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REVIEW

SARAH RAINE, SHANE BLACKMAN, ROBERT MCPHERSON AND IAIN A. TAYLOR (EDS.) (2025).

POPULAR MUSIC ETHNOGRAPHIES: PRACTICES, PLACES AND IDENTITIES.

by Rachel Ong Shu Ying

An edited volume on popular music ethnographies is a long time coming. As Will Straw aptly states in the Foreword, »a new wave of ethnographic writing was washing over popular music studies and transforming the field in productive new ways« (xiii). This transformation that Straw implied signals the turn in the field of popular music toward an anthropological approach that centres ethnography and highlights the immersive experiences of researchers and their relations to the researched. At the same time, this turn offers new ways to »think through« (as proposed by the editors of this volume) various issues in popular music studies, as is evident in this innovative volume.

The chapters in this volume are organised into three thematic sections: practices, places, and identities. Nonetheless, the chapters also draw on more than one of the organised themes, reflecting how practices, places, and identities are inevitably linked in ethnographic research. Therefore, the chapters can be read across each other when thinking about ethnographic practices in popular music. What makes this volume a delight to read is the personal vignettes interlaced at the beginning and at the end of each thematic section. These vignettes are contributed by a diverse group of individuals involved in the popular music scene, including a music magazine sub-editor (Frances Morgan–Vignette 1, musicians reflecting on improvisation (Diljeet Kaur Bhachu–Vignette 2), industry professionals who have

moved into higher education (Rebecca Wallace–Vignette 3), promoters and venue owners (Mike Hamblett–Vignette 4), a female music photographer (Michelle Grace Hunder–Vignette 5), and dedicated fans (Grant Sullivan–Vignette 6). Their stories attest to popular music as a manifold and interdisciplinary field of study. This diversity is also reflected in the chapter contributors, who come from backgrounds such as sociology, criminology, communication and media studies, ethnomusicology, and popular music studies–many of whom are also practitioners in the music/scene they are researching.

In the introduction chapter, editors Shane Blackman, Robert McPherson, Sarah Raine, and Iain A. Taylor Blackman set out to trace the historical developments of music ethnography by considering four major sources of the contested origins, starting with early folk song collectors. While this offers a sound opener to the section, it has, however, limited its references to British folk song collectors. There is also a factual error: the correct name is Francis James Child, not »Frances John Child« (p. 5). But more importantly, the introduction overlooks the crucial role of technological advances—specifically, the invention of the phonograph in the late nineteenth century and the gramophone at the turn of the twentieth century—which greatly facilitated the collection of folk songs. The mushrooming of recording companies during this period also coincided with the birth of many new forms of popular music/entertainment in urban areas, such as the Bangsawan (a popular Malay theatre with heterogenetic music repertoire) in British Malaya, as observed by Sooi Beng Tan (1996/1997). In the same article, Tan quoted Fred Gaisberg's (one of the earliest music producers for the gramophone) report of his trip to Malaya in 1903: »After a visit to Canton I continued my pilgrimage to Bangkok, Singapore and Rangoon, recording a large assortment of Siamese, Javanese, Malay and Burmese gramophone records for the first time in history.«[1] Heinrich Bumb of Beka on his expedition to Singapore and Batavia in January 1906 also reported similar findings and added that, »In two days they recorded a number of the so-called ›stamboul‹ songs [popular songs in Java] and a series of Javanese songs with the characteristic ›gammelang‹ [gamelan] accompaniment and they suffered two days of tropical rain. Then they returned to Singapore on the steamer ›Van Swoll‹.«[2] Although these expeditions aimed to record and commodify music, they nonetheless prompt us to also consider their ethnographic nature and chal-

1 Gaisberg 1946: 64, as quoted in Sooi Beng Tan (1996-1997). »The 78 RPM Record Industry in Malaya Prior to World War II.« In: *Asian Music* 28 (1), pp. 1-41.

2 Want 1976: 731, as quoted in Sooi Beng Tan (1996-1997). »The 78 RPM Record Industry in Malaya Prior to World War II.« In: *Asian Music* 28 (1), pp. 1-41

lenge the accepted epistemology of early song / popular music collection and ethnographic endeavours.

The other three major sources that the editors draw on in the introduction are the work of anthropology and ethnomusicology of non-western societies in the 20th century, the development of urban ethnographic studies at the first (1914-1943) and second Chicago School of Sociology from the 1950s onward, and contemporary developments of popular music studies. These considerations highlight vital insights that charted the course of ethnography in popular music. However, I found the discussion on power relations—specifically the statement that »Scholars such as Fredara Mareva Hadley and Bryce Henson (2019) have explicitly questioned the lack of people of colour within ethnomusicology« (p. 16)—to be somewhat misrepresenting Hadley and Henson's article and the field of ethnomusicology. Firstly, the referenced article raised questions that engage with the possibility of a critical Black ethnography and a performative fugitivity. Secondly, the term »people of colour« is primarily used in the United States and has limited resonance in other parts of the world, except perhaps the Anglosphere regions and parts of Europe. Many ethnomusicologists who might be described by this term do not necessarily identify with it, nor with the associated politics. Combining these complex issues into a single sentence risks oversimplifying the matter and may inadvertently undermine the ongoing investments of »critical refection on our own ethnographic practice and the wider field of which we are a part« (p. 17). Ethnography is writing, and writing involves the use of language. To quote bell hooks, »it informs the way we speak about these issues, the language we choose. Language is also a place of struggle.«[3]

