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# Ethnomusicology without Erotics

Deborah Wong

Most ethnomusicologists write about a bleak world devoid of desire and empty of erotics. Naturally there are notable exceptions, but we often emphasize nationalism and globalization, manifesting a deeply internalized need to prove our discipline is doing important work (i.e., just as important as anthropology) despite the double feminization of our field.<sup>1</sup> We show how our teachers and friends—the musicians we spend so much time getting to know—negotiate a landscape shaped by those macroprocesses. When we write about our friends' and teachers' gendered lives, we tend to note this in a sentence that includes a list of many differences outlined with commas: she is a woman, an ethnic minority, from the working class, and from a certain religion. But the commas can't do the necessary critical work: we have trouble living up to the intersectional analyses we know we need.<sup>2</sup> As Sherrie Tucker

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<sup>1</sup> Notable exceptions include the work of Gregory Barz, Eileen Hayes, Joshua Pilzer, Gillian Rodger, and Henry Spiller. See Gregory F. Barz, *Singing for Life: HIV/AIDS and Music in Uganda* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Eileen M. Hayes, *Songs in Black and Lavender: Race, Sexual Politics, and Women's Music* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Joshua D. Pilzer, *Hearts of Pine: Songs in the Lives of Three Korean Survivors of the Japanese "Comfort Women"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Gillian Rodger, *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima: Variety Theater in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Henry Spiller, *Erotic Triangles: Sundanese Dance and Masculinity in West Java* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

Anne McClintock reminds us that "All nationalisms are gendered, all are invented, and all are dangerous" (*Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* [New York: Routledge, 1995], 352).

See Deborah Wong, "Sound, Silence, Music: Power," *Ethnomusicology* 58, no. 2 (2014): 347–53 for more about the feminization of ethnomusicology.

<sup>2</sup> See Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review*, 1991, 1241–99.

observes, the problem is “the all-too-common tendency for historical work on gender to be short on sexuality and historical work on sexuality to be short on gender.”<sup>3</sup> Yet as Robert Buffington flatly reminds us, “We literally cannot imagine our world or make sense of our place in it without referencing sexuality.”<sup>4</sup>

How, then, do ethnomusicologists say so little about sexuality? What are the implications of erasing, ignoring, refusing, and disarticulating erotics from the musics we study?<sup>5</sup> Why would we do so, and how did that become standard practice? Twenty years ago, writing on the cusp of the decade when historical musicologists turned to erotics, Fred Maus identified the “terrible discretion that muffles and closets sexuality” in music scholarship.<sup>6</sup> Sara Ahmed writes that “it is crucial to give problems their names,” so I aim to name the absence in ethnomusicology.<sup>7</sup>

An erotics is the place where the affective and the structural come together and where corporeal control is felt and made visible. Erotics are simultaneously material and immaterial. Corporeal control is experienced at the meeting point between a body and a social system, where it is “felt” tactily through the fingertips and the skin and “felt” emotionally and spiritually. Erotics are where bodies meet bodies and where subjectivity comes home to roost in a body. Erotics are not only about women, sex, queer experience, or misogynist representation. Erotics are about all those things, as well as many other things we never seem to get to, especially heteronormative values. Erotics are central to our fieldwork, wherever (or whenever) it takes place.<sup>8</sup> All musics rely on erotics, even those focused on spiritual ecstasy rather than corporeal sexuality or plea-

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3 Sherrie Tucker, “When Subjects Don’t Come Out,” in *Queer Episodes in Music and Modern Identity*, ed. Sophie Fuller and Lloyd Whitesell (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 293.

4 Robert M. Buffington, introduction to *A Global History of Sexuality*, ed. Robert M. Buffington, Eithne Luibheid, and Donna J. Guy (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 1.

5 Kyra Gaunt takes it further and argues that we must “inhabit” the differences presented by music or “run the risk of erasing (de-racing or de-gendering)” the very experiences that drew us in the first place (“‘The Two O’clock Vibe’: Embodying the Jam of Musical Blackness in and out of Its Everyday Context,” *Musical Quarterly* 86, no. 3 [2002]: 374).

