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## **Interdisciplinarity and Musical Exceptionalism**

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Expressive culture provides a rich environment for investigating the power dynamics of culture, not just for ethnomusicologists, but for scholars in many fields. In my own work, I try to demonstrate how performances of music and dance in particular both (1) reify and reinforce a perception of immutable values and, at the same time, (2) provide a context for exploring alternatives and changing values. I think ethnomusicologists are in a unique position to illuminate this seeming contradiction: cultural behaviors simultaneously enact both stability *and* change. To reach scholars in other disciplines with our insights, however, ethnomusicologists must continue to question definitions of “music” and broaden our disciplinary limits to explicitly include a wide range of performances.

My book, *Erotic Triangles* (2010), provides an example. In it, I investigate how the protocols of Sundanese participatory dance events facilitate the acquisition, display, and dispersal of masculine power. I argue that participants in a variety of men’s social dance forms manipulate power to explore, enact, reinforce, and even challenge Sundanese gender ideology through music and dance—in particular, in the ways that dancers both follow *and* lead the drummers who “accompany” them.

In this essay, I reflect first on some of the ideas I adapted from other disciplines to formulate my own analysis, especially my ethnomusicologically-inspired perspective on the relationship between performance and performativity. I then examine how *Erotic Triangles* has been received by readers from other disciplines, as expressed in journal reviews of the book. Finally, I offer some thoughts on what Jayson Beaster-Jones, in his remarks for this roundtable, calls ethnomusicology's "musical exceptionalism" and its effects on interdisciplinarity.

Like many ethnomusicologists, I've drawn inspiration from a host of thinkers from other fields. A key word in this roundtable's title—*power*—pops up frequently in my book;<sup>1</sup> obviously, I build on Java-specific ideas of power, as described by the political scientist Benedict Anderson (1972) and others. I make extensive use of paradigms from structuralist and post-structuralist accounts of semiotics, gender and sexuality, and myth by theorists such as the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1979), the semiotician Roland Barthes (1972), and the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (Grosz 1990).<sup>2</sup> I also incorporate less reductive theoretical approaches from sociology that account for individual agency and change, such as Pierre Bourdieu's ideas of *habitus* (1984, 1990) and William Sewell's thoughtful meditations on the interplay between structure and agency (1992).

What I find fascinating about Sundanese men's dance is the way men perform masculinity in two very different senses: as "performance," by which I

mean acts where individuals self-consciously assume the appearance and behavior that run counter to what they believe to be their true nature, and as "performativity," à la Judith Butler (1990; 193) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1991; Parker and Sedgwick 1995),<sup>3</sup> in which, through unconscious but constant repetition and reinforcement, people come to believe that their acts are motivated by some natural inner core, when in fact it is the acts themselves that create the *illusion* of such a core. Or, as the anthropologist Don Kulick pithily characterizes the difference, "performance is something a subject does. Performativity, on the other hand, is the process through which the subject emerges" (2003:140).

There is much about Sundanese men's dancing that is *performative*, in the Butler-ian sense: the men who dance imagine themselves to be expressing what comes naturally from some *a priori* masculine core, even as they iteratively conjure that natural core for themselves and for men as a group with each movement they make. They don't need to learn or practice dancing, they say, because it is their nature—as men—to dance. At the same time, they have an opportunity to choose their movements—to do *performance* in the theatrical sense—and to experiment with behaviors that are not consistent with their sense of self. If they are successful in convincing others that they are something they are not, they may have effected a momentary or permanent change in their status and power. If they are not successful, they have the plausible deniability afforded by the frame of performance to justify their behavior: "Just kidding!" Here is a case,

then, where the particular protocols and frame of a performing arts tradition clearly both reveal durable structures that govern gender ideology and, at the same time, empower individuals to exercise their own agency to deform, and perhaps eventually alter, those structures.

Exploring how *performance* and *performativity* operate simultaneously—as well as the sometimes indistinct line between them—is one of the places where ethnomusicology has great potential to contribute to a wider understanding of subjectivity, culture, and meaning. There are at least two reasons for this advantage. First is the actual experience of performing that many ethnomusicologists bring to the table. Ethnomusicologists who have tried to make music in the style of the Others that they study may have a unique understanding of what it's like to transition from performance—in the form of awkward, self-conscious attempts to embody a different kind of music-making—to performativity, where those once self-conscious attempts come to feel as if they were instinctively emanating from some stable aesthetic core.<sup>4</sup> As Mark Pedelty puts it, those who engage in musical ethnography go “through a painful process of enculturation,” which is “how both children and ethnographers learn: through trial and error” (2012:8). In other words, ethnomusicologists write first-hand about the fine line between *performance* and *performativity*.

