



Representing African Music

Kofi Agawn

Critical Inquiry, Vol. 18, No. 2. (Winter, 1992), pp. 245-266.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0093-1896%28199224%2918%3A2%3C245%3ARAM%3E2.0.CO%3B2-C>

Critical Inquiry is currently published by The University of Chicago Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ucpress.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Representing African Music

Kofi Agawu

Of all the currents of change that have swept the humanities during the last half-century, the most far-reaching revolve around language. Philosophy, history, and literary criticism, among other language-based disciplines, have developed what is often presented as a largely unprecedented self-consciousness about representation. The message to scholars in nonlanguage-based disciplines is clear: to be taken seriously, one can no longer view language as a transparent window to an objective reality but must confront the foundational political and ideological baggage of the medium itself, as well as its constant slippage in the hands of the producer.

Among the fields of music study, ethnomusicology has wrestled most self-consciously with matters of representation. Since its inception in the late nineteenth century as *vergleichende Musikwissenschaft* [comparative musicology] and throughout its turbulent history, ethnomusicology has been centrally and vitally concerned with at least three basic issues and their numerous ramifications. First is the problem of locating disciplinary boundaries: is ethnomusicology a subfield of musicology, does it belong under anthropology or ethnology, or is it an autonomous

Earlier versions of this paper were read at University College, London, in April 1989 and at Yale University in December 1990. I am grateful to Stephen Blum, David Lumsdaine, Patrick Mensah, Paul Richards, and Kay Shelemay for reading and commenting on earlier drafts.

discipline?¹ Second is the problem of translation: what factors influence the attempt to translate the reality of other musical cultures into audio and visual recordings, verbal accounts, and transcriptions in musical notation? Is there a viable “theory of translatability”?² Third is a network of political and ideological matters: what sorts of ethical issues constrain the practical effort to understand another culture? What is the relation between empire and ethnomusicological representation? Can we—that is, is it a good thing to—study any music without taking note of the social, economic, political, and technological circumstances of its producers?

Ethnomusicological writing, then, foregrounds a number of contemporary concerns in ways that make it a suitable subject for critique, and it is part of my aim in this paper to develop such a critique on the site of writing about African music. Despite the growing literature on postcolonial discourses,³ and despite the long involvement with the entire gamut of traditional, popular, and art musics of Africa by European and North American scholars, no writer to date has focused exclusively on the ideologies of representing African music. Of course, the absence of a single tradition of African music study endows even the plainest of ethnological reporting with a metacritical and self-reflexive function—metacriticism by default, if you like. But we need more than incidental reflection on representation. In undertaking such a task, however, we must not underestimate the special difficulties posed by *musical* practice. Extant music theory texts from Western Europe, India, China, and Indonesia—to name only those traditions with indigenous writing systems—make clear that there are fundamental, perhaps even irreconcilable, differences between the representation of language-based systems of thought and expression and the representation of systems of sound. We would do well to keep this tension in mind.

1. A concise introduction to the field of ethnomusicology, its history, personalities, and method may be found in Barbara Krader, “Ethnomusicology,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie, 20 vols. (London, 1980), 6:275–82. The most comprehensive recent discussion of key issues in ethnomusicological research is Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Twenty-nine Issues and Concepts* (Urbana, Ill., 1983).

2. See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York, 1983), p. 43.

3. The foundational text is Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978). See also V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington, Ind., 1988).

Kofi Agawu teaches at Cornell University and is the author of *Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music* (1991).

1

In its broadest sense, representation of African music takes three forms: iconographic, metalinguistic, and metamusical. That is, it includes pictorial illustrations of music-making found in anthropological and historical documents, verbal accounts of music-making found in the same or similar sources, and—especially in the modern period—musical works based on existing “traditional” musics.⁴ I shall confine my remarks here to the second category, not necessarily because it is the most important of the three, but because a proper consideration of the others would require an extensive technical exegesis not appropriate in this particular context.

We may distinguish roughly four successive phases in the history of discourse about African music: first, the period up to 1900, which is dominated by nonspecialist, and for the most part incidental, accounts of music-making and descriptions of musical instruments by travellers, explorers, and geographers; second, the period 1900–1950 in which various writers, fired by a missionary zeal—“missionary” in both literal and metaphorical senses—search for a voice; third, the period 1950–1975, which represents the stabilizing of a professional ethnomusicological discourse; and fourth, the period since 1975, which is marked by an intensified self-consciousness about language and metalanguage. As with any periodization, this one is problematic in failing to convey associations between noncontiguous phases, and in stressing discontinuities over continuities. Nonetheless, it may serve as a convenient prop for the analysis.

