

Wind of the Bones

by Donna Marcus

1951:

A young girl with two plaits knotted with white ribbon sits on a truck from Nimule to Juba in Southern Sudan. She has finished school for the summer and this is the final stretch of her nine-part conveyance which started in Nairobi. Her father works as a Veterinary Officer near Juba. They are European. She holds in her hand a doll. The doll can talk. No, the doll can sing. As she arrives in Juba, she and her sister are embraced by her welcoming mother. Before leaving for home, she turns to a group of Dinka men who are stood around the truck and shows them her doll. The men are bemused and charmed by the young girl showing herself in miniature.

1877:

Thomas Edison invents the phonograph, the first technology which could both record and reproduce sound. A large horn is points towards the sound source, and picking up the sound's vibrations, a needle etches the waves into a spiralling hollow wax cylinder which is turned by hand on a wooden box at the end of the horn.

"Cylinders appreciate the same sort of conditions we humans like to live in, namely; stable, without extremes of heat or cold, and neither too damp, nor too dry."

Says The City of London Phonograph and Gramophone Society.

"Extremes of temperature can bring about chemical degradation and physical stress resulting in rough cloudy surfaces and fissures, which will eventually cause the record to split. Extremes of humidity promote the growth of mildews, which eat into the record surface, leaving it noisy or even unplayable."

Beware of leaving the voices to spoil like corpses. Let not their eyes grow milky, nor let their skin crack, rip and rupture, nor let their flesh be eaten by downy fungus. The human voice must not rot.

By using a miniaturised version of the wax cylinder, Edison makes the first talking doll. Women working on his factory floor are asked to sing songs into the newly invented phonograph, and their voices are

scared into the small wax. Each doll requires a separate recording, for the etchings of each wax cylinder can not yet be replicated. Every doll is thus bespoke, each trapping an individual female voice from Edison's factory inside a steel torso of an inanimate child

The dolls are a commercial failure: their bodies made of hard metal, their wax cylinder voices prone to breaking; their deathly murmurs that wail and chatter on repeat. Children become frightened of the voices displaced onto bodies steel cold — the ghostly chants that came from within, the ones that retold the rattle, forever cursed to speak the songs they were once told to sing.

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1928

The young anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard sails for Southern Sudan to begin his ethnographic research. On the ship, he is shown how to use a wax cylinder phonograph in order to record the sounds of the Zande people. Over the course of two years he takes their voices, sounds and music. He takes idle chatting, adulterous hearings, dancing song, and seals them in wax tombs. Some are sent to Berlin. 86 are sent to Oxford. Wrapped in cotton, and placed in archived boxes, the voices are hidden for a century, heard only by the specialist scholars who stole them from their flesh, from their home.

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2012

The recordings are digitised by the Pitts Rivers Museum, now available for all to hear:

"The Pitt Rivers Museum has chosen to retain its sound recordings because they remain of crucial importance to a rounded understanding of related material in the Museum's collections. For instance, sound recordings made by Edward Evans-Pritchard in South Sudan forms part of a larger collection of artefacts and photographs."

2016

The Museum makes a commitment to repatriating human remains which it holds in its collection:

"Human remains' comprise the bodies, and parts of bodies, of once-living people from the species Homo sapiens."

This also includes:

“Any of the above that may have been modified in some way by human skill/or may be physically bound up with other non-human materials to form an artefact composed of several materials.”

Where here does the voice sit? A recorded voice. A voice taken from its home, wrapped in cotton to be hidden for a hundred years. A trapped voice, made no freer by its 7 plays on Soundcloud, trapped now twice in both a metallic soap compound and digital code, prevented from rotting into itself at all costs, even when its speakers are dead — a taxidermy voice. Poltergeists, noisy ghosts silenced by wooden boxes, cotton wool and pixelled orange play buttons. Perhaps wax cylinders so notoriously crack and split because of their human desire to escape their solid forms — voices breaking, broken voices stops the larynx from speaking, a self protection that stops more damage being done.

But is our sound the body? Is a recorded voice the photograph of the fleshy remains, or is it the wind of the bones themselves? The wax cylinders are brown and hollow like a bone with pitted marrow. Their spiralled scars speak the sounds of humans now deceased, yet their songs still touch our ears, like their bones may hold our hands. And if the voice has lost its body, where might it be human? Perhaps the replaying of now dead voices is no different from the reviewing of now dead bodies in photographs — perhaps they are just records of breath as film is a record of skin... But I can hear the voice, I cannot touch the skin. The voice is there, between my ears, filtered through the wax, far away from the time and place yearning to return to the realm where it belongs. A trapped voice, a haunting, where ghosts linger. Do the spirits stay because they need to finish, or won't we let them go? Press replay, and force them to live on repeat.

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1951:

The young girl with two plaits knotted in white ribbon presents the talking doll to the Dinka men. They are bemused and charmed by the young girl showing herself in miniature. But do they know their neighbour's voices are held in cages too? Played on occasion by men in tweed suits for the same amusement and curiosity they find in this girl's talking toy? Voices that will persist through a time they did not ask to live through, shades and spectres of former flesh, the sole remains of humans now eaten by worms and birds or burnt to char.