PROJECTS

Ethnomusicologists as Public Intellectuals: Engaged Ethnomusicology in the University

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Applied, public, or engaged ethnomusicology is more typically envisioned as an alternative career choice to academia, rather than as the obligation of all ethnomusicologists (whether inside or outside of academic institutions) to share their expertise and their training widely. Even when academic ethnomusicologists discuss applied work, they often frame their ethical responsibilities as products of the need for reciprocity (as fieldworkers) in relationship to their informants and host communities. In this essay, I propose rethinking the grounds for public ethnomusicology. Drawing on my own experience with the Community Arts Technical Assistance (CATA) Project at New York University, I advocate for a public sector feature to academic careers in ethnomusicology and for the teaching (and institutionalization) of applied ethnomusicology in university curricula. I also argue for considering public and applied ethnomusicology as a localized or disciplinary-specific manifestation of the scholar as public intellectual.

Toward an Engaged Ethnomusicology

I was once an undergraduate student in forestry, landscape architecture, and urban planning at the University of Wisconsin, home of the "Wisconsin Idea." In one summer course on historic preservation, my class surveyed the remains of nineteenth-century farmsteads to reconstruct them on the grounds of an historical park called Old World Wisconsin, and we presented plans for village historical preservation to local leaders in a small north Wisconsin town. However naïve and bumbling our efforts, the experience left a lasting impression concerning the potential for university activism and intervention in community life.

The "Wisconsin Idea," popularized during the first decades of the twentieth century, held that university-based intellectuals, especially social scientists, should serve on government advisory panels and think tanks; debate public policy; and study and report on poverty, industrial concentration, and labor relations, among other social ills (Fink 1996). The proponents of the Wisconsin Idea viewed the proper role of an institution of higher learning as a resource for society. They adopted the optimistic view that social problems could be ameliorated through the cultivation of an enlightened public and well-advised policy makers (despite the corrosive influences of monopoly power, economic disequilibria, and political power). Enlightened public discourse, they argued, requires the best information, statistics, interpretations, and opinions that can be mustered, and intellectuals were called upon to draw on both their area of specific expertise and their skills in general critique. The Wisconsin Idea coexisted with an expectation that land grant colleges—which had received large grants of land at public expense—should repay their debt to society (through agricultural extension, among other services), and this service imperative was reinforced by the volunteerism of the Robert La Follette brand of Midwestern Progressive Party politics.

This view of the public sector is consonant with Jürgen Habermas's notion of a rational public sphere of reasoned, democratic, collectivist discourse ("communicative reason") and enlightened citizenship.[1] The Habermas position is a defense of Enlightenment rationality in its transformative potential for society. The responsibility incumbent on intellectuals to contribute to society is an extension, in this argument, of good citizenship, of using the "life of the mind" to inform the life of society. Indeed, throughout the history of the academy, visions of intellectual life as a contemplative removal from mundane activities have competed uncomfortably with visions of the activist, the engaged or public intellectual. What circumstances compel intellectuals to advocacy, service, engagement, activism, and "intervention," and away from purely hermetic discourses, monastic-contemplative lives, and the so-called "ivory tower"? Political crises such as France's Dreyfus Affair, the Russian Revolution, the Spanish Civil War, the Weimar Period struggle against emergent fascism, the Civil Rights Struggle, the Vietnam War, Paris '68, the Prague Spring, and the global anti-colonial struggle

all have made persuasive claims on the activist sensibilities and passions of intellectuals. The Russian Revolution, for example, made the role of the intelligentsia a matter of great debate: was the intelligentsia a naturally revolutionary force? a parasitic class? or a sector whose radical intellectual commitments were undercut by its essentially bourgeois class position? These dramatic and convulsive social conflicts asked intellectuals to choose between poles of public commitment: between the liberal expertise model enshrined in the Wisconsin Idea and the revolutionary intellectual model of Antonio Gramsci, W. E. B. Dubois, Franz Fanon, or even Paolo Friere, scholars whose independent intellectual critique placed them squarely at odds with the structure of political power of their day.

Anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, and folklorists have inherited a rich legacy of activist work from the early days of the Bureau of American Ethnology, to the New Deal's Works Progress Administration and Federal Writer's Project, when B. A. Botkin, Alan Lomax, and others dedicated themselves to the service of cultural pluralism and community empowerment and against narrow elitist constructions of culture. We can point to a vast infrastructure of projects, agencies, institutions, archives, museums, and organizations that are devoted to these principles and that reflect the success of these earlier generations of activist intellectuals. We can also point to the slow (and contested) triumph of ideas of multicultural democracy and pluralist education that are also their legacy. It is absolutely critical that our discussions of engaged academic service and advocacy *not* proceed from a superficial and ahistorical view that this is something new.

I believe it is equally imperative that we look beyond ethnomusicology, indeed beyond the ethnographic disciplines, for compelling rationales to commit our scholarship to activism, advocacy, and to serving the "public good" (however we construct that rather nebulous ideal). The ethical necessity for intervention in the public sector is often ascribed to the nature of the fieldwork relationship, i.e., that the services provided to scholars by informants, collaborators, or consultants (services that vastly inflate the scholar's reputation, earning potential, and security) mandate reciprocal gestures.[2] Relationships of this nature *do* call for reciprocity, but this is far from the only, or even the primary, ethical motivation that should be guiding intellectuals in their applied praxis

and advocacy roles. The moral and ethical underpinnings of engaged ethnomusicology are much more complex than simple reciprocity. The *constituencies* for an applied praxis would certainly include communities within which we work, but they must also include a national audience in the host countries, scholars in multiple disciplines, policy-making bodies, governmental agencies, nongovernmental organizations, K-12 students, and consumers of music recordings; in short, the prismatic constructions of the "public." Most research universities conceive of their central mission as the production and transmission or dissemination of knowledge. The role for academic ethnomusicologists that I advocate in this essay is, in essence, an extension of the transmission and dissemination of knowledge to a wider audience (outside of the institutional teaching and academic publishing) through planning, advocacy, consulting, and other engaged roles, including acting as a social critic.

I came to graduate work in ethnomusicology after a number of years working as a tenant and community organizer, and so an academic advocacy seemed a perfectly natural turn to me. It was only after some time in graduate school that I realized that this constituted a source of debate and tension in the academy. My own response to this was to throw myself into a range of activities that I later came to call "public and applied"—I directed music and folkarts festivals, produced music radio and television programs and series, consulted with philanthropic organizations, served on juries of arts organizations, provided "expert testimony" to legal cases, wrote liner notes, and moonlighted as a music journalist/critic for *The Beat.* All of this activity counted not at all for tenure but fed my need to feel involved in the world. Still, I was doing all of this *outside of* my academic job, and I eventually realized that I wanted a better integration of the two. I began to focus on this more directly in shaping the ethnomusicology program at New York University.

The CATA Project

When I came to NYU, I challenged myself to think about the ways that a university program in ethnomusicology could participate in the cultural life of the city. I was unsure as to how receptive the

graduate student body would be to this style of work (and how resistant my colleagues would be). However, NYU's motto is "A Private University in the Public Service," so I took this as license to design a course called "Applied and Public Ethnomusicology" in order to explore "public sector," "applied," "engaged," and "public" ethnomusicology and "ethnomusicology in the public interest." The course did cover extra-academic careers in public ethnomusicology (our deans prod us to prepare our graduate students for both academic and non-academic careers), but also the many public and applied aspects of academic ethnomusicology, and we explored the rationales, philosophies, ethics, and politics of such work.

Assignments for the course were structured to mirror tasks confronting ethnomusicologists in public sector work: a) researching and documenting potential nominees for a "National Heritage Award," for which we held a mock Heritage Awards Panel, b) preparing an NEA-style "site visit report" on a festival or musical event, c) writing a "white paper" on cultural policy analysis and recommendations, and d) producing "forensic musicology" expert testimony for a copyright case, among others. Some of these assignments were to be completed alone; others involved teamwork and collective presentations. I also scheduled weekly visits from guest consultants ("reports from the trenches of public sector ethnomusicology") who could discuss the motivations, methodologies, difficulties, and rewards of public ethnomusicology. Speakers addressed subjects such as advocacy projects, film productions, world music journalism, folklife festival planning, collaborative album projects, community development through music, and public performances as ethnomusicological outreach and public education.

In conjunction with the course, I obtained funding for an academic outreach program called the "Community Arts Technical Assistance (CATA) Project."[3] CATA was designed with multiple possible benefits and outcomes in mind. I wanted to stimulate an ongoing dialogue and interaction with community organizations and artists. I hoped that the practical projects students undertook would help to build their research and documentary skills. I also hoped that the contacts with musicians, some of whom performed in genres of special interest to our graduate students, might further the students' own eventual dissertation research

contacts and plans. But mostly I wanted this activity to result in tangible benefits for the community artists and presenting groups.