Pre-1900

It is doubtful whether pre-1900 writing about African music can be legitimately described as ethnomusicological since it was produced by nonspecialists—Europeans engaged in naval expeditions, Moslem writers pursuing a religious mission, correspondents for learned societies, missionaries, traders, and biographers of explorers. These accounts are of interest chiefly because they adumbrate some of the major issues that card-carrying ethnomusicologists of later years have had to reckon with. Furthermore, because earlier writers are not constrained by a prescribed, institutional mode of musical discourse, they frequently ask more fundamental questions about the nature and meaning of African music than those who have, as it were, been taught to speak properly.

The following passage from Richard Lander’s *Records of Captain*

4. For iconographic and historical data, see *Zentralafrika*, ed. Jos Gansemans et al. (Leipzig, 1986), and *Westafrika*, ed. Gerhard Kubik et al. (Leipzig, 1989). On trends in modern composition, see Akin Euba, *Essays on Music in Africa*, 2 vols. (Bayreuth, 1989).

Clapperton's Last Expedition to Africa, published in 1830, may be considered representative of the pre-1900 style of discourse:

On the morning of Thursday, the 12th, we left Chiadoo, followed by the chief and an immense crowd of both sexes, amongst whom were hundreds of children, the ladies enlivening us with songs at intervals, and the men blowing on horns and beating on gongs and drums, without any regard to time, forming altogether a most barbarous concert of vocal and instrumental music, which continued to our great inconvenience and annoyance till we arrived at Matoné, when they took leave of us and returned.

It would be as difficult to detach singing and dancing from the character of an African, as to change the colour of his skin. I do not think he would live a single week in his country without participating in these his favourite amusements; to deprive him of which would be indeed worse than death. . . . Yet even on these instruments they perform most vilely, and produce a horribly discordant noise, which may, perhaps, be delightful to their own ears; but to strangers, if they have the misfortune to be too near the performers, no sounds can be more harsh and disagreeable than such a concert.

Of all the amusements of Africans, none can equal their song and dance in the still, clear hours of night, when the moon, walking in beauty in the heavens, awakens all the milder affections of their nature, and invites them to gladness and mirth.

On these occasions all care is completely laid aside, and everyone delivers himself up to the dissipation of the moment, without a thought of the morrow, his heart having no *vacuum* for melancholy anticipations.⁵

Although this is clearly not a “scholarly” account, it nevertheless touches on a number of scholarly issues. First is the functional as opposed to the contemplative nature of African music, a distinction that, while by no means hard and fast, provides a framework for pinpointing the differing emphases between the compositional intentions of folk and art music.⁶ Second, and related, is the sheer need for Africans to make music. The motif of the music-making African—with its implication that leisure abounds—continues to be reproduced in twentieth-century writings by both African and non-African writers. J. H. Kwabena Nketia, for exam-

5. Richard Lander, *Records of Captain Clapperton's Last Expedition to Africa*, 2 vols. (1830; London, 1967), 1:90, 292–96. Of related interest are Walter Hirschberg, “Early Historical Illustrations of West and Central African Music,” *African Music* 4 (1969):6–18; Henry George Farmer, “Early References to Music in the Western Sudan,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (Oct. 1939): 569–80; and Amnon Shiloah, *The Theory of Music in Arabic Writings (c. 900–1900): Descriptive Catalogue of Manuscripts in Libraries of Europe and the U.S.A.* (Munich, 1979).

6. For a discussion of the problematics of the folk/art distinction, see the preface and first chapter of John Blacking, *How Musical Is Man?* (Seattle, 1973).

ple, discussing “music in community life,” writes about “societies which are not socially stratified” as follows:

Music making is regarded as a part of the traditional way of life and not an embellishment of it. It is as necessary to the fullness of living as any other human need that has to be satisfied. A village that has no organised music or neglects community singing, drumming and dancing is said to be dead. Music making is, therefore, an index of a living community and a measure of the degree of social cohesion among its respective units.⁷

Nketia does not go on to cite examples of African villages that have been “said to be dead” on account of not singing or dancing, and the fact that modern conveniences of mobile cinemas, videos, transistor radios, and cassette players can now be found in many remote and rural parts of Africa suggests that there is at least less music-making of the sort described by Nketia, but no resulting “death.” Only a scholarly plot seeking difference between Africa and the West will insist on propagating this myth.

