

# Divesting from Ethnomusicology

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**I**t is an unusual challenge to respond critically to an author with whom you are in broad and deep agreement. I have advocated for deprecating the term “ethnomusicology” since the day I left a PhD program in that discipline in 1990 and moved into an anthropology department. Unexpectedly, I wound up back in the Old Country after all when I accepted a position in the Department of Music at Columbia. (My fellow anthropology students who were exiles from the music department and the hegemony of Western art music would have laughed to learn how many of us would return to music later in our careers.) Since then, I have practiced as an ethnomusicologist despite my discomfort with the name of the discipline. My twenty-two completed PhD advisees are mostly professors of ethnomusicology now, although others have moved into other disciplinary spaces (anthropology, law, literature, and area studies). Until recently I had attended nearly every meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology for thirty years. I direct Columbia’s Center for Ethnomusicology and also direct the ethnomusicology BA program at Barnard College, one of the few BA programs in the discipline in the US, that itself for more than twenty years has sent many students on to the PhD, most in ethnomusicology. And I have raised or been involved in raising hundreds of thousands of dollars for work repatriating recordings in ethnomusicological sound archives.

I recite this resume, reiterating that I have a PhD in social anthropology and that my first tenure-track academic position was as a professor of linguistic anthropology, not to assert my authority but to point out that I have a real investment (if not a conflict of interest) in the health of whatever “ethnomusicology” currently is or is on the path to becoming. I live comfortably and enjoy my work at an elite, privileged institution, evidence of my own white and class and male privilege, and of my ability

to perform the role of “ethnomusicologist” and “professor” with a self-confidence inherited from Franz Boas and Alan Merriam and Steven Feld, a line of white men from whom I am intellectually descended and from whom I inherited all of the privilege so carefully deconstructed in Amico’s article, even as I have myself become increasingly woke to the closures and prerogatives of my own position and have reorganized my scholarly practice consciously around an effort to alter the conditions that gave rise to my own success in the field to be radically more inclusive and self-critical.

Despite (or because of) this history I could not agree more that the word “ethnomusicology” has to go. Indeed, it needed to go in my generation, and we failed by not getting there. It is threadbare, for all the reasons Amico describes. It is off-putting to colleagues in more theoretically sophisticated disciplinary spaces than most music departments. It is offensive to the communities where many of us work as scholars. It claims as a tradition a set of assumptions about human difference and the position from which it is critically analyzed that are patently racist, colonialist, sexist, and steeped in antimodern romanticism and in a cultural Eurocentrism that has one of its last academic redoubts in the music curriculum. I have had prospective Native American PhD students tell me the name of the discipline is so toxic to their communities (whether familial or activist) that they are averse to training in it, even while the entire field of music scholarship can claim an absurdly low number of Indigenous participants, despite (or again, because of) being founded on converting the fruits of Indigenous genocide into research archives. And within the academy it sustains disciplinary distinctions (again as Amico describes), based on method and subject matter, that are clearly obsolete in practice as well as theory. And indeed, also as Amico describes, it allows ethnomusicology to rest on its “rogue cop” laurels while sitting increasingly close to the center of power in many music departments and helping sustain the cultural fiction (itself rooted in the twentieth-century role of the expanding American university system in producing class mobility) that Western art music really is different, especially for the purpose of the undergraduate curriculum, even as graduate students in historical musicology and music theory in my department are working on things like the legacy of Alan Lomax’s prison recordings and vocal style in soul music. But they still teach mostly in a required core class called “Masterpieces of Western Music.” And everyone understands: that is how our bread gets buttered in the Department of Music at one of the world’s great research universities.

To be frank, I have been more focused on undermining the “Masterpieces of Western Music” ideology for my twenty-three years here than in placing the name of the ethnomusicology program and center

“under erasure,” except through diligent efforts to model and build a more decolonial version of that discipline under the same name. But the time has come. Indeed we are now discussing a change to the name of our center, if not our PhD program, after over half a century as the Center for Ethnomusicology at Columbia University. So all well and good. As someone as invested, quite literally, as I am in the continuation of an enterprise that has been called “ethnomusicology” for the better part of a century, I’m better positioned than most to see its limitations under that name, the most immediate of which is the message it sends about *who* is invited to participate in the field’s future and in what capacities.

