

*Necessary Noise: Music, Film, and Charitable Imperialism in the East of Congo*. Chérie Rivers Ndaliko, 2016. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. 30 b/w illustrations, bibliography, index, filmography, companion site, 285 pages.

In *Necessary Noise*, an interdisciplinary scholar and activist, Chérie Rivers Ndaliko, paints an alternative narrative for the history of the Goma, Congo, as she reveals the creativity Congolese people used in the face of extreme conflict. Ndaliko uses a multimedia approach to give an in-depth look into the Congo's history of violence and warfare by telling the stories of people, places, sounds, and images. The media has branded the Congo "in the global psyche as a heart of darkness" for its legacy—"both colonial and postcolonial – unparalleled brutality, of exaggerated violence, and of spectacular failures" (3). Ndaliko seeks to humanise these experiences by emphasising storytelling and particular historical contexts. To set the tone, Ndaliko describes how the media has sensationalised events in the Congo by providing a story of her mother-in-law in the Congo watching news from the U.S.A. To her mother-in-law, the U.S.A. seemed like an awful place filled with shootings and natural disasters because that was all she saw. This comparison brings to attention the "nuances of place and history that cumulatively make home" (3). Ndaliko explores these nuances as she avoids the avenues of previous, typically negative depictions of the Congo.

*Necessary Noise* is organised into four chapters that outline significant issues in the history of the Congo. Through a mixture of stories and empirical facts, an image emerges of the everyday lives of those in the Congo. Topics include the resistance of art as a vehicle of political expression, "histories" of the Congo, humanitarian "politics," and misconceptions surrounding Congolese women. Ndaliko explores these issues by chronicling the period of 1995-2010, as this was a time of social unrest in the Congo due to the Rwandan genocide (7 April, 1994 – 15 July, 1994) and restrictive government policies that made music legislative and a "vehicle of state control" (33). In the 1990s, hip-hop emerged as a form of resistance among the young people of the Congo. Inspired by Black American culture, the boldness of artists such as Eddie Murphy, MC Hammer, Bobby Brown, and Naughty by Nature, inspired the youth to express themselves as hip-hop represented "global belonging, dissent, and liberation ideology" for Goma's "youthscape" (36).

Arguing that consuming and producing art gives us an insight into "opinion and extant mechanisms of sociopolitical action" (3), *Necessary Noise* draws from Ethnomusicology, film/media studies, and African Studies. An interdisciplinary approach is apparent as Ndaliko provides an ethnography of Yole!Africa. Yole!Africa is a youth educational center that prioritises creative expression through a decolonial curriculum. Ndaliko uses many examples to show how the arts are beneficial in places of social unrest. She does this by providing a study of art that includes film and music, conflicts of the Congo, and a reflection on global cultural activism. In addition to analysing film and music, she addresses both mediums and the historical significance of art forms and considers who produces and controls them. Lastly, this discussion

of control and art production leads to an analysis of NGOs (non-governmental organisations).

Ndaliko brings a personal perspective to NGOs as the executive director of Yole!Africa and wife of filmmaker, Petna Ndaliko, the founder of Yole!Africa. During the Rwanda genocide of the 1990s, Petna Ndaliko was forced to leave his home in the Congo and ended up in a refugee camp in Kampala. It was there that he decided to create Yole!Africa. The formation of Yole!Africa proved monumental as the youth discovered hip-hop culture simultaneously. The birth of artistic expression was a direct response to political and cultural upheaval. Petna Ndaliko's film proved distinctive as he uniquely used his film training and technology to tell untold stories about the Congo. One is *Jazz Mama*, a film that brings awareness to gender violence in the Congo. With such stories in mind, Petna sought to develop his organisation to allow artists to embrace their own stories and express themselves without fear of political restrictions. Petna has dedicated his life's work to inspiring the youth to create art that reflected their realities while remaining free of Western aesthetics and frameworks. For his efforts, the government met Petna with harassment, complicated filming permit procedures, or soldiers and police confiscating his footage.

Ndaliko takes the audience on a journey of pre-colonial Congo. She describes Western civilisations' yearning to exploit Congo for its raw materials. These explorations of exploitation and its many complexities position her work at the intersections of race and capitalism. Ideologies surrounding the two seemed to come into view concurrently in the Congo, along with colonialism. This can be seen in the Congo's first commercial cinema houses designed to invoke Western ideologies. Once a thriving country in the 1300s, many countries coveted Congo's stability and resources. When ivory, rubber, gold, and copper, the resources hungrily sought by Portugal, France, and Belgium, were no longer available, colonisers enslaved the people of Congo for economic gain. As racist ideas were propagated that deemed those with dark skin as animal-like or even lesser, the concept of slavery was rationalised, perpetuated, then institutionalised. The history of colonialism and dehumanising images has resulted in a vital need for identity among the Congolese and the need to control their images.

