

Dilemmas Remixed: Tao Leigh Goffe's Sound Method for Confronting Colonialism

by Gordon Fung



Archive, Mixtape, Method: A Decolonial Remix | Tao Leigh Goffe Wednesday, April 14, 2021

Disturbing the silence of archives, this lecture offers an interdisciplinary approach to challenging the fixity of colonial knowledge. Through artistic production and attention to the sensorium, "Archive, Mixtape, Method" centers Black technologies and sonic techniques of remixing developed in the Caribbean as a way to rethink the meaning of media. Dr. Goffe will discuss the unfolding relationship between race, imperialism, and archives. Remixing sound and vision with "visual soundtracks," Dr. Goffe examines the possibility for how various art making practices critique History. DJ'ing is an important part of her pedagogy and research towards a decolonial methodology. Film production, sound design, digital cartography, and oral history are also integral to this praxis.

Presented by the Visual and Critical Studies program.

Tao Leigh Goffe is a multifaceted artist-scholar who works as a DJ and professor at Cornell University in Africana Studies and Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Her Afro-Asian lineage inspires her to research the cultural intermarriages that occur in the Caribbean. Through extensive research in colonial histories, she develops her passions to discuss decolonizing and Black feminism through remixing techniques. While researching her family history, she found her grandfather's passport photo with the text "CANCELLED" crossing out his face in the documentation. At that moment, she recognized the parallels between her and her grandfather's migration experience. Goffe's maternal grandfather, Edwin Hugh, was born in Jamaica. He grew up in Hong Kong, though Goffe was born in the U.K. and brought up in the U.S. This cross-generation migration inspired her to examine the historical and cultural background of Afro-Chinese Caribbean people and diaspora. In 2020, Goffe wrote "Bigger than the Sound: The Jamaican Chinese Infrastructures of Reggae." This scholarly essay unearths political economy and Afro-Asian influences on reggae's development in Jamaica in the '50s. The paper argues that dub music is essentially a genre invented by African diasporas, as this electronic music predominantly remixes tracks through sampling from existing recordings. This technique influences genres like hip hop, trap, techno, electronic dance music, and many others.

As a "PhDJ"—a portmanteau of Ph.D. and DJ—she extends her research into a remix album. Goffe's work-in-progress | *Ecology / Extraction* is an experimental remix project that exposes tourism in the Caribbean to be a double-edged sword. While tourism supports the local economy, it leaves negative footprints on the community and the environment. Through a careful selection of samples, Goffe exposes this exploitative practice in the Caribbean. The remix starts with Puerto Rican-American rapper Big Pun's "100%" (2000). The song opens with a landing announcement heard on a Puerto Rico-bound airplane. Big Pun then sings of the resilience of Puerto Ricans over a sample of Lalo Schifrin's "Anita" on *Che!* (1969), a soundtrack with typical Latin and Cubano flavor. After setting up the

Rival Landscapes of Tourism and Nature

Set List.

1. Big Pun, 100%
2. Coqui Frog
3. Life and Debt (2001)
4. Hot Hot Hot (Sounds of Tourism)
5. Day-O
6. Kromanti, Maroon vernaculars
7. Black Mother (2019) Jamaica Farewell
8. Coqui Frog (Invasive Species)

The set list from | *Ecology / Extraction*, shown during Goffe's presentation.

Caribbean reference, Goffe mixes in a Jamaican soundscape that features coqui frogs in the forest, which Big Pun also incorporated in "100%." The coqui frog is a native species in Puerto Rico accidentally brought to other tropical locations like Jamaica and Hawaii through nursery plants. The naming of the frog represents the penetrative, chirping calls of "co" and "qui" at night, reaching volumes up to 100 decibels. The dialogue between the frogs composes a unique soundscape in Jamaica despite the frog being an invasive species. This soundscape presents a rhetorical argument on what sounds are added and lost in the Caribbean under colonialism, migration, and tourism.

Following the soundscape, Goffe samples a narrative from the film *Life and Debt* (2001) that discusses Jamaicans' economic hardships experienced under American capitalism. The narrative says, "... the delicious Jamaican banana for the very first time, you wonder how it is. You've never tasted such a sweet banana before." Though Jamaica is famous for its banana production, it also exposes the exploitation behind this industry. After this confrontational message, the music transitions into Harry Belafonte's Calypso song "Banana Boat Song (Day-O)" (1956). On top of the "Day-O," the background chants Montserratian musician Arrow's "Hot Hot Hot" (1982)—an upbeat, Calypso and soca dance floor single. A group of people is chanting the line "hot hot hot" at the Dunn's River Falls, a famous tourist site in North Jamaica, disrupting the natural soundscape. These two songs are typically used to depict Caribbean scenery as a vocational island resort in movies. "Day O," though associated with the relaxing and cozy holiday season in the Caribbean, is a song about a group of banana planters who load their produce onto the ships. The lyrics hint at these worker's exploitation, as they chant their desires to return home after the repetitive and exhaustive day of labor.

