

# Doing our Essential Work

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**Keynote Address: Canadian Society for Traditional Music/  
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I am speaking to you from my home in Toronto, Canada.<sup>1</sup> I wish to acknowledge this land on which the University of Toronto operates and where my house is located. For thousands of years, it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and, most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous Peoples from across Turtle Island and I am grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land. (<https://indigenous.utoronto.ca/about/land-acknowledgement/>)

Thank you to the president and board, and leadership and memberships of the Canadian Society for Traditional Music (CSTM) and the Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM), for the opportunity to give this keynote lecture. It's an honour to be here.

I had really hoped this meeting would take place in Ottawa. I'm missing seeing all my friends, students, and colleagues, and celebrating your accomplishments. The last time I spoke at SEM was in 2017 on a roundtable organized by my colleague from the University of Toronto, Joshua Pilzer, about ethnomusicology in the Trump era. I had spoken about students and faculty who couldn't go to SEM in the United States because of Trump's travel ban. For those of you who can't remember that particular travesty, the travel ban blocked the vast majority of visa applicants from certain (mostly Muslim) countries from entering the United States because of their supposed threat to American national security. This time around, we face another travel ban — this time a Canadian government restriction on Americans because of our southern neighbour's

comparatively out-of-control spread of COVID-19. The one exception to the current border closure is for American “essential workers.” I’m sorry to report that — as of yet — ethnomusicologists are not considered “essential,” and so here I am, and there you all are behind your respective computers in your far-flung locales. Thanks for joining me anyway.

The name of this presentation is “Doing Our Essential Work.” Let’s get out of the way right now that this is a pretentious title. Who is this collective “our” that I’m referring to? Who am *I* to tell *you* what your or “our” work is? And didn’t I just imply that ethnomusicology isn’t essential? If our work as ethnomusicologists is not essential, can we find a way of making it so? The keynote abstract reads as follows:

*The global pandemic, racial injustice, economic pain, and the climate crisis are, at the time of writing, the most immediate, interrelated, and compounding phenomena that define the present moment. I hazard that one experience humans share today is regular confrontation with how very much we do not, but desperately need, to know. Every day, it seems, we learn new things about the novel coronavirus, institutionalized white supremacy, which workers are essential and why, how to wash our hands and wear a mask, and ... the list goes on. We cannot afford to ignore new information or its demands that we change our behaviour — the price of ignorance and inaction is far too high.*

*These are also days when many North American participants in the expansive, contradictory field of practice and study still known as ethnomusicology are questioning who, how, and what we teach, learn, and produce. Present challenges to the ethnomusicological status quo are informed by and participate in each of the crises listed above, which lay bare pre-existing and amplified structural inequalities across settings and scales. Who is centred and why? Which ways of knowing and communicating are privileged or sidelined? How are even the good-intentioned complicit in a host of failings, some of which we only perceive when those we have failed bring it to our attention? We need to learn and, based on this information, we need to act. Continuing self-reflection, self-education, and implementation is this moment’s essential work.*

I hope that my emphasis on learning and action will soften the pretension, but let’s keep going to find out.

The first thing I'll say is that though I'm the one monologuing right now, what's coming is the product of many dialogues — some imaginary dialogues with authors I've been reading, and many more actual phone conversations, emails, text messages, and other forms of communication with fellow scholars, parents, and people, only some of whom are named in this slide [see endnote.]<sup>2</sup> Keynote talks are intensely focused on one person, but I am thinking of this event more as me holding the mic in a long conversation and telling you about what I've been thinking, who I've been speaking with, and what I've been reading. During the question-and-answer period, I'll turn the mic over to you. I look forward to your thoughts.

## Essential Work

Let's return to the idea of essential work. Essential work in pandemic times means the labour of people supporting society's physical and economic survival, the people who rescue you, deliver you, and in lockdown, the ones who deliver *to* you. Our essential work as ethnomusicologists, folklorists, or anthropologists, and so on is obviously not in the same category. We research people, sound, culture, politics and more: our work is scholarship, education, and, to some extent, service. Our annual conference under normal circumstances would be a discussion of what we were doing in all of these areas, but especially research. For many of us, research is the focus of dissertation, hiring, tenure, and promotion committees as well. It is our *most* important work, which we showcase at our annual conferences for colleagues, mentors, current and prospective employers, and publishers. But this year, my thoughts (and maybe yours) are less about research and more about how the discipline of ethnomusicology generally, and the Society for Ethnomusicology in particular, is continuing to function in the flames sparked by Dr. Danielle Brown's Open Letter to Music Studies from June 2020 and in all the institutional chaos that has followed.

Here is a key section of Dr. Brown's letter calling ethnomusicology's foundations into question:

it is very clear to me that although many white ethnomusicologists understand interpersonal and systemic racism on an intellectual level, they just don't *get* it. ... Getting it means understanding that an organization, whose predominantly white members by and large research people of colour, *is and can be nothing other than a colonialist and imperialist enterprise*. Period. It is a hard pill to swallow but swallow we must. No matter how hard we try to

convince ourselves otherwise, until ethnomusicology as a field is dismantled or significantly restructured, so that epistemic violence against BIPOC is not normalized, Black lives do not matter (Brown 2020, emphasis in the original).

This critique of ethnomusicology is newly urgent in 2020. As the world seems to burn around us in racist, economic, pandemic, and climate-change-fuelled fires, Dr. Brown has reminded us that the house North American ethnomusicologists occupy was already on fire. Many of us just weren't smelling the smoke.

