

UC Riverside

UC Riverside Previously Published Works

Title

Sound, Silence, Music: Power

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5cg2t3pg>

Journal

Ethnomusicology, 58(2)

ISSN

0014-1836

Author

Wong, Deborah

Publication Date

2014-05-01

DOI

10.5406/ethnomusicology.58.2.0347

Peer reviewed



UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS

the society for
ethnomusicology

Sound, Silence, Music: Power

Author(s): Deborah Wong

Source: *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (Spring/Summer 2014), pp. 347-353

Published by: [University of Illinois Press](#) on behalf of [Society for Ethnomusicology](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/ethnomusicology.58.2.0347>

Accessed: 27/05/2014 12:31

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of Illinois Press and *Society for Ethnomusicology* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Ethnomusicology*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Sound, Silence, Music: Power

DEBORAH WONG / University of California, Riverside

The Music Problem

One afternoon in the mid-1990s, I walked past a bookstore in Berkeley, California and stopped to look at the window display.¹ It featured a group of at least twenty books with wildly divergent subjects that were clearly meant to be viewed together, and I stared, puzzled, until I suddenly saw that each book title had the word “power” in it. They bore titles like *Power and Accountability*, *Power and Beauty*, *Power and Civil Society*, *Power and Community*, *Power and Difference*, *Power and Empowerment*, *Power and Everyday Life*, *Power and Gender*, and so on. Power was everywhere: Foucault had gone off like a bomb in the humanities and the social sciences.

Much ink was spilled that decade laying out exactly how no position is neutral. Tracing the pervasiveness of power took up everyone’s energy for quite a long time. In significant ways, ethnomusicologists haven’t gotten much further than this, but we are stuck for real reasons.

I will be unapologetically polemical in this essay. I hold that ethnomusicology is always already neutralized in music departments, and our acceptance of music as an aesthetic framework ensures we cannot and will not have much critical clout. Many ethnomusicologists spend our professional lives arguing against powerful assumptions that are wholly normalized in music departments, where juries and western art music theory courses still dominate. We do hard, long-term work under these conditions (i.e., getting ethnomusicology courses to count toward the music major, for example) (Wong 2006), but working with or against the assumptions driving music departments means, necessarily, that we have been co-opted before we even begin our work. We count our successes in telling ways, e.g., when our courses are accepted and thus assigned cultural capital by the very ideological system with which many of us have real issues. We give ourselves over to value systems that dictate we work in permanent states of contradiction and asymmetry. We are familiar with Audre Lorde’s warning that

© 2014 by the Society for Ethnomusicology

the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house but we don't know what to do about it (Lorde 1984:112).

If ethnomusicologists want our work to matter, we must de-link (not rescue) our work from music as a historical and ideological construct. Ethnomusicology is marginalized in most music departments because its radical relativism challenges logocentric thinking about music. Gary Tomlinson has argued this repeatedly (1999:344):

[M]usic signifies not an ideologically neutral, cross-cultural array of sounding phenomena but rather a constructed cultural category—one indeed that is, as we delimit it, and viewed against the long historical *durée*, recent and local. The problem with 'music' is one familiar to us from other naturalized constructs. It tends to stand outside our thought, directing it but inaccessible. Music's transparency gives it power to determine our discourse while remaining invisible to it. In this it operates together with another construct, the aesthetic, that emerged in the eighteenth century just as music (again, the cultural category) was attaining its modern form.

The bedrock structures of music departments rely on this interconstitutive relationship between music and the aesthetic, and Tomlinson argues that this epistemology is powerful precisely because it is invisible and inaccessible. Many ethnomusicologists work in an environment where we can only intermittently identify the terms of that epistemology and render its structures marked and visible; when we do, we risk removal from the playing field. Susan McClary goes further, asserting that the ontological reliance on music as a cultural category has compromised music scholarship (2000:7–8):

But music studies . . . has long denied signification in favor of appeals to the 'purely musical,' that places music beyond the reach of 'mere' social arrangements. And this history of denial, I would argue, has put us in what is no longer a tenable position for our understanding of musical cultures, either past or present.

McClary notes this denial first hardened into the commonsensical and then into "the status of social contract" (5), and this is the crux of the matter: the aesthetic and the music object cannot be disentangled because their relationship is already rendered as natural. Similarly, Adorno argued that the conflation of beauty and autonomous music is an ideology of advanced capitalist society; he wrote that "Music is ideology insofar as it asserts itself as an ontological being-in-itself, beyond society's tensions" (Adorno 1949:100).