The exploitative stories then land on a conversation about silence in Kromanti, a Maroon indigenous language that retains a strong West African linguistic root. The forest naturally shelters the Jamaican Kromanti community, allowing their cultures and sovereignty to remain undisturbed since the Spanish and British colonial times. This temporary evasion from tourism in the mixtape lets Goffe bring in a cover of Harry Belafonte's "Jamaica Farewell," (1957) from the film *Black Mother* (2019), creating once again that typical Hollywood reference to Jamaica. Further invading the sonic landscape, coqui frogs assert their dominating calls again, emphasizing the rivalry between tourism and indigeneity in the Caribbean. Like Jamaica the cultural and historical melting pot, Goffe's experimental remix places violent histories of slavery, species invasion, and exploitative tourism all on the same plate. That said, Goffe welcomes the upside of colonialism, which cultivates remixing techniques through the blossoms of sonic technologies in Jamaica.

In addition to examining music technology and multiculturalism in the Caribbean, Goffe also seeks to decolonize archives, as their colonial undertones do not represent BIPOC communities. In 2020, she examined the complexity of power and sexuality behind the archive through her symposium essay "On Being Prone in the Archive: Black British Erotic Power and Sexual Healing." To accompany the essay, Goffe mashed up audiovisual components from various Black British artists: Issac Julien, Floetry, Sade, and FKA twigs. Filmmaker and installation artist Issac Julian's 1993



"Archive: After Hours," a visual essay presented within "On Being Prone in the Archive: Black British Erotic Power and Sexual Healing."



Stills from Goffe's audiovisual mashup of work by Issac Julien, Floetry, Sade, and FKA twigs.

eight-minute short *The Attendant* takes place in Wilberforce House in Hull, England—a museum specializing in the New World slavery history. This decolonial film portrays the after-hour sexual confrontation between a middle-aged African museum attendant and a young European male visitor. The pair's gay-sadomasochism reenacts the painting *Slaves on the West Coast of Africa* (ca. 1933) by French painter François Auguste Biard. Besides displaying an interracial affection, the erotic fantasy depicts a “postcolonial fantasy of sexual reparation for the transatlantic African slave trade.”¹ As Black women are often excluded from discussions and accounts of slavery, Goffe provides grounds for their sexual healing through the silent role of the conservator, who in the film is the male attendant's wife.

Besides remixing the visual, Goffe juxtaposed three Black British female singers' songs in the background to highlight Black women's oppression in patriarchal society. The songs are Sade Adu's “Slave Song,” FKA twigs' “Home with You,” and Floetry's “Say Yes.” With FKA twigs' sample, Goffe created a sonically bizarre backdrop by distorting the song, highlighting the unjust position where Black women are traditionally situated behind-the-scenes. History excludes Black females' contributions to Black rights and social movements. These tracks echo the Black female conservator's role in Julien's film: her responsibility to dust the artworks also reflects her own passivity to male-dominated culture. As the BDSM act plays out, she listens silently next door. Being an off-the-scene character, she has no choice but to walk away from this sado-masochist “power struggle” between the men. At that point, FKA twigs sings: “I didn't know that you were lonely/If you'd have just told me/I'd be home with you.” Goffe parallels Twigs' loneliness with the female conservator's passive role as she is an entity that lives outside the men's circle. Goffe's personal research in the colonial archive resonates with this experience, as searching through historical documents is lonely work.

Goffe views museums as a form of colonial archive where curators constantly add data to the collections. Yet once the items are archived or collected, they remain dormant until somebody reactivates them with insightful engagement. Musealized objects and archival items hence resemble traps that oscillate between burial and excavation, where “[t]here

is only one way in and no way out.”² Goffe applied an X-ray filter on Julien's film fragment, turning the positive image into a negative. The inverted color scheme and value push the viewers to rethink the transparency and opacity of history represented in the museum.

An archive or a museum enables one to unearth histories in humanity by traveling through time and space. However, colonialism and Eurocentrism leave

¹ Tao Leigh Goffe, “On Being Prone in the Archive: Black British Erotic Power and Sexual Healing,” *Inward Outward. Critical Archival Engagements with Sounds and Films of Coloniality*, Inward Outward (2020): 67.

² Ibid., 66.

many missing gaps in history and further underrepresentation of BIPOC histories and people. Goffe, quoting Jacques Derrida, says: "There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution and its interpretation."³ To Goffe, the mixtape is an effective methodology and metaphor that examines colonial dilemmas. The remixing technique, like writing, presents a sound argument through creative expressions. By transforming these colonial conflicts into "samples," she creates a critical interrogation that challenges existing curatorial modes in archives, thrusting her audience to demand refreshing ways to approach collections.

Gordon Fung is a composer, folk-instrumentalist, and cartomancer, pursuing a BFA in Individualized Studies to bridge the multi-disciplinary practices for creating installations, performance, and conceptual works.



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³ Jacques Derrida, and Eric Prenowitz, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (1995): 11.