What do you do when your house catches fire? Maybe you try to save it, or maybe you let it burn. "Letting anthropology burn" is precisely the proposal of anthropologist Ryan Cecil Jobson in his reflection on the state of the discipline in the wake of American Anthropological Association's 2018 conference in San Jose. Jobson (2019) laid out a convincing case for letting anthropology burn, to "abandon its liberal suppositions" that never served its subjects, despite anthropologists' claims to the contrary. According to Jobson, "As a discourse of moral perfectibility founded in histories of settler colonialism and chattel slavery, liberal humanism and its anthropological register of ethnographic sentimentalism proved insufficient to confront the existential threats of climate catastrophe and authoritarian retrenchment" (2019: 259). I take Jobson's statements as a more sophisticated version of "the system isn't broken — it was built this way" slogan. We can't return to some "good" past version of the ethnographic enterprise because, according to these critiques, that past never existed. This isn't "Make Anthropology Good Again," or "Make Ethnomusicology Great Again," because the good old days were only good for some, certainly not for all. And so — let it burn?

Some people walk away from a fire — and I can understand why a person would, and why some people are. But that's not the only thing that's happening — either with Jobson (last time I checked he was still employed as an anthropologist by University of Chicago) or with ethnomusicology, not if the attendance of this year's SEM conference is any measure. It has been interesting to observe that many people's responses to the various crises in our field have been largely to *invest more* in the Society. The level of activity, speaking up, organizing, and leadership in SEM is the result of many people's decisions to *believe in the possibility of change*. I cannot imagine the labour, drama, time, and energy that has already gone into addressing where SEM has been and where it needs to go, and I am grateful to those who have taken it up. For the discipline to survive and not be a mockery of its own liberal humanist principles, it will take *work*. Will it be the "significant restructuring" that Dr. Brown calls for? That remains to be seen.

## Smelling the Smoke at University of Toronto

In the summer of 2020, another catalytic communication arrived in my email inbox, just a few days earlier than Dr. Brown's. This was a letter with over 370 signatures with a lengthy header announcing its demand: "CALL TO ACTION FROM [University of Toronto Faculty of Music] ALUMNI — Make addressing systemic oppression, racism, and coloniality a strategic, faculty-wide goal." The open letter was written to align with the timing of the Faculty of Music's strategic academic planning exercise, a series of faculty and staff-wide consultations with an outside professional facilitator that, in the past, at least, many of my colleagues and I found pretty uninspiring. Strategic plans gesture towards a set of ideals in language and turns of phrase borrowed from the University's ("Central's") document and are, in my limited experience, a long distance from the actual changes that faculty, staff, and students want and need to occur. And yet, we learned from then-Faculty of Music Dean Don McLean that a Strategic Plan was an absolute requirement and that its approval by "Central" turns it into something akin to a contract or accountability document against which our faculty's accomplishments and shortcomings can be measured. Our model was the University of Toronto's Faculty of Kinesiology's Strategic Plan: a full-colour, glossy booklet combining elements of promotional brochure and annual report and peppered with pull quotes about "excellence." University of Toronto's bureaucratic machinations are not well known to me, and I can't say what exactly happens when the Faculty of Music does or doesn't meet its strategic planning commitments and goals. But what I can say is that the document to which our focus groups, consultations, and surveys ultimately contributed became a publicity brochure brandished in a Faculty Council meeting and then went away. The final Strategic Plan of 2016 to 2021 was not just instrumental or idealistic but at times misleading. The document's sole full-page photograph featured a diverse group of brightly attired students in instructor Frederick Kwasi Dunyo's African Drumming and Dancing Ensemble. The caption reads, "UofT offers a wide range of World Music Ensembles and ethnomusicology courses." At the time of publication, World Music Ensembles were worth a paltry 0.17 credits: quite a gap between the full colour, full page symbolic value of "diversity" and its low credit value on an undergraduate transcript.

Given my disappointment and cynicism regarding our past strategic plan, I was surprised to see a letter from students that took the 2020 Academic Strategic Plan consultation as an opportunity to consciously, and conscientiously, shape our institution's future. I am including a lengthy excerpt from the Alumni Letter to communicate the range of the critique:

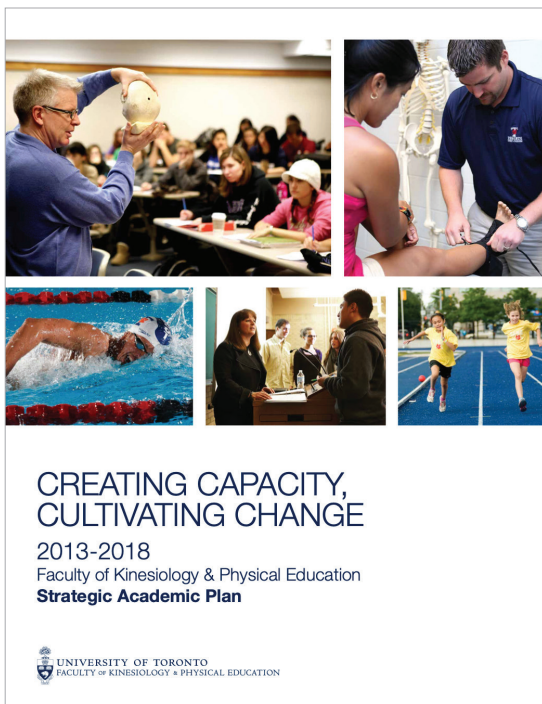


Fig. 1. University of Toronto’s Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education’s 2013–2018 Strategic Academic Plan.



