

“New Life” into Old Sounds

Listening to Simone Schmidt’s Audible Songs from Rockwood

ABSTRACT Simone Schmidt is a folk and country musician based in tkaronto (Mohawk word from which Toronto, Ontario, is derived). Schmidt’s 2017 album *Audible Songs from Rockwood* is part of their solo work as Fiver and part of an attempt to write “new life into and around folk, country, and rock songs.” The album is based on their time spent at the Archives of Ontario reading the original case files of the Rockwood Asylum for the Criminally Insane that operated in Kingston, Ontario, from 1856 to 1881. The songs are sung from the imagined perspectives of different women imprisoned at Rockwood. I read and engage with Schmidt’s work as a performance of unsettling. Unsettling comes through on this album in direct ways, such as Schmidt’s challenges to ideas of land possession and challenges to the bases of the medical and psychiatric designations. More subtle challenges come through the portrayals of the women, which, though largely imagined, come from a place of self-reflexivity. In this paper I will examine how Schmidt uses the sounds of traditional North American folk and country music as a sonic bed for a performance of unsettling on *Audible Songs from Rockwood*. **KEYWORDS** Settler Unsettling, Performing unsettling, Traditional North American Folk and Country music, Simone Schmidt, Fiver, The Highest Order, *Audible Songs from Rockwood*, Rockwood Asylum for the Criminally Insane

Fiver (also known as Simone Schmidt) is an alternative, psych, folk, rock, and country musician based out of tkaronto (the Mohawk word from which Toronto, Ontario, was derived).¹ From 2007 to 2011, Schmidt performed as part of the country band One Hundred Dollars. When this group reached its end, Schmidt continued creating music as a member of psych-country band The Highest Order (2011-present) and under the solo name Fiver (2012-present). All three projects are part of their attempt to write “new life into and around folk, country, and rock songs,” three genres containing cross-cultural exchanges and complex histories.² Schmidt’s 2017 album, *Audible Songs from Rockwood*, is part of their solo work as Fiver. It features collaborations with Chris Coole, John Showman, Max Heineman (who perform as The Lonesome Ace Stringband), Kristine Schmitt, Alia O’Brien, Cris Derksen, and Gavin Gardiner.

1. I would like to thank the editors of the special issue, Dean Hubbs and Francesca Royster, for including my work, and the peer review editor for their insight and support. I want to also thank H el ene Bigras-Dutrisac for her valuable and supportive notes. Finally, I must also thank Simone Schmidt for the music and the listening experiences.

2. “Biography” on <https://www.fiverfiverfiver.com/new-page/>. Hear Fiver, *Audible Songs from Rockwood*. Id ee Fixe Records. IF016. 2017.

Audible Songs from Rockwood is based on Schmidt's time researching and reading the original case files of the Rockwood Asylum for the Criminally Insane that operated in Kingston, Ontario, from 1856 to 1881.³ The case files were written by the medical superintendent of the asylum, police officers, and judges, and are kept at the Archives of Ontario in Toronto (North York). The album contains 11 songs written by Schmidt, which are sung from the imagined perspectives of different women and one man imprisoned at Rockwood in the mid-1800s.⁴ An additional two "unsingable songs" are included in an extensive liner notes booklet written by Simone Carver (Schmidt's title as an ethnomusicologist). The liner notes are used to contextualize the lives of the inmates whose worlds Fiver (Schmidt's title as a songwriter and musician) reimagines through song.⁵ The lyrics and notes allude to abuses of power within Canadian psychiatric, medical, and correctional institutions (past and present), unrelenting patriarchy, and settler colonialism—forces that supported a violent history of incarceration at Rockwood and shape current realities in Canadian institutions.

The detail and depth of the album and its accompanying pieces encourage a deep and continuous listening experience.⁶ The depth is given life through the many material elements of the project and the histories it brings forth and challenges, while the continuity refers to the commitment required to listen and build a relationship with this album and the narratives throughout. The relationship with the artist is not direct, but the metaphor of the performance is important. By encouraging a continuous listening experiencing with this album Schmidt is encouraging listeners to commit to listening for an unsettling and an unsettled future. This means that listeners commit to listening to and building non-violent and non-abusive relationships with people marginalized—racialized, institutionalized, classed—by settler colonial agents and structures. Learning how to listen in different and unsettled ways is a necessary first step in this process.