6 Fred E. Maus, “Love Stories,” *Repercussions* 4, no. 2 (1995): 96.

7 Sara Ahmed, “White Men,” *Feministkilljoys*, November 4, 2014, <http://feministkilljoys.com>.

8 Despite the importance of such attention, we are past the point where confessions about fieldwork encounters are enough. Carol Babiracki famously and daringly wrote about a romantic relationship in the field and its effects on her ethnographic research; Andrew Killick reflected on the place of gender, race, and nationality in his fieldwork. Generally speaking, ethnomusicologists are willing to show how researchers are implicated in world systems of desire but are less willing to address how musical worlds of desire are part of virtually all systems of teaching and learning music. See Carol M. Babiracki, “What’s the Difference? Reflections on Gender and Research in Village India,” in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, ed. Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 167–82; Andrew P. Killick, “The Penetrating Intellect: On Being White, Straight, and Male in Korea,” in *Taboo: Sex, Identity and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork*, ed. Don Kulick and Margaret Willson (London: Routledge, 1995), 76–106.

Elisabeth Le Guin’s stained bedsheets are an example of reading erotics across history (*Boccherini’s Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006]).

sure. Sexuality is one of many places erotics are learned and where erotics are understood as desire.<sup>9</sup>

Feminist music scholars often listen to music with both pleasure and bifocal discomfort, knowing that our pleasure is at odds with our political beliefs. We listen to music with the utopian hope that the patriarchal politics of sexuality and erotics can be redirected, even if we can only partially imagine what that might look, sound, and feel like. This is a permanently suspended and anticipatory erotics of musical pleasures directed toward social equality and justice. Feminist scholars know that gendered inequality is deeply eroticized and that the objects of our research are shaped by erotic attachment.<sup>10</sup>

### Relativist Inattention

Ethnomusicologists ignore sexuality for many reasons and often argue that our interlocutors don't talk about it. Our deep commitment to cultural relativism is a firewall that often prevents any engagement with work on sexuality from other disciplines, especially the powerful scholarship in musicology. Sexuality studies have focused on the West, sometimes quite narrowly, and ethnomusicologists are of course quite attuned to this.<sup>11</sup> Ethnomusicologists quickly get stuck on whether the basic musicological handles for erotics and gender are Western-centric, and the conversation stops there.<sup>12</sup> Ethnography can teach us a lot about erotics, regardless of our location (e.g., native ethnomusicologist, empathetic interloper, etc.), but it can't do all possible critical work any more than any other method.

Ethnomusicologists are uniquely positioned to address two matters if we are willing to think beyond cultural relativism.<sup>13</sup> First, postcolonial subjectivity is particularly audible in music, and its workings are often articulated through erotics (whether defined, generated, or refused). Music-objects bearing erot-

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9 A few ethnomusicologists have focused on the relationship between music and sexual praxis, for example, Mu Yang, who coined the acronym EMA for "erotic musical activity" ("Erotic Musical Activity in Multiethnic China," *Ethnomusicology: Journal of the Society for Ethnomusicology* 42, no. 2 [1998]: 199–264). In my conversations with North American ethnomusicologists about these matters, my colleagues have consistently regarded erotics as equivalent to sexual practices, that is, strictly as a matter of intimate encounters between bodies rather than as cultural systems. That the entire social system is present in an individual body and that the personal is political are generally understood by the ethnomusicologists I know *unless* sexuality is the focus. The most basic critical frameworks of feminist approaches are thus looked at askance by many ethnomusicologists. As Susan McClary wryly observed, "I should have anticipated . . . that the attention of the discipline would fixate on the scandals of gender and sexuality themselves" (*Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form*, Bloch Lectures [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000], x).

10 See Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012). My thanks to Sherrie Tucker for pointing me toward this book.

11 Buffington, introduction, 4–5.

12 Francesca Rebollo-Sborgi, "Decentering the Feminist Self," *Repercussions* 1, no. 2 (1992): 26–51.

13 Cultural relativism sometimes holds the Other in place as not-us and refuses the lessons of postcolonial theory. Judith Butler argues that the humanities are undermined, and undermine us, with our reliance on "relativism and questioning and 'critique'" (*Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* [London: Verso, 2004], 129).

ic traces slip around in time and space. The extended postcolonial historical-moment-without-end defines much of the world. Music moves through awarenesses and subjectivities shaped by postcoloniality and can do unexpected work along the way. Second, music is a key sphere where normativities are asserted and maintained.<sup>14</sup> Cross-culturally, normative erotics are virtually always heterosexual,<sup>15</sup> but ethnomusicologists tend to focus on extraordinary exceptions and absences rather than the powerful work of music in sustaining heterosexual regimes; since the 1990s, like other humanists, we have mostly focused on the sounds of minoritarian resistance. Our work on gender is thus mostly about women rather than heterosexual relationships, and our (limited) work on sexuality is mostly about queerness rather than heteronormativity.<sup>16</sup> Our long-standing disciplinary focus on nationalism already puts us in a good position to consider postcolonial erotics. In critiquing heteronormativity, we not only would address one of music's most powerful siren songs but at the same time could queer ethnomusicology in critically useful ways.<sup>17</sup>