Yet ethnomusicologists are wed to music as a cultural category because of our reliance on relativism. In the United States, the ethnomusicological problem with music begins with our origin myth, i.e., with the powerful imprimatur of Merriam, who was at pains to delimit a framework for defining music "from the standpoint of scientific analysis" (Merriam 1964: 26–32). Merriam's purpose was to delineate the ethnomusicological object of study, and he thus asserted

that “music cannot be defined as a phenomenon of sound alone” (27). As an anthropologist, Merriam needed to create an object of study that wasn’t “just” sound. One of the first things we learn as young ethnomusicologists is that music is thoroughly contingent. As Nettl writes, “Very few societies have a concept (and a term) parallel to the European ‘music’” (2005:17). Klaus Wachsmann acknowledged the ethnocentric premise embedded in ethnomusicological work (1971:384):²

I could say to myself that those phenomena outside my own immediate culture to which I now attach the label “music” because I recognize and acknowledge them to be music, are merely so labeled because, rightly or wrongly, they seem to me to *resemble* the phenomena that I am in the habit of calling music in my home ground. I am used to thinking of a (more or less) certain group of phenomena as music; this group embraces a number of different properties that I cannot clearly define, yet I have no doubt that they belong to this group “music.”

In sum, both ethnomusicologists and musicologists have identified the problem with music but I ask whether ethnomusicologists are willing to acknowledge our reliance on the same historical connotations and premises that shackle historical musicology. We rely on relativism but keep one foot on home base. If we ever hope to say what we really want to say, we will need to reject music.

The Power Problem

Ethnomusicologists focus on power in our research but don’t have much of it, structurally speaking. Ethnomusicology speaks from the periphery, not the center. Ideologically and methodologically, ethnomusicologists tend to side with the powerless³ and sometimes romanticize music’s ability to shift power. When we teach in music departments, we are often surrounded by the musics of elite systems, whether aristocratic courts or the radical avant-garde. Teaching and writing from a discipline that is *not* powerful has advantages, of course. Despite our critical subjectivities, however, a real shift has taken place: ethnomusicologists have taught in music departments for long enough that more and more of us serve as department chairs⁴ or as deans and provosts:⁵ some of us now oversee the edifice that once viewed us as interlopers. Indeed, many of us still view ourselves as disenfranchised interlopers, trespassers, and meddlers, but the gatecrasher—in some places—now oversees the core curriculum. Ethnomusicologists are not only institutionalized in (some) music departments but have been given the keys to the kingdom. Harry Berger rightly calls for ethnomusicologists to “rethink our traditional but undertheorized populism” (Berger 2014), and we face special opportunities and challenges when we are not only embedded in but put in charge of elitist structures. This terrain is

dizzily uneven: if the institutionalization of ethnomusicology is now well underway in some places, it has barely begun in many others. As Berger noted when responding to an early draft of this essay, both our successes and failures are part of incomplete revolutions.⁶

For the past thirty years, we have turned to Foucault, Gramsci, Bourdieu, Said, and Baudrillard to understand power. Humanities scholars have gone from discovering that power is everywhere, to assuming its ubiquity, and then to expecting that scholarly work should trace its movement. Foucault famously argued that power is a relationship, not a thing, and that power and freedom have a complicated relationship, a “permanent provocation” (1994:342) in which the two are not mutually exclusive but rather interdependent in ways both unstable and perpetually linked (347). Ethnomusicologists who teach in music departments can attest to this, but I would go further. Ethnomusicology *cannot* matter because the humanities in the United States are largely irrelevant; our problems are part of a much bigger set of problems.

Media scholar Toby Miller argues that humanities scholars have retreated to positions where we are all too easily regarded as interesting but superfluous thanks to long-term defunding (2012:17–28). Nor can ethnomusicologists congratulate ourselves for already participating in what Miller calls “a new, refurbished, collectivist humanities” that emphasizes “multiple languages, numbers, ethnography, geography, environmentalism, or experiments” (122–123) because we are wholly dependent on the cultural category of music. Music *cannot* matter (and those who focus on it cannot matter, either) due to an extended post-Enlightenment ideological process casting Music as the feminine corner of the humanities (i.e., as feelingful, experiential, embodied, and unnecessary) (Solie 1993:13–14; Tolbert 2002).

