

UC Riverside

UC Riverside Previously Published Works

Title

An Ethnomusicology of Hope in a Time of Trauma

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/28s4v216>

Author

Wong, DA

Publication Date

2023-12-10

Peer reviewed

AN ETHNOMUSICOLOGY OF HOPE IN A TIME OF TRAUMA

DEBORAH WONG

Introduction

In this essay, I explore shared sensibilities between politically progressive activists and researchers who do ethnographic research (e.g., folklorists and ethnomusicologists). Some ethnomusicologists self-identify as activists but most don't, yet I have come to think our research is pre-disposed for advocacy if we care to take it there. My ideas are deeply informed by the critical pedagogy movement, a lively area founded by theorist and teacher Paulo Freire. I will make my argument through several case studies, including a recent position statement issued by the Society for Ethnomusicology addressing music and torture and my own research on Japanese American drumming (*taiko*).

I aim to connect two observations: (1) we live in a time of trauma, and (2) a generalised, often unspoken commitment to social justice marks most work in ethnomusicology. Let me try to put these matters together; I will use language and rhetoric in an unabashedly idealised way to try to move us, as ethnographers, into a more explicit relationship with our own inclinations. I am not trying to say that all ethnomusicologists must share the same profile, nor am I presenting a manifesto. Rather, I hope to sharpen up and articulate certain trends that are already out there. I have no desire to force-fit all ethnomusicologists onto the same bandwagon, but ethnomusicologists are often too content just to “hang out” on the front porch (or in the nightclub) and to leave it at that. I think we could take it further. My purpose is to move us into a different framework.

In context

North American cultures of commemoration are pervasive. There is so much trauma and so many efforts to commemorate it even as we commence new horrors. Last week at the time of this writing, network television in the U.S. was full of anniversary documentaries about the

death of Princess Diana and very little, really, about the Iraq war. Last week I woke up in a hotel in New York City on September 11, 2007 and the names of the dead were already being read in a commemorative ritual broadcast live on TV; by 11 am, they were only up to the Ms. We commemorate the deaths of celebrities, the holocausts of here, there, and then, and everyday deaths in traffic accidents. As folklorist Holly Everett puts it, commemorative roadside crosses are part of a cultural landscape of liminal space that are deeply polysemic and “commemorate the unthinkable” while “crossing religious, cultural, and class lines” (2002, 118-19).

In Riverside, California where I live, a curb-side altar commemorated the death of Joseph Hill, a young African American man killed by police officers in 2006 during a routine traffic stop. The informality, ephemerality, and recognisability of this altar was a troubling indication of both its function and its quotidian recognition of how violence is everywhere and nowhere. Several weeks later, the altar was gone and at the time of writing, two years later, the case has yet to be addressed by the local police review commission.

Consider the CNN-produced Larry King special focused on Firehouse 54-4, the station in New York City that lost fifteen men on 9-11. This documentary exemplifies mediatised commemoration. The presentation, framing, and performance of commemoration relies on deeply-established and deeply commercialised tropes of national pride, sacrifice, and militarised hero-making. Indeed, almost all quotidian memorialising is presented through these formulas—through practices deployed by real people, and the media representation of those practices. Firehouse 54-4: A Larry King Special is marked by strong genre conventions: a relentlessly hushed tone, a dramaturgical emphasis on personal connections to the men, a hagiographic attention to the representation of personal items, a music score of long sustained pitches over a drone that creates a sense of timelessness and suspension. We are given access to the most intimate details of grief: the stepmother’s tears, the family members’ notes on the firehouse bulletin board.

People in every era believe that their horrors and injustices are the most notable. Perhaps we’re always living in Kali Yuga, the final era in the Hindu Buddhist universe that always ends in fire, destruction, and the inevitability of starting over again. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we’ve made commemoration into a banal gesture, at once pervasive, channelled through mediatised kitsch, and sharpened through a dull language of victimhood.

There are ribbons for everything. SupportStore.com offers car magnet ribbons for victims of AIDS, breast cancer, prostate cancer, colon cancer, skin cancer, autism, and Alzheimers plus ribbon magnets supporting gay pride, POW-MIAs, many variations on “support our troops,” and much, much more. Commemoration, protest, and indiscriminate support have become interchangeable.

