital, Wyclef hails

33 Melani McAlister, "What Is Your Heart For? Affect and Internationalism in the Evangelical Public Sphere," *American Literary History* 20, no. 4 (2008): 883.

34 Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Fruits of Sorrow* (Boston: Beacon, 1997), 65; cited in *ibid.*, 883–84.

35 Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 42.

36 Paul K. Longmore, "Conspicuous Contribution and American Cultural Dilemmas: Telethon Rituals of Cleansing and Renewal," in David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, eds., *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 135–36.

from a sector of the black majority and not from the elite. His rise to superstardom (with the success of the hip-hop group the Fugees) allowed him to vault over the Haitian class and color hierarchy to a position at the social and economic zenith. He is also, arguably, both a Haitian survivor of the quake's trauma (who went to collect and bury corpses in the quake's aftermath) and an American musician working to inspire charitable giving. A friend and artistic collaborator of many other celebrities (Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie, George Clooney, and countless others), Wyclef lent a hint of immediacy to the telethon script and the artists' ad-libbed comments. He seemed to embody just one degree of separation between Haitian survivors and the celebrities working the telethon. In turn, he allowed the audience an imagined personal connection.

Wyclef's act for the telethon was a finale that showcased a quintessentially Haitian orientation to music. He performed a distinctly Haitian music genre and was the only artist to sing in Kreyòl, the language of Haiti's majority. Rounding out the telethon in the last segment (as, similarly, New Orleans native Dr. John had done for the Hurricane Katrina telethon), Wyclef wore a large Haitian flag as a scarf and appeared with a full band of Haitian musicians, including his sister Melky on vocals and his cousin Jerry on bass. He began in English with the iconic Jamaican Rastafari song "By the Rivers of Babylon," by the Melodians. This piece, based on Psalm 137, evoked the ancient Israelites' Babylonian exile and sorrow, implicitly situating the quake disaster within a history of the suffering of Afro-Caribbeans in the Middle Passage and slavery times. Like his performance for the victims of 9/11, where his rendition of "Redemption Song" was "a powerful 'minority report' that put race and imperialism at the heart of the matter," Wyclef brought a spark of historicity and Pan-Caribbean sensibility to the evening.³⁷ After a verse of "Babylon" he segued into his own dirge-like composition in Kreyòl, "Yéle" ("Cry"), a slow and evocative song that summons, "If you have a voice, shout out, if you have tears, cry out."

After a short time he stopped the band abruptly in a rehearsed intrusion, shouting, "Enough with the moping, let's rebuild Haiti." Like a cortege of New Orleans jazzmen coming back from the cemetery, the band burst into rara—the exhilarating parade music from the Haitian countryside. Played on hand-fashioned bamboo and metal horns and hand drums, this parading musical form is singular to Haiti. It forms the soundscape of a carnivalesque festival and a religious ritual all wrapped into one. Most viewers would be unaware that rara music is played in funerals in the Haitian countryside, and surely heard it as the upbeat, celebratory sound that it also is.³⁸

Rara music provides a powerful and distinct sonic association for most Haitians. Probably dating back to the musical bands of the maroon armies who resisted slavery, the very sound of rara has long been considered by elites to be unruly, brash, and low brow. No other

37 Jeffrey Melnick, *9/11 Culture: America Under Construction* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2009), 63.

38 For more on the history and context of Rara, see Elizabeth A. McAlister, *Rara! Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and Its Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

nation plays *rara* (besides Dominicans near the Haitian border), and so its singularly pitched horns have become an aural index of identity. *Rara* music historically has provided a venue for groups to say what individuals could not, to send messages of popular opinion or political, strategic consequence under the cover and protection afforded by large, parading groups.

Rara is therefore an opportunity for the artistry of coded speech, and Wyclef's telethon *rara* delivered several poignant shout-outs, first to Anderson Cooper of CNN, and next to King Kino, the lead singer for the band Phantom, who had been rumored to be dead but was not. Next Wyclef called the names of Jimmy O, Fan Fan, and Little Cliff. Only those closely following the news from Haiti would know these Haitian rappers who had died in the quake. The performance, while on the global stage before millions, was also an insider affair, a moment of "dual addressivity,"³⁹ whose messages were for members of the Haitian diaspora.