Beyond Music

Rather than argue that many cultures do not have a general word for music (true though it is), we would do better to address the more pressing problem: our *raison d'être* relies on music as an ontological construct, and that construct contains the very terms for our unimportance and irrelevance. A body of commanding work has already intervened by resituating music as noise and sound (Feld 2003; Cusick 2006), and the best of such work forces a reconsideration of the taxonomies allowing us to think/not think about music and power. Performance studies, sound studies, and the anthropology of the senses offer the most obvious tools for breaking free from music. The anthropology of the senses relocates sound and hearing in the sensorium (Banes and Lepecki 2007). Michelle Kisliuk has long argued that ethnomusicologists should reconceive our work as

performance studies because we generally work hard to effect “the breakdown of the odd boundaries between ‘music’ and other aspects of enacted life,” but we shy away from the full implications of our own work because “as soon as the theoretical, political, and socioaesthetic agenda of ethnomusicology . . . begins to be fully realized, it implies its own abolition” (1998:313).

Similarly, sound studies disrupts the taxonomies that enclose ethnomusicologists’ work. As Attali famously wrote, music is noise (1985:6),

All music, any organization of sounds is then a tool for the creation or consolidation of a community, of a totality. It is what links a power center to its subjects, and thus, more generally, it is an attribute of power in all its forms. Therefore, any theory of power today must include a theory of the localization of noise and its endowment with form.

While far-reaching work has gone on in sound studies since the 1990s, it occupies only a small (though growing) corner of ethnomusicology. As Kara Keeling and Josh Kun observe, this is “a moment [in the humanities] when the study of sound and listening is suddenly more ubiquitous than ever” (2011:446). Scholars in anthropology, cultural studies, literary studies, American studies, communications, and beyond, work on sound rather than music, positioning music as only one of many kinds of cultural noise. Sound studies has stretched and expanded from R. Murray Schafer’s earliest work (1977), to Feld’s acoustemology, to *Sounding Out!*, an extraordinary peer-reviewed interdisciplinary multi-authored blog established in 2009;⁷ it encompasses a sprawling range of work that is not immune to the baggage of the humanities generally. As Jonathan Sterne writes (2012:3, 9),

Sound studies’ challenge is to think across sounds, to consider sonic phenomena in relationship to one another—as *types of sonic phenomena rather than as things-in-themselves*—whether they be music, voices, listening, media, buildings, performances, or another other path into sonic life. [. . .]. We must not automatically take any sound in its own terms, but rather interrogate the terms upon which it is built. We must attend to the formations of power and subjectivity with which various knowledges transact.

Thick, particularistic ethnographies of music and sound will always be important, but ethnomusicologists must resituate the place of both music and particularity in our critical value system. As novelist Alice Walker has written, “The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don’t have any.”⁸ In our humble, grounded way, ethnomusicologists give up our power over and over again because we will not break away from music. I choose to leave music behind, and will stop rerouting my projects to wrestle music into center place. Music is already at journey’s end of rationalist ideologies that performatively render it powerless. Ethnomusicologists pour much of our critical effort

into explaining that music has power, is powerful, and has effects. Of course it does, it is, and it always will, but engaging in that dialectic activates ideologies of the transcendent, or the master's tools, or both. If we have to actually explain how and why music is political, we have already lost. So, I am leaving music behind. I will follow the trail of sound, noise, and silence, which makes powerfully audible the questions I find most important.

