Revisting Sensory Methods

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1 Introduction

Since its founding articulations as a distinct field of inquiry, the discipline of ethnomusicology has been delicately positioned between the twin poles of musical performance and anthropology. Indeed, since the publication of Mantle Hood's 1960 essay "the Challenge of Bi-Musicality" and Allan Merriam's equally influential publication, *The Anthropology of Music* in 1964, ethnomusicology as a discipline has maintained a vexed relationship to artistic practice, simultaneously the site of tremendous intellectual and ethnographic effort and the least representational mode of the discipline's academic output. Buoyed in part by a destabilization of the authoritative ethnographic text during "Writing Culture debates" which dominated the anthropology of the late 1980s (see: Zenker 2014), ethnomusicology has asserted the validity of musicking itself as a *constitutive element* in a research process which makes claims on the matrices of social and cultural practice. This desire to explain the "special ontology of musical being," which bound the non-representational qualities of research to long-standing methods in ethnographic practice, formed in parallel to a resurgent interest in "the sensory" as articulated in anthropological discourse, particularly among those anthropologists with previous experience in the arts (Titon 2008, 32; Ingold and Gatt 2013; Pink 2012). In explaining this development Karen Nakamura has distinguished two particular modes of engagement in the turn to what has been called "sensory ethnography": the "aesthetic-sensual" dimension and the "multisensory-experimental" one (2013, 133). Taking a cue from Stephen Slawek (1994), I here contend that ethnomusicological performance and other forms of what I term (after Haraway 1988) "situated art" should placed in the context of this aesthetic-sensual realm of sensory ethnography; further I maintain that these modes of engagement have a unique value in the antagonistic relationship they pose as aesthetic objects to epistemic strictures.

2 Ethnomusicology and Performance Practice

In developing a theory of ethnomusicological performance practice, it is necessary to briefly revisit how such notions are constructed in relation what may be called the formative object of musical study. In "The Scope, Aim, and Method of Musicology," an 1883 document which has come to crystalize the

historical aims of musical study, historian Guido Adler laid out what he saw as basic properties of the discipline, foregrounding in particular an inductive method which would cast music history as a kind of empirical science. Adler's writing on this topic is instructive insofar as it cites the tight interrelation of an art and its "science" as a key by-product of induction:

> To attain his main task, namely, the research of the laws of art of diverse periods and their organic combination and development, the historian of art utilises the same methodology as that of the investigator of nature; that is, by preference the inductive method…The setting up of the highest laws of art and their practical utilisation in musical paedagogics reveal the science in unmediated contact with the actual life of art. The science attains its goal to its fullest extent only when it remains in living contact with art. Art and the science of art do not exist in separate compartments, the boundaries of which are sharply drawn; rather it is far more one and the same field, and only the way in which each is treated differs. [Mugglestone (1983): 16).

This insistent emphasis on the utility of scientific knowledge in relation to the further production of art is paramount to Adler's unifying vision, itself stated in the essay's conclusion as "the Discovery of the True and the Advancement of the Beautiful" (16). Tellingly, Adler assigns the nascent investigations of comparative musicology, the discipline from which ethnomusicology eventually developed, to his "systematic" subdivision of the musicological project, grouped with music theory and other adjacent pursuits (13). Thus the roots of ethnomusicology, which itself can be credibly seen as a socio-cultural critique of the comparative project, are still fundamentally tied to the relation of knowledge to the performance of music. Such a notion might be obvious on its face –that music making and its study are bound together in some capacity should not particularly surprising – but what I find necessary to highlight here is the extent to which nineteenth century notions about the production of knowledge through a scientific (or here we might say "positivistic" in historical parlance) practice form an over-arching discourse from which various subfields may depart.