While I read and engage with Schmidt's work—which they describe as the work of a "non-historian non-academic"—as a performance of unsettling, Schmidt makes an effort to leave space for listeners to make their way through the world of the album and come to different conclusions.⁷ Thus, it is important to clarify and frame my engagement with Schmidt's work. It is also important to note that this article is part of a larger process of

3. Rockwood is located on land of the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg, Haudenosaunee, and Wendat Peoples.

4. The final track, "Red Bird," is sung by Max Heineman.

5. The names of the inmates are redacted in the liner notes "out of a feeling of privacy." Ibid., 26. Additionally, throughout this article, I use Schmidt's name when referring to the artist behind the general project, but I refer to the specific personas behind the liner notes and music where appropriate as a way of respecting the performance.

6. The liner notes include photographs, paintings, and drawings from artists such as Darby Milbrath, Jeff Bierk, Markus Lake, Geneva Haley, Jennifer Castle, Juliana Neufeld, Sojourner Truth Parsons, and Kyle Gregory Sanderson. The layout is the work of Alex Durlak and Schmidt. See Sarah Greene's review, which describes her "immersive experience" with the album. Sarah Greene, "Fiver: Audible Songs From Rockwood" for *Exclaim!* Published on 25 April 2017. Accessed at: http://exclaim.ca/music/article/fiver-audible_songs_from_rockwood

7. Schmidt (2017):26; and Carly Lewis, "Toronto musician Simone Schmidt's new album a meditation on mental health" for *The Globe and Mail*. Published 13 April 2017. Accessed at: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/music/toronto-musician-simone-schmidts-new-album-a-meditation-on-mental-health/article34704858/>. See also "Ep. 374 Fiver" on *Kreative Kontrol* podcast with Vish Khanna. Released 10 January 2018, accessed at: <http://vishkhanna.com/2018/01/10/ep-374-fiver/>; also an interview with CKUA, accessed at: <https://ckua.com/listen/interview-fivers-simone-schmidt-talks-audible-songs-from-rockwood-2/>

opening and working through what unsettling could mean for settlers on Turtle Island. For the purposes of this article, I think of unsettling as a collection of unique self-reflexive experiences and processes that are undertaken with the aim of dismantling the structures of patriarchy and settler colonialism. These processes are part of a commitment to finding new ways to participate in worlds constructed and led by Indigenous leaders across Turtle Island. Unsettling is a psychological and material surrender and restructuring with larger socio-political implications. These processes must also operate in conjunction with the decolonial work of Indigenous nations on Turtle Island.

Unsettling comes through this album in direct ways, such as Schmidt's anti-colonial discussion of land possession in the song "Haldimand County" and their challenge of the racist and sexist histories and structures that support the medical and psychiatric designations given to the women portrayed. The portrayals of the women in the songs are reimaginings that come from a place of self-reflexivity and contribute, in more subtle ways, to the unsettling of these same structures of racism and sexism. Fiver imagines the experiences of these women in an attempt to encourage the reshaping of the images listeners have of themselves. These self-reflexive and critical aspects are significant but not common enough in the work of settler performers and academics.⁸ In this sense, Schmidt engages a progressive style of performance that unfamiliar listeners might not associate with traditional North American folk and country music.⁹ In this article, I examine how Schmidt uses the sounds of traditional North American folk and country music as a sonic basis for a performance of unsettling on *Audible Songs from Rockwood*. More specifically, I unpack how Schmidt, by bringing together different histories of listening in these songs and liner notes, engages in—and opens space for—an unsettling and a rebuilding of settler identities.