Fig. 2. The University of Toronto Faculty of Music’s 2016–2021 Strategic Academic Plan, modelled on the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education.

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Fig. 3. The Table of Contents for the Faculty of Music’s 2016–2021 Strategic Academic Plan.



Fig. 4. This photograph of instructor Frederick Kwasi Donyo's West African Drumming and Dancing Ensemble is the only full-page image in the Faculty of Music Strategic Academic Plan. At the time, this ensemble — and all other non-Western performance ensembles — were one semester long, met once a week, and were assigned a mere 0.17 credit hours.

This strategic planning meeting at the University of Toronto Faculty of Music comes at a crucial moment in our community — one where, over the past years, months, and weeks, issues of coloniality, racism, and other systemic inequalities have been made more visible than ever in the public eye. We are writing this letter as a group of University of Toronto alumni, in the midst of ongoing racially-fueled police brutality in both the United States and Canada; continued systemic violence against Indigenous communities; and a global pandemic that has amplified and revealed the ways in which our social systems unfairly advantage some over others. We list these as examples of how our institutions are continuously failing the people they serve. ...

As a leading Canadian institution of western classical and jazz music, the University of Toronto Faculty of Music is fundamentally implicated in the establishment and perpetuation of these racist, colonial, and otherwise oppressive structures. Eurocentrism, white supremacy, and coloniality are built into the core of how we perform, analyze, teach, and learn classical music — and institutionalized jazz music owes its existence to the labour of BIPOC (Black/Indigenous/People of Colour) communities ... . In your 2016–2021 Strategic Academic Plan, you point to diversity of the student body, diversity of the city of Toronto, and academic diversity via enhanced “world music” curricula as key areas of focus. Our hope is that you now go further, by **making a strong stance against systemic racism, coloniality, and related issues a core planning goal**. This should be a concern not only in your ancillary curricula but in the core classical and jazz art forms taught at the school. It is an issue not only of diverse representation, but also of dedicating funding, programming, and training to crafting an explicitly anti-racist and anti-colonial school environment.

It is impossible to be at the forefront of musical education without acknowledging social issues that are central and urgent within our music community — and it is impossible to achieve what the 2016–2021 Plan lists as the school’s core objectives while this overdue action holds it back from being on the vanguard of music pedagogy in North America (Call to Action from Alumni 2020, emphasis in the original).



The 46-page letter's opening paragraphs are followed by a series of recommended action items and alumni's names, many accompanied by extensive, emotional comments about disappointing educational and advising experiences, descriptions of where their education had not prepared them for the world outside the University, and ideas for how the Faculty of Music could live up to its stated commitments. Many areas for improvement or radical overhaul were cited — including that the required curriculum includes just one course introducing students to non-Western music and that our Jazz faculty has no Black members. While most of the criticism was directed towards Western art music and Jazz curricula and the marginalization or exclusion of non-white students, musicians, composers, and others, ethnomusicologists did not escape critique. One person objected to learning about non-Western music from “white men teaching ethnomusicology from a white perspective” and another urged us to teach ethnomusicology in a way that was “21st century relevant.”<sup>3</sup> I was taken aback by the spirit, enthusiasm, and the optimism of the letter. The letter writers seemed to believe that the Faculty of Music could do better and that *we should try*.

### Why Not Work Towards Institutional Change?

Reading the letter was a moment to reflect on why I hadn't been trying to hold my institution accountable to these principles. I agreed with so many of the comments and critiques — what was holding me back? Well, many things. One of the most important reasons I wasn't committed to the cause was that working towards institutional transformation before tenure was not necessarily advisable. In the tenure and promotion metrics, “research” is counted separately from the work of “service” and “teaching”; external evaluators only review the research dossier. As a research-stream faculty member, I would be judged on my record of peer-reviewed publications, peer-reviewed scholarly presentations, and research grants; to keep my job, I needed to maximize my accomplishments in each of those areas. Accordingly, it made sense to treat academic research as my “essential (existential) work.” Of no less importance: agitating for change was not necessarily politically expedient. The Faculty of Music is focused on training performers of Western Art Music and, throughout its history up to the summer of 2020, has been conservative and overwhelmingly Eurocentric in its approach. I was not in a strong position to advocate for a mission shift because I didn't have individual power or allies in high places and because my continuing employment depended on being a “good (read: not difficult) colleague.” All the career advice I'd been getting from the National Center for

Faculty Development and Diversity, my near-constant virtual companion since I learned about it, guided me towards finding out what counted towards tenure and pursuing those activities relentlessly until I got there. Though I couldn't avoid the temptation of investing in teaching and designing new classes, I tried to be mindful of the fact that my priority had to be publishing.

Another factor: the start of my tenure-stream assistant professorship in July 2013 coincided with another new position. In January of that year, I became mother to twins. Raising my children was the *other* essential work that I was doing — and it wasn't just me: it was my husband (thank you, D), a nanny working 40 hours a week for a year and a half (thank you, R), a series of housekeepers (thank you, A, D, E, and S), and, once we made it to the top of the waitlist, full-time childcare around the corner from my house (thank you, Campus Co-op Daycare staff). There is a straightforward correlation between first-generation immigrant women's labour and my "individual" success: as soon as my family paid for childcare and help running the household, I was able to research and publish in ways that I could never have done without these women's contributions. I include this here because it is so infrequently acknowledged that professionals with care obligations can do their work by drawing on *other people's — usually women's — labour*.