This intricate theoretical dance between art and its science, always in the midst of revealing novel truths and resultant beauties, becomes quite complex when shifting to the 1950s and 1960s, a period of substantive concretization in the ethnomusicological discipline. Though the differences between the historical and ethnological strands of musicology had long been established by this period, there was still, as Bruno Nettl notes in his 1964 monograph *Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology*, considerable

fluidity of perspectives regarding ethnomusicological methods *per se* (1964, 12). Notable among the theoretical paradigms discussed by Nettl is the concept of bi-musicality, popularized and developed by Mantle Hood of UCLA in numerous sources, but perhaps most directly "The Challenge of Bi-Musicality" in 1960 (1964, 22).

Though Mantle Hood's intention in this elaboration of the bi-musicality concept is to comment upon the practicalities and difficulties of developing expressive expertise in multiple codified musical traditions (i.e. those with particular traditions of master-student teaching etc.), he speaks on multiple counts about the distinct relationship between knowledge and performance the theory engenders. The first of such statements is his declaration that the "crowning achievement in the study of Oriental music is fluency in the art of improvisation," a state which ultimately requires an assimilation of "the whole tradition" on the part of the student (Hood 1960, 58). Leaving aside Hood's obviously dated language and deeply reductionist view of Asian musical traditions, his preoccupation here is clearly homologous to Adler's insistence on the circular relationship of science and art, particularly as the two are realized in Adler's notion of "practical pedagogics" (**mugglstone_guido_1983**). In other words, Hood here gestures to a inductive relation between the "life of art" and its constituent science, with the necessary caveat that the terms of "life" and "science" must be broadened to include the cultural codes of the particular expressive art to be studied. A similar perspective is demonstrated in Hood's investigation into the question of "how far a Western musician can go along the road of Oriental music studies" (1960: 58). Hood makes clear that the question is not really one of limits, but of time, evincing a perspective of complete expressive fluidity. Particularly illustrative, however is his note that "If [the musician's] desire is to comprehend a particular Oriental musical expression so that his observations and analysis as a musicologist do not prove to be embarrassing, he will have to persist in practical studies until his basic musicianship is secure" (58). What is most striking about this passage is the fashion in which it foregrounds observation and analysis in musical practice itself; for Hood, the process of rendering music is itself fundamental to accurate study. As Nettl notes, this development of ethnomusicological method resulted in a novel alignment of ethnomusicology with music departments in the United States, a connection which had languished in the early years of the field's formation (1964, 22).

It is in this fashion that we can theorize a strong relation between artistic performance and the knowledge generated by ethnomusicology as an Adlerian science of art. Of course, this is only one face of the epistemological coin, for this period also saw the rise of Alan Merriam's distinctive style of anthropological analysis, epitomized by his landmark text, *The Anthropology of Music* (1964). In marked contrast to the methods of Hood, which emphasize an embodied and dialogic experience, Merriam hones in on the exterior position of the social scientist. Indeed, the boundaries between social science and the humanities generally seems to be a sore-spot for Merriam, as evidenced by early theoretical passages in *The Anthropology of Music*:

> We are faced with the inevitable conclusion that what the ethnomusicologist seeks to create is his own bridge between the social sciences and the humanities. He does so because he must be involved with both; although he studies a product of the humanistic side of man's existence, he must at the same time realize that the product is the result of behavior which is shaped by the society and culture of the men who produce it. The ethnomusicologist is, in effect, sciencing about music…He does not seek the aesthetic experience for himself as a primary goal (though this may be a personal by-product of his studies), but rather, he seeks to perceive the meaning of the aesthetic experience of others from the standpoint of understanding human behavior…Ethnomusicology endeavors to *communicate knowledge about an artistic product,* the behavior employed in producing it, and the emotions and ideation of the artist involved in it. (1964, 25)

What this passage reveals is the primacy of the active verb "sciencing" as a process which is, at its foundation, a communication of the truth attained by empirical investigation. It indicates that the only method available in this project is an analytic which is disjunct from the scholar's own active process of music-making and aesthetic contemplation. Indeed, this emphasis on the communicative is articulated most clearly a few pages earlier, in which Merriam states that ethnomusicology is distinct from artistic practice insofar as "it does not seek to communicate emotion or feeling, but rather knowledge" (19). The incommensurability of art and science's semantic object, feeling and knowledge respectively, is paramount to Merriam's distinction. Thus, for Merriam there is a single position which the ethnomusicologist inhabits as a researcher, one which probes the functional aspects of musical behavior and expresses results through methods which are verifiably true; "science" rather than art-making, or, in Adler's terms, "the Discovery of the True" has triumphed over "the Advancement of the Beautiful".