The *rara* lyric, composed for the occasion, switched back to English. It rhythmically asserted, "Earthquake, we see the earth *shake*, but the soul of the Haitian people it will never *break*." Reaching to touch the psychic devastation of so many Haitians, Wyclef's song was at once Haitian to Haitian and American to American, mediating several orientations to the quake and its music. He and his musicians produced a sonic intervention into the cultural anesthesia that had characterized the rest of the telethon. Wyclef ingeniously inserted the loud, anarchic sensory presence of the "in-your-face" music of the popular classes, this funerary celebration festival, into the soundscape of the telethon as its final act. Refuting the association of Haitian-ness as a mute sign of suffering, Wyclef chose the oldest and loudest music of resistance to broadcast Haitian-ness as a site of action and agency.

Of course, Wyclef was only able to make this intervention, such as it was, because of his supercelebrity status. Born in a thatched house without electricity, he is now an A-list celebrity who has become a roving Haitian ambassador, lectured at Google headquarters, won an award at Harvard, played for a Barack Obama inaugural ball, and founded a humanitarian nongovernmental organization. He even put in a bid for the Haitian presidency in 2010, only to be disqualified under residency requirements.

It seems telling that celebrities would pull together for the most widely broadcast telethon in history to benefit Haiti, the black republic long considered the "most African" nation in the Caribbean. Haiti has arguably come to occupy a similar position to that of the mythical "Africa" of celebrity humanitarianism. Clooney, like other celebrities, has become involved with various causes in Africa, to the extent that "Africa," has become the main focus of common-sense humanitarianism. The scare quotes around *Africa* refer here to a mythical and naturalized object of Western thought comprising an entire continent in need of debt relief (facilitated by Bono) full of war-torn areas, child soldiers, famine, refugee camps, AIDS, girls in need of education (by Oprah Winfrey), and orphans in need of adoption (by Madonna and Angelina

39 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 95.

Jolie).⁴⁰ The main focus of Clooney's considerable humanitarian work has been in Darfur, Sudan, where he installed a private satellite to monitor military movements on the north-south border in order to prevent another genocide.⁴¹ Since the earthquake, Haiti has become a kind of metonym for Africa in terms of both representation and celebrity response. Wyclef Jean's humanitarian work in Haiti has attracted other stars to the country, such as Brad Pitt and Angela Jolie. In turn, Ben Stiller and Sean Penn have involved themselves in postquake Haiti, as have countless Christian missionaries.

Epilogue: Muted Haitian Audiospheres and American Evangelical Fundraising

Haitian quake survivors gathered en masse to sing on the one-month anniversary of the disaster, filling the area of Port-au-Prince around the collapsed palace. A collective of transnational evangelical Protestant organizations held a three-day revival to commemorate the disaster and to narrate it as a part of God's plan to redeem Haiti. The event took the place of Carnival, which fell one month after the quake. Pastors interspersed sermons and speeches with hymns, which the vast crowd sang together. On the third day, I thought I recognized the song Janette had sung as she was lifted out from under the collapsed building: "Ne pas avoir peur de la mort." The lyrics assured that God will deliver his people and bring them through any struggle. As the event went on, the crowd sang more energetically, despite standing for three days, and despite their fasting in repentance. Hands in the air, singing loudly and swaying, the crowd gave off an energy that verged on the lively atmosphere of Carnival. Thousands and thousands of people were singing one song together, moving their bodies with one great pulse. Once again, Haitian survivors deployed singing as a unifying, healing meaning-making and community-building technique.

Later, some of the sponsoring American missionaries created a video to celebrate the event. The footage showed the square, the masses of people, the pastors, the skyline. The soundtrack included hands clapping, clapping for the transformation of Haiti. But as the film focused on the people singing, editors dubbed the score with American music and narration by an American pastor. The energetic singing of the enormous crowd was overdubbed with the slow, emotional strains of contemporary American "praise and worship" music. Used for fundraising, just like the telethon, the video *Revival in Haiti* muted Haitian voices singing Haitian songs, and like the telethon, presented American music and American voices in their place. Even as Haitians sang widely in response to disaster, these media rendered them unamplified and mute. The telethon and the evangelical video both amount to media products that work by leveraging the emotions of American music, alongside images of Haitian victims, to

⁴⁰ Tester, *Humanitarianism and Modern Culture*, ix.

⁴¹ John Avalon, "Twenty-First-Century Statesman: Celebrity Diplomat George Clooney," *Newsweek*, 28 February 2011, 18.

raise money. They present the mediated suffering of Haitian bodies as a poignant pleasure to be consumed by listening viewers. These media present disaster through an anesthetized, American way of knowing, divorced entirely from a Haitian perspective, from Caribbean narratives, sensory perceptions, histories, understandings, or ownership. Still, Haitian survivors sing on, alone and together, creating their own audiospheres, orienting themselves again.

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