

The Anthropocene and Music Studies

By Jim Sykes

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The following claim, for some of us, seems obvious: the normative disciplinary boundaries of music studies—historical musicology, ethnomusicology, music theory, and composition—are intimately linked to the discourses, processes, and values that facilitate the Anthropocene^[1]. (Or if you wish, the Capitalocene: for I will suggest below, in the limited space allowed, that these emerge from a symbiosis between a longstanding (pre-Reformation) Christian notion of the human, celebration of the divine, and art as glory (Agamben 2011), on the one hand, and the birth of capitalism, on the other.) To put this another way, we are living our academic lives through mid-twentieth-century disciplinary divides that embed much older European-derived ideas that—not coincidentally—helped produce and legitimize what Clive Hamilton describes as “active human interference in the processes that govern the geological evolution of the planet” (quoted in Angus 2016:53). Some of these include: a certitude in human triumphalism, demonstrated by investment in linear narratives of human progress and cultural development through music; anthropocentrism, via a conceptual split between nature and culture; and a sedimented disciplinary division between “the West” and “Rest”. Less obvious (though I will argue also vitally important) is a conceptual sheltering of creative or artistic labor in music departments so that it appears related simply to human expression and its commodification rather than to the production and maintenance of the Earth system, or what in the literature on the Anthropocene is known as Gaia; and lastly, we find a conception of “the world” in our disciplinary divisions that recognizes different ontologies of music/sound but—proceeding via human spatial and temporal scales—embeds uniform ontologies of the self, the social, territory, time, and how these (and all beings) relate (i.e., a specific “worldview”). All studies of music either fit the worldview embedded in our disciplinary divisions or must be squeezed through an ontological funnel to be made legible within them. This is not to say music studies shuns difference: it transforms it ^[2].

The foundation of musicology and ethnomusicology, for instance, both utilize the “container model” for thinking about culture that has been long criticized in anthropology (e.g., Gupta and Ferguson 1992). This remains at the core of our normative conception of music history, in which an “understanding of the general and the global” (space) is used to conceptualize the local (place), after which places are considered able to be compared at the global scale (Messeri 2016:14). This includes the idea that music history just naturally consists of distinct ethnic, religious, national, and other groups that “have” their music which, by definition, reflects or produces their identity. These supposedly pre-formed (that is, seemingly internally-constituted) communities are *then* conceived as converging upon one another through encounters (e.g., globalization) to produce new identities (e.g., cosmopolitans). Music studies’ belief in a uniform metaphysical reality despite evident differences among diverse peoples about what constitutes humans, space, and time is an example of what John Law dubs a commitment to the metaphysical truth of the “one-world world” (Law 2011). This is a Northern-derived notion of “a world that has granted itself the right to assimilate all other worlds and, by presenting itself as exclusive, cancels possibilities for what lies beyond its limits” (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018:3). Arturo Escobar writes that the one-world world (OWW) operates via “a twofold ontological divide: a particular way of separating humans from nature (the nature/culture divide); and the distinction and boundary policing between those who function within the OWW from those who insist on other ways of worlding (the colonial divide)” (2016:21).

I stand on the shoulders of many giant scholars, and what I’ve said above is not new. But let’s dwell on it for a moment. Consider, for instance, if I were to write music history as though reincarnation *actually exists*—as though two humans (or a human and nonhuman), separated by great distances and eras, have a shared music history because one is the reincarnation of the other. Consider if Feld had written *Sound and Sentiment* from the birds’ point of view, or better, as though the birds really *are* the Kaluli’s deceased ancestors (perhaps he did—but do we act this way when we read or teach the book?). Such ontologies beyond the nature/culture divide are branded “beliefs” and situated within music studies’ normative conceptions of music, territory, and culture, rather than be taken as the *form* through which we present our studies. (Rather than get hung up on what constitutes reality, let’s agree that adopting the forms and values of Others in our writing does not require us to actually believe what we are representing *per se* but requires respecting “the ontological self-determination of the world’s peoples” [Viveiros de Castro 2003:18; Holbraad et al. 2014; see Steingo and Sykes 2019]).