Choosing to remember injustices thus requires new kinds of determination these days. How can I research Asian American responses to injustice when there are just too many injustices to remember? How can one presume to hope in a time when militarised horror has a kind of hackneyed presence in our lives? How can one indulge in music scholarship when there are so many wrongs competing for attention and when so much of our energy is necessarily focused on blocking some of it out? The links between difference, military expansionism, and colonialism are acted out over and over again with exhausting repetitiveness. Trauma is so widespread, both so near and so pervasive, that rendering it banal is perhaps a necessary self-defense.

Hope

Scholars who work on difference and social justice move continuously between anger and hope. Many such scholars are in Ethnic Studies and Women’s Studies, but others are in every possible corner of the humanities and social sciences. Anger and hope have a dynamic relationship for scholars and activists. The field of education is ideologically based on hope, centred on the belief that anyone is capable of learning and that learning is transformative. When such hope is explicitly focused on social transformation, education is recast as critical pedagogy. Since the 1960s, certain channels of scholarship have focused on social transformation as well: Women’s Studies, Ethnic Studies, feminist theory, critical race theory, some strains of queer theory, etc. Having the ability to imagine a different way of being-in-the-world—a better way—is at the heart of these areas. All have a structural relationship with hope that is informed by anger and deep engagement with injustice and inequities.

Progressive politics are by definition a politics of hope because they envision a future defined by the democratic principles of participation, access, equity, and tolerance. Progressive hope is focused not only on the need for social transformation but the ability to strategise about how to get there. Such hope is neither generalised nor vague: it is usually focused on the very do-ability of specific changes that could yield real effects. The

politics of the personal are part of this understanding—that is, progressives usually understand the interconnectedness of any society’s structures and populations, and thus understand how even small changes can have significant effects.

I have written elsewhere about critical pedagogy and its promise for ethnomusicology (Wong 1999, 2006), but let me quickly outline this area. The critical pedagogy movement was formulated in the 1960s by the Brazilian educator and theorist Paulo Freire. Working on adult literacy in a postcolonial Third World context, Freire argued that teaching and education needed to be reimagined. His classic book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) outlined the principles of critical pedagogy. Rather than “give” knowledge to those regarded as being without it and thus reenact colonial models of power and authority, Freire argued that teachers and students should share the responsibility for, and the power of, generating the terms of knowledge, and should teach one another how to learn. The sites for knowledge production might be classrooms but are potentially anywhere that social encounters take place. Knowledge is the means for social transformation, for reconfiguring the class formations that define a given society, and for generating radically new terms for class and authority. Knowledge and knowledge production are thus always situated and always about more than themselves; knowledge is neither abstract nor generalised. Critical pedagogy is the means for questioning social formations and generating new ones, and strategies for social justice are thus at the heart of teaching and learning.

Hope has appeared repeatedly in the titles of the books written by the many scholars influenced by Freire, including Henry Giroux (1997), Peter McLaren (2006), and bell hooks (2003). Their often angry and always passionate writing is imbued with both vision and anticipation. Freire himself was a consistently optimistic theorist of social transformation. Never stepping back from the brutal inequities at the heart of the postcolonial condition, he modelled vision and strategy, warned that his ideas should never be hardened into simple methodologies, and explicitly addressed the necessity of hope. In his book *Pedagogy of Hope* (Freire 1994), he reflected at length on the process of writing his first book and putting its ideas into action. In his introduction, he wrote, “Hope is an ontological need. Hopelessness is but hope that has lost its bearings, and become a distortion of that ontological need” (1994, 8). Yet he did not romanticise hope—indeed, he was adamant that hope and praxis must be interconstitutive. He wrote (Freire 1994, 8-9):

I am hopeful, not out of mere stubbornness, but out of an existential, concrete imperative. [...] The idea that hope alone will transform the world,

and action undertaken in that kind of naïveté, is an excellent route to hopelessness, pessimism, and fatalism. But the attempt to do without hope, in the struggle to improve the world, as if that struggle could be reduced to calculated acts alone, or a purely scientific approach, is a frivolous illusion. To attempt to do without hope, which is based on the need for truth as an ethical quality of the struggle, is tantamount to denying that struggle one of its mainstays. The essential thing [...] is this: hope, as an ontological need, demands an anchoring in practice. As an ontological need, hope needs practice in order to become historical concreteness. That is why there is no hope in sheer hopefulness. The hoped-for is not attained by dint of raw hoping. Just to hope is to hope in vain.