In its initial phase, the project was designed to utilize the technologies available in the *EthnoLab* facilities at NYU and to put into use the training students receive (in interview techniques, multimedia documentation, publication, etc.) as resources for community arts groups. Rather than send students off on their own, I found it preferable to work through existing presenting organizations, and I consulted with members of various groups (CityLore, the World Music Institute, the Center for Traditional Music and Dance [CTMD], and the Smithsonian Folklife Festival). In the end, we worked primarily through the auspices of the CTMD.[4] In consultation with CTMD staff, each student or small team of students identified artists in need of documentation and other types of assistance; contacted artists with whom the CTMD worked; prepared a needs assessment in consultation with the artist(s); and developed technical assistance packages (brochures, web sites, CDs, videos, CD-ROMS and other multimedia forms) for the artists' grant applications, promotional efforts, concert interpretation, and outreach. Each student was also asked to assist the CTMD in archiving and cataloguing their own materials and those of the Center.

Outcomes

The products that graduate students produced in conjunction with their community artist-partners included:

- A Lincoln Center performance by the Korean Traditional Performing Arts Association that was organized, stage-managed, and emceed by a graduate student, who also wrote the stagebill.
- A complete revision of the brochure and web site for Irish uilleann piper Jerry O'Sullivan, with recordings, video, new photos, and new copy.
- New promotional videos for the Djoniba Dance and Drum Center, the Afro-Dominican group Palo Monte, and the Kotchenga Dance Troupe.
- An interview edited down into a promotional CD for the Rajkumari (Indo-Caribbean) Cultural Center.

- Demographic research for the "Mountain Jews *Nashi Traditsii* ('Our Traditions')" initiative of the Center for Traditional Music and Dance (focusing on little-known groups of Jews from the former Soviet Union), and video and photographic documentation of the festival that resulted from the community research.
- A promotional package with a biography, video, photos, and recordings of Dja Rara, a Haitian roots music ensemble.
- A new promotional package with biographies, descriptive copy, short video, photographs, and recordings of the Afro-Jamaican troupe Ancient Vibrations. Our student also wrote concert program notes for the group's performance at Symphony Space.
- A series of concerts in Brooklyn schools under the MusArt umbrella (a project of the New York City school system), organized by a class member.[5]

The CATA project produced a small amount of local publicity, including a full-page article in NYU's *Service Matters.* Subsequently, the programming coordinator for NYU-TV (the closed circuit television network for the University) asked to air the videotapes produced by the project along with interviews of students involved, and I was asked to present on the project at the 2001 conference *Local Music/Global Connections: New York City at the Millennium* at the City University of New York.[6]

NYU's connection to cultural organizations in New York City was stronger as a result of the project and course, and a number of the artists with whom we worked have raised the possibility of continued involvement. The benefits flowing from CATA to CTMD were, of course, modest, but according to CTMD staff, the outcomes more than justified the demands on the staff's time and expertise. Student term projects helped to professionalize the outreach and promotional profiles of some CTMD roster artists. In addition, student efforts in cataloguing tapes and recordings augmented the work of Center interns. Three students worked directly on preparing for one CTMD event, and one of them continued with the organization as an intern afterward. Two others were asked to write concert program notes for

World Music Institute. Three were asked to manage the groups they were assisting! CTMD and other community arts organizations have expressed interest in continuing the collaborative project.

The impact of this course on graduate training for future ethnomusicologists seems especially promising. Students were motivated to deepen their skills in audiovisual documentation and they spent long hours in the lab and in the field mastering new technologies. Most of the students gained additional exposure to potential research topics and to individuals who could help them with their research. The rather striking conclusion from this is that the emphasis on applied work actually strengthened their preparation for research (research and applied work are sometimes treated as philosophically and practically opposed). All of the students in the class noted that they expected to engage in more "public" ethnomusicology as a result of their experiences in the course, and they were certainly much better versed in the issues, terminology, and methodologies of public and applied praxis. I was particularly inspired by the enthusiasm of student participants for imagining an ongoing commitment to service, engagement, and advocacy in academic ethnomusicology. (It should be noted that two of the students later left the program to pursue career goals related to their course projects!)