To return to the original thread, there were many practical and self-protective reasons why institutional change wasn't on my personal to-do list. But there were other reasons as well that may be more broadly relatable to the listening audience. The first is this: I had resigned myself to the idea that ethnomusicologists in the traditional conservative North American music school are diversity workers, with all the qualified acceptance and acceptance of marginalization that position entails. To be more precise: we work on diversity and inclusion, but not equity. Take a curricular example that will be familiar to many of you: our beloved colleague Professor Emeritus of Ethnomusicology James (Jim) Kippen had fought for all undergraduates to take his course HMU11: Introduction to Music and Society. As Jim taught it, the course introduced students to the social and cultural study of music through a wealth of international case studies organized by issues and themes like religion, gender, nation, and more. As Jim recounts in a recently published history of the ethnomusicology program, the establishment of HMU111 in the required curriculum was a major victory (see Kippen 2021). And yet, for decades now, HMU111 has been the only required course in which most of undergraduate music students are certain to encounter non-Western music — precisely what some alumni complained about in the 2020 letter. I inherited the course in 2018, and I have been struggling with it. By continuing to teach it as it has been, I fear I continue serving the spicy side dish that has allowed

the institution to say it is committed to diversity without being committed to it at all. As Rinaldo Walcott has stated, following Sara Ahmed, “Institutions use diversity to produce the effect of not being racist and to pre-empt more radical transformative change that requires new collective imaginaries and modes of being in the world” (2019: 406). Gestures towards diversity — a full-page colour photograph of African drumming and dancing in the Strategic Plan, a single course in the core curriculum in which students hear non-Western music, the banner depicting taiko drummers draped over the Faculty of Music’s edifice — can “tick the diversity box” while forestalling deeper changes. Providing “difference” is what makes ethnomusicology essential to the contemporary Western art music school charged with diversifying its offerings in response to various external and internal demands.

If most of what ethnomusicology does for the Western music school is tick the diversity box, then ethnomusicology might also be dispensable. The knowledge of ethnomusicologists’ marginal status within Western art music-oriented faculties, schools, and departments can make even securely employed faculty feel insecure: we are grateful to have been included, and we don’t want to do anything to make anyone in power change or reconsider including us in the first place. That most of our colleagues are precariously employed exacerbates this insecurity and works against transformative impulses.<sup>4</sup> If an instructor is hoping for a contract position to be renewed, and if, in addition to being precariously employed, they are also from a minoritized, equity-seeking group or groups, it is not necessarily safe to question the grounds of their professional or personal inclusion. This is where the crisis of university labour meets the questions of our essential work. And it is why many of us — including me — learn to perform the “right kind” of non-confrontational, palatable difference required to acquire and maintain our jobs.

At the same time, I think it’s important to acknowledge that there’s a pleasant and at times empowering sense of moral superiority that comes with occupying the diversity slot. Compared to more transparently elitist, Eurocentric, conservative strands of musicology, music theory, and Western art music performance curriculum and pedagogy, ethnomusicology comes out looking as if it is doing the good work and fighting the good fight. This disciplinary self-conception is one reason why Brown’s critique of ethnomusicologists’ good intentions stung so badly — the impassioned torrents of defensiveness clogging the SEM listserv in response to Brown’s letter textually manifested deep discomfort and disavowal.

The foil of Western art music’s dominance in North American music departments is part of what has prevented ethnomusicologists in North America from a real reckoning with our discipline as what Brown calls “a colonialist and

imperialist enterprise.” It is no longer correct to assume that we have some moral superiority for investing in (and profiting from) non-Western and/or non-elite forms of music. We never had a right to this superiority, and we do not now. It may be just the opposite, or worse, because we used that position to assure ourselves of the rightness of the mission. It has taken us a few years to get to #ethnomusicologysowhite — our colleagues in the American Musicological Society got there first. It took Suzanne Cusick giving a graduate seminar at University of Toronto for me to hear the words “white supremacy” uttered in the same sentence as “musicology.” It took the cross-disciplinary Project Spectrum collaborators to bring us the demographic information on SEM’s membership. It took Jardena Gertler-Jaffe, Hadi Milanloo, and Ryan Persadie, three scholars I am privileged to have learned from and taught in UofT’s ethnomusicology program, to begin the Decolonizing Ethnomusicology Facebook Group that I would have never had the courage to start myself. It took alumni from the University of Toronto’s Faculty of Music — the vast majority of whom came there to study Western art music, the people I was pretty sure were only just tolerating ethnomusicology’s presence — to tell me in a way and in a time that I could hear that the institution needed to change. They had written things I knew, that I agreed with, and that I had to admit I had given up on.

## Running Into a Burning House and Other Acts of Heroism

What do you do when your house is on fire? Well, that depends on how you feel about the house. You might get a bucket of water and convince your neighbours to pitch in, hoping to save your home from destruction. You might run in and try to rescue some things that are special to you and let the rest of it go. You might join the volunteer fire department to stop something like this from ever happening again. Or you might walk away and let it burn.

After the June 2020 alumni letter, my colleagues and I waited for Dean Don Mclean’s official response. When it arrived, it wasn’t what I or others had hoped for. I was concerned that the momentum would stop with that disappointing response: it was COVID times, after all, and everything was up in the air, unclear, and unknown. Was this really the time to expect a robust reaction from an overtaxed administration that was not, even under the best of circumstances, predisposed to accept and act on these sorts of critiques? It was not easy to decide whether to reach out to colleagues about the alumni letter or how to help its concerns and suggestions be taken seriously. It felt risky, even — what if I didn’t get any replies, or any replies I wanted?

