

REFRAMING THE DIGITAL AGE: MUSIC, INDIGENEITY AND DIGITAL MEDIA

**Book Review of *Music, Indigeneity, Digital Media*
by Thomas R. Hilder, Henry Stobart, and Shzr Ee Tan**

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As technology continues to impact society and how people participate in cultures around the globe, scholars must navigate how to position themselves within the relationships that many people and communities have with the virtual world. The eight articles in the collection *Music, Indigeneity, Digital Media* (University of Rochester Press, 2017) seek to do just that by specifically addressing issues relevant to the impact that technology has on the music of Indigenous cultures. Developed from a symposium of the same name, the collection is co-edited by Thomas R. Hilder, Henry Stobart, and Shzr Ee Tan, all of whom contribute to this volume.

The introduction is written by one of the editors of the volume, Thomas R. Hilder. In this introduction he presents a context of a world greatly influenced by digital media and technology. On one hand this influence has resulted in significant shifts in communication, media, and distribution. On the other hand, the consequences of a digitally connected world may include providing additional spaces for colonial practices and reemphasis of the domination of hegemonic cultures. Hilder introduces other scholars' conclusions about Indigenous communities within the digital world in which Indigeneity is ultimately placed at a disadvantage and at times Indigenous values are actively opposed to digital musical practices. He and the other contributions to this volume offer questions and ideas that encourage the reader to reimagine the relationships between virtual and physical, local and global, Indigenous and hegemonic.

The first chapter is written by Shzr Ee Tan, another organizer of the Music, Indigeneity, Digital Media symposium and editor of the book. In her essay titled "Taiwan's Aboriginal Music on the Internet," Tan explores how the introduction of technology and virtual spaces within Taiwanese music cultures reshapes communities. Tan encourages rethinking presupposed technological distinctions between Taiwanese cultures (specifically 'Han-vs.-aboriginal' or 'rural-vs.-urban'), shifting the discourse to generational divisions rather than ethnically driven or locally driven divides. Han people make up the majority of the Taiwanese population, accounting for 96 percent of the population. The Indigenous population includes about four hundred thousand people in fourteen territories. Tan explains that elders in the Indigenous communities tend to stay in these areas, but the younger aborigines are more involved in urban life. Thus, blurring what may have been more clear distinctions between the majority and minority populations of Taiwan. Tan places media on a continuum, suggesting a digital culture that builds upon previous innovations rather than operating in a line of succession. Tan questions the disconnects that may occur between content vs. how or who is contextualizing and transferring the music and traditions. She emphasizes this disconnect between aborigines over and under fifty years old,

observing a general enthusiasm for the musical traditions but finding a divide in interest regarding how these traditions are featured and perceived in new media. These “submarginalities” of generations then represent different kinds of cultural experience that are adjacent to one another.

In the next chapter, “Recording Technology, Traditioning, and Urban American Indian Powwow Performance,” John-Carlos Perea details his experiences using recording technologies to assist in the pedagogy of practicing powwow music. Perea notes a shift facilitated by recording technologies in his oral and aural relationship to powwow traditions. Perea’s work is centered around analog and digital recording as an archival process, how these archives exist in the passing of time, and one’s relationship with archives. In exploring these issues, Perea writes about his experience learning powwow singing on analog recording technology and considers how recording as a pedagogical tool changed as he began using analog and digital technology to teach powwow singing. Furthermore, this relationship to the recording process and with previous recordings changes as these archives are placed in different contexts and different time periods. Perea summarizes this idea wonderfully saying, “I hear and interpret Dr. Hoehner differently today than I did eighteen years ago. In this way, I find that my own traditioning—my sonic sense of identity as a powwow singer—must be understood as a fluid process, since the social experience of playing those tapes is unique each time I press the play button.”¹

Fiorella Montero-Diaz introduces methods of virtual ethnography during her study of perceptions of Indigeneity in Lima. In her article, “YouTubing the ‘Other’: Lima’s Upper Classes and Andean Imaginaries,” Montero-Diaz interrogates how upper-class society understands Andean music and culture via an online survey asking questions about well-known Peruvian artists and Andean fusionists: Miki González, Damaris Mallma, and Magaly Solier. This study is, to some extent, an extension of her previous work. She found that although Andean music did not share the popularity of other traditional musics or popular music (e.g., rock and salsa), it was recognized as the most representative music of Peru among teenagers. Montero-Diaz then continues this line of inquiry in a study to see how Indigenous Andean music is presented on YouTube and how it is perceived. The videos themselves present different issues regarding representation and authenticity, however this study presents a similar dichotomy to the one Hilder is negotiating in the introduction. There is a dissemination of various Indigenous voices providing a deeper understanding of how Andean music can be represented. However, Montero-Diaz also considers the possibility of what she calls “identity tourists.” The digital space creates autonomy with one’s cultural experiences, therefore within the context of Indigenous culture there is the opportunity to have a “recreational plat at otherness.”²

The fourth chapter is an interview with the composer, singer, and producer Russell Wallace. Wallace is guided by questions from Thomas Hilder and conversations among others in this “self” interview. Wallace discusses his experience with Salish culture and in what ways the introduction of digital media has affected musical practices within the culture and his own experience teaching, performing, and archiving the music. Wallace attempts to have a controlled, limited relationship with technology in his work. Especially with his teaching he finds cultural value in limiting media involvement in how a student discovers the practice of learning a song.

¹ John-Carlos Perea, “Recording Technology, Traditioning, and Urban American Indian Powwow Performance,” in *Music, Indigeneity, Digital Media*, eds. Thomas R. Hilder, Henry Stobart, and Shzr Ee Tan (University of Rochester Press, 2017), 68.