The term “Anthropocene,” so widespread in the academy and now even in popular culture, has been surprisingly

under-defined in music studies (even in ecomusicology; e.g., Allen and Dawe 2011; see Ochoa Gautier 2016). Popularized by atmospheric chemist and Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen in the early 2000s, the term refers to “a new geological epoch displacing the Holocene epoch of the last 10,000 to 12,000 years” (Angus 2016:9) in which “human activities, not natural processes, are now the dominant driver of change on Earth’s surface.” The term thus does not refer simply to the climate crisis but to the fact that “changes resulting from human actions in this world...are so large and ubiquitous that humans are now behaving as geological forces” (Pereira Savi 2017:945). Writings on the Anthropocene in the popular press have fostered discussions on the impact of humans on the environment and the question of sustainability, while scientific discussions have centered on interpreting data on the anthropogenic impact to propose a starting point for the Anthropocene (ibid. 371). Crutzen and Stoermer (2000) locate the Holocene-Anthropocene boundary in the second half of the 18th century, when trapped air in polar ice cores were found to have elevated levels of carbon dioxide and methane, a period that includes Watt’s 1783 invention of the steam engine (Braje 2015: 373). Numerous scientists since have argued this periodization denies the “millennia-long history of human impacts on the planet and fails to focus on the causes of human domination of the Earth in favor of the effects” (ibid. 369).^[3] For my purposes here, I am interested in how the Anthropocene crosses “one of modernity’s fundamental intellectual boundaries,” between “the ‘natural’ and ‘human’ sciences” (Moore 2016:3). My interest is in the use of aesthetics to reshape the “distribution of the sensible” (Rancière 2004:12)—the sensed hierarchy of social relations—through the questioning of fundamental metaphysical categories that arises when we put ethno/musicology’s area studies paradigm into dialogue with (on the one hand) the conception of globality and its transformation named by the Anthropocene and (on the other hand) the ontological differences music studies has so often encountered.

“Gaia” was coined by James Lovelock and promoted by Lynn Margulis to refer to the Earth as a self-regulating system, and it has become a core concept in discussions of the Anthropocene. While “Anthropocene” forges a “new age of time” in which human history is considered within the scale of the biological and geophysical sciences, “Gaia” denotes “a new way of experimenting space” (Viveiros de Castro and Danowski 2018:172; Latour 2017). When I refer to a relationship between music studies and the Anthropocene, I refer in large part to our historic inability to promote a conception of music, on a global scale, that enhances the capacity of the Earth to exist as a self-regulating system. This is because, as I suggest in more detail below, many musical/sonic actions conducted in world history for precisely the purpose of protecting and regulating the planet have been misunderstood or rebranded as expressions of a particular human cultural identity.

To take one example—it would be easy to trot out a long list here—consider the original job of the *devadasi* (dancers in South Indian Hindu temples) whose job it was to safeguard “the generation of Cosmic Energy in the *linga*,” which if not “safeguarded...cooled off (by various offerings) and reabsorbed into an undifferentiated unity” would “burn up the entire kingdom and *bhutiloka* would come into existence” (Kersenboom 1987:120). This genre is now called Bharata Natyam, has seemingly been disenchanting, and is a hallmark of South Indian cultural (and Tamil ethnic) identity. What was about protection through showing respect to Others has become about pride through performing for oneself and one’s cultural or ethnic community—and this is perhaps the dominant ontological transformation in the world’s music history. All the while, the anthropocentrism and human triumphalism promoted by our normative conception of music history feeds into a willful ignorance of humans’ capacity to relate to the environment (“The expression ‘relation to the world’ itself demonstrates the extent to which we are, so to speak, *alienated*” [Latour 2017:14, his italics]). It undergirds our neglect of how our exploitation of the Earth’s resources are straining the planet’s capacity to exist. All this may sound cheesy, but that does not make it untrue. I take this argument as my starting point here (see Sykes 2018 for an elaboration); I’m more interested for the rest of this short essay in what to do about the situation, intellectually and disciplinarily. Of course many other aspects related to the Anthropocene will have to be taken into account by music studies, such as reducing the carbon footprint of our academic conferences, considering sustainability for musical instrument building and the ecosystems in which musics are situated (e.g., Titon 2009), and critiquing the waste of the music industry (DeVine 2015; Silvers 2018); but I fear we may only focus on those (worthwhile) aspects while ignoring how the very problems that constitute the Anthropocene deeply shape our academic disciplinization, areas of inquiry, and modes of representation.