In short, hope must be grounded in a politics of motion and a commitment to action. The heart of his model is the encounter between cultural workers and its generative power. This is the foundation for the politics of hope.

bell hooks draws Freire's ideas into the critical pedagogy of race and gender, creating useful links between feminist theory, critical race studies, and critical pedagogy. Much of her writing reflects on the process of teaching and its role in social justice work. Looking deeply into the interrelationships between race and gender inequities in the U.S., she has consistently identified the pedagogical encounter as a nexus for social change. She describes that meeting ground as a site where possible futures are drafted, and she argues that it is, at its best, imbued with hope (hooks 2003, xiv):

Hopefulness empowers us to continue our work for justice even as her forces of injustice may gain greater power for a time. [...] My hope emerges from those places of struggle where I witness individuals positively transforming their lives and the world around them. Educating is always a vocation rooted in hopefulness.

Critical pedagogy is imbued with hope even when it is suffused with anger. Just as daily engagement with performative material teaches the ethnographer to live in a constant state of becoming, ethnomusicology involves giving oneself over to a constant state of listening that pre-empts the desire to claim authority. Conservatives are scarce in higher education for real reasons, and ethnomusicologists are often politically progressive for those same reasons: the inclination to think restlessly and critically results in a worldview focused on change and dissent. Further, ethnomusicologists work closely with people at the level of lives lived, focused on the messy politics of everyday experience. They are willing to engage deeply and repeatedly with subjectivities not their own. The utopian effort to listen well, to really hear that other subjectivity, is at the

heart of ethnomusicology. This attempt has an almost Buddhist intention to get beyond yourself, to get over yourself. As Freire wrote (1996, 9), “One of the tasks of the progressive educator, through a serious, correct political analysis, is to unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be.” My argument is that ethnographers often witness, identify, and dwell on such opportunities in the course of their work, and this is no coincidence: ethnographers are predisposed to it. Ethnography carries a certain moral imperative that ethnomusicologists are often unwilling to draw forward or even to articulate. We lapse into silence on these matters because we are too busy listening.

Outtake: dancing

I am Chinese American but for the past ten years, July has become the month when I nearly become Japanese American. July is the highlight of my year as a taiko player. It’s Obon in the Japanese American community, and Japanese Buddhist temples all over Southern California hold the festival and its rituals every weekend, with different temples taking turns for about six weeks. I go from temple to temple, hitting at least three or four festivals every July, going from Orange County to Gardena to the four temples in Little Tokyo in downtown Los Angeles. It’s all about spam musubi, dango, teriyaki, and udon. It’s about bingo. It’s about taiko. It’s about running into people I know, mostly taiko players. It’s about dancing.

Obon is a Japanese Buddhist calendrical ritual to honor ancestors. Its Japanese American realisation includes lots of fundraising, food, and family fun. Its heart is a long set of community dances known as *bon-odori*, done in huge circles of people moving in a counter-clockwise direction. Participation is valued over skill. This is community-based performance at its best. We dance in parking lots and in streets closed to traffic, following white lines chalked on the asphalt. Some, especially older women, spend weeks every year rehearsing and getting ready for the event. Others just show up and wing it. People don’t dance only at their own temple: they go around to other Obon festivals to support their friends and relatives. Often there are hundreds of people dancing together in concentric circles so everyone can fit. Some of the dances are traditional and others were choreographed in the last twenty years. All are danced in unison, everyone doing the same thing together. All use the same vocabulary of gestures, a basic set of moves, which are endlessly rearranged into different dances.