As a result of exploitation, the Congo has experienced significant, unequal incomes. Because of inequality, many NGOs have sought to "help" the Congo with its many complex issues. What has proved more complex is the relationship NGOs have with the arts in the Congo. Traditionally, NGOs have used the arts to convey their developmental messaging. Yet, as Ndaliko points out, their messaging typically neglects the trials of the local community. This often puts Congolese artists hired by NGOs at a crossroads; to present what is authentic to their experience or something that will keep them employed. Ndaliko describes a partnership Yole!Africa had with a local NGO, Solidarités, that wanted to partner with local artists to create a song about cholera. Instead of reflecting on contaminated water conditions, the selected piece advocated handwashing as a core solution to the problem. Ndaliko shows that cultural activism through art can be both expressive and oppressive. Petna making films in

dangerous circumstances or the youth forming hip-hop rap groups that performed protest music can be seen as expressive. On the other hand, when artists partner with NGOs, the NGOs missions are propelled to the forefront. Ndaliko reminds us that in conflict regions, art is a real currency with the ability to “dismember and to re-member, to erase and to immortalise” (252).

With the wealth of information provided, Ndaliko offers a “new praxi” for socially engaged work - merging activism and scholarship that pays close attention to the details of creative processes. This praxis includes using scholarship for public service. She avoids the more typical academic notion of providing a formula for engaging in community work. Instead, she uses a “practice as method” approach. She believes that the emphasis on storytelling is “capable of modeling precedent and catalysing critical thought” (255). The merging of method and practice renders the book a model for any community-engaged course. It will require students to engage in greater reflexivity when thinking about society and scholarship. The realm of social engagement can often be seen as limiting and sometimes separate work from academia, but Ndaliko’s ethnography of Yole!Africa proves it is not independent work, and indeed often is the work itself.

With a focus on audio and visual images, the author’s companion website takes the text to the next level as it provides video and audio representation from various creatives mentioned, along with photos of the Congo, and exposes the reader to various related works, including, for example, examples from the Solidarités song competition. Some of the pieces are shorter clips from Petna’s films. Stylistically, quotes and sayings from multiple scholars paint a rich, multi-faceted text before the chapters begin. For example, Palestinian academic, Edward Said’s “to represent Africa is to enter the battle over Africa” (32). (Said is a pioneer of postcolonial studies and a former literature professor at Columbia University.) Using quotes and sayings transports the audience to the story’s place while bringing cultural significance to the forefront. Strikingly, Ndaliko quotes Patrice Lumumba, former Prime Minister of the Congo, declaring that “history will one day have its say; it will not be the history taught in the United Nations...however, but the history taught in the countries that have rid themselves of colonialism and its puppets. Africa will write its history, ...it will be a history full of glory and dignity” (83). A highlight of this text is when the author breaks down the colonial record of the Congo and how it is prevalent today. In the “Epilogue,” one can feel the author’s passion for art and activism coalesce. In the vein of global activism, she calls for us not to “give voice” but to amplify the voices of the communities we seek to help. Ndaliko’s partnership with Petna, her work with Yole!Africa, and first-hand analysis bring the reader into her world and encourage them to seek the truth. To do this, she offers that we should “hear through the cacophony of global activism and identify necessary noise.” Additionally, she suggests that “listening means being open to the things we might prefer not to hear” (252).

Ndaliko asks in her introduction that if someone could only see negative images of your country, what would they think, and what conclusions could they draw from

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it? Although the pictures that the media show of the U.S.A. are sometimes accurate, Ndaliko offers that, like the Congo, there is more. We can find that more by putting stories of “human catastrophe in dialogue with studies of human creativity” (255). Ndaliko’s storytelling about community members in the Congo is utilised to “render the human lives in this ‘conflict zone’ more vivid.” She does this with hopes of “rendering lived physical spaces seeable” (253), subsequently becoming a “necessary context that promotes radical listening.” The “noise” that *Necessary Noise* makes is unavoidable and very “necessary.” It has the uncanny ability to make the stories told through the text inevitable. Audiences will want to know more while also feeling a sense of encouragement to look at their practices and find stories that speak for themselves. This method shows how there can be authenticity in the process of dissemination - like Petna’s films that do not sensationalise complexities but reveals beautiful and sometimes awful truths. Most striking is Ndaliko’s ability to keep her “why” at the forefront of every story, song, or analysis. She seems to zoom in on the small picture consistently and paints the stories of local communities in sections such as *Jazz Mamas*, where we meet Mama Brigitte, a civil servant who sells fabric to provide for her family. Ndaliko’s passion makes this an exciting and inspiring work that will serve as a pillar of change in scholarship and provide hope for ethnographers who seek to create the change they want to see.

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