Difference and the Global

In his famous 2009 essay, Dipesh Chakrabarty argued that while critiques of capital remain important, an emphasis on globalization “allows us to read climate change only as a crisis of capitalist management” (2009:212). For him, the problem is not just capitalism but the difficulty for humans of identifying with the concept of species that was

“politically mobilized by naturalists such as Edmund Wilson...a collective identity that is phenomenologically empty” (Viveiros de Castro and Danowski 2018:174). What is needed, Chakrabarty asserts (as Viveiros de Castro and Danowski put it in their summary of his essay), is a new historical subject that is “impossible: humankind as a subject, precisely” (ibid.).^[4]

This global and inclusive rendering of the human—as species and thus, presumably, without culture or with a uniform culture—would seem to be impossible and ethically problematic for music studies. For decades, music scholars have retreated (for good reason) from the universal. But as William Connolly notes, to consider the universal as the opposite of difference “reduces the essentially relational character of difference to the bland idea of diversity among independent identities” (1995:xx). As Alain Badiou puts it, “The single world is precisely the place where an unlimited set of differences exist . . . far from casting doubt on the unity of the world, these differences are its principle of existence” (2008:39). As I hinted above, music studies *already* produces a uniform notion of the global through a discourse on difference (multiculturalism) that embeds a Western ontology of the human, space, and time.

The crisis called the Anthropocene, I suggest, requires a new orientation to the universal for music studies and this does not mean suppressing difference. In this light, the power of music studies is not so much in giving voice through representation but in helping conceive and promote understandings of the human and how humans relate to each other and the world. It is less about pride and more about protection through the promotion of narratives of relation. What needs to be addressed, then, is how music studies might facilitate different articulations of the global that allow for local comparisons outside the terrain of one-world metaphysics. I contend this means making “a transition from one-world concepts such as ‘globalization’ and ‘global studies’ to concepts centered on the *pluriverse* as made up of a multiplicity of mutually-entangled and co-constituting but distinct worlds” (Escobar 2016:22). This requires not just acknowledging different *musical* ontologies as though they exist in isolation but acknowledging historical entanglements between differing ontologies of music/sound, personhood, community, human-nonhuman relations, territory, time, and so on. Methodologically, it requires what Giorgio Agamben calls “a politics of vital forms, that is, a life that cannot be separated from its form,” and this does not mean such forms are static.^[5]

Sonic Protection / Immunity

My Buddhist interlocutors in Sri Lanka would be surprised to know that many in the West feel that Western classical music is exceptional because in the Romantic period music was theorized as transcendent from society. For my interlocutors, the music they play—conceived as sacred speech so that it will be acceptable as an offering to the Buddha—is the music the gods played to celebrate the Buddha’s Enlightenment. It stands outside time and is conceived as unchanging; it is transcendent. Drummers are not the composers of this speech but the handlers of it. It was sent to them via a gift exchange in which the gods gave it to an indigenous group called the Vāddas, who gave it to the Sri Lankan (Sinhala) Buddhist caste of drummers I work with, called the Berava (Sykes 2018). What makes Western classical music different, I suggest, is not the notion of transcendence but, first, how it hinges on the idea that music emanates from an inner self that is ontologically closed (not permeated, for instance, by godly or demonly possession, not stretched across time and distance via reincarnation) in which music is presumed to say something about what constitutes that inner self; and (second) a failure to recognize music *ontologically* as a gift that may be conceived as having nothing to do with an internal self, which is offered to and connects people with Others, from different human communities to beings like gods, demons, spirits, animals, and objects imbued with value. I suggest such a view—which emerges in any number of ways among diverse peoples—is a more globally justified understanding of music history than the Western notion of musical selves and expression that emanated from the West and then has been uniformly applied elsewhere.