One of the best things about contacting my colleagues about organizing our own response was finding out that the Faculty of Music housed many, many people I didn't know at all who also wanted to make changes. Staff and faculty from across the disciplines and specializations collaborated on documents, collecting information, ideas and actions for curricular change, communications strategies, organizing, and all the other parts of making and advocating for institutional change. I knew my fellow ethnomusicologists were with me, but what was most encouraging was that music theory colleague Daphne Tan, music education colleague Nasim Niknafs, communications officer Natasha Smith, research grants officer Ely Lyonblum, alumni relations officer Tyler Greenleaf, voice instructor Elizabeth McDonald, UTSC music studies colleagues Marc Campbell and Laura Risk, and still others had great ideas, important insights, and were ready to be involved. Collaboratively writing a memo addressed to music's administration about how our institution was failing to live up to its "commitment to diversity and inclusion" was one of the most satisfying work experiences of my life so far. It was energizing and exciting to play a part in creating a community that was mutually supportive and working towards a shared goal. The strategic planning exercise could have been this but wasn't. That our conversations and collaborations occurred during the first months of the pandemic when in-person togetherness was impossible must be part of what made the experience so important. When more calls to action followed from current U of T students and faculty and students in Jazz, it felt like something was really happening.

And things *have* been happening — administrative, official, institutional things.<sup>5</sup> At our urging, the dean and the Senior Leadership Group created the Anti-Racism Equity Diversity and Inclusion Workgroup — acronym AREDI (all the stuff that should have "aredi" happened a long time ago — pardon the pun). I co-chaired AREDI with my colleague percussionist Aiyun Huang. The workgroup made recommendations. Faculty Council voted to create a permanent Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression Committee. The workgroup arranged for a faculty-wide anti-racism training. Jazz created its own task force. The Music Library, Voice, Piano, and other performance areas began working on diversifying their repertoire and audition requirements. Some especially invested undergraduates began a new student group called FoMARA — the Faculty of Music Anti-Racist Alliance. An ad hoc on-campus network emerged of all the faculty who have been given or taken on the role of divisional "diversity officer" — and there are so many of us, almost all women, many women of colour, many new to the job, and many going through similar convulsions in our respective academic areas.

All the same, it's not easy to be optimistic. I'm afraid to get my hopes up because the obstacles are many and the solutions, if that's even the right term, are so elusive. It is so much easier to write a document about what should be done (and especially what should have been done) than to do the other work of transformation. Sara Ahmed has told us that statements, policies, committees, and commitments do not a just institution make. An institution's stated commitment to diversity is more often than not a "non-performative." Playing with Austin's performative speech acts that do what they say (saying "I now pronounce you man and wife is performative" in that the words itself marry two people), Ahmed's non-performatives *don't* do what they say they will. A statement of commitment can "be a way of *not* bringing something into effect" (2012: 117, emphasis added). In plain words, it's talking the talk with no intention of walking the walk — talk *instead of* walk. Statements, commitments, and documents are one of the ways people get out of doing things, or saying that they've already done them, as if the text is the work. The land acknowledgement that I gave at the beginning of this talk could very easily fall into this "non-performative" category. We acknowledge the land in the process of institutional Indigenization recommended by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but verbal acknowledgement is as far as it goes. A much pithier real-world version of this observation: the fall of 2020 as I was biking on Davenport Road, I passed a spray-painted paper sign stapled to a lamp post. It read, "I lost my land and all I got was this lousy land acknowledgement" (see Fig. 5). This sums up the non-performative critique better than I ever could.

Another issue we come up against when attempting institutional change: an institution can't commit to anything. An institution is made of people, and committed individuals are the key to making the commitments real. Ahmed, again:

Even when organizations have committed to diversity in the form of policies that are authorized and passed through the right committees, committed individuals remain key to making things happen. Yet the commitment of individuals can also be a means for organizations *not* to distribute commitment. ... This is why the work of diversity seems never ending: even when universities allocate resources to diversity and equity initiatives, that allocation seems to depend on individual persistence and individuals who keep saying that diversity counts after it has, as it were, been counted (2012: 135).



Fig. 5. Handmade paper sign on a wooden lamp post reading “I Lost My Land and All I Got Was This Lousy Land Acknowledgment.” (Photo by author, artist unknown.)

These persistent, passionate individuals are tasked again and again with this work, individuals who get tired of serving as “diversity champions.” As attached as we are to hero narratives — and let’s admit that we all participate in the expert, lone ethnographer/genius/music/star/scholar-monk system that promotes this — individuals cannot keep up the tireless energy to produce change on their own, and they shouldn’t have to. Change is not a single-authored work.

Populating the Faculty of Music’s Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression Committee (ARAO) hasn’t been easy. Not all of us who argued for its creation in the summer of 2020 are ready to sit on the committee — that includes me. I’m taking a break from high-profile institutional diversity work because this is a long game. The reward for volunteering for and even moderately competently engaging in diversity work is more of it. And so even if I and my fellow “diversity champions” sit out a few rounds, we can be pretty sure we’ll find ourselves called back into the ring again before too long.