You should participate. It’s fine to watch, but you should participate. It doesn’t matter if you don’t really know what you’re doing: you follow the

people around you. It's fun and it's profound. None of the dances are complicated, though finding your way into the nuances is the real art of it: that curve of the hand, that way of moving from the knees. Perhaps you've gotten the sequence of moves by the third round, and now you can stop thinking about yourself and just expand into that sense of being part of a body bigger than yourself. It's the best feeling in the world.

I look at my own video footage of the crowd dancing at the Obon festival in Pasadena in July 2005. The details absorb me: the older women moving so gracefully and confidently, the young people in their shorts and running shoes, the young parents with their babies watching from the sidelines, one tall African American man moving a little stiffly but with experience. I have a moment of disappointment in which I think, everyone's backs are to the camera!, but then I am reminded all over again that the dancers aren't performing for the spectators, or for my camera: they're directed inwardly, toward the tower, the *yagura* in the middle and the two young taiko players in it. My eyes move out over the entire scene and I see the mass of dancers as a single body moving with a slow certainty.

These dances summarise west coast Japanese American community-building. They enact a multigenerational pedagogy, usually unstated but unequivocally present, that teaches post-internment survival. The dances are both old and new; they perform memory even when choreographed anew; they bring people together by gently removing the ego and making you part of a bigger whole; they create a body politic over and over again.

Music and torture, American style

When you get a lot of ethnomusicologists together—say, at the annual meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM)—it's like herding cats. Ethnomusicologists can make anything into a complicated morass of issues upon issues. But we can also step forward in extraordinarily principled ways; when we do so, it is often with marked humility. Ethnomusicologists are the Minnesotans of the humanities, or perhaps I should say the Canadians—we tend to be practical, with our feet on the ground, and to humbly assume that the main show is underway on some other stage (e.g., English or anthropology departments). Still, we know that our work goes right to the heart of some of the most important and deep-seated social processes.

Not all ethnomusicologists are SEM members, and SEM doesn't represent all ethnomusicologists. Ethnomusicologists gather together through other bodies, including International Council for Traditional

Music (ICTM), the British Forum for Ethnomusicology, the Korean Musicological Society, the Sociedad de Etnomusicología, and the Canadian Society for Traditional Music. At certain levels, though, SEM and ICTM each claim all-encompassing, international memberships. On the SEM website, past President Philip Bohlman wrote,

Since its beginning a half-century ago, the SEM has comprised an international membership, whose disciplines stretch across geographical and professional boundaries, and who have benefited from the diverse approaches and activities they bring to their experiences with music (2005).

The ICTM, through the imprimatur of the United Nations, is explicitly international in its membership. Its website offers this definition: “The ICTM is an NGO (non-governmental organisation) in formal consultative relations with UNESCO” (International Council for Traditional Music 2009). Ethnomusicologists thus have access to various national and regional circles as well as several extra-regional if not international bodies. This is as it should be. More is more. Centralisation is only as useful as it needs to be.

But SEM actually has a troubled relationship with its international identity. The vast majority of our annual meetings are held in the U.S. and our chapters are all in the U.S. as well. A membership survey done in 2002 revealed that approximately 73.6% of its membership lived in the U.S. Non-American members have told me privately that the annual meetings often seem aggressively focused on American graduate students searching for American academic positions. Yet many (American) SEM members are passionately committed to the international character of SEM. A proposal to rename it “The American Society for Ethnomusicology,” informally put forward by then-President Tim Rice in 2004, met with instant, fervent opposition from both American and non-American members for a host of reasons. The 2007 ballot for SEM officers contained a remarkable number of non-American candidates, presumably because the nominating committee made a point to look beyond the American membership. In short, ethnomusicologists are generally a well-meaning, hopeful group of people who by definition want to reach across borders and boundaries. For some of us, our research puts us into motion in those ways, and we want to create organisational bodies that re-enact those movements. Our intentions are sound.