There is another advantage as well. Studying performance (whether as a performer or as an analyst) involves mastering a series of structures—forms,

models, styles, idioms, etc.—that govern or limit performance choices and that performers and audiences alike have internalized as naturalized core aesthetic values. Individual performers and audience members, however, constantly make self-conscious choices—as agents—in relation to those structures, engendering change. In other words, making and consuming expressive culture involves a rather systematic microcosm of what Bourdieu has famously dubbed *habitus*, and understanding both the “structuring structures” as well as the ways they can be “adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends” (Bourdieu 1990:53) is part and parcel of both the doing and receiving ends of performances. As such, they present a sort of microcosm of the ways in which stability and change operate in culture writ large.

My point is that ethnomusicologists have the faculties and the opportunity to observe slippages between *performance* and *performativity* on many levels: between stable cores and active challenges to them, both in “the music itself” and in the social interactions around performing; between, on the one hand, the persistence of old values and aesthetic systems and, on the other, the adoption of new ones; between stability and change. Put another way, we can observe slippages between deep structures that seem to predetermine people's actions, and *habitus*, which describes how people make agentic choices based on a flexible understanding of conventions.

Such are the theoretical approaches I've brought to bear on my own work, and I'm hopeful that my work will arouse cross-disciplinary conversations. One positive sign that such dialogues are emerging is that, of the six reviews I've seen to date, five have been published in journals from fields other than ethnomusicology. Reviewers have found much to criticize; not surprisingly, these criticisms have mostly been along the lines of their own disciplinary interests, but the authors generally recommend the book to their journals' readers.

The cultural anthropologist Kalissa Alexeyeff, reviewing the book in *Ethnos*, for example, would have liked to see more ethnographic description; nevertheless, she thinks the book is of interest to “anthropologists interested in the dynamic nature of cultural production” because of the ways it “maps the formal, sociological and historical components” of the genres under scrutiny (2011:569). Paul H. Mason (an anthropologist who focuses on movement), writing in the Indonesian studies journal *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land- en Volkenkunde*, criticizes the book for its “scant” description of movement, while begrudgingly acknowledging that music provides a good entry-point for analyzing Sundanese performing arts in general (2011:357). Although he wryly comments that my focus on the geometry of erotic triangles will not likely result in my being remembered as the “Pythagoras of cultural theory”—a dig, perhaps, at my reliance on structuralist thought in a field where it has been mostly discredited—ultimately he recommends the book to the journal's multidisciplinary readership

(359). Anthropologists, it would seem, are eager to understand how ethnomusicologists illuminate the larger questions of the production of meaning through our studies of expressive culture. They are tolerant of musical description and analysis provided there is sufficient attention to other dimensions of culture.

In the *Dance Research Journal*, theatre and dance scholar Kathy Foley takes issue both with my male-centric viewpoint and (like Mason) with my focus on musical activities. The ethnomusicologist Sydney Hutchinson, writing in *Worlds of Music*, in contrast, asserts that *Erotic Triangles* provides the most “in-depth description of music-dance relations I have ever read” (2012:155). As a scholar of gender studies, however, Hutchinson echoes Foley in suggesting that more attention to the voices of the central female participants would have been welcome. I acknowledge that additional female voices would have enriched the study, but, in my defense, my own subject position as a male participant in dance events both limited my access to female consultants and colored any conversations with them to a certain extent.

In contrast to Alexeyeff’s approval of the book’s treatment of historical matters, theatre scholar Matthew Isaac Cohen, whose own work takes a profoundly historical bent, laments in *Asian Theatre Journal* that I neglected some of the deeper historical implications of my topic. Nevertheless, he suggests that the book “offers an excellent model for integrating analysis of music and dance” (2012:316). Like the anthropologists who reviewed the book, scholars of



dance, theatre, and gender studies seem willing to bear with my disciplinary emphasis on the sonic aspects of Sundanese men's dancing, as long as they are illuminate other aspects of expressive culture.

