

Imagine you're in a museum. What do you hear?

Bhavisha Panchia

Rhodes University, Makhanda, South Africa



Fig. 1. "Tracing Fractures – Across Listening, Movement, Restitution and Repair," Centre de la Vieille Charité, 12 Sep. 2020, Manifesta 13 Marseille, manifesta13.org/programmings/rencontres-tracing-fractures-across-listening-movement-restitution-and-repair/index.html. Accessed 8 Oct. 2021. © Françoise Beauguion / VOST COLLECTIF.

The audio collage *Imagine you're in a museum. What do you hear?* is a curatorial response to colonial histories and their impact on material heritage and culture in light of questions of extraction concerning land, resources, and sacred, cultural objects. It was commissioned for “Tracing Fractures: Across Listening, Movement, Restitution, and Repair,” a program held in connection with the 2020 contemporary art biennial Manifesta 13 at Vieille Charité in Marseille (see fig. 1), where sound installations, readings, listenings, performances, and interventions addressing restitution and repair through art were presented within the courtyard of this historic site.¹ What was once a chapel and hospital to accommodate the destitute and the elderly, Vieille Charité is today a space for science and culture that houses the Musée d'Archéologie Méditerranéenne and the Musée des Arts Africains, Océaniens, et Amérindiens.

The collage weaves together disparate musical tracks, extracts of interviews, speeches, and audio notes as listening provocations that speak to the affective resonances of dislocation and the dispossession of land, people, and (im)material culture. It was conceptualized in response to the site of Vieille Charité and the ethnographic collections it houses. Despite the low hum and silence that museums encourage, their collections voice a violent past. An extractive and accumulative logic is evidenced in the ethnographic objects housed by museums, as well as in their methods of display and storage. John Kannenberg's research into the sounds of museums is extended through the audio collage into an ideological inquiry of the sounds and silences perpetuated by museums built within the logics of coloniality.

¹ “Tracing Fractures: Across Listening, Movement, Restitution, and Repair” was conceived and curated by Nikola Hartl, Alya Sebti, and Jonas Tinius.

Museums are guardians who communicate for objects, directed by the pathology of Eurocentrism. As institutions they are symbols of power that speak with a voice filled with the grain of authority as they house, care for, and preserve their collections and archives.

Considering forms of listening in relation to the paradigms of the colonial period raises questions about what has been lost in the museum's translation of cultural artifacts: what has been silenced? What are we unable to hear? As sociologist Rolando Vázquez crucially points out, the question of who speaks and who listens is critical for understanding the configuration and determination of the world around us, including the art we see and the music we listen to (44).

What voice does the (ethnological) museum speak with? How can we listen to the acoustic impossibilities of objects housed in these institutions? Who are we listening to as we move through the museum and encounter objects and archives? These questions are significant to the colonial pasts and epistemological futures of ethnographic objects. They also resonate with the Western intellectual lineages and histories of sound studies, which have thus far come to reinforce Western ideals of a white normative subject that is figured as the universal default frame of reference. Marie Thompson's formulation of "white aurality," together with Gavin Steingo and Jim Sykes's "remapping" of sound studies, begin to unsettle the monolithic ear that has informed a large corpus of sound studies and, arguably, the history of sound in art and culture.

Imagine you're in a museum. What do you hear? is a response to European modernity's monopolization of representation in museums and archives. It opens with a field recording of the interior of the British Museum that slowly crossfades into a description of the intricately carved ivory hip pendant mask worn by the Oba of Benin during important ceremonies. The

mask was looted during the British expedition of 1897 and is currently held in storage in the British Museum. In 1977, the organizers of the arts and culture festival FESTAC' 77 in Lagos, Nigeria,² asked to borrow this sixteenth-century ivory mask for the duration of the festival. Yet, the museum refused, citing concerns around the object's fragility.

Such power dynamics between imperial forces and colonial subjects are investigated in the audio collage through late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century ethnographic field recordings from Africa, which make evident the relation between European recordists and those being recorded. The history of phonography in Africa is fundamentally linked to colonialism, as European explorers left for expeditions with technical instruments for capturing native peoples in their milieu and for mapping out the continent. This collection of data took on visual form in maps, illustrations, and photographs, and also occurred through the medium of audio recording (Sterne; Mhlambi). The phonograph in particular, as sound scholar Jonathan Sterne puts it, "became a tool of embalming an already supposedly frozen native present for the future" (319).

Following these expeditions, World Fairs marked periods of scientific, industrial, and technological discovery and invention, undergirded by colonial expansion around the world. The Paris Colonial Exposition of 1931 was a celebratory *fête* of international colonialism that highlighted colonial conquests and territories. It brought the European public (approximately eight million visitors over six months) into contact with France's imperial achievements. More significantly, it was a site to propel propaganda for European nations at the helm of civilization. In addition to the visual fanfare of dioramas, demonstrations, and performances,

² FESTAC' 77, the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, was a major international festival held in Lagos, Nigeria, from 15 January 1977 to 12 February 1977.

the Exposition featured colonial recordings of sounds from Bali, India, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Madagascar captured by Phillipe Stern, who worked at Musée de la Parole et du Geste de Paris of the University of Paris³ and was responsible for the musicology section of the museum. A sample from the recording titled “Dahomey: Danse devant le fetiche,” recorded by Stern and housed at the Center for Research in Ethnomusicology (CREM), is featured in the audio collage as an invocation of ‘fetish’ objects removed from their original contexts.⁴ This acoustic signal from the past presented in CREM’s online repository provides scant information regarding the recording. This lack of data makes it difficult to listen to such recordings today, as the auditor has little to no contextual understanding of the musicians and performers, who are ultimately unnamed and unacknowledged.