There can be no doubt that such strong statements by Hood and Merriam set themselves up to be

viewed in dialectical opposition, and indeed, the tension between these perspectives has been a productive one within the field. However, what the two outlooks share at their root is an emphasis on the necessity of epistemic clarity. Hood's innovation was to suggest how musical expertise impacts the process of observation which forms the ground of inquiry. Where Merriam abstracts, noting that ethnomusicology "is both a field and a lab discipline" and that it "aims to approximate the methods of science," Hood opens the possibility of observational fallacy, and the deeply subjective nature of experiment (1964, 37). Thus we may understand this early instantiation of ethnomusicology as a discipline which is characterized by its variable tolerance to performance as a research-method and the emotional, aesthetic nature of communication which characterizes it. However, this antinomy between the performance-oriented scholarship of Hood and the empirical, functional school of Merriam was entirely undercut by the development of the so-called "Writing Culture" debates of the 1980's in cultural anthropology, destabilizing the notion of communication which was so central to both the "social sciences" and the project of ethnography as a whole. Adopting what has variously been described as a textualist, post-structural, reflexive, or post-modern stance, the co-authors of *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* troubled the relationship of ethnographic writing to what it sought to describe by highlighting its position *as writing,* which is always accompanied by the confines of genre, aesthetics, and partiality (Zenker 2014). It is in this sense that James Clifford, in his introduction to the volume, declares that all ethnographies are *fictions* in the sense that they are objects with their own histories and systems of production -their claims to truth in the scientific, empirical sense are entirely suspect (Clifford 1986, 6). These perturbations cut out the heart of any anthropologically-oriented positivism; if ethnomusicology was to follow contemporary analyses of culture it would, inevitably, have to confront its own position as a *writing* of music which was bereft of any claims on knowledge distinct from its object of study.

While the impact of the writing culture debates on the use of performance practice in ethnomusicology cannot be treated with any finitude here, there are two examples which I find particularly pertinent in demonstrating novel relationship of ethnographic writing to performance initiated by these debates. The first text is Stephen Slawek's 1994 elaboration of the guru-sisya relationship "The Study of Perfor-

mance Practice as a Research Method: A South Asian Example," based on his own position as a senior disciple of Pandit Ravi Shankar, a virtuoso performer of the sitar. A key feature of Slawek's approach is the complex position that the results of fieldwork, variously termed "data," "collectanea," etc., can inhabit. While terms with a strong postivist legacy like "data" clearly indicate a perspective which has yet to fully embrace the fictive nature of ethnographic writing, Slawek notes that a key feature of the guru-sisya relationship is an ethical imperative to conceal certain details of musical instruction (1994, 9-10, 16). Indeed, Slawek does not hide the complicated position that such cultural norms force him into:

> The insights I have gained into Indian musical culture by becoming a sisya transcend the complex vocabulary of music. I now have a clear understanding of the real life of the tradition…When certain aspects of playing technique or particular elements of a repertory are designated as "classified", and I am forbidden by Pandit Ravi Shankar to include them in my research data, I cannot help but gain a better understanding of the value of this knowledge to him. Yet, it is vexing to me as a scholar, and certainly is the most extreme example of the drawbacks inherent in attempting to combine the role of sisya with that of researcher. (1994, 16)