It will help to consider a few examples. Consider the Iñupiaq of Alaska, who receive music as a gift from whales (Sakakibara 2009); the Temiar in Malaysia, a rainforest peoples who receive songs from nonhuman animals and inanimate objects in dreams (Roseman 1991); or the Suya in Brazil, who accept music as a gift from neighboring communities (Seeger 2004). Music-as-gift is just as evident in world religions: I’ve already provided a Buddhist example from Sri Lanka (see also Wong 2001) and a Hindu example from South India above. One could argue the entire core of Carnatic classical music (compositions called *kritis*) were conceived as gifts to gods. From a casual perusal through the *Excursions in World Music* textbook alone, we learn that in Japan, “until the Edo period, musical creation was regarded as a gift from god” (Wong in Nettl et al. 2016:212), in South Korea, “two times a year...on the grounds of the Munyo shrine in Seoul, a ceremony is performed in which highly formalized court

dances are performed and sacrificial gifts are presented to the great Chinese Confucians” (Pilzer in *ibid.* 173), in Java the sacred dance *bedhaya* was “clearly a gift from He Who Is Great and Holy and meant to be a *pusaka* [treasure, heirloom] for the kings of Java that would bring blessings” (Warsadiningrat cited by Capwell, in *ibid.* 240), and that among Native American communities it was traditionally common for songs to be received (be given?) in dreams (Nettl in *ibid.* 437). It is widely believed that Bach conceived of his music as having come from God (Sykes 2018:5). Why stop there? Music is probably a gift more often than it is not in secular contexts (and in capitalism, e.g., the “free download” [*ibid.*:15]). Saying as such does not mean musical offerings always connect people (or do so positively), for gifts mark differences between individuals and groups (Weiner 1992)—my purpose here is to locate them simply as a ubiquitous social field relevant for music history. I suggest that once we notice commonalities across the globe that differ from the Western worldview—a widespread belief in music-as-gift is just one example—we have some basis for an alternative method for conceptualizing the world’s music history outside OWW.

I emphasize that my call here should *not* be taken as a wish to amplify supposedly pre-existing, homogenous, racially essentialized practices that—especially when linked to religion—favor elite perspectives and today form the core of religiously-based ethnonationalist movements (such as Hindutva in India, the 969 movement in Myanmar, Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka, and so on). Rather, the historical narrative has to recognize similarities and historical connections across cultures and species without resorting to a naïve retreat of comparative musicology and refusing to position itself as a chance to “make each culture great again.” Such a recognition of heterogeneity should be positioned as a fulcrum towards an equitable future, not a reclaiming of a mythologized, elite-oriented, precolonial past. Recognizing that “*the plane of existence is not one plane of existence*” (Povinelli 2014; her italics) does not necessitate a return to the figure of “the primitive,” as Bessire and Bond (2014:444) memorably put it: “is there anything more banally modern than that orthodox dialectic of Otherness wherein Indigenous ontological legitimacy is restricted to the terms of an alterity grounded in myth with which many do not agree and from which many are always already excluded?”^[6] Rather, I suggest this project will require building a new music history for the world (not: “world music history,” a term that somehow typically occludes the West) that re-situates and re-animates the persistence of alterities and sonic exchanges in the wake of modernity’s physical and intellectual transformations—not as lying at the margins but at the center of our global narrative. This is indeed a provincializing gesture. I mean no ill will towards my colleagues who study Western classical music; rather, the point is that the way of framing the world that emanates from that tradition is intellectually a bad one when considering the history of music throughout the *longue durée* of world history, including in the West itself.

One might misread me above as suggesting we should go back to “myths” and “refute science.” But as Talal Asad puts it, “Myth was not merely a (mis)representation of the *real*. It was material for shaping the possibilities and limits of action,” a “desire to display the actual” that “became increasingly difficult to satisfy as the experiential opportunities of modernity multiplied” (2003:29). What I am suggesting is that we utilize narratives of music history to construct a vision of humans in which we think about music as a kind of action that connects us to human and nonhuman Others, that this is a “desire to display the actual,” and that using music (and music history) in this way *actualizes* a respect for Otherness and the Earth that is necessary for combatting the Anthropocene. As Escobar (2016:17) puts it, “To think new thoughts...requires to move out of the epistemic space of Western social theory and into the epistemic configurations associated with the multiple relational ontologies of worlds in struggle.”