In short: even though the non-musicologist critics generally did not find as much of their own familiar disciplinary topics as they might have liked, there was at least enough ethnography, dance, theatre, and history in *Erotic Triangles* to get them reading, and, more significantly, to get them to consider how the sonic dimensions of culture might amplify their own work. If our work fails to inspire scholars in other fields, perhaps it is because we shut them out by insisting on a relatively narrow view of music.

Like many other ethnomusicologists, I ask students to ponder the limits of the category music early on in just about every introductory course I teach. We have all rehearsed the various angles of this question, and I doubt that I am unique in my reluctance to conclude the discussions with an actual definition. In my view, the goal of the exercise is not so much to define music, but rather to make the students aware of just how fluid and amorphous a category it is.

Despite the vagaries of the boundaries of our object of study, however, it is my perception that ethnomusicology as a field tends to perpetuate a sort of *musical exceptionalism* where we regard music to be unique among other forms of expressive culture—a legacy, perhaps, of our roots in an approach to historical musicology and musical analysis that for generations sought to valorize “the

music itself.” Like American exceptionalists—politicians and writers who promote the notion that the U.S. has a unique historical status that exempts it from standards of conduct by which other countries are judged—musical exceptionalists posit music as a unique realm of aesthetic activities that stands on its own, separate from other forms of expressive culture, and which requires a concomitantly unique set of vocabularies and tools to analyze.

Ethnomusicologists, who routinely come face-to-face with aesthetic systems that make disentangling pure music from other threads of expressive culture extremely difficult, should have long ago disabused themselves of vestigial notions that music requires exceptional treatment. Yet such notions persist, both in a jealous guardianship of what counts as fodder for ethnomusicological inquiry and in an insistence on the necessity of jargon and analytical approaches that don’t easily translate to other fields.

One of the anonymous peer reviewers for *Erotic Triangles*, for example, expressed mild apprehension that the book might not fit well into an ethnomusicology series because its emphasis on dance was not, strictly speaking, music. My work was once turned away from an ethnomusicology journal, at least in part, I was told, because its spare attention to specifically musical parameters of style didn’t qualify it as ethnomusicology, no matter how “broadly defined”—even if the questions the work addressed, in my opinion at least, illuminated eminently ethnomusicological concerns.

Based on their reviews of *Erotic Triangles*, it is clear that scholars of anthropology, dance, theatre, and theatre history are concerned with broad questions of expression, meaning, and cultural production. While they are tolerant of, even fascinated with, the exclusively sonic aspects of our work, they are more accustomed to un-exceptional approaches. While I do not advocate that we do away with our focus on sound, or that we dumb down the analytical approaches we take to understanding musical structures and processes, I do recommend that we interrogate any hints of musical exceptionalism our work might convey, and make it clear to our readers how our musical case studies, and the analytical techniques we apply to them, might apply to other fields of inquiry.

I've heard it remarked that ethnomusicology tends to be behind the curve of the theoretical innovations compared to some of our cognate fields (e.g., Rice 1987:471; Hood 2000:372; Wade 2006:197). I have also heard it suggested that ethnomusicologists are eager to adapt the theoretical ideas of scholars from other fields, but that such adaptation is rarely reciprocated (e.g., Rice 1987:483). I do believe that ethnomusicologists have unique insights that might benefit other fields; my real-life exemplar of performance vs. performativity is just one example. I hope that scholars in other fields will find my novel synthesis of established theoretical approaches helpful and that at least a few will find in it a model for their own cross-disciplinary work. And I encourage my fellow

ethnomusicologists to consider how their own theoretical musings might be adaptable to other fields of interest, and to consciously reach out to non-music scholars in their writing to spark interdisciplinary conversations.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> A search in Amazon.com's preview of *Erotic Triangles* results in 81 page hits.

<sup>2</sup> I define "structuralist models" as "theoretical approaches that look for fundamental, fixed patterns of thought and behavior that manifest in the details of beliefs and values" (2010:162).

<sup>3</sup> Their work is, in turn, based on J. L. Austin's theory of speech acts (1975).

<sup>4</sup> Of course, anybody who has acquired any sort of skill has experienced the transition from the execution of self-conscious movements to a more performative competence. In most such situations, however, the neophyte brings a great deal of passive competence to the task, which masks the transition, to a certain extent.

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