² Fiorella Montero-Diaz, “YouTubing the ‘Other’: Lima’s Upper Classes and Andean Imaginaries,” in *Music, Indigeneity, Digital Media*, eds. Thomas R. Hilder, Henry Stobart, and Shzr Ee Tan (University of Rochester Press, 2017), 78.

Two central reasons for why Wallace emphasizes less contact with technology in his own practice of Salish culture and in teaching is students are first, to encourage an embodied experience of the music. He wants to feel and hear his voice coming together with others in real time and he prefers for his students to learn through a more personal experience. Second, Wallace observes a delicate balance between technology and culture. A community that is too influenced by technology may negatively exploit cultural activity and become disconnected with the functions of cultural practices. Wallace suggests a thoughtful and careful approach to utilizing technology to advance culture. Similar to Shyr Ee Tan, Wallace emphasizes the importance of music and culture in context and cautions the reader of the implications of allowing culture to “become a tool of technology,” something that is assigned a function or intention outside of its original purpose.

In the fifth article, Beverly Diamond explores the relationship between the “traditional” and the “modern” in regard to recording aesthetics and audio mixing techniques. In this chapter titled “Mixing It Up: A Comparative Approach to Sámi Audio Production,” Diamond questions how Sámi narratives of their own music may or may not be consonant with the hegemonic media’s narratives of Indigenous musics. Put another way, Diamond challenges the idea that “self-governed” Indigenous media only exists to work against the mainstream but finds a way to emphasize local values while expecting and embracing larger audiences. Diamond compares the musical approaches of two producers, Frode Fjellheim (an “insider” of Sámi culture) and Spencer Crewe (an Anglo-Canadian “outsider” of Sámi culture). Diamond observes at what points these producers’ interpretations and approaches to mixing Sámi music overlaps and at what points there is divergence. Although there are factors such as language that prevent Crewe from entirely grasping musical aesthetics of the culture, other points of overlap exist such as historical understanding and spatial understanding. The comparison of how the producers engage with Sámi music provides an opportunity for Diamond to develop a foundation for intercultural understandings in musical languages and technological processes.

The sixth chapter, “Creative Pragmatism: Competency and Aesthetics in Bolivian Indigenous Music Video (VCD) Production,” uses originario (Indigenous) musician Gregorio Mamani Villacorta as a case study to consider the relationship between knowledge and technical skill with aesthetics in media production—particularly in Indigenous film and video. In this article written by Henry Stobart, the increasing availability of digital technology is addressed. Stobart reflects on this increased availability of technology and the role that access to technology plays on amateur/professional distinctions. Ultimately, his goal is to specifically place the conversation about amateurism within Indigenous media. He uses these ideas and questions as a framework to recall his experience working with Mamani and examines the process of an artist becoming more skilled in video production.

Then, in an article called “Keepsakes and Surrogates: Hijacking Music Technology at Wadeye (Northwest Australia),” Linda Barwick adjusts the focus slightly and complicates the question of “how does technology reshape Indigenous culture?” and perhaps introduces “how do Indigenous societies shape technologies value within cultures?” This is not to say that the recording technology did not have an effect on the music of the Murriny Patha people—the Indigenous culture that Barwick examines. However, Barwick notes that, while digital recording has produced new traditions in the Wadeye Indigenous group, the use of these technologies speaks to cultural values that already existed within the Murriny Patha society. This article highlights the reciprocity between Indigenous societies and available technologies that can be used in musical practice.

The final article is a return to Thomas R. Hilder. He calls this chapter “The Politics of Virtuality: Sámi Cultural Simulation through Digital Musical Media.” The primary goal is to

challenge Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*. The theme of Baudrillard's monograph and what Hilder takes issues with is the belief that digitality embodies a trend in humanity of escapism and detachment from a physical world. Furthermore, this detachment can only be an enemy of Indigeneity which represents the real and the earthly. According to this belief Indigenous cultures cannot maintain their beliefs in a digital world. Hilder disagrees and presents a world in which Indigeneity and the digital world can coexist. To use his own words: "at its core, my chapter highlights the importance of virtual worlds and the contemporary technologies that help make them perceivable as a fundamental and powerful element in Indigenous expressive culture, in what I term the politics of the virtual."³ Hilder's "politics of the virtual" first acknowledges that digital media is a tool that can be adapted for the user and the communities that it serves. Secondly, Hilder's phrase asserts that the act of adapting digital media to preserve Indigenous practices is inherently political. Therefore, "politics of the virtual" can serve as terminology that encompasses general themes explored by the other authors of this volume.

The case studies presented in these articles broaden ideas about who benefits and who is disadvantaged by these digital technologies, thus offering a clearer understanding of the relationship our world has with digital media. This volume's back cover summary/text states that "Music, Indigeneity, Digital Media is essential reading for scholars working on topics in ethnomusicology, Indigeneity, and media studies while also offering useful resources for Indigenous musicians and activists." These authors have created templates for the study of digital musicking that can also decenter colonial forces that often dominate conversations about virtual spaces. However, as technology continues to become more of a necessity in parts of the world it may be fair to say that this work or this kind of work is essential reading for scholars within any corner of the humanities and perhaps scholars within all academic fields.

About the Author

Kabelo Chirwa is a PhD student in Musicology at the University of Cincinnati, College-Conservatory of Music. His research focuses on West African and African American music. More specifically, he studies the history of hip-hop within these communities. His work is also concerned with digital musicking — exploring how participants within a community engage with digital technologies during their musical experiences. Kabelo has been performing as a jazz guitarist/vocalist for the past ten years.

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³ Thomas R. Hilder, "The Politics of Virtuality: Sámi Cultural Simulation through Digital Musical Media," in *Music, Indigeneity, Digital Media*, eds. Thomas R. Hilder, Henry Stobart, and Shzr Ee Tan (University of Rochester Press, 2017), 177.