Wark (2019) argues that the Anthropocene needs to be read “through the figure of immunity rather than community.”^[7] Rather than using one-world conceptions of musical meaning to understand music *in* the Anthropocene, we need strategies for immunizing our field *from* the one-world metaphysics that generated its crises, from musicology’s lack of considering race (Bohlman 1993) to the challenge of the Anthropocene and those who continue to be left out by the division between ethnomusicology and musicology. As Ochoa Gautier puts it, “The point is not to negate that the ear produces an ontology of the relation between the person and the world, but rather not to confuse that with our own notion of relationality. What this implies is the need to explore the richness of a multiplicity of variables among what different peoples consider the given and what they consider the made that come together in the acoustic” (2014:22). This requires a cosmopolitics (Stengers 2014) for music that is the opposite of the universalizing of the human that goes under the guise of cosmopolitanism and multicultural inclusion.^[8]

Singular/Plural

Tim Ingold worries that denoting multiple ontologies results in a *fractiverse* in which each society, even each

person, appears to be in a world separate from others. He urges us to turn away from ontology towards *ontogenesis* (“the becoming of being”), a term denoting that “every being or thing is open, subject to growth and movement, issuing forth along its own particular path within a world of nevertheless unlimited differentiation.” He believes this “allows us to reconcile singularity and multiplicity, agency and patency, within *one* world.” (2018:167).^[9] Ingold seeks to universalize an ontogenesis he sees articulated by Inuit views of the soul, which he reads in a dichotomy with Western notions via Roy Wagner’s (1975) *The Invention of Culture* and Descola’s (2013) *Beyond Nature and Culture*. Both of these books denote two “ontological regimes,” the “Western” and “tribal” (Wagner’s terminology) or “naturalism” and “animism” (Descola’s terminology). Western naturalism denotes distinct objects over a common ground, denoting distinct individuals and cultures through a process of *articulation*. By contrast, much as a crease in a folded paper is still *in* the paper, animism sees the world as primordially undifferentiated, as *continuity*, as “populations of more or less identical individuals but with a continuum of yet-to-be differentiated relations” (Ingold 2018:164). If the soul in the Western perspective carries distinct individuality and identity, in animism “there always remains a memory of that undifferentiated potential from the interstices of which every being is drawn. This memory is the soul... a constant reminder of the viscosity of the relational field, and of the effort that has to be put in to work against it” (ibid. 163). Ingold urges us to proceed not via “the naturalistic dyad of identity and diversity but...the animistic pairing of continuity and differentiation” (ibid. 165).

I must admit I am hesitant to simply flip the binary and define all the world’s music history, including European music history, through an “animistic pairing of continuity and differentiation.” But I suggest Ingold’s notion of *ontogenesis* and his insistence on reading global communal formations and individuals through the notion of continuity is useful for promoting a holistic music studies in which one-world metaphysics is just one kind of system—even in Europe—among others in the intersecting *pluriverse*. Even modernity, through such a light, is continuous rather than transformative; consider that traditional practices like trance mediumship, for example, may allow “claims to a shared modernity and, as a modernizing strategy, [evolve] along nationalizing, folklorizing, and missionizing practices that expand and circulate in networks of migration and in transnational media networks” (Behrand et al. 2014:7). This is different from saying such practices are changed by modernity into something totally different from what they were—rather, it is to note that people through their practices make use of modernity for their own sustainability and shape modernity in their likeness.

Glory, (Dis)Enchantment, Capital

May I suggest at this juncture that certain studies that have done the spadework to analyze the roots of our disciplinary worldview—one thinks of Ana Maria Ochoa Gautier’s (2014) *Aurality* and Philip Bohlman’s long history of discussing the occlusion of difference in historical musicology (e.g., 1992) and Johann Gottfried Herder’s (1744-1803) contributions (e.g., Herder and Bohlman 2017)—should be considered historical musicology. Though written by ethnomusicologists, they are after all about the historical emergence of our disciplinary divisions and presuppositions, not texts to be conceived of simply as ethnomusicology. The core suggestion I want to make here is that we need to dig further into the European past than, say, Romantic era views of “the work” or colonial encounter.