And so, the work continues, at University of Toronto, in the discipline of ethnomusicology, in the climate emergency, in Black Lives Matters, in Indigenous land struggles, in hospital rooms, in lines in front of food pantries, everywhere. The question is not only what the essential work is (for so much work is essential at different times and in different ways) but also, how can we strengthen ourselves in order to continue it? Progressive academics often rhetorically tend towards pessimism, but I’m giving this talk on a Saturday night, life is hard these days, and downers are not my style. Instead, I’ll close

with two quotes I keep returning to as I have been learning and reading for this presentation. The first is from Carla Bergman and Nick Montgomery's book *Joyful Militancy: Building Thriving Resistance in Toxic Times*. They are inspired by Rebecca Solnit.

Among others, feminist essayist Rebecca Solnit has taught us to see optimism and pessimism as two sides of the same coin: both try to remove uncertainty from the world. Both foster certitude about how things will turn out, whether good or bad. Optimism and pessimism can provide a sense of comfort at the expense of openness and the capacity to hang onto complexity. They can drain away our capacity to care, to try, and to fight for things to be otherwise without knowing how it will turn out. A fundamental premise of this book is that no matter what, things can be otherwise — there is always wiggle room, Empire is already full of cracks, and the future is always uncertain. Uncertainty is where we need to begin, because experimentation and curiosity is part of what has been stolen from us (2017: 8).

Turning “worry” into “wonder,” and regarding uncertainty as possibility, is what they recommend.

I leave you with a quote from a collectively authored article, which appeared in a 2019 issue of *Public Culture*, devoted to “Interrogating Diversity.” The article is titled “Woke to Weary,” and it is about doing diversity work within institutions, and how exhausting it can be. At this moment when we are thinking about the decolonizing, anti-racist transformation, structural overhaul, and mission shift that so many find needing within our field, as well as in the institutions in which our members work, I think there is plenty that applies. This portion is by Dr. Laura Yakas, an anthropologist and social work PhD. She is not burning down the house — not yet:

For me, the most compelling reason to reject a war with everything is simple survival: it is dangerously soul crushing to believe there is nothing here worth saving . . . . No, there is no post-oppression world, there is only *this* world, which we inherited, and which inertia will ensure continues. Once woke to this, there is no way to nod off for a few more peaceful hours of slumber, but, as anyone who has born the unbearable can attest, unlivable lives are lived. . . . When we accept this unacceptable world, we are more easily empowered to resist what we can resist, to take manageable bites



out of the “problem” of oppression, and commit ourselves to chewing forever (2019: 384).

Chewing takes work — especially bitter pills. There are lots of things we can learn to do, and we can learn from each other. Let’s make learning our essential work, and let’s keep learning and working together.

## Afterword

### *Who Does Which Work? Further Thoughts on Institutional Change and Identity Taxation*

I write this afterword in April 2022 with the benefit of experience, hindsight, new research, and solidified concerns about essential and unessential work. In the following pages, I report briefly on post-2020 developments in the fires burning in Society for Ethnomusicology and the University of Toronto Faculty of Music. I also reflect on the disproportionate number of women and women of colour leading diversity, equity, and inclusion-oriented institutional change in the academy and in the context of women’s heightened care work responsibilities during the pandemic.

I delivered the CSTM Keynote from a study that shares one wall with a bathroom and another with my children’s bedroom. As I read the paper on Zoom, my husband was guiding my then-seven-year-olds twins through the tooth brushing, pajama selection, and reading aloud bedtime rituals that I normally participated in. Through my headphones, I could occasionally hear the kids giggling and whining and my husband shushing them. I kept my game face on as I performed a separation of work and personal life that was often already shaky and almost fully collapsed in the pandemic. I already knew the personal was political; now I was learning how the personal was also the professional ... which was also political.

My husband and I were lucky to be able to work from home during the pandemic because our elite professions were not “essential”; we were shielded from exposure to the COVID-19 virus at its most unknown and terrifying to date. By chance, my children were attending in-person school during the days in which I wrote and delivered my talk, but they had been out for weeks the prior spring and would soon be back at home for weeks.<sup>6</sup> When schools closed, many parents — and especially mothers — became the primary caretakers in addition to working their full-time jobs (c.f., Powers 2020). Research on women in academia prior to the pandemic shows that we already engaged in

service and emotional and invisible labour at higher rates than our male peers, with deleterious effects on our job security and promotion.<sup>7</sup> Danielle Docka-Filipek and Lindsey B. Stone's recent research suggests that the combined effects of academic women's service work and their care work during the pandemic has amplified existing inequities:

[The] lopsided division of domestic and academic physical and emotional labours together serve to maintain an ongoing academic "status quo," which contribute to the obstacle course laid before women in their route to career advancement (especially, to full professor), particularly as women simultaneously navigate pandemic-amplified domestic demands. Put another way, women academics are expected to care (and further, reap great emotional reward in doing so) at work, at home, and in all other aspects of both public and private life, despite a lack of any significant or measurable corresponding material reward for doing so. (2022: 2162)

I felt and feared each of these pressures to care, to work, and to do care work within and beyond my job, as did every mother in academia that I knew. Even more worrying but not surprising are the studies documenting women faculty's additional pandemic-related care responsibilities in relation to their decreased research productivity (c.f. Squazzoni et al. 2020, Bender et al. 2022, and Unkar et al. 2022). And yet, from the beginning of the pandemic there was a parallel urgency of social inequalities lay bare by the extrajudicial police murders of Black North Americans, climate crises, ongoing struggles against settler colonialism, and other massive problems that inspired so many of us to take on the fires, despite whatever other new or existing work we faced. Not everyone heard or heeded the call. As I very briefly summarize some developments in ethnomusicology and the Faculty of Music, I also note the firefighting team's demographic makeup.