But SEM also has a long history of denying the many ways that it is profoundly and blindly American. Non-American members sometimes see American ethnomusicologists as overly-focused on cultural theory, and are all too aware of how this plays out when the SEM program committee

makes decisions about paper acceptances for the annual conference. What's considered good or cutting-edge work is deeply shaped by intellectual agendas that are local, regional, and national. In itself, this isn't a problem—it's a reality, the after-effect of scholars linked through powerful networks of doctoral programs and editorial boards. But it becomes a problem when it we don't acknowledge the regional or national base of the matter, i.e., when we universalise such agendas as "good work" that becomes defining criteria. It matters who's doing the universalising: it's a short step from intellectual hegemony to the socioeconomic/military complex of an imperial U.S. that has very real effects. I envision an SEM that faces up to its Americanness as an anti-imperial gesture. Rather than camouflaging this American society as an all-encompassing international body, what if we try to model a different kind of American presence, a kind of critical humanism that reaches out while interrogating its own provincial character?

In fact, SEM has been moving in this direction for some time. In 2005, the Board instituted the practice of Position Statements, something already done by the American Folklore Society, the American Anthropological Association, and many other scholarly organisations. It was a cautious but dramatic step toward acknowledging the political nature of our work, and it was precisely this that made some members uneasy. Stepping away from an apolitical approach to research could open a Pandora's box of disagreement. We have only made two position statements to date, one on music and fair use and the other on music and torture.

The request for a position statement on torture came from the SEM Committee on Ethics. In Fall 2006, musicologist Suzanne Cusick gave a tight, damning paper at the annual meeting of the American Musicological Society on the U.S. military's use of music as a means of torture and interrogation in the Middle East. Cusick drew her material entirely from media accounts and pieced together a pathological history of how U.S. intelligence has used sound to break down prisoners' sense of self and their boundaries (Cusick 2006). During 2006-07, people were talking about her paper. It consolidated things that some ethnomusicologists had noticed but hadn't put together. Ethnomusicologists were viscerally offended by this history of torture because it inverts our praxis of listening: it is literally a nightmarish effort to deafen and to annihilate subjectivity. The SEM position statement is as follows:

On behalf of the Society for Ethnomusicology the SEM Board of Directors approves the Position Statement against the Use of Music as Torture, which originated in the SEM Ethics Committee and has the unanimous support of the Board of Directors.

The Society for Ethnomusicology condemns the use of torture in any form. An international scholarly society founded in 1955, the Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM) and its members are devoted to the research, study, and performance of music in all historical periods and cultural contexts. The SEM is committed to the ethical uses of music to further human understanding and to uphold the highest standards of human rights. The Society is equally committed to drawing critical attention to the abuse of such standards through the unethical uses of music to harm individuals and the societies in which they live. The U.S. government and its military and diplomatic agencies has used music as an instrument of abuse since 2001, particularly through the implementation of programs of torture in both covert and overt detention centers as part of the war on terror.

The Society for Ethnomusicology

- calls for full disclosure of U.S. government-sanctioned and funded programs that design the means of delivering music as torture;
- condemns the use of music as an instrument of torture; and
- demands that the United States government and its agencies cease using music as an instrument of physical and psychological torture (Society of Ethnomusicology 2007).

This statement created a minor media frenzy in February 2007 that lasted for about four days—the proverbial 15 minutes of fame—but it was a new experience for the members of the SEM Board. The internet erupted with jokes about how Barney’s songs were surely instruments of torture and how everything from gangsta rap to Barry Manilow must here forth be banned. Shock jock talk shows had a field day. If we didn’t already know that ethnomusicology was irrelevant, we discovered that we were a standing joke. Yet the position statement actually took SEM in a very important if perhaps unintended direction. It singled out the U.S. military use of music as a weapon of torture and thus went straight to issues that are inextricably American. The position statement was directed toward the U.S. government, even though it was more broadly a matter of international human rights. In sum, the position statement crystallised the national character of SEM in a productive manner. It moved us toward an understanding of how our most intimate methodologies make is ideal actors in a critical pedagogy of national response. It allowed us to try on a critical and reflexive anti-nationalism that simultaneously acknowledged our location.

