

Review Article

Studies in Shellac

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Elodie A. Roy, *Shellac in Visual and Sonic Culture: Unsettled Matter*. University of Amsterdam Press, 2023. 240 pp. ISBN 9789463729543 (hardcover).

Gavin Williams, *Format Friction: Perspectives on the Shellac Disc*. University of Chicago Press, 2024. 208 pp. ISBN 9780226833262 (paperback and hardcover).

Fact: the shellac disc — aka the 78 — was the dominant format for the circulation of sound recordings until it was eclipsed by vinyl — the LP — in the 1950s. Saying so seems obvious, indisputable. Yet within this commonplace lurks a bit of complexity. For one thing, every phonograph (aka gramophone) disc was made of many materials in addition to shellac, which made up only a portion of the whole. Somehow this one ingredient garnered synecdochical sway over all of the others, becoming our total idea of the 78 within what we might call the phonographic imaginary. For another thing, calling a ten- or twelve-inch disc played at 78 rpm a ‘format’ confounds additional uses of this same term. Suppose, for instance, we want to call ten-inch discs one format and twelve-inches another? Or suppose by ‘format’ we want to draw a distinction between discs in general — including LPs — and the (non-shellac) cylinder records played on phonographs designed specifically for them? Can ‘format’ be the correct usage in all of these cases? Both of these wrinkles, it should be clear, have less to do with fact than they have to do with language. The curiously expansive and differently imprecise meanings of *shellac* and *format* are minor media-historical conundrums of the sort that beg larger questions about media as cultural phenomena and the ways that we approach media as objects of study.

I had to ask myself, what are the odds that two monographs about shellac records would appear within eight months of each other? True, Gavin Williams and Elodie A. Roy write from different perspectives. Williams identifies his home field as music studies (*Format Friction* appears in the New Material Histories of Music series from Chicago, and the press calls it ‘the first book to consider the shellac disc as a global format’). Meanwhile, Roy hails from what she calls media-material theory (the University of Amsterdam Press lists *Shellac in Visual and Sonic Culture* under the disciplinary heading of Film, Media, and Communication). Yet both authors have fixed their attentions on shellac. Williams cites four earlier works by Roy about recording; Roy cites one by Williams about shellac. Why shellac? And why now? Answers to both of these questions are likely to lie in the conjuncture of issues that these authors tackle amid and against

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larger conversations across humanistic domains of enquiry related to format and (another imprecision) ‘materiality’.

Discussions of format — with which Williams is more directly engaged than Roy — have likely achieved currency for readers thanks in some measure to the work of Jonathan Sterne. Sterne’s magisterial *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (2012) is both an exemplary enquiry into the origins of a single digital format and a brief for studying formats generally. Looking at format doesn’t replace looking at media, Sterne notes; rather it allows us ‘to consider the embedded ideas and routines that cut across them’.¹ Studying format enriches the study of media partly by decentring hardware in favour of the accumulated decisions and protocols that structure the operability of an analogue device or a digital file. It’s the relationships between media and relevant formats that are key.

Discussions in other quarters have meanwhile focused less on media/format relationships than they have on format/genre ones. How might we historicize the relationship between books (format) and novels (genre), for instance, or between ballads and broadsides?² For that matter, what are the mutual pressures that sound recording formats have variously brought to bear on musical genres, and vice versa?³ Abstract though they may be when phrased in this way, these are interesting and important questions that cut productively across multiple domains of expertise. Play the same questions out a little bit further, and the relationships among media, formats, and genres start to beg additional attention to things like platforms and substrates.⁴ Substrates at least are straightforwardly material. They are made of stuff. Stuff like shellac.

The attention paid to shellac by both of these authors makes sense against a long-standing material turn within the humanities and social sciences, while Roy’s work is more directly engaged with the so-called new materialisms theorized recently by Jane Bennett, among others.⁵ Both authors set out to situate shellac historically within sprawling contexts, socio-cultural and otherwise. Roy appeals in particular to the ‘productive materiality’ or the ‘vibrancy’ of substrates as they at once intervene in and are transformed by ‘social and symbolic networks’ (p. 17). Attention paid to shellac also makes sense in light of eco- and ‘elemental’ approaches in media studies, which have emerged recently alongside the new materialisms. To wit, shellac is ‘green’ compared to synthetic polymers like celluloid and vinyl.⁶ Williams explains how shellac

¹ Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Duke University Press, 2012), p. 17. See also Jonathan Sterne, ‘33⅓ rpm’, *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 33.3 (2022), pp. 8–10, doi:10.1525/jpms.2021.33.3.8.