Since the CSTM event, the disciplines of ethnomusicology and anthropology, and the American Anthropological Association and the Society for Ethnomusicology have not burned down. Ethnomusicologists in North America continue to contend with the historical legacies and ongoing impact of colonialism and racism in their work. This special issue of *MUSICultures* and the CTSM's efforts are examples of that process in Canada. As of writing, the SEM Board is now comprised of individuals from equity-seeking groups. Tomie Hahn, an Asian-American woman with a career demonstrating deep

commitment to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, stepped into the role of SEM president at a moment when the society was deeply embattled.

In June 2021, the University of Toronto Faculty of Music saw another open letter and new calls for institutional action and accountability. The letter

calls on the Faculty of Music to address the historical and ongoing misogyny and systemic inequalities which have once again been brought to light. In the wake of the recent outcry on social media regarding allegations of sexual harassment and misconduct, it is clear that serious action is needed to ensure the safety and well-being of all members of the University community (Faculty of Music Undergraduate Student's Association Open Letter 2021).

The letter and list of signatories is 83 pages long (sans appendices) and contains over “60 separate stories of sexual harassment and abuse.” Some events are historical, some recent, some allegedly perpetrated by students, some allegedly perpetrated by faculty members, and all pointing to a profoundly troubling institutional culture that has repeatedly failed. The action was organized by Ines Wong, then a rising fourth-year Faculty of Music undergraduate, the president of the Faculty of Music Undergraduate Association, and an Asian-Canadian woman.

At the Faculty of Music, the 2020 Strategic Academic Planning exercise our alumni and students directed us to take seriously has not yet taken place. The pandemic interrupted that work. Just as significantly, our prior dean reached the end of his term and our collective mission and outlook have shifted significantly under direction of our new Dean Ellie Hisama, an Asian-American woman whose career demonstrates deep, multi-pronged commitment to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion and many successful campaigns to change institutions from the inside (c.f., Hisama 2018). Dean Hisama has her work cut out for her: she has inherited enormous budgetary and staffing challenges along with student and alumni allegations of sexual harassment and racism detailed above.

The anti-racism and decolonial work in the Faculty of Music continues. I declined the request to co-chair the ARAO Committee in 2020 and suspected my turn would come again soon. It felt inevitable, and I dreaded and preemptively resented the responsibility. Some of the thoughts keeping me up at night were, why am I so certain this job will land with me?<sup>8</sup> If I draw attention to problems, am I automatically qualified or voluntold to help solve them? Though part of me wants to help, is adding a major responsibility the smartest

decision for me or my family *now*? What are the consequences of declining — again? If I say no, will I then be considered “problematic”?”

The request came in late summer 2021. I was told plainly that one of the reasons I was being asked was that the committee needed to be co-chaired by at least one person of colour. The person asking acknowledged that I already had a lot on my plate but said that without a person of colour in a leadership position, undergraduate and graduate students wouldn’t “take [the committee] seriously.” In the heat of the moment, my desire to support my colleagues temporarily trumped my misgivings and I accepted the position. Unable to sleep, unable to suppress my doubts, and staring down excess pandemic-related departmental duties, I stepped down one week later.<sup>10</sup> The position was then offered to music theorist Daphne Tan, an Asian-Canadian woman and junior colleague who played a major role in writing and delivering the 2020 faculty and staff memo urging change. Already overburdened with service herself, Daphne consulted me and others about whether to accept; I shared my reasons for declining and suggested she strongly consider doing the same. She wrestled with her decision but then said yes and stuck with this contentious, time-consuming position for the year. Daphne, who has generously read and commented on this text, tells me she has found many aspects of the work personally rewarding. The ARAO committee is in a much better place because of her and her co-chair’s tremendous efforts, but she is also exhausted. She is still deciding whether to continue the position next year. I will keep seeking ways to support Daphne, whether she decides to keep shouldering this burden or not. And I will wait for my turn to come again.

I do not fault the person who asked me and Daphne to take this role. Had I been the one populating the committee, I might also have considered seeking out a person of colour in response to student requests for diverse representation knowing that when I was a student, I would have had the same expectation of my college’s committees. But as a faculty member tapped for these roles when my white, cis male colleagues are not, I see the ask and expectation differently. Women and other minoritized faculty and staff’s disproportionate participation in diversity-based labour drains their ability to complete work essential to their promotion, the work they will be recognized for, the work they choose (c.f. O’Meara et al. 2019). There is a term for this: the “identity tax.” As defined by Laura E. Hirschfeld and Tiffany D. Joseph, “identity taxation occurs when faculty members shoulder any labour — physical, mental, or emotional — due to their membership in a historically marginalized group within their department or university, beyond that which is expected of other faculty members in the same setting” (2012: 214).<sup>11</sup> Because these additional responsibilities are often unacknowledged, undervalued, or invisible/hidden/overlooked, they may not

appear in workload and service assignments, but rather appear as if women, people of colour, and other minoritized groups are “less productive” when compared to their white peers. There is a perverse logic at work: minoritized faculty’s DEI service is essential to the institution’s performance of commitment to DEI but may hurt their chances at promotion, which in turn reinforces the inequitable hierarchies DEI investments are supposed to mitigate.