RECORDS OF LISTENINGS

When you put the record player needle down (or click play) on *Audible Songs from Rockwood*, a collection of listenings and reimaginings is slowly revealed. Part of the significance of the performances on this album is the coming together of multiple moments or histories of listening. For the purposes of this article, I am most interested in this element because it is through this coming together of different moments and histories of listening that Schmidt is able to write "new life into and around folk, country, and rock songs."¹⁰ This coming together also allows Schmidt to challenge the assumptions of the histories brought forth on the record. Moreover, it involves an attempt at reimagining part of a history of traditional North American folk and country music and part of a settler identity that lives through an

8. Beverley Diamond, "Decentering Opera: Early 21st Century Indigenous Production" in *Opera Indigene: Re/Presenting First Nations and Indigenous Cultures*, ed. Pamela Karantonis and Dylan Robinson (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011), 56.

9. Hubbs makes clear that despite the unfamiliarity of some listeners, progressive thought and performative elements have existed throughout the history of country music. Indeed, Hubbs argues that we must leave room for them. See Nadine Dean Hubbs, "Them's My Kind of People: Cross-Marginal Solidarity in Country Music of the Long Seventies" in *The Honky Tonk on the Left: Progressive Thought in Country Music*. American Popular Music (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018) and "Country Music in Dangerous Times" in *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, vol. 30, nos. 1–2 (2017):15–26.

10. "Biography" on <https://www.fiverfiverfiver.com/new-page/>.

identification with this history. The key moments and histories of listening that I hear together on this album are: (1) the history of the sounds of traditional North American folk and country music; (2) a history of settler colonial listening exemplified by the documents that serve as a basis for this album; and (3) Schmidt's reimaginings and experiences of listening to the archives and traditional North American folk and country music.¹¹ I will address these histories in varying degrees throughout this article.

It is important to note that Schmidt engages with the archives as materials and voices of the settler state. Schmidt does not hear the voices of the women directly. The women are only present through the interpretations and analyses of police officers, judges, and the medical superintendent of the asylum. Schmidt builds their reimaginings from these notes but with a critical understanding of the illegitimate authority of the voices in the notes. Further, Schmidt turns a critical eye toward their authority as a songwriter and their relationship to the positionality of the women reimagined. That is, Schmidt is careful not to appropriate voices as they attempt a reimagining. Schmidt notes that there were African American and Indigenous inmates, but the voices of these inmates are more deeply obscured by the colonial voices of the medical superintendent, judges, and staff because of the anti-black and colonial abuses of power. In other cases, the voices of these inmates are absent from the records.¹² This is a notable absence and evidence of historical instances of an ongoing violent erasure of African American and Indigenous presence on Turtle Island. To avoid perpetuating this violence without engaging in appropriative acts, Schmidt includes the words from two "unsingable songs" (not recorded) in the liner notes.¹³ Though these voices may be audible, the songs remain unsingable in this case.

Considering Schmidt's recognition of the danger and violence of appropriation and the obscured or lack of a presence of African American and Indigenous voices in the Rockwood archives, I listen and write with the assumption that the reimaginings of the women on the album are all from the perspectives of white settlers. Irish and Scottish heritage are the most noted when Schmidt has had access to and included this information.¹⁴ Schmidt recognizes the racialized position of the Irish settler during the mid-to-late 1800s in their song "Hair of the Dead" (discussed later on) and in one unsingable song. Schmidt does not, however, equate this violence with the ongoing anti-black and settler colonial violence faced by African American and Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island. I acknowledge the heritage of the women reimagined on this album to recognize the complexity and range of violence faced by different inmates.

I also acknowledge the inmates' heritage to note that the reimagining of settler positionalities on this album does not undo the unsettling effect. I read and hear this album as a re-introduction of marginalized (institutionalized, sexualized, racialized, and classed) settler voices for processes of reconstructing settler identities in the twenty-first century. In other words, this reintroduction comes at a time when the structures of settler colonialism are

11. Traditional North American folk and country is sometimes referred to as "Old Time music" in the liner notes. See Schmidt (2017): 24.

12. *Ibid.*, 3, 27.

13. *Ibid.*, 22–23.