A third issue raised by Lander emerges from his negative evaluation of the *sound* of African music. Music is performed “vilely,” producing a “horribly discordant noise”; sounds are “harsh and disagreeable.” Although this sort of description has been permanently excised from professional ethnomusicological discourse, it is not without one possible advantage: the prejudices of Lander’s own musical culture are made clear, his personal constraints situated. The idea that a semiotic, prelinguistic, or purely physiological response to the sound of music is much more intense and immediate than the parallel response to performative acts in the verbal arts explains—but by no means justifies—Lander’s impatience with this music. To put it simply, Lander actually uses his ears, which is why he is uncomfortable with African drumming. When in later periods of “proper” ethnomusicological discourse such descriptive language and its attendant ideology are excised, we enter also a period in which, perhaps only coincidentally, writers are less confident about what their ears tell them. With this new, mediated response, this elevation of symbolic above semiotic order, comes a substitution of a false piety for an authentic, personal engagement with the phenomenologist’s *Sachen selbst*. The fate of African music reception is not helped by such piety.

Fourth, Lander’s account should not be assumed to represent only a uniform “Westerner’s” response. How do we know what the people themselves—Nigerians—felt about this music? Since there is no monolithic “Nigerian,” we have to at least retain the possibility that some of them found this music “discordant,” “barbarous,” or “vile.” A group voice

7. J. H. Kwabena Nketia, *Music in African Cultures: A Review of the Meaning and Significance of Traditional African Music* (Legon, Ghana, 1966), p. 15.

must not be allowed to swallow individual discerning responses. Indeed, a vigorous pursuit of individual responses to music-making has become a prominent part of the ideology of contemporary ethnomusicology, but such investigations seldom yield clear-cut, dichotomous views.⁸ The notorious distinction between what “we” as Westerners and what “they” as Africans hear must be replaced by distinctions between what any two individuals hear. But to argue for this democratization of representation is perhaps to overlook aspects of political economy.⁹

In sum, pre-1900 writings show unself-conscious exploration of musical possibilities. Writers wrote themselves into their texts, so to speak, because they knew no other way. Few limits were placed on the kinds of aesthetic and evaluative questions that could be asked about African music.

1900–1950

The search for a voice during this period produced an eclectic body of texts. Three features mark this period. First was the institutionalization of comparative musicology, spelled out in 1885 by Guido Adler¹⁰ and pursued through a variety of regional interests by several other European scholars, including Carl Stumpf, Robert Lach, and Erich Moritz von Hornbostel. With a background in Gestalt psychology and a concern for empiricism, Hornbostel, for example, made important contributions to the study of African music.¹¹ He wrestled with problems of tuning, with issues of rhythmic and metric organization (including the psychological reality of musicians’ actions), and with the vexing problem of the relationship between speech tone and melody. Second, this was a period of colonial domination and of the emergence of the government anthropologist. Teachers, colonial officers, and military personnel who took an interest in music produced accounts of musical practice and, in some cases, prescribed programs for the musical education of colonized people. Third, a

8. Blacking pursues this idea throughout *How Musical Is Man?*

9. Such democratization is only conceivable in a world in which representer and represented inhabit the same socioeconomic and political spheres. Ethnomusicology cannot claim such a condition of work, not even in cases involving “native scholars.” For a related discussion of the field of anthropology, see Said, “Representing the Colonized: Anthropology’s Interlocutors,” *Critical Inquiry* 15 (Winter 1989): 205–25.

10. See Guido Adler, “Umfang, Methode und Ziel der Musikwissenschaft,” *Vierteljahrsschrift für Musikwissenschaft* 1 (1885): 5–20.

11. See E. M. von Hornbostel, “African Negro Music,” *Africa* 1 (Jan. 1928): 30–62, and *Hornbostel Opera Omnia*, ed. Klaus P. Wachsmann, Dieter Christensen, and Hans-Peter Reinecke (The Hague, 1976); the latter contains articles and reviews on music from different parts of the world. Stephen Blum, “European Musical Terminology and the Music of Africa,” in *Comparative Musicology and Anthropology of Music: Essays on the History of Ethnomusicology*, ed. Nettl and Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago, 1991), pp. 1–36, includes an extensive discussion of key terms and concepts used by Hornbostel.

missionary discourse, initiated in the previous phase, was vigorously pursued in the context of translating hymn books, liturgies, and the Bible into African languages. The crucial turn in these discourses was the gradual emergence of an explicit, institutionally marked writing style alongside the amateur discourses that persisted from the previous era.