The poor fit between committee work and radical change was not lost on Allison Sokil, an advanced doctoral candidate in the Faculty of Music’s Ethnomusicology program on whose dissertation committee I am privileged to serve. She also kindly read this manuscript before publication. During the question-and-answer period following the CSTM talk, Allison asked my thoughts on whether the master’s tools could in fact dismantle the master’s house. She was referring to Audre Lorde’s famous comments, “*For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.* (1984: 107, emphasis in the original). I gave a rather mushy, personally unsatisfying response about the master’s tools — the official channels — being the ones I and my colleagues had at hand.

I now answer Allison differently. For me, the most fulfilling, enduring, and influential aspect of bringing the ARAO Committee into being was the process, not the product. It was the open communication, collective action, and solidarity my colleagues and I experienced while sharing ideas and experiences on topics that I had almost never heard publicly discussed in my workplace. It took crisis and disruption for us to find each other and to work up the courage to speak to one another about our disappointments and desires. That others know and understand stays with me. While I am less optimistic about the master’s house and tools, I am more confident in the transformative potential of teaching, mentoring, and researching and in the efforts many faculty and staff members have made to support one another in doing our best work. I will eventually take on leadership roles in hopes of bettering the institution and with heightened awareness of who serves before, beside, and after me. For unless we reckon with the distribution and recognition of the labour of change, identity taxation will stay in place: without intervention, who does the change work will not change, and we run the risk of “enact[ing] the problems we are trying to resolve” (Ahmed 2017: 30).

Diversity, equity, inclusion, and care work may (sometimes) be labours of love or at least passion, but that doesn’t mean we always love doing it, or that the work loves us back.<sup>12</sup> It may also be the work we take on because we’ve been asked to, and we might accept because it is so important to us despite its lack of recognition, or because we can’t be sure anyone else will help us put out the

flames of the burning discipline, academic society, department, or institution. Whatever it is and however we get there, it is also work. If you, dear reader, are often tasked with these kinds of assignments in the office, in the home, or in that in-between place so many of us occupy, please remember to put on your own oxygen mask before attempting to help others, to take breaks when possible, and to say no when you need to. And if this kind of responsibility doesn't often fall to you, please consider signing up for the fire department. Your colleagues could use some help holding the hose. 🌿

## Notes

1. This text was originally delivered orally as the Canadian Society for Traditional Music Keynote Lecture at the Society for Ethnomusicology's 2020 Annual Meeting on October 24, 2020. SEM was scheduled to take place in Ottawa but was moved online due to pandemic-related concerns. I read the lecture from my study at my home in downtown Toronto. I have lightly edited and annotated the piece while preserving its conversational tone. A few key slides from the PowerPoint presentation accompanying the original talk are included as images. An Afterword written in April 2022 reflects new experiences, observations, and research on academic labour and change led by women and people of colour.

2. Some of the people I've been talking to include Liz Przybylski, Yun Emily Wang, Carolyn Ramzy, Nasim Niknafs, Daphne Tan, Katie Kilroy Marac, Seika Boye, Jeff Packman, Danielle Robinson, Jim Kippen, Josh Pilzer, Lyndsey Copeland, Ely Lyonblum, Aiyun Huang, Laura Risk, Mark Campbell, Bina John, Sherry Lee, Luis-Manuel Garcia, Natasha Smith, Tyler Greenleaf, Ryan McClelland, Don Mclean, Elizabeth McDonald, Tara Kannangara, Mike Murley, Ellen Lockhart, Sarah Gutsche-Miller, Stephane Martin Demers, Nikhita James, Jody Glean, Eliot Briton, and Midori Koga. They bear no responsibility for presentation's contents or tone.

3. In a different 2020 open letter from current students, I was criticized for not including African American music in my required undergraduate course, Introduction to Music and Society.

4. "More than half of all faculty appointments in Canada are contract appointments. In 2016–2017, 38,681 faculty appointments, or 53.60 percent, were contract positions compared to 33,490 tenured and tenure-track appointments" (Pasma and Shaker 2018: 5).

5. See <https://change.music.utoronto.ca> for information on the Faculty of Music's diversity, equity, and inclusion work. This website was initiated by Tyler Greenleaf and Natasha Smith in 2020.

6. Ontario public schools were closed for in-person learning for an estimated 27 weeks between March 14, 2020, and February 28, 2022 — more than any other province in the country (People for Education, 2022).

7. See The Faculty Workload and Rewards Project for a summary of recent scholarship on gender- and race-based academic workload inequities and evidence-based research on how to productively intervene. <https://advance.umd.edu/fwrp/home> (accessed April 28, 2022).

8. Or, as put in the title of a short piece by Kuvavea et al. (2021) “Why Are Women of Colour in Academia Expected to Do Diversity Work?”

9. For more on “becoming the problem,” see Sarah Ahmed (2017).

10. On women faculty’s mental health in the context of disproportionate service and care work, see Docka-Filipek and Stone (2022).

11. Reframed in Hirschfeld’s and Joseph’s terminology, ethnomusicologists of all backgrounds can be seen to pay a professional “identity tax” when they are tasked/taxed with contributing diversity to an otherwise Eurocentric Western music school curriculum.

12. Labour journalist Sarah Jaffe’s book *Work Won’t Love You Back* (2021) interrogates the “labour of love” myth in terms of not-for-profit, care, artistic work, and more. While not specifically about academic labour, the book contains many observations relevant to graduate students and professional academics.

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