Clearly such a complex relationship to data, one in which experience may or may not be distilled into publishable theory but may quite seriously impact the researcher's relationship to further investigations, is simultaneously the apogee of Mantle Hood's notion of "assimilation" and a devastating blow to the epistemic paradigm which undergirds it. Finding himself at an unique impasse, squarely positioned in "the crisis of representation" brought into such contention by Writing Culture debates (Zenker 2014), Slawek makes a gamble on the actual object to which he has gained access through the guru-sisya relationship: musical performance itself. His writing on this subject explicitly references *Writing Culture*, noting that the in some sense ethnomusicologists with a strong relationship to performance have been doing the work of destabilizing ethnography "without getting credit" (Slawek 1994, 22). More important than credit, however, is Slawek's assertion of the potential of performance itself, the successful execution of which may "equal a written document in intellectual engagement and most probably will surpass a written statement in the intensity of its emotive affect" (1994, 22).

The second document which underlines the distinct contributions of *Writing Culture* is Jeff Titon's

elevation of the question of fieldwork to the grounds of ontology in the seminal anthology *Shadows in the Field* (2008). In discussing the questions of what can be known about music and how such knowledge might be created, Titon pursues an alternative tack, suggesting that such knowledge is best solved through an exploration of musical being. Key to Titon's argument is the conception of a "special ontology" of musical being, which he elaborates in the following passage:

> Another way of saying this is that I ground musical knowledge in the practice of music, not in the practice of science, or linguistics, or introspective analysis. In my paradigm case of musical being-in-the-world I am bound up socially with others making music and when that music is presented fully to my consciousness it is the music of the whole group, not simply "my" music, although at peak moments I feel as if it is all coming through me. (2008, 32)

This emphasis on the subjective account of musical knowledge, produced through a collaborative, but *perceptually subjective* experience is anathema to the inductive knowledge and empirical character which dominated ethnomusicological discourse in the '60s. Much like Slawek's attestation of the affective and scholarly potential of performance, Titon suggests here that musicality is itself the site of access to musical knowledge; where for Slawek the project of public scholarship was limited by ethical and cultural demands, for Titon the musical subject *is itself* one which has its foremost presence in the experiential. This phenomenological account of musical experience is taken up in the same volume by Timothy Rice, whose acquisition of Bulgarian *gaida* ornamentation exceeded the capacity of his teacher to explain, and was produced through intense examination of recordings and personal instruction. In Rice's case, the dialogic relationship between study in "the field" and outside of it produces a kind of knowledge which is neither emic nor etic, but one which attests its validity in experience and in verification through others (2008, 51-52).

With the sanctity of ethnographic writing thus perturbed and the fundamental epistemological structure of ethnomusicology shifted to include performance as a scholarly document, it seems necessary to pose the question: in what sense can the distinction between the artist's "communication of feeling" and the scientist's "communication of knowledge" be meaningfully maintained? And indeed, if such a distinction is collapsed, what could distinguish the nature of the resultant scholarship from artistic practice itself? Have we escaped Adler's paradigm of the true and the beautiful, or have

we simply reproduced them in the form of a single entity? In discussing these questions, I will outline the development of *sensory ethnography* in cultural anthropology and its use of notions like affect, "thick depiction," and the sensory, to justify artistic forays into the presentation of ethnographic research. In so doing, I will discuss the development of arts-based research in the social sciences, often termed "research-creation" in Canadian academic contexts (Chapman and Sawchuk 2012), and discuss the applicability of Donna Haraway's notion of "situated knowledges" to mediate contesting epistemes (1988).

3 The Sensorial Turn and the Crisis of Methodology

Unsurprisingly, the question of artistic practice and the process of anthropological research has haunted more than just ethnographers working with music and the written word. Indeed according to Karen Nakamura, the so-called "crisis of representation" inaugurated by *Writing Culture* had been traversed almost twenty years earlier among visual anthropologists, with no small degree of anxiety (2013, 133). In deliniating the various methods of what has been called *sensory ethnography* among socio-cultural and visual anthropologists, Nakamura establishes two forms, both of which confront the question of experience in producing ethnographic work: the *aesthetic-sensual*, which traces its roots to observational cinema, and the *multisensory experimental*, which attempts to center the senses in writing and theoretical orientation (2013, 133-135). Of the two perspectives, the aesthetic-sensual is the most clearly analogous to Slawek's notion of research-based performance as a kind of "experimental translation of a cultural experience," and provides the strongest case for the utility of experiential research forms (1994, 22).