The 1931 Colonial Exposition also included presentations from countries such as the then-nascent Union of South Africa, which did not directly participate in the fair but instead presented a dossier of information on its history and economic, agricultural, and mineral resources. This document, written in French, aimed to demonstrate the state’s progress since 1910 and, more importantly, to provoke capital investment for agricultural, mining, and industrial sectors and establish trade relations with Europe. It opens with an image of the Cape of Good Hope, the southernmost point in South Africa and a term used to engender optimism around the opening of the sea route to Asia. The excerpt included in the collage, taken from the French National Library archive, features a voice reading a list of minerals available in South Africa—gold, diamond, coal, iron, copper, arsenic, barium, chrome, cobalt, mercury, platinum,

³ In 1931 the Musée de la Parole et du Geste was the only institution in France collecting and preserving sound archives.

⁴ CREM houses sound archives that gather commercial recordings and over 48,000 field recordings of music and oral traditions from around the world dating from 1900 to the present.

and zinc—and is a stark reminder of the history of dispossession and extraction in the region, most notable in The Natives Land Act passed in 1913⁵ that restricted Black African land ownership, and the continued struggle for land reparation and restitution taking place in South Africa today. Author Fiston Mwanza Mujila further explores the histories and legacies of colonialism and extraction in the opening lines of his novel *Tram 83*:

In the beginning, was the stone, and the stone prompted ownership, and ownership a rush, and the rush brought an influx of men of diverse appearance who built railroads through the rock, forged a life of palm wine, and devised a system, a mixture of mining and trading. (1)

The impassioned voice of Mujila reading this passage is sounded in the collage and placed in conversation with tracks by Dane Belany, Healer Oran, Chino Amobi, Tiago Correia-Paulo, Lamin Fofana, and Speaker Music, whose musical expressions offer a poetic retort that critically work against the negation of Black expression and life.

Imagine you're in a museum. What do you hear? asks its audience to listen to these complex histories and to the voices of institutions that shape and control the circulation and meaning of cultural objects that have been displaced and dispossessed, including natural resources that have been extracted and accumulated. It draws upon the voices of archives, authors, documents, and musicians to speak back to these distant and recent histories, and to reveal the colonial mechanisms of control and the injuries of cultural heritage.

⁵ The Natives Land Act of 1913 initially limited African land ownership to seven percent. It restricted Black people from buying or occupying land except as employees of a white person, allowing for majority white ownership of land. Thereafter, the apartheid government began the mass relocation of Black people to their homelands and to inadequately planned and serviced townships.

Works Cited

- “Dahomey: Danse Devant Le Fetiche.” *Exposition coloniale de Paris, 1931*, 1 May–30 Nov. 1931. *CREM: Centre de Recherche en Ethnomusicologie*, archives.crem-cnrs.fr/archives/items/CNRSMH_I_1932_001_045_02. Accessed 9 Oct. 2021.
- L’Union de l’Afrique Du Sud: Exposition Coloniale Internationale, Paris 1931*. L. Danel (Lille), 1931. *Bibliothèque nationale de France*, gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6222408j. Accessed 9 Oct. 2021.
- Hoffmann, Anette. “Introduction: Listening to Sound Archives.” *Social Dynamics*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2015, pp. 73–83.
- Kannenberg, John. *Listening to Museums: Sounds as Objects of Culture and Curatorial Care*. 1 June 2020. University of the Arts London, PhD Dissertation, johnkannenberg.com/home/phd. Accessed 9 Oct. 2021
- Mhlambi, Thokozani. “Early Sound Recordings in Africa: Challenges for Future Scholarship.” *Herri*, no. 4, Aug. 2020, herri.org.za/4/thokozani-mhlambi. Accessed 9 Oct 2021.
- Mujila, Fiston Mwanza. *Tram 83*. Jacaranda Books, 2016.
- Steingo, Gavin, and Jim Sykes, editors. “Introduction.” *Remapping Sound Studies*, Duke UP, 2019, pp. 1–36.
- Sterne, Jonathan. *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sonic Reproduction*. Duke UP, 2003.
- Thompson, Marie. “Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies.” *Parallax*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2017, pp. 266–82, doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2017.1339967.
- Vázquez, Rolando. “Listening as Critique.” *Buried in the Mix*, edited by Bhavisha Panchia, MEWO Kunsthalle, 2017, pp. 39-46.

Bhavisha Panchia is a curator and researcher of visual and audio culture, currently based in Johannesburg. Her work engages with artistic and cultural practices under shifting global conditions, focusing on anti/postcolonial discourses, imperial histories, and networks of production and circulation of (digital) media. She is the founder of Nothing to Commit Records, a label and publishing platform committed to expanding knowledge related to the intersection of contemporary art, literature, and music within and across the global South. Email: bhavisha.panchia@gmail.com