But I am not sure that we escape the ideological closure of “ethnomusicology” with a new name, whether it be “cultural musicology” or just “musicology.” In part this is for a reason Amico discusses in passing as beyond the scope of his critique: Are we a “science”? Are we practicing *Musikwissenschaft*? Is cross-cultural comparison really a source of valid generalizations about human musicality in its phenomenological, naturalistic, or historical dimensions? A strong movement has emerged to reassert the natural scientific claims of the past and explore them with new tools for generating and analyzing data, ranging from neuroimaging to computational analyses of massive data sets. Champions of the new comparative musicology, as I call it, while naively importing racist assumptions many of us thought long dead (at least among scholars), frequently call out “ethnomusicology” for the opposite sin: for not being scientific enough, for being uninterested in questions of universality or the biological bases for musicality, etc. Many of us have instead embraced an opposite view: that we aren’t practicing “social science” in any meaningful way unless we are testing our ideas in applied and activist settings, which should in turn generate the questions that demand attention and funding. Indeed the most sophisticated and “decolonial” versions of ethnomusicological “research” practice as I see them, once derided as unscholarly “applied” ethnomusicology, are now often indistinguishable from “activism” and politically engaged work. For those of us asserting this (I’m one), and for the new comparativists, the “-ology” suffix is a bit of a joke, a pretense to objectivity that is insufficient to qualify as “science” and an obstacle to the idea of engaged scholarship as applied research first, contribution to general knowledge second. Even taking the history of ethnomusicological ethnography at the highest level as social “science” runs aground on the shoals of replicability, a crisis (as it is for many of the soft social sciences at the moment) only if you assert that your methods and questions should be applicable in every setting rather than generated by the interests of the communities one serves, represents, and studies alongside—as I have come to believe is the best way to practice and teach my own version of the discipline.

“Cultural” presents its own problems as a prefix, some of which are addressed by Amico, but one of which is skirted over rather too quickly. While indeed “culture” is a core abstraction in the history of anthropology, and while I feel it is salvageable for some purposes and vital for modeling certain kinds of social processes, we are thirty or more years into a withering critique of the “culture concept” in anthropology, emanating from work that until recently did not form much of a canon at all in ethnomusicology PhD programs but was the essential canon for my generation of anthropologists. Ultimately, the term shares historical roots with the idea of “ethnos” and the colonialist worldview that imputed stasis and premodernity to Indigenous peoples while denying them “history” and equal co-presence in the modern world. Less damaged than “ethno-” anything, or even anodyne concepts like nominalized “traditions,” “cultural” is still a way station: in historical ascension as an invocation not of a way of life or a communicative faculty but of nationalism and political identity in the public sphere, and in contemporary decline as a useful abstraction for social scientists given the baggage it carries.

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So what of “musicology” itself? Minus the “-ology,” it leaves “music.” Surely we all agree that we are interested in something called “music,” even if we do not agree on the parameters of that abstraction, however objectively extant in the world. Surely we are mostly “musicians,” whatever that means. Or we would say we all “love” whatever “music” means to us. But of course that is a circular solution to the problem of what to call a scholarly practice concerned precisely with figuring out what the abstraction “music” might mean. Without going into detail, the central observation of my own research practice is that it is not, in fact, so clear that “music” is an identifiable object in the world, as such. Certainly it shares blurry boundaries, if not entire regions of thought and feeling and ideology and practice, with language, with dance, with architecture, with religion, with law, with technology, with science, with ecology, and with sound—this last category now snaking through music scholarship everywhere as a portal to a world in which “music” as such (whatever such may be) is decentered within the sensorium, deprecated in favor of the seemingly objective and metacultural abstraction of “sound” as such (whatever such may be, it can be measured in decibels). “Sound, Music, Verbal Art, Dance, and Media Studies” is the most encompassing description of the work I have found most stimulating, including that of graduate students who have gone on in the profession. But of course, that is not a discipline—yet, at least—either in terms of institutionality (the segregation of academic disciplines of music and dance in particular seems endless in the American university as nowhere else in the world, and clearly gendered in ways that call that segregation into question as anything

objectively useful) or in terms of methodology (although a spate of beautiful recent ethnographies at the intersection of the five abstractions in the phrase above has given me the confidence to assert that they, or any subset thereof, can coalesce within the purview and competence of a single scholar). I have helped to train some, so I'm especially sure of it.

