



HISTORICAL PRESENCE IN VISUAL CULTURE

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Questionnaire Response

Lee Veeraraghavan

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About the Author

Lee Veeraraghavan is an ethnomusicologist interested in how music and sound participate in settler colonial state apparatuses, with an emphasis on the juridical, the police, and public health. Her work focuses on the intersection of Indigenous sovereignty claims and resistance to oil and gas pipeline development in Canada. She is currently a Kenneth P. Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences Diversity Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Music at the University of Pittsburgh.

Questionnaire

Response

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I find it difficult, as a postdoc, even at the best of times, to think about mobility without becoming anxious about the future. *When will I stop having to worry about my own mobility?* It isn't always clear to me where the line is between awareness of one's working conditions and solipsism—and I have the nagging suspicion that the difference is important when it comes to the quality of one's scholarship. Now, of course, we have all been thinking about mobility and exchange (quarantine, germs, will there ever be conferences again, how does the

medium of Zoom affect the exchange of ideas in the classroom . . . ?) and I can't imagine that it won't percolate into everyone's work. I hope that this won't read as an attempt to salvage a more innocent way of life in the ivory tower. As my fellow ethnographers are acutely aware, the failure to be vigilant when it comes to these kinds of intellectual borderlines can have an impact on the lives of others. The difference between awareness of one's working conditions and solipsism is comparable to the difference between the concept of exchange as such and the urge to frame our scholarship in terms of its exchange value.

My work as an ethnomusicologist explores the relationship between political and aesthetic listening practices and their impact on Indigenous communities fighting the Canadian petrostate. While I don't center the terms of mobility or exchange in a topical way, both are unavoidable concepts when it comes to the context that shapes my research. They manifest in governmental structures, economic priorities, cultural practices, and ultimately as key aspects of my scholarly stance.

Constraints on the mobility of Indigenous people is a salient feature of settler colonial governmentality, whether that means the imposition of the reservation system by the Indian Act of 1876, or the disproportionate rate at which Indigenous people are incarcerated in Canada. In contrast, the Canadian government's economic priorities have emphasized removing obstacles to the mobility of energy commodities in their flow to international markets, by building oil and gas pipelines that criss-cross the country. Furthermore, to protect these economic interests, court injunctions and aggressive policing are used to prevent Indigenous land defenders from interfering with developments that take place on their land without their consent, including their forced removal. These actions contravene the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, to which Canada is a signatory. One might thus entertain the notion of a figurative kind of mobility: dancing around the law.

Set against the colonial governmental apparatus are myriad Indigenous ways of life. I did my ethnographic fieldwork in British Columbia, where the majority of Indigenous nations are potlatching nations: gift economies in which social organization takes place through ritual exchange. The anthropological imagination has been fired by images of the potlatch that include the competitive, ceremonial exchange of gifts as well as the spectacular sacrifice of those objects whose lives of circulation are over. However, a crucial aspect of the potlatch is less tangible: the exchange of songs and stories. These exchanges are highly structured; for example, the knowledge of and right to sing a song might come with the right to use particular territories and historical knowledge about how one ought to use it. Culture, including land-use rights, is reproduced through the exchange of song.

In my research, I explore how the cultural systems described above are absorbed into the colonial juridical apparatus through aurality and sound. The aural—that which pertains to the ear, the voice, the heard, spoken, and sung—is a node regulating the exchanges between colonial and Indigenous law. This regulation takes place primarily through the negotiation of incommensurable understandings of orality, writing, and the kind of knowledge each medium bears. Quasi-judicial processes like the hearings for oil and gas pipelines held by the national

energy regulator connect this site of exchange to the mobility of oil and gas, which travel from the land where they are extracted to the markets.

The free exchange of ideas is a central academic value. However, a necessary virtue for such exchange is that of forbearance. Anthropologist Audra Simpson and Indigenous studies and sound studies scholar Dylan Robinson have made compelling arguments in favor of a stance of ethnographic refusal when writing about Indigenous people and culture. They emphasize how much academics *take* from Indigenous culture and politics in order to build a career, and with little thought for the ramifications, which is a crucial consideration when thinking about colonial power dynamics. However, I feel that even if one is not writing about politically sensitive dynamics that affect marginalized and oppressed peoples, choosing not to participate in every scholarly exchange—the refusal to take every opportunity—is a virtue that can help preserve the space of thought amid the rush to get our ideas to market.



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