A central theme of this volume is the authors' use of autoethnography to document their immersive research experiences and their engagement in critical self-reflection. Autoethnography, as an ethnographic research method, represent cultural experiences, social research that uses the personal (»auto«) experience to create a representation (»graphy«) of culture (»ethno«) experiences, as a way of understanding the social context they are studying which includes social expectations, and shared beliefs, values, and practices.[4] As Buscatto notes in the concluding chapter, the autoeth-

3 bell hooks (2015). »Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness.« In: *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. New York: Routledge, pp. 145-153.

4 Tony E. Adams / Stacy Holman Jones (2018). »The Art of Autoethnography.« In: *Handbook of Arts-Based Research*. Ed. by Patricia Leavy. New York, NY: Guilford Press, pp. 141-164 and Laura L. Ellingson / Carolyn Ellis (2008). »Autoethnography as Constructionist Project.« In: *Handbook of Constructionist Research*. Ed. by James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium. New York: Guilford Press, pp. 445-465.

nographic accounts in this volume are »not only numerous, but also quite varied« (p.337), offering a rich diversity of perspectives and insights. Some notable examples are autoethnographic reflections on supervising and ethnographic popular music Ph.D. (Chapter 5 by Andy Bennett); writing from gendered positionality as female and/or queer female as seen in how Jasemin Anika Khaleli navigated queer techno spaces grounded through her embodied experience (Chapter 1), Mengyao Jiang's ›insider‹ position as a female DIY rock musician (Chapter 10), and Radia Kasdi's experience as a lone female-presenting researcher conducting chaperone ethnography in the conservative and patriarchal society in Algeria (Chapter 12).

In ethnographic research, building rapport with our interlocutors and/or research partners is imperative for successful research. Though not always the case, the relationship with our research partners can lead to opportunities for collaboration and co-creation which is highlighted in several chapters in this volume. For example, David Kerr and Hashim Swahili present their more than fifteen years of transnational creative collaboration and ethnographic research, transpired from their ›hanging out‹ together. This kind of intimacy with research partners is also reflected by Sarah Raine and Aileen Dillane (Chapter 3) when conducting ethnographic research of their research project during the Covid-19 lockdown in Ireland through digital intimacies and shared hopefulness. Intimacy in a form of academic friendship is explored ethnographically by Asya Draganova and Shane Blackman (Chapter 16) through a non-linear documentation of events in the form of a diary. In it, they included biographical aspects of doing popular music ethnography, teaching and research through working together.

The particular valuable contribution of this volume are the chapters that challenge the way we think about doing ethnography and this is highlighted in Michael B. MacDonald's concept of CineWorlding (Chapter 4) and Eva Krisper's (Chapter 15) group interpretation setting, which at the same time highlight unequal power relations between the researcher and the researched by untangling the researcher's preconceptions about the field and oneself. This effort can be viewed as a decolonialising ethnography. The theme of decolonising ethnography is further emphasised in Juan Pablo Viteri (Chapter 9), where he proposes a reconsideration of counter-colonial practices in ethnography through his own Ecuadorian identity.

Another commendable effort of this volume is the inclusion of the perspectives of ethnographers who are also dancers. Too often, dance has been treated as a separate art form, distinct from music but yet it is deeply

entangled with music and social life. Dance offers social ramifications in the form of embodied knowledge. These embodied encounters are highlighted in ›H‹ Patten's (Chapter 11) qualitative ethnographic exploration into reggae/dancehall through his positionality as a Jamaican born in Britain, and both a social and professional dancer. As a b-boy dancer and researcher of hip-hop, Jason Ng (Chapter 6) illustrated how his sustained participation as a b-boy dancer afforded him insider knowledge of the cultural codes, networks, practices and traditions within his research.

Popular Music Ethnographies: Practices, Places and Identities provides numerous examples of using autoethnography as a method for ethnographic research. The authors in this volume demonstrated different degrees of self-reflexivity by examining their own roles as researchers from various positionalities and subjectivities. This reflexivity involves continually negotiating and articulating their involvement and detachment throughout the course of their research. Their insider perspective, explored through autoethnography, produces rich, detailed, and contextual data that contributes to new knowledge production that informs or challenges existing theories. All in all, this book is recommended for all and offers a creative step toward a new direction in popular music research and beyond.

Sarah Raine, Shane Blackman, Robert McPherson and Iain A. Taylor (eds.) (2025). *Popular Music Ethnographies: Practices, Places and Identities*. Bristol (UK) and Chicago (IL): intellect. (384 pp., paperback: 45,95€; hardback: 144,95€; eBook (PDF, EPUB): 107,95€).