Ethnomusicologists tend to emphasize the individual, whether individual experience or the contributions of individuals.<sup>18</sup> We have good ethnographic methods for getting at the individual's ability to think, feel, and act and are thus less apt to address the affective sweep of music. However, the precise mechanisms through which the individual absorbs structural paradigms and then affects them in turn are less addressed. I turn now to why late colonial sexuality is so seductively accessible through music.

### Global Puritanism

Ethnomusicologists don't write about sex, sexuality, erotics, or desire because in some (or even many) musical traditions, musicians generally don't explicitly talk about such matters. The deep ways colonialism changed, enforced, coerced,

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<sup>14</sup> I happily note that while I was writing this essay, a CFP appeared for *Queering the Field: Sound-ing Out Ethnomusicology*, ed. Gregory Barz and William Cheng.

<sup>15</sup> Obviously, gender and sexuality are culturally contingent and defined in profoundly different ways across different cultures. Drawing from the work of Sara Ahmed, Saskia Wieringa and Horacio Federico Sivori write that sexuality is always "a biopolitical project" focused on "the creation of normativities" ("Sexual Politics in the Global South: Framing the Discourse," in *The Sexual History of the Global South: Sexual Politics in Africa, Asia, and Latin America* [London: Zed Books, 2013], 4).

<sup>16</sup> Three key exceptions from this pattern are Jane C. Sugarman, *Engendering Song: Singing and Subjectivity at Prespa Albanian Weddings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Spiller, *Erotic Triangles*; and David Kaminsky, "Gender and Sexuality in the Polska: Swedish Couple Dancing and the Challenge of Egalitarian Flirtation," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 20, no. 2 (2011): 123–52. These scholars each address the interconstitutive play of masculinity and femininity. Music and masculinity studies is also an important critical intervention, since it reveals the costs of patriarchy. See, for example, Paul Jong-chul Yoon, "Asian Masculinities and Parodic Possibility in Odaiko Solos and Filmic Representations," *Asian Music* 40, no. 1 (2009): 100–130; David A. McDonald, "Geographies of the Body: Music, Violence and Manhood in Palestine," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 19, no. 2 (2010): 191–214.

<sup>17</sup> As Robyn Wiegman puts it, heteronormativity is "the central political term for a distinctly queer approach to the study of sexuality" (*Object Lessons*, 303).

<sup>18</sup> See Jesse D. Ruskin and Timothy Rice, "The Individual in Musical Ethnography," *Ethnomusicology: Journal of the Society for Ethnomusicology* 56, no. 2 (2012): 299–327 for an overview.

and legislated new kinds of bodies and new sexualities is well researched.<sup>19</sup> Anne McClintock's work linking imperial desire and conquest has had sweeping critical effects.<sup>20</sup> Colonialism reached straight into the subjectivity of the colonized, as most famously argued by Frantz Fanon and Homi Bhabha.<sup>21</sup> Foucault showed how sexuality was an ideological invention of the late nineteenth century, followed by sweeping regimes of repressive control and prudishness that crossed East–West and North–South spheres.<sup>22</sup> Ideas about sexuality are always culturally specific *and* in circulation across geospatial boundaries, and the long reach of colonialism means that erotic ideologies move between cultures in ways both powerfully disturbing and sometimes liberatory.<sup>23</sup> As Joshua Pilzer writes, “Wars, conflicts, and colonial encounters are gendered activities and . . . genders and sexualities can be militarized.”<sup>24</sup>

Our teachers and interlocutors are thus silent about sex, sexuality, sexual orientation, and musical sexiness for real historical reasons, but silence does not signal absence. Ethnomusicologists must activate different modes of listening in order to hear the erotics of empire. Purnima Mankekar and Louisa Schein listen to silence. They write, “The forms of erotics that we seek to understand are rarely straightforwardly accessed through interviews and are, for the most part, inimical to direct observation.”<sup>25</sup>

Ideas about both non/normative sexualities changed profoundly through colonial contact, and late capitalist mediascapes ensure these erotics remain unstable. Some scholars search for indigenous erotics. The tendency of neo-colonial elites to adopt Western sex practices and attitudes points to interconstitutive relationships between class, gender, race, and nation.<sup>26</sup> The violence of

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19 Hakima Abbas and Sokari Ekine, eds., *Queer African Reader* (Dakar, Senegal: Pambazuka Press, 2013); Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); Wieringa and Sivori, *Sexual History of the Global South*.