There were also areas in need of improvement and better planning. For example, the timeline for completing work within a single semester was overly optimistic. CTMD needed to meet with students, put them in contact with artists, and train them in archiving, placing real burdens on the staff members. Our principal liaison was finishing his dissertation in the early part of the semester, and a couple of other key personnel left CTMD in the middle of our project, and thus students were sometimes adrift. These kinds of timing problems should be anticipated, but problems in contacting and securing work time with the artists were perhaps even more disruptive. A few of the artists were initially skeptical, unresponsive, or difficult to contact. Even after a "needs assessment" and work plan had been negotiated between the artists and student, the process of getting groups together for documentation purposes was often cumbersome and littered with broken appointments and no-shows. Thus, tangible results from the

project were slow to materialize, and it soon became apparent that most of the individual projects would not be wrapped up until well into the following semester. I think this served as an excellent object lesson in the unpredictable nature of working in the real world (where students could not always set the timetables)—and this has clear implications for fieldwork-based research—but it represented a difficult integration with a "semester-based" educational timetable.

Concluding Thoughts

New York City offers the most productive and fecund site imaginable for this kind of work. In New York's more recent migrant communities, the pool of talent from around the world is extraordinary, but these artists encounter fundamental problems in gaining access to resources. Many of these artists have full-time jobs outside of their performance activities and squeeze rehearsals and performances into their free time. Some have only limited command of English and some are undocumented. Some have little experience in dealing with the media and in writing grants and funding applications. Such groups are often plagued by high turnover rates and by lack of both the time and the money necessary to develop their own promotional materials and performance infrastructure. Community presenting groups fill a number of these voids, but they too face funding, personnel, and infrastructural issues. University-based assistance projects—which can draw on a steady base of institutional support, on a stock of computers and communications equipment (and pro bono web hosting), and on a steady supply of graduate student talent and energy—can provide a useful ongoing function in stabilizing community arts groups and artists and in making resources available to them.

The principal challenge in envisioning the second round of the project (and of the course) is to find ways to make the relationship less purely one of technical assistance and more one of collaborative training and resource sharing. Another challenge is to find a mechanism by which to disentangle the CATA project from the "Applied and Public Ethnomusicology" course and to make this work a more freestanding and continuous component of graduate student life at NYU.

Clearly, a project like the Community Arts Technical Assistance Project is only one of countless possible designs for putting the resources of the university at the service of the arts-in-communities. Any such project can bridge the gulf between a university and its host community (and wider society) and add real value to ethnomusicological training at the graduate and undergraduate levels. Imagine how much more ready students would be—having experienced this kind of work at the graduate level—to embark on academic careers of greater relevance to themselves and to their world.

Notes

1. See, for example Jürgen Habermas's historical analysis of the impact of the Enlightenment (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* [1991]), or his theoretical writings on the constitution of society, as epitomized by *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (1990). Also see Calhoun 1992.

2. I should note that the volume *Music in the Dialogue of Cultures: Traditional Music and Cultural Policy* (ed. Max Peter Baumann [1991]) explores a much broader role for ethnomusicologists in policy debates over traditional music. For a variety of constructions of the ethical imperative to applied work in ethnomusicology, consult the abovementioned edited volume and two volumes of disciplinary journals: *Yearbook for Traditional Music* (Christensen 1996) and "Ethnomusicology and the Public Interest," a special issue of *Ethnomusicology* (Titon 1992).

3. The CATA project was funded by NYU's Curricular Initiative Grants and by a supplemental grant from the Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences.

4. I would like to acknowledge the important contributions of CTMD staff members Thomas Van Buren, Ethel Raim, and Martha Cooper, and of some of the many consultants for the project, including Nancy Groce, Roberta Singer, Martin Lipp, Lois Wilcken, Steven Feld, Michelle Kisliuk, and Lucy Duran.

5. This activity is, of course, the product of an especially energetic and determined group of students that included Lyndon Achee, Babette Becker, Tom Brett, Melvin Butler, Luther Elliott, Joyce Hughes, Gloria Lee Pak, Daniel Neely, John Runowiscz, Ted Sammons, Scott Spencer, and Eric Usner. I gratefully acknowledge their many contributions to this project.

6. This conference was co-sponsored by CUNY, NYU, and the Smithsonian Institution.

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