Notes

1. University Press Books in Berkeley.
2. I am indebted to Ian Cross for this quotation (Cross 2012:20).
3. Ethnomusicologists serve a real function in this regard. Higher education administrations rely on us to serve the needs of multicultural curricula by doing this kind of work. At the same time, it is also important for the sustained authority of music department structures to have only a small number of ethnomusicologists and world music courses so that the balance of things is not disrupted or (really) challenged.
4. Mark Slobin and Eric Charry (Wesleyan University, Department of Music), Kay Shelemay and Ingrid Monson (Harvard University, Department of Music), Gage Averill (NYU, Department of Music), Robert Garfias (University of Washington, Department of Music), Eileen Hayes (Towson University, Department of Music), Aaron Fox (Columbia University, Department of Music), Harris Berger (Texas A&M University, Department of Performance Studies), Anne Rasmussen (College of William & Mary, Department of Music), Henry Spiller (UC Davis, Department of Music), Ben Brinner (UC Berkeley, Department of Music), Chris Waterman (UCLA, Department of World Arts and Cultures), Steve Pond (Cornell University, Department of Music), and myself (University of California, Riverside, Department of Music).
5. Robert Garfias (UC Irvine, Dean of the Arts), Gage Averill (University of Toronto, Dean of the Faculty of Music and then Dean of the Mississauga Campus, Arts & Science; University of British Columbia, Dean, Faculty of the Arts), Tim Rice (UCLA, Director, Herb Alpert School of Music), Dan Neuman (University of Washington, Director, School of Music), Bonnie Wade (UC Berkeley, Chair of the Department of Music 1983–88 and 2005–2009, Dean of Undergraduate Advising 1992–98, Chair of the Deans of the College of Letters and Science 1994–98, Chair of the Group in Asian Studies since 1999), Dan Neuman (UCLA, Dean of the School of the Arts and Architecture 1996–2002, and Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost 2002–2006), Chris Waterman (UCLA, Dean of the School of the Arts and Architecture), Lorraine Sakata (UCLA, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, School of Arts and Architecture). Bonnie Wade noted (personal communication, March 28, 2013), "I think ethnomusicologists are good at administration because we deal with people." Similarly, Aaron Fox wrote (personal communication, March 25, 2013), "I think our advantage also stems from being ethnographers. It makes it simpler to crack the political codes and structures of something simple-ish like an academic department if you've practiced doing it under more complex situations. [...] I think the extent to which ethnographers have broad experience in contexts outside the academy is a reason so many ethnomusicologists have wound up in practical leadership roles."
6. Personal communication, February 25, 2013.
7. At soundstudiesblog.com.
8. I have not been able to find the original source for this quotation. It is quoted at <http://livingempowered.areavoices.com/2010/10/top-25-empowerment-quotations-for-women/> (accessed on November 1, 2012).

References Cited

- Adorno, Theodor W. 1949. *Philosophy of Modern Music*. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Attali, Jacques. 1985. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Banes, Sally, and Andre Lepecki, ed. 2007. *The Senses in Performance*. Worlds of Performance. New York: London: Routledge.
- Berger, Harris M. 2014. "New Directions for Ethnomusicological Research into the Politics of Music and Culture: Issues, Projects and Programs." *Ethnomusicology* 58 (2): 312.
- Cross, Ian. 2012. "Music and Biological Evolution." In *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*, edited by Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, and Richard Middleton, 2nd ed., 17–27. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Cusick, Suzanne G. 2006. "Music as Torture/Music as Weapon." *TRANS-Revista Transcultural de Música* 10. <http://www.sibetrans.com/trans/a152/music-as-torture-music-as-weapon>.
- Feld, Steven. 2003. "A Rainforest Acoustemology." In *The Auditory Culture Reader*, edited by Michael Bull and Les Back, 223–239. Oxford: Berg.
- Foucault, Michel. 1994. *Power*. Edited by James D. Faubion. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York, NY: The New Press.
- Keeling, Kara, and Josh Kun. 2011. "Introduction: Listening to American Studies." *American Quarterly* 63 (3): 445–459.
- Kisliuk, Michelle. 1998. "A Response to Charles Keil." *Ethnomusicology* 42 (2): 313–315.
- Lorde, Audre. 1984. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. New York, NY: Crossing Press.
- McClary, Susan. 2000. *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form*. Bloch Lectures. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Merriam, Alan P. 1964. *The Anthropology of Music*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Miller, Toby. 2012. *Blow up the Humanities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Nettl, Bruno. 2005. *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-one Issues and Concepts*. New edition. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Schafer, R. Murray. 1977. *The Tuning of the World*. New York: Knopf.
- Solie, Ruth A. 1993. "Introduction: On 'Difference.'" In *Music and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, edited by Ruth A. Solie, 1–20. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sterne, Jonathan. 2012. "Sonic Imaginations." In *The Sound Studies Reader*, edited by Jonathan Sterne, 1–17. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Stoller, Paul. 1989. *The Taste of Ethnographic Things: The Senses in Anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Tolbert, Elizabeth. 2002. "Untying the Music/Language Knot." In *Music, Sensation, and Sensuality*, edited by Linda Phyllis Austern, 77–95. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Tomlinson, Gary. 1999. "Vico's Songs: Detours at the Origins of (Ethno)musicology." *The Musical Quarterly* 83 (3): 344–377.
- Wachsmann, Klaus P. 1971. "Universal Perspectives in Music." *Ethnomusicology* 15 (3): 381–384.
- Wong, Deborah. 2006. "Ethnomusicology and Difference." *Ethnomusicology* 50 (2): 259–279.