² See Jordan Alexander Stein, *When Novels Were Books* (Harvard University Press, 2020); Meredith McGill, ‘What Is a Ballad? Reading for Genre, Format, and Medium’, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 71.2 (2016), pp. 156–75, doi:10.1525/ncl.2016.71.2.156.

³ Williams cites Suisman on format as a factor in the length of popular music genres (p. 4); David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Popular Music* (Harvard University Press, 2009).

⁴ Whitney Trettien, ‘Substrate, Platform, Interface, Format’, *Textual Cultures*, 16.1 (2023), pp. 286–312, doi:10.14434/tc.v16i1.36107.

⁵ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010).

⁶ ‘Green’ is the term used by Jacob Smith in *Eco-Sonic Media* (University of California Press, 2015). Both Williams and Roy are critical of Smith’s chapter on ‘Green Discs’ (pp. 25–60), although it informs their interests in shellac. For a concise account of eco- and elemental media studies, see Nicole Sterosielski, ‘The Elements of Media Studies’, *Media+Environment*, 1.1 (2019) doi:10.1525/001c.10780. The ‘elements’ of elemental media studies are both chemical (think carbon) and classical (i.e. earth, wind, fire, water). Roy also wants to recover François Dagognet as a pioneer in thinking eco-materially; see the latter’s *Des détritits, des déchets, de l’objet: Une philosophie écologique* (Institut Synthélabo, 1997).

eventually came to be seen as a ‘natural plastic’ in the context of celluloid (p. 27), and Roy notes more pointedly that its uses and associations may have been plastic, but there was never anything finally or fully ‘natural’ about it, since shellac is the result of ‘numerous manual, machinic as well as symbolic and cultural processes of association and transformation’ (pp. 14–15). Both authors embrace old-fashioned materialism to the extent that they focus on labour.

Despite their different styles of thought, these authors share certain sympathies, and both of their books make the same opening gesture. After an introduction, Williams has one chapter and Roy has two that zero in on shellac as a material (what is this stuff anyway?) and chart its long career, including its eventual uptake by the global recording industry and thence the phonographic imaginary. Shellac is made from lac, a resinous secretion by insects onto certain trees native to forests in areas of India and Thailand, so add lac to your pocket list of arboreal (e.g. gutta-percha, quinine, rubber) and insectile resources (e.g. cochineal) embraced and extracted by imperial powers. Early scientific and colonial accounts of shellac tended to make the lac insect into their protagonist, occluding indigenous knowledge and labour (Williams, p. 31), and both Williams and Roy are at pains to recover the diverse labours and labourers whereby lac was cultivated and harvested and shellac processed and brought to market. Roy goes into greater detail about what she calls the ‘pre-mediatic (and pre-sonic) moment in the long history of the material’ (p. 40). It was variously used homeopathically and decoratively in India and adopted by European painters as early as the Middle Ages (it was shiny), used later to enhance the look and resonance of stringed instruments (it was thus ‘intersensorial’), and was eventually used in the moulding of daguerreotype cases and other sundries (it was thermoplastic). As the phonographic imaginary eventually gained sway, earlier understandings of shellac were forgotten, becoming ‘inaudible’ (Roy, p. 64), while sound recordings only sounded acceptable to the extent that listeners didn’t hear the sounds of the needle scratching against the recording surface (Williams, p. 43).

Neither Williams nor Roy is writing a standard commodity history. Shellac is neither a world-changing triumph nor a depredation by global capital. Neither is it a staple of the sort that interested Harold Innis, say, or a catalyst for globalization and changing human geographies of the kind that interests Sven Beckert in *Empire of Cotton*.⁷ Instead, for Williams and Roy shellac is an opportunity to recover a ‘necessarily messy’ backstory (Williams, p. 1) for the worldwide circulation of disc records. And it’s an occasion to theorize, effectively to overload, ‘even the most inclusive or expansive definition of “musicking” as a social activity’ (Williams, p. 24), as well as to acknowledge ‘the unwritten, the subjugated and the partially erased’ (Roy, p. 93).⁸ Both authors recover the labours of shellac production as a supplementary counterpart to the labours of industrial disc production. With an ear tuned for friction, Williams hears ‘the grinding of cogs between knowledge systems — scientific and Adivasi, and those of colonists and laborers, listeners and makers’ (p. 23). Roy avers ‘a deep yet unacknowledged solidarity’ between colonial labourers and the workers (many of them women) in gramophone factories.