20 McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 5.

21 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

22 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

23 As Sabine Frühstück writes, “There is no linear, uniform story of the formation of modern sexuality, just as there is no singular web of relations that connect sex and sexuality to the nation-state. The transfer and translation of sexual cultures across national boundaries and periods has been limited in some places, extensive in others” (“Sexuality and the Nation-State,” in *A Global History of Sexuality*, ed. Robert M. Buffington, Eithne Luibheid, and Donna J. Guy [Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014], 51).

24 Joshua D. Pilzer, “Music and Dance in the Japanese Military ‘Comfort Women’ System: A Case Study in the Performing Arts, War, and Sexual Violence,” *Women & Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 18, no. 1 (2014): 23, DOI:10.1353/wam.2014.0001.

25 Purnima Mankekar and Louisa Schein, “Mediations and Transmediations: Erotics, Sociality, and ‘Asia,’” in *Media, Erotics, and Transnational Asia*, ed. Purnima Mankekar and Louisa Schein (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 27.

26 Nkiru Nzegwu writes, “In a trend toward cosmopolitanism, African elites and urbanites are rapidly adopting erotic practices circulated by North America and European media houses and conglomerates” (“Osunality” [or African Eroticness],” *African Sexualities: A Reader*, ed. Sylvia Tamale [Capetown: Pambazuka Press, 2011], 253).

legislating homosexuality as un-African is well documented.<sup>27</sup> Imperial desire is not only somewhere else or sometime else. Mark Rifkin asks, “When did Indians become straight?,” linking sexology and North American settler imperialism.<sup>28</sup> Asian American studies scholars have shown how US imperial relationships are reproduced in racialized desire, but they also actively imagine a countererotics that acknowledges history while rewriting it.<sup>29</sup> Sheena Maholtra and Aimee Carrillo Rowe dwell on the dialogical connections between sound and silence and offer a feminist refusal of simple binaries between voice/silence and power/powerlessness, going to “the edges of sound” in order to hear the Western-centric assumptions connecting voice and agency.<sup>30</sup>

### Listening to Erotics

What might this kind of ethnographic interpretation look and sound like?<sup>31</sup> I am sitting in an art center on the first day of the Guelph Jazz Festival listening to a solo free improvisation by Dutch cellist Ernst Reijseger. He is astounding: his technical chops are flawless; he has a stunning ability to flip between rhetorical gestures; and he is fully in control of his own narrative moves in the ways sounded only by the most experienced improvisers. For the first half hour, he simply sits and plays, sometimes plucking, sometimes bowing, often using extended techniques; it’s all about “the music.” As his set goes on, though, he draws more and more on theatrical flourishes. First he begins to use facial expressions while playing—he grins, he grimaces, he looks rapturous. Then he stands and begins to walk around the room while playing. He walks off stage into an adjoining room, still playing, and suddenly screams, making the audience jump and then laugh. He comes back into the room—still playing—and wanders through the tight aisles of the full house. About eighty audience members are packed tightly together on folding chairs, and I think we’re all waiting for him to accidentally stab someone with his bow. He finds one of the few empty folding chairs in the room, stops, puts his left foot on the seat, props the cello horizontally on his knee, and starts playing it like a guitar. Suddenly he reaches out and grabs the hand of the young woman sitting in the next seat. Clearly startled, she laughs but doesn’t resist. He takes her hand and starts rhythmically strumming the cello strings with *her* fingers while pushing out the chord changes with his left

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27 Sylvia Tamale, *African Sexualities: A Reader* (Capetown: Pambazuka Press, 2011).

28 Mark Rifkin, *When Did Indians Become Straight? Kinship, the History of Sexuality, and Native Sovereignty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

29 Geraldine Kudaka, ed., *On a Bed of Rice: An Asian American Erotic Feast* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995); Kumiko Nemoto, *Racing Romance: Love, Power, and Desire among Asian American/White Couples* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009).

30 Aimee Carrillo Rowe and Sheena Maholtra, “Still the Silence: Feminist Reflections at the Edges of Sound,” in *Silence, Feminism, Power: Reflections at the Edges of Sound*, ed. Aimee Carrillo Rowe and Maholtra (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1–22.