Nakamura's description of the aesthetic-sensual style of sensory ethnography traces a genealogical path through the history of visual anthropology, begining with the foundation of the Harvard Film Studies Center by Robert Gardner. Gardner's first ethnographic films (Nakamura cites *Dead Birds* as an example) followed standard anthropological and documentarian tradition, utilizing voice-over narration, staged narrative, etc., before he developed a style more closely inline with the nascent *Cinéma Vérité* and observational cinema movements, which prized realism, collaboration, and a reflexive under-

standings of filmmaker and subject. The substance of this critique was to place film within the role that *Writing Culture* authors would confine writing to – the production of genre.[1] In Nakamura's account, Harvard continues to be a hotbed of innovation in the 1990's with the work of Lucien Castaing-Taylor and his foundation of the Harvard Sensory Ethnography lab, which has produced (and continues to produce) a number of films which have rejected the conventions produced in ethnographic film practice, insisting upon a deliberately performative and affect-oriented filmic style. Nakamura makes clear the intentions of this filmic school to move both "beyond a discipline of words" and develop a deliberate combination of aesthetic and ethnographic practice, in effect *leaning into* the limitations posed by the form of film itself (2013, 133-134).

The rationale for Castaing-Taylor's turn towards the what Nakamura refers to as the"supratextual" (2013, 133) is detailed in his polemical 1996 essay *Iconophobia*, a work which provides a strong theoretical paradigm for the scholarly utility of film's aesthetic (as opposed to strictly pedagogical) potential. Castaing-Taylor first outlines typical anthropological objections to filmic representation, best exemplified by Maurice Bloch's notion that films are not "discussive" and therefore bereft of the dialogic context which is the *sine qua non* of ethnographic writing (Taylor 1996, 66). He critiques these text-first perspectives as an anxiety around the semiotic potential of the filmic image, as it is simultaneously (in Piercian terms) iconic, symbolic, and indexical; this semiotic uniqueness allows for a surfit of interpretations, viewpoints, etc., which both exceed the bounds of the filming ethnographer to control and allow for the production of meaning (75). As Castaing-Taylor puts it,

> In otherwords, if the rules of film resist formulation, this may not be because filmmakers are even more unconscious about the form they manipulate than every day language speakers are about their syntax. It may be that the relative syntactic poverty of the medium is precisely its semantic strength, that which allows it to respond to the diversity and density of human experience as flexibly as it does. (1996, 86-87)

Here Castaing-Taylor throws in his lot with precisely the qualities of artistic practice which repeled thinkers in the ethnomusicological canon: film's capacity to speak about a particular topic is not actualized solely in the linguistic realm of symbols, but also in the plane of the sensory, or as Merriam would

1. A more substantive description of Cinéma Vérité can be found in the writings of Jean Rouch, particularly "The Camera and Man" in *the Principles of Visual Anthropology* (Rouch 2009).

likely say, feeling. What is key in this formulation of ethnographic film theory is that it is fundamentally *not* a justification of film as a method; rather, it is a declaration of film's potential *as a statement research itself,* defined as such by its unique ability to respond to and reproduce, in some refracted capacity, human experience. This gambit on the unique semiotic qualities of the filmic work sums itself up in Castaing-Taylor's propositeion of "thick depiction" as film's counterpart to "thick description," the famous phrase which Geertz adapted from Gilbert Ryle to describe ethnographic writing's ability to layer context on top of context (Geertz 1973, 6). Implicit in the notion of thick depiction is the suggestion that the potential thickness of sensory experience does not stem from the unique properties of text to remediate events, but rather from hazy relation between aesthetic creation and, what I will term here an ethnographic posture. Thus it is a distinct relational position which is the measure of film's, and here I would submit other media's, ethnographic potential.

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