Taiko and the body politic

I turn now to the “work” of taiko, and by that I mean quite deliberately to play with the idea of the “work” as an isolatable musical object and the corporeal, sensual, spiritual, and political work that goes into creating the complex of understandings called taiko. I want to know what does what effects performance has in a world of politicised praxis. Rather than think of taiko “music” as a sound object, I have moved toward a conception of music as body: the movement of music through bodies over time, between bodies (both within and across time), the placement of music within particular bodies and its generation by particular bodies, the linkages created between bodies through sound, and the metaphorical leap from the corporeal, material body to the body politic and the body of the community. Resituating the music-object onto/into bodies has radical implications, and this methodological approach would work for any “piece” or “tradition” of music; it moves the discussion away from an isolated “thing”, wherein much effort must be focused on identifying its shape and its boundaries, and instead towards the connective traces of processes and activities across time and space. It offers both a material and a metaphorical means for regarding the “work” of music, that is, the things that music does. For taiko, the pleasure of such an analysis is doubled because this tradition is explicitly (emically) grounded in a social, philosophical, and political aesthetic of the body.

Taiko is intensely physical, and it represents a corporeal aesthetic system that is both Buddhist in origin and decidedly contemporary in its realisation. Contemporary *kumi-daiko* is explicitly based in certain Buddhist values linking the mind, body, and spirit via the principle of *ki*, energy. *Ki* is the vital energy that can be realised physically but is mental and spiritual as well; it blurs and even collapses distinctions between the physical, spiritual, and mental. The pragmatics of how *ki* is used and actualised in taiko is drawn from the Japanese martial arts. The body is thus always more than the body: it is understood as a corporeal realisation of vital principles that exist beyond the body, but without demoting the body to secondary importance. The importance of *kata*, or “form”, in taiko and the martial arts bespeaks this. Much attention is given to the body by taiko practitioners. Warm-up exercises precede all rehearsals, and the Japanese groups Oedo-Sukeroku and Kôdo are (in)famous for their extreme physical regimens focused on long distance running—e.g., Ondekoza members’ participation in a Boston marathon followed by a full-length concert, and Kôdo members’ habit of running up to ten miles every morning before rehearsal. Preparing the body for taiko in these ways

is actually preparing the mind and spirit for the “work” of taiko. Bodily experience is something that taiko players like to talk about and to theorise. Blisters and aching muscles are an honorable part of the taiko experience, but they speak more deeply to the centrality of the corporeal/spiritual conjuncture in taiko. Some groups bring beginning students into the tradition through physical exercises, introducing them to the drums and “the music” only after weeks or even months of bodily training.

Taiko has been central to Japanese American and Asian American identity work since the 1970s. Taiko posits strength, discipline, organisation, group consciousness, etc.—the very things that define the Asian American movement as a political presence. Further, taiko took off in North America during the decade when universities were creating Ethnic Studies programs and when the Japanese American reparations movement was defined: taiko was part of a new and assertive Asian American sensibility, and it has come to represent not only Sansei confidence but also the vital consciousness that Japanese American and Asian American identity are related—that Japanese American issues, especially the internment, affected all Asian Americans. The pan-ethnic gesture of the “Asian American” is a coalitional grouping, not an erasure of history or difference. Taiko becomes a metaphorical and an actual manifestation of the Japanese American/Asian American body politic, though the extent to which this is acknowledged or deliberately activated varies. Part of its power is the dynamic difference between the “Japanese American” and the “Asian American” as separate but interconstitutive and even overlapping identities. This is central to my own interest in taiko and is manifested in some of the sites where we play.

In April 2003, my taiko group played at the annual pilgrimage to Manzanar in central California, one of the ten Japanese American internment camps. All of the camps were located in remote areas and few have any remaining structures: most are now barren expanses of rock, grass, sand, and tumbleweed punctuated by the foundations of the barracks that housed over 110,000 Japanese Americans from 1942-45. Since the 1970s—that key period when Japanese Americans and Asian Americans got politically organised—former internees have organised annual pilgrimages to these sites that serve the purpose of keeping memory alive and linking past and present civil liberties issues. The pilgrimages always feature music, speeches, religious services at the camp cemeteries, testimony from the now-elderly surviving internees, and more. They are a compelling example of self-consciously created ritual, and they return politicised bodies to temporarily reinhabit the ruins that have been transformed into a commemorative site of trauma.

