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Review

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Queering the Field: Sounding Out Ethnomusicology is a powerful book that an international community of ethnomusicology should welcome wholeheartedly. It sets out to chart a “queer ethnomusicology,” thus following in the footsteps of a queer musicology. That it has taken over a quarter of a century since the publication of *Queering the Pitch* ([1994] 2006) for such a volume to appear is something that the authors themselves reflect upon. In the foreword, Kay Kaufman Shelemay states that “[e]thnomusicological research and writing have long been a heavily androcentric and heteronormative domain” (3). As Gregory Barz writes in the introduction, queering ethnomusicology is about “the queer rejection of heteronormativity in field research design and implementation, the queer embrace of sound as embodied, the queer critique of gendered binaries, the advocacy of queer-identified musical individuals and traditions, and the queered rethinking of inherited theoretical models for analysing and performing global music traditions” (9). In its reflexivity and scope, it is reminiscent of *Shadows in the Field* ([1997] 2008) – Barz is a co-editor of both projects – and despite its attempt to resist disciplinarity and institutionalisation, it has inevitably already become part of the ethnomusicological canon.

The volume is an intense read, especially for those of us who identify as queer. It takes a holistic understanding of ethnomusicology as a discipline and practice, focusing on fieldwork, fieldwork colleagues, ethnographic writing, and life in the academy. Through their candid reflections on ethnographic messiness and vulnerability as well as offering insight and foregrounding potential, the “authors are taking risks” (27), Barz

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reminds us. It is important to note that nearly all contributors are based in the US or have studied there, and many authors are from a particular generation of scholars completing their PhD between the late 2000s and the late 2010s. The book is expansive and long, consisting of 22 chapters and divided into eight parts. These parts bring together different chapters under specific themes, though owing to the numerous connections and overlapping themes there are many other ways in which the book might have been assembled. Notable themes that emerge are reflections on roles of queer ethnomusicologists in the field; challenges to the models of the discipline in terms of fieldwork methods, ethics, and institutions; and also debates about the term ‘queer’ and the potential imperial consequences of global LGBTQ+ rights discourses and activism.

In line with a feminist anthropology and ethnomusicology, many of the authors offer much important reflection on their roles in the field. Zoe C. Sherinian, by discussing her long career working as a scholar and activist in different parts of India, considers the presentations of gender and sexuality we bring to the field and how they are (mis)read in the contexts in which we work. Such a line of reflection is taken up by many of the contributors, including Kathryn Alexander, who addresses the challenge of being a queer scholar in the particular “patriarchal and heteronormative system” (292) of square dance she studied in Cape Breton Island. This leads her to argue that the disclosure of gendered and sexual dynamics of the researcher are an ethical imperative: “Desexualizing and ungendering the researcher, through omission or reflexivity, is a kind of closeting that distinguishes us from the thoroughly unpacked identities of our subjects. It shores up our competence as experts and professionals” (301). In fact, much of the book is about ‘uncloseting’ and disclosure. Another thoughtful example of this is Nicol Hammond’s account of studying white Afrikaans popular music in South Africa, where she both celebrates and warns of the intense nature of fieldwork: “ethnographic fieldwork is like having sex: relational and intimate, capable of being deeply pleasurable, deeply uncomfortable, and deeply damaging – sometimes all at the same time” (54). Considering the strong connections between queer scholars’ experiences in the field, the book strongly suggests the notion that there might be a queer ethnomusicology, a question that is at the heart of Barz’s chapter. Seeing this volume as a queer sibling to the queer musicology texts of the 1990s, Barz argues that queer ethnomusicologists – through their heightened ability to empathise and greater connection to the body and understandings of identity and alterity – are potentially better positioned to do ethnographic work.