14. Five of the ten songs are reimaginings of inmates with Irish or Scottish heritage.

being challenged by self-determination processes of many Indigenous nations on Turtle Island. The work of unsettling settlers and settler colonial agents and structures must be taken up by settlers themselves in response to the self-recognizing and land reclamation processes of Indigenous peoples. These songs work as an aesthetic reconfiguration that makes room for a rebuilding of settler identities. This rebuilding is done with the goal of learning how to participate in realities unfolded and led by the many and varying Indigenous nations on Turtle Island.

i) Simone Schmidt: *The Listener* (Listening to a history of a musical genre)

Since John Showman's fiddle opens the album, it is worth considering the sounds of traditional North American folk and country music first, if only briefly. These sounds set the scene and guide the listener into the reimagined lives of the women at Rockwood as they unfold on the record. The instruments and sounds of traditional North American folk and country music draw in and support the listener's submergence in the realities on the album. These are worlds that I recognize but do not know. The structures of settler colonialism are familiar, but the world of the asylum and the experiences of these women are not. The unsettling balance remains. I am carried by sounds that are familiar through difficult moments in the lives of the women portrayed on the album.

This simultaneous opening up of sonic (the sounds of traditional North American folk and country music) and institutional histories (settler state authority as represented by psychiatric and medical institutions) is immediately evident. For example, the first song, "Waltz For One," opens with the sounds of a fiddle heavily sighing before the acoustic guitar is strummed slowly, ringing out alongside the fiddle. The acoustic guitar moves the waltz along as Fiver enters with their voice, asking "Will I live to love you till the day I die? / Is my love for you and you alone?"¹⁵ But it is not Fiver asking this question. It is Fiver as one of many unnamed inmates at Rockwood. The reader is informed by Carver in the liner notes that "Waltz For One" is the reimagining of the case of a 16-year-old Irish servant "admitted to Rockwood in 1876 by her father."¹⁶ Carver tells of the trauma faced by this young woman—including being "bled once by the medical team"¹⁷—but the music written alongside this research conveys the weight of these experiences through the slow waltzing pace of the acoustic guitar, the interspersed sighs of the fiddle, and Fiver's reflexive lyrics and heavy voice.

The notes provide helpful contextual information, while the music sets the scene. Schmidt takes the words from the case files—already a filtered interpretation of the woman's life—and reimagines the woman's experiences outside of the violent and dehumanizing gaze of the settler state. Schmidt works with the sounds of traditional North American folk and country music because they can represent a particular reality of settler colonialism through this performance. They recognize that these sounds represent a history of listening and contain particular assumptions for many listeners.¹⁸ Superficially, the sounds of the

15. Fiver, "Waltz For One," *Audible Songs From Rockwood*. Track 1. Idée Fixe Records. IF016. 2017.

16. Schmidt (2017):8.

17. Ibid.

18. These assumptions are products of a larger project of collective reimagining on the part of record company marketers and people interested in creating a clean and often whitewashed narrative of the sound of certain music

fiddle and banjo of traditional North American folk and country music evoke the times of Rockwood's operation (1856–1881). Contemporary artists make music employing these traditional sounds, but these sounds come to contemporary ears by way of a history of cross-cultural exchange through settler colonialism that is too deep to get into here.¹⁹ Simply put, these sounds conjure thoughts and images of early settlers and early settler colonial cultural exchange on Turtle Island throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Schmidt commits to this idea of traditional North American folk and country music as of an earlier settler colonial time and produced through early settler colonial exchange. Schmidt places the listener in the time and place of Rockwood. Yet Schmidt unsettles this history of the production, performance, and listening by writing into it the stories of women's lives misrepresented or ignored by the genre. For Schmidt, these sounds still refer to an idea of the mid- to late-1800s, but they are opened to include a wider range of realities (such as the worlds of the women of the Rockwood asylum and the abuses of power of the settler colonial institution).

