

Mobile Secrets: Youth, Intimacy, and the Politics of Pretense in Mozambique.

Julie Soleil Archambault. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. 224 pp.

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Mobile Secrets charts how the residents of Liberdade, an informal suburb of the Mozambican provincial city of Inhambane, use mobile phones to manage their relationships and pursue their aspirations amid the challenges posed by a postwar, postsocialist economy. As Julie Soleil Archambault demonstrates in her vivid and engaging account of the daily lives of the suburb's residents, to live (*viver*) rather than simply survive (*sobreviver*), people need to develop, as they put it, vision (*visão*). Her book reveals how the enthusiastic uptake of mobile phone communication mediates and transforms the tensions of what may be said, seen, and known versus what must be left unsaid, unseen, and unknown.

Mobile phones are sometimes portrayed not only as a sign of progress but as a vehicle for economic development. Better information, in such a view, leads to better choices, empowering citizens and consumers and promoting socioeconomic development. Archambault reviews these claims and assumptions and offers a nuanced critique of the wishful thinking that permeates much of this literature, arguing that mobile phone communication does indeed have transformative potential, yet not necessarily in the way its proponents suggest. For example, students reported coordinating group assignments and contacting their teachers via their phones, but most admitted that the latter contacts often included offers of (or the coercion to offer) sexual favors in exchange for better grades. Rather than unlocking market potential by giving them better access to information, cell phones allow young adult Mozambicans to craft

fulfilling lives by careful maintenance of opacity and management of the circulation of information.

To see the context where such lives are lived, the first two chapters, “The Communication Landscape” and “Display and Disguise,” give the reader a sense of the profound reorientations that Mozambican society has gone through in the transition from war to peace and from socialist single-party rule to market capitalist democracy. In their attention to detail—the food and drink consumed, the shifting kinship relations, the importance of appearances in a small and close-knit neighborhood—the two chapters provide the context of daily life in Liberdade, almost echoing classical village ethnographies, and introduce readers to the diverse cast of characters that they will accompany through the book. Over the next four chapters, Archambault develops her argument of the politics of pretense, showing how mobile phone communication mitigates tensions and dissonances between opacity and transparency and between “truth” and falsehood, not by resolving their underlying causes but rather by covering them up.

In the first of these chapters, “Crime and Carelessness,” Archambault follows her informants through the drinking spots of Liberdade, tracking the circulation of handsets as quasi-currency that helps to a certain extent level the growing disparities of the postwar economic landscape. The focus is not so much on the material value of the handsets as it is on the cycles of fortune and misfortune that her informants experience, which are evaluated as resulting from *visão* or, conversely, *desleixo* (carelessness). Next, “Love and Deceit” looks at the management of intimate relationships from courtship to suspicions of infidelity. In often exhilarating vignettes, Archambault reveals the ambivalence of the mobile phone, which can conceal some things at the same time as it reveals others, and which opens new spaces where couples can negotiate their relationships and debate intimacy and gender relations more generally. Suspicions of

infidelity may arise or be substantiated depending on the time of night when a message is sent, or if one's partner's phone is turned off when called, and the caller's communication patterns may also come under scrutiny. Conversely, clearing phone logs and message in-boxes regularly becomes an essential tool for mastering mobile phone communication or navigating different relationships in parallel—even if this means having to delete “beautiful messages”. For all its focus on transgression, though, Archambault's discussion turns exclusively around heterosexual and heteronormative amorous relationships. This most likely reflects social realities in a provincial town like Inhambane, but it would have been interesting to enter into a conversation about forms of love and sexuality scripted as more deviant (or clarify why these debates are less relevant in the context of this study).

“Sex and Money” and “Truth and Willful Blindness” delve deeper into the intimate economy of the youth of Liberdade, as well as the management of the epistemological uncertainty required to maintain the pretense of authenticity and respectability in relationships. Archambault decodes the rules that govern sending and replying to *bips*, free missed calls and text messages asking for a callback, demonstrating how gender and socioeconomic relations are shifting and being contested. Phone etiquette thus constitutes a new register for the “negotiation of normativity” (118), through which gender relations and ideas of masculinity and femininity can be reworked and economic resources can be channeled and redistributed. The mobile phone then also enables, albeit imperfectly, discretion and concealment, allowing people to choose not to know certain things about their partners and relatives. This, Archambault argues, is both conservative and transformative, simultaneously contributing to upholding and subverting patriarchal authority over young women's sexuality.

Archambault's focus throughout the book on the sociality and management of relationships required to develop a vision for one's life is a welcome extension of debates

on the informal economy that are often more concerned with the material aspects of subsistence and survival in Africa. As she writes, “If this book achieves only one thing, I hope it gives a sense of what it might feel like to be a young person growing up in Mozambique today” (159). Beautifully written, thought-provoking, and evocative, *Mobile Secrets* achieves that and more, making it essential reading for anyone interested in debates about youth and economic activity in Africa, intimate relationships, and regimes of truth.