Many authors employ their queerness to ask pressing questions of the discipline of ethnomusicology and the types of methods, representational strategies, and institutional structures it has nurtured. Drawing on experiences as a researcher and teacher of Irish music, Tes Slominski takes a broad and sober perspective – on the dynamics of ethnography and institutions. She observes, in dialogue with Sara Ahmed, how “home is belonging is happiness, while away is not-belonging is unhappiness – is queerness” (222), thus highlighting the inherently queer nature of much ethnomusicological enquiry. But this is not to imply that only certain types of fieldwork are queer. Indeed, Amber R. Clifford-Napoleone reveals the complicated and fraught nature of working in

a context in which she imagined was “home.” Discussing her research on queer fans of heavy metal, she notes the prejudice she faces from colleagues as well as the new sense of detachment from her field. She argues that “[b]eing a native ethnographer means understanding one’s position intimately and using it as a vehicle for embodying the complex, expressive, and conflicted lives of ourselves and our subject(s)” (285). Such reflections are complemented by Christi-Anne Castro’s chapter on ethnographic fieldwork in and writing on the Philippines. Here, she reconsiders the politics of the closet to conclude hopefully that “queer ethnography is both a critique of orthodoxy and an exploration of what more can be known and articulated” (118). Where Castro sees potential, Alexander M. Cannon sees necessity: “Ethnomusicology desperately needs queer orientations” (136). Confessing his own intimate queer relationship during fieldwork in Vietnam, Cannon suggests that only through letting go of outdated fieldwork models was he able to achieve a better understanding of the traditions he studies: “To queer one’s fieldwork means to embrace fluidity and step outside the binaries – male and female; dominant and subordinate; homosexual and heterosexual; emic and etic – imposed on the individual in the field” (p.121).

Indeed, much of the volume reaffirms that the essentially improvised and experimental nature of fieldwork is often much more pronounced for the queer fieldworker. Recounting his many years of research on gay identity in Cuba, Moshe Morad shares the fraught nature of fieldwork as a non-Cuban with people whose lives are under constant surveillance. In a frank statement, he assesses, “[i]f queer means breaking conventions, opposing normativity and dichotomies, and ‘anything goes,’ then my fieldwork experience and methodology were definitely queer” (159). This contrasts interestingly with Peter McMurray’s reflections on ethnographic experiences in Berlin. Here, he draws on encounters with Sufi *zikrs* and the queer club night *Gayhane* to call for new modes of fieldwork, specifically positing sensual ethnography as queer methodology. In turn, this forms an interesting counterpoint to the work of Jeff Roy with transgender and Hijra communities in India. Through a deeply self-critical discussion, he charts his endeavours to develop new ethnographic film methods that are less documentary but rather participatory and performative. “[R]evisioning new possibilities for yourselves and others” (184), such an engaged method, he posits, could be labelled as “queer ethnomusicological filmmaking.” Sarah Hankins offers perhaps the frankest account, depicting a personally and ethically fraught and traumatic episode in Tel Aviv. Advocating a psychoanalytical approach, she surmises that the challenges of queer ethnography are the seeds of its own potential: “Queer ethnographers will always face messy, complicated realities of difference in our fieldwork. At times, we won’t be able to get our bearings – but those moments might be opportunities for our richest, most nuanced ethnographic work” (363).

While queer ethnography seems to push beyond normative boundaries of methods, it also has the potential to raise pertinent questions about power hierarchies, research ethics, and agency. Aileen Dillane and Nic Gareiss’ chapter on queerness in Irish dance offers a critique of research ethics boards for their heteronormativity and underlying conservative university institutional norms. But they extend this line of questioning

further to the discipline of ethnomusicology, stating that, “[f]or all its built-in reflexivity, ethnomusicology as an institutionalized practice within particular university/national contexts (and possibly more broadly) may sometimes prove more conservative and unaware of its heteronormative structures than the music (and dance) traditions it purports to study and reveal” (256). Likewise, William Cheng’s reflections on earlier fieldwork in virtual spaces leads to a poetic unpacking of his own complicity in ethical codes that serve to maintain scholarly detachment and unwittingly perpetuate forms of hetero-patriarchal violence. Juxtaposing this with two other events – including the suicide of the trans woman Rachel Bryk – Cheng philosophises that, “[m]y responsibility is to queer allies, students, and individuals like Rachel Bryk who deserve my voice of resistance more than they need my behavioural propriety or my signature on an authoritative contract” (332). Another field site that raises methodological and ethical quandaries is nightlife, the subject of Luis-Manuel Garcia’s contribution. Pointing out the lack of normative ethnographic method training, he highlights not only the logistical challenges posed by queer nightlife spaces, but also issues of health, safety, and the complex “identity management” of queer researchers. He too, drawing on conversations with three colleagues, advocates for “processes of improvisation, experimentation, and revision that are indispensable to queer nightlife fieldwork” (252).