Writing these stories into the history of a genre is only a piece of this performance. Fiver's songs address the imagined perspectives of some of the women at Rockwood, but they are framed through the contemporary perspective of unsettlement. Carver's notes contextualize the songs and stories of the women as pieces of an ongoing history and as existing alongside settler colonial authority and abuses of power. Specifically, the structures and assumptions that these sounds of traditional North American folk and country music carry are actively present in the contemporary production of settler colonial life. The structures that placed these women in Rockwood continue to operate in the twenty-first century. The belief that contemporary life is liberated from the structures and assumptions that built and supported Rockwood is challenged and unsettled through Fiver's reimaginings and Carver's notes. These materials operate alongside one another to reveal the past in the present and the present in the past. Indeed, the album is a critical reading of the present through the past, for a future. Fiver, as an admirer of the sounds of traditional North American folk and country music, works with these sounds to call to a specific period of settler colonialism, which includes a process of foregrounding the structures and assumptions of this time. Yet the sounds also become the foundation upon which Schmidt reimagines moments of lives that challenged settler colonial society. This process also reveals the active presence of these same

genres—in this case, the sound of southern rural folk musicians. It is worth acknowledging that the period that the sounds of fiddles and banjos evoke, is, in some cases, inaccurate and the result of calculated reimaginings of executives looking to boost record sales and present a fabricated inheritance of a sound from one artist to another. For more on the retroactive construction of the sound of a period: Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues*. (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2004); and Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004).

19. See John Troutman on the cross-cultural history of banjos, early blues, and country music. John Troutman, *Kikā Kila: How the Hawaiian Steel Guitar Changed the Sound of Modern Music*. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016); and Troutman, *Indian Blues: American Indians and the Politics of Music, 1879–1934*. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009).

oppressive structures and encourages the development of settler identities that exist in an unsettled world.

ii) Simone Carver: *The Ethnomusicologist* (Listening to a history of settler colonial authority)

Alongside the identities, histories, and assumptions associated with traditional North American folk and country music, Schmidt brings forth a history of settler colonial listening—an active non-listening—revealed within the case files of Rockwood. The time Schmidt spent reading the archives is significant because it is during this time that they began piecing together the foundation for their reimaginings of the perspectives of the women in the archives. This research is a kind of listening of its own. Schmidt builds their reimaginings of the perspectives of the women from these notes, but Schmidt simultaneously reveals processes of settler colonial listening that involve a process of erasing those people deemed disruptive to settler colonial life from society and history.

Schmidt's emphasis on processes of settler colonial listening primarily includes bringing forth a history of abuses of power in psychiatric and medical institutions in the burgeoning settler state. Carver notes, in a section titled "Trying to Record a Fact: Approaches to Listening" (which draws attention to the collector's, songwriter's, and settler state's approaches to listening), that "through time, what is notated in the historical record is played over and over, mounting some meticulously rendered wall of sound which exposes the ambitions and desires that drove the logic of Rockwood's administrators."²⁰ Schmidt questions the legitimacy of these authority figures by trying to speak to the realities of inmates living at Rockwood. Most of the songs on the album address cases of women who were diagnosed with medical or psychiatric conditions. The diagnoses given to inmates of the asylum, which were also used to justify the concerns of the family members and confirm the nature of the women-as-deviants and patients, essentially facilitated their removal from society. In Carver's notes for the song "Hair of the Dead," their displeasure with the power imbalance involved in the processes of giving medical or psychiatric labels to the women is made clear: "The language of the medical superintendent's notes betrays a deep skepticism toward [redacted name]'s account of reality. The collector counters it ten fold, with a personal skepticism toward the judgement of those intent on locking people up."²¹ Ultimately, Schmidt questions the notes and authority of the employees of Rockwood as a way of challenging the medicalization and institutionalization of these women and, more generally speaking, challenging the authority of the settler-state.

A primary characteristic of a settler colonial listening is not simply a kind of non-listening, but a severe desire to impose one's understanding of reality upon another. For many racialized and sexualized inmates, this violent imposition of a way of life operates in addition to the racial and sexual violence experienced from doctors, police, and legal staff. What characterizes this settler colonial violence, however, is the central issue of land. Inmates were often incarcerated based on a diagnosis of mental illness or "goaded into insanity while in prison" because

20. Schmidt (2017): 2.

21. Schmidt (2017): 15.

they challenged land ownership practices or made life difficult for landowners or those working the land.²² This idea of making life difficult for settler landowners covered a range of instances, including becoming pregnant, suffering an injury, suspecting a husband of infidelity, having epilepsy, and showing “signs of melancholia.”²³ The men who had these women committed ignored the fact that many of the “illnesses” were the result of or further strained by the migration process and settler lifestyle in the mid- to late-1800s.