Satori Daiko was invited to play in the 2003 Manzanar pilgrimage. We spent a long morning in the hot sun and desert wind surrounded by others determined to remember—elderly former internees, young Asian American activists, local schoolchildren—listening to music and speeches, participating in an interdenominational religious service, etc. And we played. We played with the snow-topped Sierra Mountains behind us, the hot desert wind in our faces, and the stirring, sobering presence of Manzanar’s ruins around us.

As an ethnomusicologist, I have been drawn toward musics that construct idealised versions of social reality and cooperative models for ideal human relationships. As an Asian American ethnomusicologist, I think taiko provides a compelling model for a social, cultural, and musical reality that unambiguously emphasises relational experience. Taiko in North America comes to have meaning through a web of associations: First World/Third World patterns of labour migration, the racialisation of material economies, the surveillance of these economies, etc. This aggregative process is the mechanism behind political process: how do individuals draw together into formations? How does an idea become shared? How does a movement become political action? How is the body politic activated?

The psychology of ethnography and activism

Ethnomusicologists are trained to be tolerant, patient, and empathetic. Why are so many ethnomusicologists also politically left of centre? In fact, many scholars who rely on qualitative, humanistic ethnographic methods fall to the left of the political centre, which begs the question of how psychology, politics, and ideology are related. Virginia Dominguez and Ingrid Monson have each pointed toward the ethical base of ethnographic work. Anthropologist Virginia Dominguez has characterised the heart of contemporary anthropological work as a “creative, committed, honest, and unending struggle to be grounded, daring, ethical, consequential, open-minded, and critically constructive” (2007, 405). Ethnomusicologist Ingrid Monson has argued that ethnography is “the only ethical point of departure” for jazz studies given its location in American histories of race (Monson 1996, 6-7). Ethics and politicisation are conjoined for many ethnographers though this is rarely acknowledged. As Dan Sheehy has observed, ethnomusicologists who view themselves as doing “applied” work have “an implacable tendency first to see opportunities for a better life for others through the use of music knowledge, and then immediately begin devising cultural strategies to achieve those ends” (1992, 324).

To try to explain why these predilections are already in place, I will need to reach into an area in which I am strictly an amateur to suggest that scholars drawn to the ethnographic method share a number of characteristics with activists. Let me turn briefly to a subfield of psychology and a circle of researchers who work on activism, moral emotions, and self/other boundaries. Their work suggests that (at least some) ethnographers share a certain psychological profile with political activists.

The psychology of activism addresses how people come to perceive themselves as individuals and how they view their connectedness to the groups or communities to which they are attached. What motivates individuals to act beyond self interest? How is group consciousness generated? How is a political ideology translated into action? Psychologist Lauren Duncan posits a triangulated relationship between personality and life experiences, group consciousness, and collective action (1999, 613). Psychologists define group consciousness as “identification with a group in which an individual recognises the group’s position in a power hierarchy, rejects rationalisations of relative positioning, and embraces a collective solution to group problems” (Duncan 1999, 621).

Life experiences (e.g., discrimination), education, and “cognitive flexibility” are strong correlates for any individual’s proclivity for group consciousness. Erikson’s (1963) concept of psychosocial generativity—the desire to contribute to future generations—is a logical predictor of group consciousness and collective action (Duncan 1999, 630). The extent to which individuals perceive themselves as near or far from others, and the ways that boundary maintenance is constructed or allowed to be flexible, are also predictors for activist inclinations. In psychological terms, “closeness” is a kind of intersubjectivity in which social absorption and social individuation are in dynamic interplay (Ickes et al. 2004). Some individuals are actually averse to the intersubjectivity of closeness whereas others seek it out. Ickes et al. argue that “By applying the close relationship construct of inclusion of others in the self, we suggest that community connectedness can be appropriately conceptualised as the inclusion of community in self” (2004, 258). Some individuals actively seek “self-expansion” in which, “through relationships, we take on the resources, perspectives, and identities of others” (Ickes et al. 2004, 258).

