

***Sound Fragments: From Field Recording to African Electronic Stories.*** Noel Lobley, 2022. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press. 16 illustrations, bibliography, index. 348 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8195-8077-1

African musics and cultures exist in an unfortunate reality of being indelibly linked to the violent and oppressive realities that have plagued the continent for centuries. From colonialism to slavery and the perpetual oppression and reinforcement of socioeconomic inequalities, one would question when exploitation would end. The book, *Sound Fragments: From Field Recording to African Electronic Stories*, presents a noteworthy decolonial work that positions itself as facilitating the restitution of archival recordings to marginalised communities through music repatriation and reimagining colonial sound archives.

Through *Sound Fragments*, Noel Lobley takes readers on an ethnographic expedition into the International Library of African Music's (ILAM) archives at Rhodes University, and practices of sound curation and sound activism that exist as a contemporary reclamation of colonial archival recordings. The writer positions these archival sound recordings as being fragmented due to "the disconnection of these recordings with their rightful owners and their communities" (6) and proposes the need to rethink where processes of sound curation and archiving fit into post-apartheid South Africa. Lobley prompts his reader to consider how these processes can be repositioned and the recordings recirculated beyond their institutional home to return them to the communities of origin.

Lobley, an established ethnographer and sound curator, paints a picture of the history and context of Tracey and the archival recordings at ILAM, and the strategies employed by local creators in surrounding communities to repurpose the archives. *Sound Fragments* establishes the processes of archiving and sound curation as "revolutionary acts" through its use by contemporary amaXhosa creators "as radical tools for expression and action" (167) within their communities, through engaging with the recordings "as sites of personal historical inquiry" for "reengaged ownership" (130). The writer calls his readers to "listen beyond the recorded fragments" (131) through foregrounding local artists and organisations who have contributed to the reimagining of the colonial archives through granting these sound fragments the space to "recirculate in newly connected ways" (13) in local amaXhosa communities in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Additionally, Lobley refers to his role in community engagement as being "a translator and mediator" (98) who facilitated the musical exchanges which resulted in the archival recordings being heard and engaged with by these communities through a process of sound elicitation.

*Sound Fragments* presents readers with a thought-provoking look into the ILAM archive and its surrounding amaXhosa communities. Lobley's extensive immersion in the archive has led to this work contributing a nuanced account of Tracey's contribution through field recording. While at times coming across as overly cautious of how to articulate the problematic history of Tracey, the writer has ensured that he presented a comprehensive historical account of Tracey's role in African music history. Throughout

the book, Lobley has rightfully ensured that his positionality within this space – as a white English man who works in an American institution – is clearly stated upfront, and again reinforced in the concluding chapter of the book. This framing has allowed for Lobley to show his awareness of his positioning within this space while actively proposing a decolonial work which serves to benefit the local communities and redress the past through music repatriation. Although the writer has provided a meaningful account of the future of colonial archives, I am of the belief that the place of Euro-American scholarship is to highlight and promote the voices of the local collaborators who contribute to the work, alongside their own. Meaning, it is necessary to provide a level of material ownership to these local collaborators for the use and study of their culture to avoid further marginalising and exploiting of African voices.

While we cannot undo the past, we can actively choose to move forward in a more ethical way towards a decolonial and anti-colonial future. This means unbinding the ties to colonial figures and correcting any positioning that undermines indigenous African communities through the foregrounding of a white saviour. Instead, we should acknowledge this aspect as a subtext, with the core focus remaining on the communities, and their music and culture. The act of humanising a colonial figure as “a charismatic and contradictory personality” (65) serves to undermine the history and experiences of the nameless creators who cannot speak of their personal experience of a man who built his legacy through profiting off their culture. These ideas serve to reinforce the colonial ideology that African communities are incapable of achieving certain milestones without a white hero. By continuing in this trend, one denies the humanity of communities whose stories and experiences of Tracey go unspoken through overstating his dominance and significance to African music history. One must ask: would the decentering of the ILAM archive around Tracey provide a level of justice to the communities whose cultures he exploited? What benefits, financial or otherwise, do these communities receive through the archive beyond increased access to and use of the recordings, and how should these practices evolve to allow for a more effective symbiotic relationship between the institutions that hold their culture and the actual social networks which exist within local communities?

*Sound Fragments* presents scholars with a call to action, to do the work – the practical work of restitution, repatriation and compensating marginalised communities for the use and study of their culture, and to ensure that research endeavours are beneficial not only to the institution but also to the communities under study. It highlights discussions on the real-life implications of working to redress power imbalances as a result of the colonial project and asks us to do the work to unbind and rectify remnants of the continent’s colonial history. In a reality where the core of academia is in question for its relevance and contribution in present-day society, one must ask: what is the work of decolonisation and how can we participate, not only in the conversations but, more importantly, in the practical doing and undoing of the archive?

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