The song “Hair of the Dead” conveys the realities of women forced to immigrate to Turtle Island against their will. The story of the woman from this song involves coming to Turtle Island from Ireland under false pretenses, dealing with the pressures and disasters of domestic life in a new colony, living with an unsupportive and unfaithful husband, and being admitted to Rockwood by way of a transfer from the Toronto Asylum. The song feels more subdued than others on the album, but the picking of the acoustic guitar underneath the lyrics invokes the presence of an underlying turmoil boiling in the mind of someone pushed to their limits. The guitar picking weaves through the sounds of Cris Derksen’s cello, which groans slowly, seemingly conveying the aches and pains that the body begins to experience as the mind grows weary from the internal chaos. In this instance, the internal chaos of the song’s subject is intensified, expressing the external pressures placed on women shipped over as wives and workers in the 1840s and a “grief for all things lost to the ravages of migration.”²⁴ Fiver sings quickly at points, and their voice works with a frequent vibrato to express the force of the dream unfolding through the song. Yet the listener gets a sense that the vibrato of Fiver’s performance is also conveying the instability of the realities converging in this dream—that of the Rockwood medical superintendent’s words and the utter instability of settler colonial life for all but the land-owning elite.

Historical and contemporary institutions that claim authority over ways of understanding the world and people—particularly people racialized, sexualized, and classed according to structures of settler colonialism—are on trial in these songs. As arms of the settler state, superintendents of medical and other settler colonial institutions disregard the realities of people who unsettle and challenge settler life; a life established on Turtle Island through force and violence. Challenging settler life can simply involve showing disinterest in the life offered, actively desiring a different life, or, most commonly, disrupting the life of the landowners and those working the land. The violence against women who unsettled settler life took physical, psychological, and emotional forms. Refusing to listen to—and take seriously—the concerns and realities of citizens is a significant form of violence used in the establishment, maintenance, and development of a settler colonial system. Though it may seem like a specific moment to highlight, Schmidt’s making audible this woman’s story exemplifies the disregard and psychological and emotional violence that work together to privilege land-owning settlers in a settler colonial system. The unfolding of this moment throughout the songs and notes expresses a larger distrust or lack of desire for the system

22. *Ibid.*, 5.

23. Schmidt (2017): 12

24. *Ibid.*, 15.

itself. This includes but also reaches beyond a distrust of the persons who operate as gatekeepers of the system.²⁵

In this vein, the songs become performances of a turn to build, from the rubble of the deviance and disasters of settler colonialism, the foundations of settler identities that might be afforded the opportunity to participate meaningfully in new worlds created by the people and cultures systemically attacked by the structures and agents of settler colonialism. Many characters—composed of and inspired by real people (including Carver and Fiver)—are involved in the unfolding of “deviant” realities as a way of reintroducing them into history. The very designation of “deviance” is being recast upon those who once claimed—and continue to claim—authority over its scope. This works as an unsettling of those voices that seem convinced of their infallibility.

iii) Fiver: The Songwriter and Musician (Listening as Reimagining)

Schmidt’s challenging of the authority of the settler state through the album involves a complex move much like their appeal to the sounds of traditional North American folk and country music. Schmidt questions the settler state and the authorities, while recognizing that their performance is ultimately based on documents and interpretations that come *from* these authorities. Schmidt constantly turns inward as they think through larger socio-economic structures. This complex moment of emotional labor involves Schmidt leaving room to question their own authority over the narratives of the women reimagined in the songs. Indeed, the final moments and history of listening that comes together through the performance of this album is that of Schmidt’s experiences of listening to the archives and to traditional North American folk and country music. By experiences, I do not mean that there is necessarily a personal or confessional element to be unearthed in Schmidt’s performance as a kind of pseudo-critique. Rather, I think the self-reflexive element that Schmidt brings to the performance is significant and worth thinking through.