Amitav Ghosh notes a historical turning point when he says that “even within Christianity, it was not till the advent of Protestantism perhaps that Man began to dream of achieving his own self-deification by radically isolating himself” before God (2016:87). Herder, the inventor of the term “Volksmusik,” was indeed a Lutheran (Bohlman 2017:2). The New Musicology viewed an ontological transformation in European music as having occurred through aesthetic decisions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but there is now acknowledgement that Protestantism’s ontology of the human formulated relations between sound and vision (what Sterne calls “the audio-visual litany” [2003:15–19]) that influenced (via a Protestant secularism) the formation of modern sound reproduction technologies. It seems obvious to me that studies of the theological, social, and material processes that generated the audiovisual litany will have to begin well before New Musicology’s starting point (i.e. before the second half of eighteenth century)—the Protestant Reformation is one place to begin. Another is capitalism’s tendency to present “a fantasy of wholeness, one that operates to obscure diversity and disunity” (Graham 1995:193; cited in Biersack and Greenberg 2006:11). Treating capitalism as an ecology, which is to say as a particular way of understanding of human/nonhuman relations, I wonder if we may explore whether the Protestant-derived audio-visual litany and its view of the self were necessary for finding a place for music and musical labor in capitalism. Recognizing this, I suggest, will be necessary for producing an alternative history of music/sound amidst but not defined by the ontological foundations of capital. As Deborah Wong insightfully notes,

this will require expanding and moving beyond ‘music’: “our *raison d’être* relies on music as an ontological construct, and that construct contains the very terms for our unimportance and irrelevance” (2014:350). This is because “music is already at journey’s end of rationalist ideologies that performatively render it powerless” (ibid.). The link between capitalism and Protestantism is of course long acknowledged (e.g., Weber 1905) but the manner in which they combined to transform music and musical labor in their image is a major gap in the historical record for music studies. I suspect it was these elements, through the political liberalism written into colonial law (particularly in the British colonies)—through which culture became defined as interior and related to community, and the market as public (Birla 2009)—that first brought the Western notion of music as expression/identity to the rest of the world.

I suspect, though, that the relationship between music and the self I am linking to Protestantism built upon a *longue durée* stability in Western thought about the *function* of music that can be traced to early Christian relations between government, religion, music, and glory, that is “between power as government and effective management, and power as ceremonial and liturgical regality” (ibid.). Giorgio Agamben writes of a “special relation that ties glory to inoperativity” in both early Christianity and Judaism:

In Judaism, inoperativity as the dimension most proper to God and man is given a grandiose image in the Sabbath. Indeed, the festivity of the Jews par excellence has its theological foundation in the fact that it is not the work of creation that is considered sacred but the day on which all work ceases (Genesis 2:2–3; Exodus 20:11). Thus, inoperativity is the name of what is most proper to God . . . and, at the same time, that which is awaited in eschatology. (2011:239)

The work of Ochoa Gautier and Bohlman (among others) that explores the roots of the Western musical ontology as it was enshrined in our disciplinary divisions could be fruitfully put into dialogue with scholars of medieval Europe and even the ancient Judeo-Christian world. Which is to say, I suspect “the romantic aesthetic,” which “involved both a transcendent move and a formalist one” that “served more thoroughly to separate musical meaning from seemingly worldly affairs by merging form and content and eliminating mimesis as a goal of music” (Goehr 1994) has much earlier roots than German Romanticism, and it is this fundamental Judeo-Christian bias that has made Western thinkers unable to see music as something other than mere entertainment (“inoperativity is the name of what is most proper to God”) or the bestowing of glory to help produce sovereign, personal, or communal power and identity. One problem, as we see (for example) in the writings of Rancière and Attali, is that Western writers often assume functional art (as craft, mimesis, and ritual labor—what Rancière (2004) calls the “ethical regime”) gave way to a “representational regime” that, in virtue of new specialists supposedly above the status of mere laborers, laid the groundwork for the musical commodity (“The artist was born, at the same time as his work went on sale” [Attali 1985:47]). But this transformation belies a fundamental continuity in music-as-glory in Western culture, while ignoring that in virtually every society around the world—including Western ones (!)—musicians still play the role of ritual laborers even when they are designated as artists. We might ask, as Agamben does (drawing on Schmitt’s critique of Weber) whether “theology continues to be present and active in an eminent way” within the supposed disenchantment of music in modernity (Agamben 2011:4).