The ethnographer’s pleasure in intersubjectivity, and the ethnomusicologist’s skill at pushing the boundaries of the self/other interface through listening, have real points of contact with the patterns identified by our social science cousins in psychology. Ethnomusicologists are ethnographers who consistently experiment with the very parameters

of closeness and distance—the subjectivities of proximity. We are trained to look for the dynamic traces of how individuals and communities are interconstitutive. We know that community connectedness can be constructed in many ways and that it is the essential condition for music to have performative effect. Our predilection for group consciousness is very, very strong even though we usually work through the modalities of the particular and the individual. The cognitive flexibility that makes it possible to hear new things in new ways puts us in position to act on what we come to know. What we know is an intersubjective new thing that speaks, sings, hums, dances, and whistles as it forecasts possibilities.

Truth claims

One of the recursive truth claims of ethnomusicology is that we often learn directly from other people. Even if our work is historical or archival, we are often focused on experience. Our primary documents tend to be people (as well as other materials), and we inevitably address the practices that connect people to one another, or that sometimes fail to. The priority placed on community-building is shared by the progressive left and ethnographers. This is no coincidence. You could say that both groups are experts in the social failures that create boundaries and in the counter-practices that tie people to one another. This essay has been deliberately allusive rather than tightly structured, and my idealism has been a rhetorical strategy. No doubt I went too far at moments and made oracular pronouncements too carelessly. But of course I was enacting a poetics of hope, and this rhetorical gesture was meant to performatively shift your listening toward something else.

In the next 10 years, I hope to see several things happen. I hope critical pedagogy will become more widely operationalised by ethnomusicologists, both in the classroom and in the field. I hope all ethnomusicologists will involve themselves in applied or public sector ethnomusicology, perhaps better called engaged ethnomusicology. I hope that the distinctions between research, advocacy, and cultural work will become increasingly blurred. I hope that the organisations through which we create community and set intellectual agendas, whether SEM or beyond, will continue to move toward action in a public sphere where there is all too much work to be done.

References

- Bohlman, P. 2005. About ethnomusicology, SEM website. <http://webdb.iu.edu/sem/scripts/aboutus/aboutus.cfm> (accessed on 24 February, 2009).
- Cusick, S. G. 2006. Music as torture/music as weapon. *Revista Transcultural de Música Transcultural Music Review* 10. http://www.sibetrans.com/trans/trans10/cusick_eng.htm (accessed on 19 April, 2008).
- Dominguez, V. R. 2007. Foreword. *American Ethnologist* 34 (3): 405-407.
- Duncan, L. E. 1999. Motivation for collective action: Group consciousness as mediator of personality, life experiences, and Women's Rights activism. *Political Psychology* 20 (3): 611-635.
- Everett, H. 2002. *Roadside crosses in contemporary memorial culture*. Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press.
- Freire, P. 1970. [1993]. *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (New revised 20th anniversary edition). New York, NY: Continuum.
- . 1994. *Pedagogy of hope: Reliving pedagogy of the oppressed* (With notes by A. M. Araújo Freire; trans. R. R. Barr). New York, NY: Continuum.
- Giroux, H. A. 1997. *Pedagogy and the politics of hope: Theory, culture, and schooling*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- hooks, b. 2003. *Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Ickes, W., J. Hutchison, and D. Mashek. 2004. Closeness as intersubjectivity: Social absorption and social individuation." In *Handbook of closeness and intimacy*, ed. D. J. Mashek and A. P. Aron, 357-373. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
- International Council for Traditional Music. 2009. Homepage. <http://www.ictmusic.org/ICTM/> (accessed 24 February, 2009).
- McLaren, P. 2006. *Rage + hope: Interviews with Peter McLaren on war, imperialism, + critical pedagogy*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Monson, I. 1996. *Saying something: Jazz improvisation and interaction*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Sheehy, D. 1992. A few notions about philosophy and strategy in applied ethnomusicology. *Ethnomusicology* 36 (3): 323-336.
- Society for Ethnomusicology. (2007). *Position statement: Music and torture*. http://webdb.iu.edu/sem/scripts/aboutus/aboutsem/positionstatements/position_statement_torture.cfm (accessed 24 February, 2009).

- Wong, D. 1999. Ethnomusicology and critical pedagogy as cultural work. *College Music Symposium* 38: 80-100.
- . 2006. Ethnomusicology and difference. *Ethnomusicology* 50(2): 259-79.