

REVIEW | Decomposed

Kyle Devine

Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019

9780262537780

Mark Pedelty

University of Minnesota

Pedelty@umn.edu

Kyle Devine's *Decomposed* (MIT Press) is a pathbreaking take on the environmental impact of musical media. The book begins with the era when shellac dominated the incipient record industry (1900-1950), travels through the vinyl age (1950-2000), and ends in the digital present. Devine's thesis is not completely new to those who have read books like *Media and the Ecological Crisis* (Maxwell et al. 2015): our media consumption systems are unsustainable. However, Devine does the work of tracing the life cycle of musical media extremely well, and brings ecological analysis into a domain where scholars have tended to ignore material contexts. Musicologists emphasize the "close reading" (174) of musical texts, sometimes to the exclusion of other methods. Devine reminds us that the material contexts and practices of composition, production, performance, marketing, distribution and listening are also fundamentally important. His close reading of the environmental history of musical recording and listening is an important contribution to music scholarship.

Devine's book is refreshingly well written. His insightful ecological analysis is embedded within a descriptive and informative historical narrative. At no point does he fall prey to the historian's temptation to dwell on archival minutiae. I was constantly reminded of Stephen Witt's *How Music Got Free* (2015) while reading *Decomposed*. Like Witt, Devine draws back the curtain on musical production to help readers better understand the technology, materials and institutional infrastructure that make our music possible. For example, Devine provides fascinating descriptions of Victor Record's manufacturing complex in Camden, New Jersey (69-72) and England's EMI campus near London (72-75) in the early Twentieth Century. Devine's industrial vignettes bring home the massive scale of manufacture involved and inevitably brings him into conversation with Adorno's criticisms of musical reproduction. However, Devine's assertion that "the winds of demand" (126) propel the system, as opposed to marketing or industry, comes off

more like a neoliberal assertion than evidence-based claim. Adorno may have misunderstood the semiotic complexities of musical taste, genres, and art, but his arguments regarding the industrial reproduction of music are, if anything, supported by Devine's stark description.

As a material history of recording formats, *Decomposed* excels. While it might not seem essential for musical scholars to understand the transformative role played by shellac in the early record industry—a resin produced by billions of female lac beetles and harvested by thousands of exploited plantation workers in India—Devine makes a solid case that it is field-central knowledge. He offers this answer to “musicologists” who “wanted to know where the music was” and reviewers who questioned if his “research belonged in musicology” (168-169):

Of course, I hope this book is relevant to musicologists (not to mention scholars in other fields). But if musicology is defined only by studying so-called texts in relation to their so-called contexts, or only by engaging with those domains of ordered audiovisual practice that readily offer themselves to established and institutionally recognized tools of analysis, then these musicologists are right: *Decomposed* is not about music and it is not musicology.

Hopefully political ecology has a role to play in musicology and all music research fields. I agree with Devine and others (Dawe 2015) that political ecology has much to offer music researchers.

As a music scholar and listener, I found Devine's case studies instructive. My generation started with vinyl albums when we were in grade school, moved on to 8-track tapes in junior high, took to cassettes in high school (which we used to record our older siblings' records), then adopted compact discs in college and very gladly replaced “physical media” with Wav and Mp3 files when they became available. Like most music listeners, I have added cloud-based streaming to the list. Through *Decomposed* we can see how deeply imbricated we are, as musicians, music scholars, and music listeners in the deleterious media we so deeply love.

Devine refuses to preference one period, method of manufacture, format, medium or technology as more sustainable than the others. Furthermore, he points out that the ecological history of musical listening is not just a matter of replacement; it has also been accumulative. For example, records are still with us. In fact, as explained in the Introduction and throughout the Plastic chapter, the age of vinyl is one of the most mythologized and fetishized periods. Yet, these records were, and remain, one of the most toxic media. The plastic platters many love for their “warm” sound and iconic look, are manufactured from fossil-based compounds whose extraction, refinement and manufacture reduce biodiversity, exacerbate climate change and negatively impact human health. Most vinyl albums are “buried or burned” (8), leaching or outgassing toxic chemicals. Not “cool,” but true.

Given all that Devine describes, what then must we do? *Decomposed* purposefully sidesteps this question, in part because there are no magic bullet solutions (186):

If no recording format has ever conformed to principles of extraction or energy that would qualify as equitable or ethical, and if pastoral returns are nonstarters, what we need is a musicology in the future tense—a musicology of the otherwise.