31 Here, my close reading is inspired by Suzanne G. Cusick, “Gender and the Cultural Work of a Classical Music Performance,” *Repercussions* 3, no. 1 (1994): 77–110. I have also learned a lot from Susan McClary’s brilliant close readings of “works,” for example, *Reading Music: Selected Essays* (Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2007).

hand on the cello neck. It feels like a cowboy ballad. He smiles down at her in a goofy romantic way. Her hand is his hand, they are hand in hand, she is playing him, or perhaps it's the other way around. He lets go of her hand, and she starts to draw back, but he shakes his head vigorously—she's supposed to keep strumming. He's Harpo Marx, wordless but not silent, crazily sweet but also a little weird, a little scary, because you know he might do something inappropriate like throw his leg over you. He's a guy sweet on a girl; he's a guy in control of a girl; he's a guy relying on a girl to let him control her. Or are these gendered and eroticized terms simply built into the music? Communicating through smiles and nods, he leads her into a *ritardando*, then a cadence, and the piece ends. The audience bursts into pleased laughter and applause. He doesn't bow or acknowledge it: he smiles at her and then works his way back up to the front of the room, still in character but not the same character.

Was Reijseger aware of the complicated narratives he improvised through and with the hand of the young woman? I think so, but I'm not sure. This funny, beautiful, masterful, heteronormative improvisation moved, amused, and dismayed me because I have internalized the terms for spectating.<sup>32</sup>

### A Manifesto

I want to make erotics audible. Mary Ann Caws writes that “the manifesto is by nature a loud genre, unlike the essay. . . . Immediate and urgent, it never mumbles, is always in overdose and overdrive.”<sup>33</sup> A feminist manifesto is thus my remedy to disciplinary baggage; I now switch gears and genres, all at once, to shake loose my habits and step away from the would-be subtlety of the essay. How can I convince ethnomusicologists to regard erotics as important? I shout:

1. **Listen.** Listen beyond what our interlocutors don't tell us about the erotics of the music.
2. **Teach.** Address the erotics of world music. Teaching world music activates erotics in ways that we never, ever discuss. The Other is automatically eroticized: in the classroom, world music is not immune to this despite our best efforts to disentangle the racialized imagination from principled ethnography. We automatically trigger these tropes when we teach the musicking Other.
3. **Liberate.** A liberation politics isn't possible without attention to gendered erotics.<sup>34</sup> We are drawn to the musics of resistance and anti-

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<sup>32</sup> I love Ernst Reijseger's work. Over and over again, the feminist listener hears, feels, and struggles with competing agendas.

<sup>33</sup> Mary Ann Caws, “The Poetics of the Manifesto: Nowness and Newness,” in *Manifesto: A Century of Isms* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), xx, xxi.

<sup>34</sup> Charise L. Cheney writes, “These black men (and many black women) have not even *conceived* a politics of liberation that is not dependent upon a masculinist discourse that incorporates a subordination of the feminine” (*Brothers Gonna Work It Out: Sexual Politics in the Golden Age of Rap Nationalism* [New York: New York University Press, 2005], 169).



subordination, but we put the asymmetries of gendered erotics into a footnote when we foreground and overfocus on race and class.

4. **Abolish.** Musicked erotics are a key means for taking the body to a place it hasn't yet arrived. The abolitionist gesture of arguing for a future where the structures have already been changed is a poetic necessity. Music is a primary site for abolitional politics, but ethnomusicologists tend to write about music as if it were merely hopeful and inspirational.
5. **Transect.** Intersectionality isn't the arrival point but is where we must begin.<sup>35</sup> Erotics are most certainly heard and felt from the first few seconds of the pop song, the string quartet, the *kirtan*, and the *corrido*.

Suzanne Cusick gently points out “the stark contradiction between feminism’s inherent commitment to political action on behalf of gender equality and ethnomusicology’s equally inherent commitment to the dispassionate understanding of music’s importance in human lives.”<sup>36</sup> Since the 1990s, many ethnomusicologists have turned away from the objective and sometimes aloof methodologies that tacitly gave us permission to ignore sexuality and erotics. My manifesto is a way to try to do better by engaging with Cusick’s mild critique. It’s high time to lose the dispassion, to address the master narrative as well as the oppositional margins, and to admit that what we hear is sometimes beautiful and sometimes not.

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<sup>35</sup> That is, we can't expect intersectionality to offer “political completion.” See Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, 240.

<sup>36</sup> Suzanne G. Cusick, foreword to *A Feminist Ethnomusicology: Writings on Music and Gender*, by Ellen Koskoff (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), x.