⁷ See Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (Viking, 2015), and Harold A. Innis and Daniel Drache, *Staples, Markets, and Cultural Change: Selected Essays* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995), as well as Bruce Robbins, ‘Commodity Histories’, *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 120.2 (2005), pp. 454–63, doi:10.1632/003081205X52374. See also Sidney Mintz’s influential *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (Penguin Books, 1985), which has implications for the history of taste that are perhaps not irrelevant to the entwined histories of music and recording.

⁸ Williams here invokes Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performance and Listening* (Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

She even sees parallels between the tiny insects that end their lives entombed in lac and the 'disembodied voices — and forms of labor — entombed within the grooves' of a record (pp. 96 and 40).

Having introduced shellac, Williams and Roy each pursue different strategies. Noting that format 'cannot be adequately grasped from any one perspective' (p. 12), Williams takes a multi-pronged approach, with friction as his central conceit. Friction is real: the repeated and repeatable scratching of a needle against a recording, for instance, as well as the inner logic of the kazoo or 'gazooka', which comes up in a later chapter. Friction is also metaphorical, evoking productive tensions and abrasions across multiple forms of difference. So friction is a useful lens, even what he calls a 'scholarly epistemology', with the potential to illuminate not just the social lives of sounds and formats but also the social worlds that they effectively help to engender.⁹ In one chapter Williams pursues gaps and frictions along an imperial axis, connecting the multinational Gramophone Company to potential listeners in Singapore. In another he picks out frictions within the celebrated career and recordings of Enrico Caruso. Another chapter connects sound and social class in the coal-mining towns of South Wales, reading accounts of gramophone concerts and working-class gazooka bands. And a final chapter considers a fictional friction, the obsessively repeated playback of a single jazz recording in Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *Nausea* (1938), which Williams traces forwards into the existentialism of *Being and Nothingness* (1943).

Friction is useful as Williams's central conceit because it maps so broadly across his specific interventions into the meanings of shellac discs. Roy, too, must contain sprawl, and she does so with a stronger hand, by dwelling meta-critically on what it takes to tell the story (or stories) of any one material. The trick is 'to channel the witnessing power of objects in order to (re)convert materiality into narrativity — while recognizing that not every story can be redeemed, retold, or revealed' (p. 98). Shellac and its stories are incumbent upon one other, or, as Roy would put it, storytelling is itself 'a material practice' (p. 21). Her two chapters introducing shellac are followed by three that assemble its stories differently. In a chapter on 'phono-fetishism and intersensory visions', Roy unpacks the interwar phonographic imaginary partly via its tropes and using Adorno's well-known essays on recording.¹⁰ In a chapter on 'shellac at war', she returns to the plasticity of shellac, reflecting on its wartime uses and associations as well as the contexts wherein vinyl emerged as an 'interference, superimposition, [and] mutual parasiting' (p. 163). A final chapter focuses on the work of contemporary artists who engage with shellac records as a way to theorize 'deep media-material history' (p. 169).

It is difficult to encapsulate the disparate interpretive adventures in these two books, but it should be clear that they are far from duplicative, even as they treat the same subject. Neither are they contradictory. Williams's tilt towards cultural history complements Roy's tilt towards media theory, while both prosper in each other's terrain; many readers will profit from reading both. Roy restores the visibility of shellac to its meanings, while Williams builds out from specific sounds and variously conjures listeners in the era of 78s. Using largely different jargons, they share similar impulses to take the meanings of shellac in new directions. Williams

⁹ Williams, pp. 9 and 14; one inspiration acknowledged here is Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton University Press, 2005).

¹⁰ See Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Curves of the Needle' and 'The Form of the Phonograph Record', trans. by Thomas Y. Levin, *October*, 55 (1990), pp. 48–55, doi:10.2307/778935, and 56–61, doi:10.2307/778936.

sticks a bit closer to the histories of recorded sound; Roy roams more widely to consider visual arts and culture in her pursuit of (her subtitle) ‘unsettled matter’.