I have characterized Schmidt’s reimaginings as the results of listening—or even as a kind of listening itself—to the case files of the Rockwood Asylum and, more specifically, the lives of the women buried in these files. Despite the distance between Schmidt and these women, Schmidt takes time to find a way to listen to them instead of perpetuating a diagnosis and disregard for colonial practice. There is a moment in the articulation of this listening, however, when Carver notes their approach to working through the noise. After noting the “blatant paternalism amplified” within the archives, they write: “To hear what it drowns out, however, requires another kind of listening altogether. The collector approaches the archive, then, with some skepticism about the key, an all and all identification of a new frequency, and a retuning of the ear under and around that wall. One will find that sometimes omission sings louder than words.”²⁶ Their skepticism here marks another moment where they express distrust and distaste toward the writers of this key. “Omissions sing louder than words” conveys a sense that Schmidt hears more coming through the absences in these files than they do the words documented. There is much to hear in the files—that of “deep paternalism, sexism,

25. Among this list of gatekeepers, one must also include academics, who, I think, Schmidt is very much thinking about in the writing of the liner notes.

26. Schmidt (2017): 2.

racism, and disablism”—but Schmidt hears what they ultimately felt encouraged to listen to—the written-over memories of the women at Rockwood.²⁷ Fiver’s songs are much louder for contemporary ears than the words in the archives. These files, preserved, archived, and partially available for public engagement, essentially remain removed from the public and a public exchange of ideas. On the other hand, Schmidt’s reimaginings have entered this exchange and play out to contemporary ears. The release of the album brings the case files back into the public exchange, but they have been reinserted under new conditions and on Schmidt’s critical and unsettling terms.

I also read into this moment in Carver’s notes a more general self-reflexive analysis about the approach to the project. The skepticism expressed about the key and the wall of noise in the archives is a moment of acknowledgment that these reimaginings stem from this very wall, despite greater wishes to start from another point. Further, Schmidt is aware that their “retuning of the ear” to the neglect of these women should not come with an assertion about the authority of their own reimaginings regarding the accounts or lives of these women. These songs and notes are not definitive characterizations of the women. These women’s lives and experiences cannot be fully represented because the only information about their lives at Rockwood is contained in the writings of men. Still, Schmidt knows that these songs must be sung despite this. Listeners must confront these histories, helping to release them from the archives.²⁸

Schmidt’s self-reflexivity is subtle and complex, and important to work through. Their expressions of skepticism and the need for “retuning” contain three distinct elements: (1) a distaste for the reality exhibited by the archives—that they are the memories of men and power; (2) an awareness of the reality that though the reimaginings performed go beyond and challenge these unstable sources, they do come to listeners as part of an exchange with them; and (3), an acknowledgment of their position as a distantly removed “non-historian non-academic” researcher engaged with the realities of these women. That is, Schmidt recognizes that there cannot be an authoritative voice in the reconstruction or reimagination of the lives of these women. Yet, there is a necessity, urgency, and power in Schmidt’s performances of these reimaginings despite the obstacles they acknowledge.

I highlight these complex moments because I read and hear them as part of a process of writing and performance (a “recreation of experience”²⁹) that leaves room to question the assumptions from which one is working. Schmidt’s reimaginings begin from—and return to—this self-reflexive point to break through the various assumptions carried forth through the engagements with traditional North American folk and country music, settler colonial psychiatric and medical histories, and larger structures of settler colonialism. Schmidt is

27. Ibid.

28. There is an awkwardness to the archival reality that I do recognize here. On one hand, these women’s files were only maintained and available to Schmidt because of their being archived. Yet, the terms and reality of the process of being and maintaining their lives at Rockwood as archived documents is another reflection of—and subjection to—the authority of the settler state.

29. Fred L. Standley and Louis Pratt, eds., *Conversations with James Baldwin*. (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1989): 155. See also Ed Pavlić, *Who can Afford to Improvise? James Baldwin and Black Music, the Lyric and the Listeners*. (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2016): 133–34.

aware of the connotations carried forth by elements like the sounds of traditional North American folk and country music and psychiatric history. A historical lens allows settler listeners and readers to understand contemporary practices as rooted in narratives from and about settler colonial life during the 1800s. Schmidt feels a responsibility to deal with these histories. They complicate the historicizing processes that allow listeners and readers to distance themselves from what they see as sounds or practices from another time. Schmidt unsettles these kinds of readings by revealing the presence of settler colonialism in these institutional histories and contemporary processes. The sounds support the scenes that unfold, but they also allude to realities that Schmidt engages as a fan and as a performer who writes “new life into and around” these realities. This “new life” comes by way of their “retuning” and returning to their own assumptions and the assumptions carried forth through the histories they engage with.