In this context, it is worth emphasizing that “there is no evidence of the decline of religion in Asia,” even if “the problematic of ‘the secular’ in Asia is very important” (Dean and van der Veer (2019:1)—and surely the same could be said about many other places. What is important to understand is not simply the failure of the global disenchantment of music but the ways in which the discourse on sonic disenchantment coexists with its opposite. I am thinking here of my fieldwork in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), where public space for many is disenchanted, as people walk to work in dress shirts on ethnically diverse streets amidst skyscrapers and past Starbucks, while numerous Hindu festivals throughout the year (such as the annual Hindu festival called Thaipusam) involve devotees undergoing extreme acts of penance (hooks attached to their skin to pull chariots of deities, spears piercing their cheeks and tongue, etc.) along those streets, accompanied by drumming that supports trance. Recognizing the historic failure of musical disenchantment despite the ubiquity of its discourse is one core component of representing our interconnected pluriverse as music history on a global scale: the crossing of this-worldly (human) and that-worldly (nonhuman) divides over the *longue durée*. Against the nation-state model for *longue durée* music history, against “the West vs. the Rest” as a paradigm for teaching, and against “history vs. ethnography” as a normative methodological distinction, I suggest we need more encouragement and empathy for interconnections stylized not as globalization but as maintaining “the will to be otherwise” (Povinelli 2012) in the wake of encounter. This is one challenge for music studies in the Anthropocene.

Doing so, I suggest, will bring our definition of musical/sonic labor closer to types of labor typically considered radically distinct from it: investment banking, the hard sciences, and private security firms. Music history will become (a) stories of exchange based on hedging bets that build value; (b) histories of materiality explored through physics, biology, and the geosciences that are greatly enhanced through sociology and anthropology, via attention to (sound)waves, rocks, plants, bugs, and so on, from the big bang to histories of capitalism such as the extraction of shellac from the lac beetle to be used for records (Silvers 2018); and (c) stories of human protection and persistence in the wake of crises, in which the Anthropocene—though larger and more serious than previous ones—provides the impetus to reframe music history as a tale about the maintenance of the Earth system.

Musical Disciplines: Towards Twenty-First Century Praxis

In sum, many of us are attached to our subdivisions and academic societies; let me put some imaginary critics at ease here by saying we can have our cake and eat it, too. European music studies should exist as its own recognized and celebrated field. But “historical musicology” should refer to *any* kind of music history, anywhere, and accept that a plurality of ontologies (not just of music but of the human, the social, territory, time, and so on) means a plurality of forms for what constitutes music history, geographically and structurally. It means accepting music histories outside the container model. “Ethnomusicology” should refer to the method of doing ethnography, anywhere. It makes little sense that a scholar of (say) the current state of the *Jiangnan Sizhu* genre in China should be in the same subfield as someone studying (say) the early history of samba in Brazil—especially since the latter is the direct result of colonial processes that connect Brazil historically to Europe. Consider that a student wanting to study music history anywhere outside the West will most likely have to sign up for a degree in ethnomusicology even if she wants to do archival research and a project that does not require ethnography. Our disciplinary divisions embed an assumption that the non-West is “the people without history” (Wolf 1982), accessed primarily through ethnography. While many scholars today combine ethnography and history, it makes sense (to me, anyway) to define historical musicology and ethnomusicology via method rather than place (e.g., Rice 2010)—but we should be careful that our methods do not presume the metaphysical reality of the OWW but allow us to study its emergence and effects.

In my opinion, this does not have to be a fight. It is an expansion—though admittedly through a displacement of the Western ontology from our intellectual formal structures and eliminating the disciplinary emphasis on the West/Rest distinction. This means it is long past due for ethnomusicology to cease being the dumping ground for otherness—and again, I mean no ill will here towards European music studies (having canvassed opinion, I think most scholars working on European music, at least the younger generation, agree in many respects with what I’ve outlined here). European music studies should be its own thing—and it can be strong and continue to be an important force in music departments—so long as the definition of historical musicology expands. This is simply the smart thing to do: we are academics, we want our thinking to be based on sound arguments. In history departments, for instance, there are no “ethnohistorians” who study the rest of the world outside Europe and European histories. There are simply historians with different regional specializations, of which Europe is one. We are at a point where ethnomusicologists now study the West, quite frequently, but job openings rarely if ever call for an ethnomusicologist who studies the West. Ethnomusicologists have, I suggest, largely moved into a definition of ethnomusicology as method, while historical musicologists (at least in job calls) seem to retain a definition of their subfield as region. This is ironic, for the disciplinary divide places history on the side of historical musicologists (who tend to emphasize *era* distinctions among themselves), thus downplaying the fact that the field *within music departments* mobilizes itself largely as region.

