

BOOK REVIEW

Angela Impey. *Song Walking: Women, Music, and Environmental Justice in an African Borderland*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018. ix + 284 pp. Appendices. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$32.50. Paper. ISBN: 978-0226538013.

This accomplished and moving monograph by Angela Impey provides a nuanced gendered history of the borderlands that lie at the intersection of South Africa, Mozambique, and Swaziland. *Song Walking: Women, Music, and Environmental Justice in an African Borderland* also demonstrates an innovative interdisciplinary methodology, mixing ethnomusicology with extensive review and analysis of the historical record to produce a women-centered and interpreted account of the major eras of change in that region since the late nineteenth century. Impey uses women's walking songs as an entry point; although these songs had been out of use for several decades when she started her research in the early 2000's, they were quickly remembered and performed when Impey brought a box of mouth harps (a cheap, popular instrument for girls and young women in the first half of the twentieth century) to the area to see if the older women remembered how to play them. In an approach intended to counter the absence of both women and culture from the historical narrative, her work with two groups of women over nearly ten years of visits, walks, and interviews produced an extraordinary account of place, space, and time. Walking with women through their area jogged personal as well as "secondary memories," those stories of place and time passed down from others, remembered when walking past a grave, a fence, a water course, and so on.

The narrative traces the sequence of dispossessions, enclosures, and impoverishment of local African communities in the area, starting with the incursion of early white colonists in the late nineteenth century, through to post-apartheid times when, in 1997, the area was included in the Transfrontier Conservation Area under the Peace Parks Foundation. In between, Impey recounts the establishment of Ndumo Game Reserve in 1924, the subsequent further expulsion of local people from the reserve in the 1950s and 1960s, the hardening of the borders with Mozambique and Swaziland during the 1970s and 1980s due to anti-apartheid struggle activity and the independence of Mozambique in 1975, and the establishment of Tembe

Elephant Park in 1983. Each era further restricted local people's access to land and other resources, especially water and wild foods, and curtailed the mobility of the people who had historically moved freely around the borderlands for marriage, trade, and other livelihood activities.

The book is organized into eight chapters, which include a discussion of methodology, a detailed engagement with the historiography and historical record of the area, and rich descriptions of women's relationships to their environment over time, including to the fields, water sources, and paths they traveled to reach shops and relatives. The story of women's lives that emerges from this careful research is then linked to the economic and colonial history of the region, including not only the eras of dispossession, but later the pattern of male labor migration that, as elsewhere in the region, profoundly affected gender relations and livelihoods. Impey recounts the era of enforced "Zulu-ization" of the 1970s and 1980s (when in an effort to control the area in the time of unrest, the apartheid state extended the borders of Zululand), which led to post-apartheid times of increasing unemployment, meager land-based livelihoods, unfulfilled promises of community benefits from conservation areas, and dependence on state welfare.

In perhaps the most extraordinary and accomplished chapter, Impey recounts a trip with some of the women into Ndumo Game Reserve. She proposed the trip in the hope that actually moving through the park would trigger the women's memories of the meanings of the place to them, so long ago lost. Instead, she uncovered something much more profound. The women showed little real interest in the place anymore, and even expressed that they would not know what to do there if they actually returned. Instead, it is the memory of the place and what it represents that animates them: the dispossession, loss, hunger, conflict with whites, and how this stands in contrast to a past of abundance and peace: "... (T)ime and space in Ndumo were explained away by a stock of images that memorialized life as ceaselessly abundant and harmonious, a scenario that inescapably cast their current lives in negative relief: as deprived, dissonant, and inconsolably interrupted" (164). This tragic tone is hard to dispel, given the unresponsiveness of contemporary "green" politics as represented by the Transfrontier Conservation Area that relies on a different logic of value, place, and environment, one that commodifies nature for the benefit of international corporate interests, although purportedly providing benefits to local communities through benefit sharing arrangements.

In the concluding chapter, Impey argues for the importance of work such as hers in countering this logic, although she admits that her work has made no impact in improving women's lives. Women's history is one of deepening dispossession, poverty, and marginalization. Like the women she visited one last time in 2009, Impey's tone is dispirited. The women no longer want to sing, and while Impey's book is an astonishing and beautifully written piece of scholarship, she seems to wonder what use it is. I would encourage all those interested in South Africa, environmental history,

conservation, and interdisciplinary methodology, that indeed, this book is an important contribution.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Little, Peter D. 2019. "When 'Green' Equals Thorny and Mean: The Politics and Costs of an Environmental Experiment in East Africa." *African Studies Review* 62 (3): 132–63. doi:[10.1017/asr.2019.41](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.41).
- Ogunleye, Foluke. 2003. "Environmental Sustainability in Nigeria: The 'Awareness' Imperative." *African Issues* 32 (1–2): 41–52. doi:[10.1017/S1548450500006600](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1548450500006600).
- Sheridan, Michael J. 2009. "The Environmental and Social History of African Sacred Groves: A Tanzanian Case Study." *African Studies Review* 52 (1): 73–98. doi:[10.1353/arw.0.0149](https://doi.org/10.1353/arw.0.0149).