But it is important also to step back from nominalism. One defense of "ethnomusicology" is that it is what "ethnomusicologists" *do*, and surely that is different enough from past iterations of the field to merit consideration as a counterweight to the ideological and colonialist legacies and implications of the name. Could we decolonize a field that was still called "ethnomusicology"? Are we all not ultimately "other" to each other, if not in the ways foregrounded by nineteenth-century racists, and if in ways structured in dominance and racism and sexism? Is the accomplishment (or lack thereof) of feelingful human solidarity not still a universal process worth studying and understanding? Is the world not still full of old and new sounds that have not been shared, documented, archived, and studied, that deserve the status of "art" and an effort to acknowledge that they existed on this earth and to remember the inventions that got us to the present?

Early on in my ethnographic engagement with the Iñupiaq people of Alaska's Arctic coast, a senior whaling captain explained to me why cultural essentialism and notions of "culture" and "tradition" as unchanging and reflexive adaptations to a stable environment made no sense in his world. Asked why hunting with a semiautomatic rifle and a GPS unit was still "traditional" hunting practice, my interlocutor paused and said, "We didn't survive up here for thousands of years by standing still. Our 'tradition' has always been to use the best tool."

I have never forgotten the lesson imparted to me by my fellow American citizen on that day, showing that an Indigenous Alaskan elder is far ahead of most ethnomusicologists in grasping the essence of the postcolonial critique of our field, and the cost it has had for people like him to be an object of "scientific" classification as "primitive," "traditional," "cultural," "ethno-," or anyone's "other." All humans invent and innovate. No human lives entirely within a static cultural bubble or outside of history. All humans are alike at the most basic level of how we think, how we feel, and how we communicate; we have innovated for millennia on that common operating system and hardware, creating local and also transient applications that run interchangeably on that apparatus. That innovation is itself rule-governed and constrained. (The utility of the "culture concept" in social science remains its value for describing the "operating system" layer of this analogy as a universal interface of biology and human creativity.) Using the best tools to understand why this fundamental set of conditions has produced something we can recognizably

isolate as “music” (if usually at the expense of decoupling it from dance, verbal art, ritual, etc.) may militate for rearranging the toolbox and hanging a new sign out front. Indeed, it must. But if the issue is what to call it, and I do not mean to trivialize the question, then we must also discuss what it is we are trying to (re)name or what we would like to summon as a common disciplinarity with a new name. I’m not sure that jettisoning “ethno-” and “-ology,” let alone adding “cultural” as a common qualifier or settling on “music” as a common interest, gets us to clarity about that. It hasn’t for me. But as with the history of all musical genres, perhaps a new name has to emerge for us to finally recognize the distinctive properties of the practice it circumscribes. I’m late in my career; for better or worse I am a “musicologist,” an “ethnomusicologist,” and an “anthropologist” according to Wikipedia. So be it. But I will retire as an anthropologist who became a professor of music who trained students under the banner of ethnomusicology, so I will also feel a twinge of nostalgia if and when it is gone, if I’m not gone myself by then. Nonetheless, the conversation must be had in earnest, beyond the level of individual departments, and especially with respect to our undergraduate curricula. We shape the future of music research profoundly by the way we present it to the next generation.

#### ABSTRACT

This response to Amico’s paper draws lessons from the author’s own career to endorse Amico’s call to rename the discipline of “ethnomusicology,” while cautioning against the risks of nominalism as a sufficient response to the underlying tensions animating dissatisfaction with the current name of the discipline. The response emphasizes points of convergence and divergence between diverse disciplinary practices of music scholarship and locates a problem for efforts to synthesize such practices in competing views of science and applied research, and indeed in competing concepts of “music” as such.

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