This is the closest Devine gets to offering solutions. Not offering an “otherwise” strikes me as a highly Foucauldian cop out for a work of political ecology. Granted, central figures have from time to time asked “where is the politics” (Walker 2007) in political ecology (Paulson, Gezon, & Watts 2003)? Yet, political ecology was formed around the premise that critical ecological analysis would allow us to better understand *and* more effectively engage, environmental crises. Ecology, more generally, is about drawing connections, understanding relationships, retaining complexity and thinking holistically. Devine makes a convincing case that all methods of musical listening—past, current, and projected—have ecological costs. But surely some practices and future possibilities are preferable to others? To understand this we need only read some of the work that Devine mostly demotes to the endnotes. For example, Aaron Allen’s ecological exploration of violin bow materials, wherein he traces the deleterious relationship between music listening practices and the ruinous harvesting of Brazil’s pernambuco trees, demonstrates the relative benefits of sounder systems for sourcing wood and manufacturing violins (2012). Yes, it is essential to consider *The Dark Side of the Tune* (2013), but should our work also end in darkness? I would like Devine, as an expert in shellac, plastic and digital ecologies, to at least hint at solutions.

One might ask, where the politics are in Devine’s political ecology? Much like a biological ecologist might “black box” (ignore) the cultural factors that cause endocrine disruptors to flood our lakes, rivers and water supplies, so too, Devine glosses over political and cultural forces that overdetermine the material system he so effectively describes in *Decomposed*. Musical preferences and meanings fostered by industry and marketing—and not just the “winds of demand”—play central roles in this destructive listening. The semiotic is always central to political ecology. For example, when Paul Robbins, one of the central figures in political ecology, examined environmentally damaging landscapes in *Lawn People* (2012), he investigated not only what lawns do, from a material standpoint, but also what they mean. Those cultural meanings are every bit as important if the goal is to understand the political ecology of residential landscapes, as are explanations involving grass, fertilizers, and gas mowers. How we think about music, including which culturally informed listening practices we adopt (Von Glahn 2013), has deep ecological implications. To return to Allen’s example, culturally constructed perceptions in regard to which woods produce the best tones have, in turn, affected logging practices (2012). Musicians have become conscious of this connection between culture, sound and material as well. For example, Steve Earle notes that we will have to learn to appreciate sounds made by sustainably sourced and produced materials if we want to be good musical stewards of hardwood forests (Trump 2012). Sound and signification have everything to do with ecomusicology. Devine has made an invaluable contribution in music scholars’ collective efforts to form a more integral, relational, systemic, explanatory, meaningful and holistic *political ecology* of music, but *Decomposed* only traces the material side of the matter. In order for the book to become a political ecology of musical recording and listening, as Devine intended, *Decomposed* would need to be followed by a second volume (Recomposed?) that also considers the esthetic, cultural, ideological, and political dimensions of the ecological system (126).

Neither of the above criticisms dampens my enthusiasm for *Decomposed*. Devine has produced one of the finest works on the material ecology of media. I highly recommend Devine’s groundbreaking book and will certainly assign it in my courses.

References

Bibliography

- Allen, A.S., 2012. 'Fatto di Fiemme': Stradivari's violins and the musical trees of the Paneveggio. Available at: https://www.ecomusicology.info/wp-content/uploads/Allen/Fiemme/26_Allen.pdf Accessed 18 November 2020.
- Dawe, K., 2015. "Materials matter: Towards a political ecology of musical instrument making." In Allen, A. and Dawe, K. *Current Directions in Ecomusicology*. New York: Routledge, 117-129.
- Johnson, B. and Cloonan, M., 2013. *Dark side of the tune: Popular music and violence*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Maxwell, R., Raundalen, J. and Vestberg, N.L. eds., 2014. *Media and the ecological crisis*. New York: Routledge.
- Paulson, S., Gezon, L.L. and Watts, M., 2003. Locating the political in political ecology: An introduction. *Human Organization*, 62(3): 205-217.
- Robbins, P., 2012. *Lawn people: How grasses, weeds, and chemicals make us who we are*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Von Glahn, D., 2013. *Music and the Skillful Listener: American Women Compose the Natural World*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Walker, P.A., 2007. Political ecology: where is the politics?. *Progress in Human geography*, 31(3): 363-369.
- Witt, S., 2015. *How music got free: The end of an industry, the turn of the century, and the patient zero of piracy*. London: Penguin.

Videography

- Trump, M., 2012. *Musicwood*. DVD. Helpman Productions.