Another pertinent thread throughout the volume is the politics of the term queer and the imperialism of global LGBTQ+ rights discourses. Queer hip hop is the subject of Matthew Leslie Santana’s chapter which offers an important critique of the whiteness of the term ‘queer’. Advocating a Black/queer studies and queer of colour critique, he explores intersectional readings of artists who employ “tough love as a critical performance tool” (196). Henry Spiller draws on his extensive work in Indonesia to question whether queer readings are apposite in understanding *topeng* (masked dance) performance. While from a ‘Western’ perspective *topeng* might appear to exhibit transgressions of gender norms, “[i]t is doubtful, however, that queer as a category makes any sense at all from a *topeng* insider’s perspective” (215). Likewise, Cory W. Thorne argues that Afro-Cuban religious Santería ceremonies within drag queen performances in gay bars are not transgressive of social and gender norms within a local context. This leads him to argue for a “decolonized queer theory” that is respectful of an “emic perspective” (379). Again, there are similarities with *La danza Bugabita*, a rural Panamanian dance-drama that acts as a case study for Heather J. Paudler’s chapter. Exploring the intersections of gender, sexuality, and race, she highlights how national/imperial readings of gay identity have actually led performers to abandon the tradition. She poses the provocative question: “How do presumptions about the ‘normative queer,’ for example, idealize certain expressions of queerness that, in turn, produce new forms of hierarchy?” (258). Finally, in Gillian M. Rodger’s chapter, we learn how the dangers of mapping queerness across cultural contexts also apply in historical work. By studying male impersonation in variety entertainment and popular theatre in the 19th century USA, she reveals the challenges of doing archival work and the lack of sources on “queer” figures, and reflects on the ethics of imposing one’s own understanding of gender and sexuality onto the past.

Through its probing at the heart of contemporary music scholarship, this is a book for all music scholars. There is no one way to read this book and readers are certainly free to trace their own narrative path. While some chapters are stronger than others, none of them stick out by themselves. The richness of the book emerges from the chapters as a collection and in dialogue with each other. Indeed, for those wanting a quick dip into what queer studies in ethnomusicology might be, there is no one chapter that will offer that overview. Likewise, it is important to note that this collection does not offer an exhaustive approach to queer studies through the lens of music. With so many important insights and perspectives, it is difficult at close proximity to note the absences and silences left by the book. Some topical themes in queer studies, such as HIV/AIDS, temporality, pedagogy, and kinship, are not addressed. Likewise, the volume focuses more on disciplinarity and methods above teaching and institutional building.

Overall, I feel this book has helped me to better understand my own work, my methods, and my career. I am grateful for the thorough scholarship, honesty, and vulnerability the contributors shared, which invites engaged and reflective reading. In particular, I was struck by Hankins' words: "As a white woman academic, my privilege has often allowed me to substitute theorizing for actual lived experience, and I can easily use theory to validate, not challenge, my established self-perceptions" (361). Her chapter urges us to look deep into ourselves and demand, with due self-care, answers to painful questions. That Halberstam's notion of "queer failure" (2011) becomes a theoretical tool for many of the contributors reveals the importance of speaking out about the delicacy and frailty of ethnographic work often rendered invisible in the neoliberal academy. And Slominski's chilling conclusion, where she laments all of those of us who might have been excluded from the academy, is a call to resist the neoliberal spaces that are the home of the discipline. Perhaps most helpful is Garcia's advocacy, via queer studies, for "weak methods" (351–352), an approach which abandons universal perspectives and guidelines, but instead foregrounds the local, individual, and queer. We, as an ethnomusicological community, would do well to train, supervise, and mentor colleagues and students in ways that are more apposite to their particular contexts and open to the possibilities and limitations of them as individual scholars. As Cheng writes, "[e]thnography is already much queerer than we assume. Yet it can be queerer still" (328).

References

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