Consider Williams’s chapter on ‘The Reproduction of Caruso’, which builds on accounts of Caruso’s celebrity by David Suisman, Simona Frasca, and others in order to approach the singer’s role in the history of mass listening. After his death in 1921, Caruso was hailed as an industrial phenomenon, a celebrity product that had helped to boost the prestige and profitability of disc records. Williams seeks additionally to reconstruct the singer’s own ‘agency in the making of the format’ (p. 76). Caruso’s early experience as a metalworker, his gifts of small medallions at recording sessions, his success publishing caricatures, and a self-portrait bust in bronze are among the examples mobilized to index his deep engagement with reproduction as such amid evident friction between opera as a favoured taste category on the one hand and Neapolitans as a disparaged immigrant group on the other. Williams assembles a new Caruso from many parts, making sense of his posthumous reputation while making a case for his discs being sites ‘for listening’s entanglements’ rather than any ‘straightforward object of audition’ (p. 94). Caruso himself emerges as something of a media-material theorist *à la* Elodie Roy, while Williams asks, meta-critically, ‘How should we tell the story of the emergence of mass listening?’ (p. 76).

For Roy, mass listening was part of a ‘phonograph culture’ within which the mass-produced disc ‘remained a symbolically unstable, multivalent artifact’ (pp. 105 and 107). She coins the term *phono-fetishism* to suggest the libidinal zeal with which phonographs and records were taken up, used, and imagined, while she explores the mirror trope — the record as ‘mirror of the voice’ — to understand the persistent and dynamic interplay between sonic and visual registers within modernity. Like Williams, Roy mobilizes historical and fictional representations and engages Adorno, among other theorists, while she also turns decisively to the visual arts and the European avant-garde to pursue shellac discs as complex signifiers. She locates Moholy-Nagy’s 1927 photograph *Grammophonplatte* and Marcel Duchamp’s 1935 series of *Rotoreliefs*, for instance, within a range of interwar intermedial experiments. The context is broadly one of technological ambivalence (p. 131), which resonates with but must also be distinguished from the contexts of obsolescence within which contemporary artists in Europe and the US today continue to find shellac discs ‘an important symbolic resource or matrix’ (p. 169). Art practice *is* media-material theory, and Roy shows herself to be an astute curator.

Should we, I wonder, expect to see additional monographs about shellac in the coming months or years? Could there be more to say? While it may be that shellac itself has been sufficiently theorized for now, *Format Frictions* in particular offers a good reminder of just how much more we have to learn about shellac discs in the material histories of music. The productive specificity of Williams’s historical slices — Singapore, South Wales, Caruso — begs comparative enquiries. How have scholars addressed other specific sites and subjects of record production, circulation, use, and reuse, and how will they? This question will have many particularist answers, attentive to individual sites and subjects, but it also begs for inductive insights that generalize from the particular, and it begs as well for methodological innovations and reflections. I want to close with a minor speculative detour in the direction of methodology with a proposal about Fred Gaisberg; it is a proposal that will climb back out of format studies and into media studies.

Both Williams and Roy draw on the peripatetic recordist Fred Gaisberg, who traversed continents in the early twentieth century as a representative for the multinational Gramophone Company, collecting performances and developing markets. Indeed, search ‘Fred Gaisberg’ in Google Books (or your library catalogue) and you will get a good idea of the work being done to

tell the local and global histories of recording and popular music. Gaisberg's 1942 memoir, *The Music Goes Round*, is perennially a key source.¹¹ Here's my proposal: could we put Fred Gaisberg into conversation — or even imagine him crossing paths — with the peripatetic Reginald Orcutt? Orcutt traversed continents in the early twentieth century as a representative for the multinational Mergenthaler Linotype Company; his 1945 memoir, *Merchant of Alphabets*, tells of his efforts to develop markets for this 'machine of many tongues'.¹² Gaisberg encountered a range of linguistic, musical, and performance traditions to which recording was then adapted, with diverse and reciprocal results. Orcutt, too, encountered many linguistic traditions, languages written (and sometimes printed) in character sets that had to be variously adapted for mechanical typesetting. Long story, but imagine the conversations that Gaisberg and Orcutt might have had: conversations, we might say, about modernity and locality as well as about the expressive and destructive potential of media made global.

¹¹ Fred W. Gaisberg, *The Music Goes Round* (Macmillan, 1942).

¹² Reginald Orcutt, *Merchant of Alphabets* (Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1945), p. 6.