Leaving this space to reveal and question the inherent assumptions is significant because it allows for a rebuilding of a sense of self from this new point. This is what the “new life” becomes: new understandings of what it means to be settlers in worlds that unsettle and deviate from the structures and ideas of settler colonialism. This album brings forth and unsettles ongoing settler identities as represented by the sense of power and authority over the psychological, emotional, and physical realities of the women at Rockwood. Schmidt navigates a personal unsettling through these performances without engaging in an overtly or deeply confessional process. This encourages the listener to look for the structural realities that Schmidt illuminates, and it challenges listeners who might ignore or attempt to silence Schmidt’s performance—an attempt that ultimately perpetuates the same violence addressed through the album. These performances of emotional and psychic realities reach for a larger collective socio-political unsettling by way of an individual’s confrontation with and rethinking of the assumptions of settler colonialism. Ultimately, creating space for collective unsettling encourages a rebuilding of settler identities. Schmidt performs with great collective and self-awareness and engages a responsibility to retune and return to questions about the assumptions supporting settler colonial identities. This allows settlers to find new ways to participate in new worlds opened by the various decolonial and unsettling processes unfolding on Turtle Island.

CONCLUSION

This article could only be written in conversation with the album (sitting beside a turntable or listening to the digital version) and the liner notes. Every time I sat down to write about this record, I had to surrender myself to the worlds opened and imagined by Schmidt. Unpacking the ongoing history of settler colonial listening and institutional abuses required that I listen repeatedly and with care. This repetition and care are required because this album pulls at the comfort and encourages listeners to consider responsibilities they might have as they listen to it. In other words, the listener is encouraged to think about whether the solitary moments experienced listening to records have a greater meaning or reveal something more about ourselves and our socio-political realities. In this case, this album encourages listeners to re-think what it means to listen to marginalized people in the context of settler colonial systems of power and to consider realities that challenge these

systems. This requires settler listeners to listen to the voices of Indigenous and African American peoples, and people categorized—institutionalized, racialized, sexualized, classed—and ignored or silenced.

For Schmidt, working through a kind of writing and performance that includes questioning both their assumptions and authority as well the assumptions of the musical and research traditions they work through, is part of an ongoing commitment to navigating a personal process of unsettling that exists within a collective process. This kind of writing encourages and opens space for others to do the same. Further, it is an aesthetic process that promotes a psychic and material re-structuring—a restructuring that enables and requires the rebuilding of settler identities and ways of being. The intricacies of this rebuilding process will ultimately be very complex, but they need to be worked out. A sense of settler identities as the authoritative voices, bodies, and minds is a key pillar of settler colonialism, one that allows settlers as a collective to continue to neglect, abuse, and silence people and ways of being that challenge settler colonial ways of life. Schmidt reconnects settlers to this history despite attempts to distance contemporary realities from what is often categorized as “a sad chapter in our history.”³⁰ At the same time, Schmidt begins clearing a path for what could become a process of rebuilding settler identities. This process is not an erasure of settler colonial history, nor an Indigenization of settler colonialism. It is a process of learning to participate in worlds that unsettle settler colonial systems but do not forget the weight of these systems. It is not a forgetting, but perhaps something more like Schmidt’s “retuning” that reaches “under and around [the] wall” that are the settler identities of settler colonialism.³¹ Schmidt’s music and writings help with this retuning. Listening to these songs can be the necessary initial moments that open listeners to an aesthetic, psychic, and material unsettling. It is not enough, however, to just listen to music that unsettles the listener and settler identities. There must be movement and concrete action in addition to this. These moments of listening, however, are important experiences in what can become a larger collective process of emotional, psychological, material, political, and socio-economic unsettling. ■

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