Perhaps “theory” and “composition,” likewise, can be expanded in ways that both retain their current focus and become methods emanating from diverse anywheres rather than from a single Western musical heritage. Taken on name alone, the journal *Analytical Approaches to World Music* should refer to all music theory anywhere, including the West. My point is not to critique that journal (which I have published in), but rather that Western music theory can remain its own distinct field without positioning itself as music theory, full stop, in such a way that places everything else into its own, singular category. This could happen through more recognition of regional differences (say, music journals dedicated simply to Indian, or Javanese, or Chinese, music theory) with publications positioned simply as “music theory” being diversified and not simply reduced to Western music theory.

Of course I know these are among our most contentious issues—perhaps the very definition of a “third rail.” I doubt that *anyone* will agree exactly with what I’ve written here. (While I write as an ethnomusicologist, I admit that my own field has its own biases and shortcomings, and also that historical musicology has already expanded in

important ways in recent years.) We do not need to agree on where music studies should be headed; my aim in this essay was not to lay a clear path forward but to argue—even if you do not agree with my suggestions for disciplinary change—that whatever path we choose, we need better recognition that the intellectual presuppositions behind our disciplinary distinctions are rooted much farther back in Western metaphysics than modernity, and that this metaphysics, through certain social processes (e.g., capitalism), generated the Anthropocene. Most of us find a way to do the work we want to do *despite* the normative disciplinary identities and distinctions in music departments; they are widely perceived now as a roadblock, except for the small number of people they benefit. Moving beyond these twentieth-century biases needs to be at the core of our discussions about musical disciplines, but in a way that is respectful to all. If we are good public intellectuals, we can play some role in articulating a vision of self and world that contribute, even if a little, to sustaining the planet—at least until we terraform Mars.

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[1] I would like to dedicate this essay to my graduate students, who have helped me think through many of the issues in this paper—especially Andrew Niess, whose dissertation (in progress) is devoted to thinking through sound and the Anthropocene. (I should stress that all ideas here are my own.) I would like to thank Gavin Steingo for reading a draft of this essay. I am solely to blame for any mistakes or failures of the imagination.

[2] I do not believe “ontology” is another word for “culture” (Venkatesan et al. 2010)—while I have dubbed our disciplinary divisions a “worldview” I mean here a definition of *what exists* and how such entities relate and are deemed worthy of study through sound/music. In Viveiros de Castro’s (1998) terms, music departments proceed through a belief in “one nature, many cultures”.

[3] The start of the Anthropocene has been placed as long ago as the early Holocene (roughly 10,000 years ago) and as recently as fifty years ago (Braje 2015: 371).

[4] Yet because “Anthropocene” appears to mark all humans as responsible for the climate crisis rather than a few companies, CEOs, and politicians responsible for major decisions causing environmental damage, several scholars—notably Haraway (2017) and Moore (2016)—argue “Capitalocene” is a better term since it “signifies capitalism as a way of organizing nature—as a multispecies, situated, capitalist world ecology” (Moore 2016: 6). It should be obvious that I suggest music studies needs to adopt the “Capitalocene” mantra, since it will allow us to situate music and sound in the material and social processes that generated the crisis.

[5] <https://libcom.org/library/god-didnt-die-he-was-transformed-money-interview-giorgio-agamben-peppe-sav%C3%A0>

[6] It will be important to nuance a distinction between sound and music in such a project. The link between music and identity has often transformed certain practices that may best be described as “sound” (and which link peoples *to one another* and *to nonhuman entities*) into distinct “musical” genres perceived to be related *just to a single human community*.

[7] <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4236-elizabeth-povinelli-when-the-rocks-turn-their-backs-on-us>

[8] “For those who support cosmopolitanism, this is the field of human political action, while for advocates of cosmopolitics the world is something to be constructed involving human and non-human actors” (Flores Silva 2017).

[9] Lisa Lowe prefers the terms *residual* and *emergent*, referring to “the implied but less visible forms of alliance, affinity, and society among variously colonized peoples beyond the metropolitan center” (2015: 19) and suggests that “the management of life and death that we now associate with neoliberal security regimes and the state of exception in crisis and war are constituted in and through” such “colonial differences” (ibid.: 16).

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