One example of the best writing from this period is W. E. F. Ward's "Music in the Gold Coast," which appeared in the short-lived *Gold Coast Review* in 1927. Ward, a historian, educationist, and amateur musician, is perhaps best known for his sometime standard works on the history of Gold Coast/Ghana.¹² The principal virtue of Ward's study stems from his adoption of a framework that allows similarities and contrasts to be drawn between European and African musics. In so doing, he sidesteps the solipsism of later ethnomusicology, and puts a dent in the oft-heard exhortation to scholars to consider African musical cultures "on their own terms." Such a strategy, however, is problematic for two basic reasons. First, it cannot be implemented on logical grounds since the language in which the results of fieldwork are reported (usually English, French, Portuguese, or German) carries irreducible conceptual baggage. Second, the phrase encourages the formulation of what is essentially a political distinction between "our theory" and "their theory," between a general theory and so-called ethnotheory.

Ward's framework allows him, for example, to reject the theory of a peculiarly African tonal scale and to note the relative modesty with which harmony is explored in African music. The comparison is between a timeless African folk tradition and two hundred years of European functional harmony, culminating not (predictably) in the musics of Wagner, Strauss, and Schoenberg, but in the works of Alexander Scriabin. Ward's is not a one-sided comparison, however. African harmony may be "as far developed as European harmony in the sixteenth century," but "Africans have not merely cultivated their sense of rhythm far beyond ours, but must have started with a superior sense of rhythm from the beginning."¹³ There may be room for argument about the details of these particular comparisons, but there is no room for argument about comparison as such.

Elsewhere in the article, Ward explores the comparative weighting of parameters in African song and concludes that rhythm and phrase contour are primary. He does not, however, attempt to link this order of parametric interaction to an abstracted social order in the way that Alan Lomax and others have done.¹⁴ His solution to the notorious tone/tune

12. See W. E. F. Ward, "Music in the Gold Coast," *Gold Coast Review* 3 (July-Dec. 1927): 199-223. See also Ward, *A History of the Gold Coast* (London, 1948) and *A History of Ghana* (London, 1958), the latter being a revised and retitled edition of the former.

13. Ward, "Music in the Gold Coast," pp. 223, 222.

14. See Alan Lomax, "Song Structure and Social Structure," *Ethnology*, no. 1(1962):

problem remains unimproved: speech tones may influence melodic direction, but they cannot be said to determine melodic structure. Best of all, perhaps, Ward provides a sensitive discussion of African rhythm as expressive behavior, including the technical procedures that support such expression: the virtual absence of triple time in African music; the preference for polymeter and polyrhythm; and the comparatively longer units (bars) of African music. An amateur he may have been, but Ward's writing gets at essentials.

The eclecticism of the 1900–1950 period is hard to illustrate concisely, but we may contrast Ward's study with the contributions of one of the major figures in African music research, the Reverend A. M. Jones, whose numerous and unflinching enthusiastic writings come close to exhausting the dimensions of African music study. Jones's magnum opus, the two-volume *Studies in African Music*, although published in 1959 and therefore strictly belonging to the third phase of my periodization, manifests an eclectic style characteristic of the 1900–1950 writing. A separate paper is needed to fully assess Jones's contribution, but it is noteworthy that in this properly ethnomusicological age, Jones has often been attacked not so much for what he said but for how he said it. The distinction is fragile, of course, but it allows a glimpse into how scholarly plots concerned to excavate Jones's ethnocentrism, his pretenses towards omniscience, and his knack for exaggeration, can miss the value of his specifically technical demonstration.¹⁵

The most profound condemnation of Jones, however, has been the systematic refusal of scholars to deal with the full implications of his transcriptions *in extenso*, transcriptions that remain, to my mind, among the most important in the field. Again and again, the age-old questions about pulse, bar lines, meter, and rhythm dealt with by Jones return to haunt later writers in a curiously circular historical movement. At a time when we have become more sensitive to the heterogeneity of African music, it is easy to criticize Jones for allowing his work on the Icala of the then-Northern Rhodesia or the Ewe of the then-Gold Coast to stand as

425–51. A more comprehensive analysis may be found in Lomax, *Folk Song Style and Culture* (Washington, D.C., 1968). Among recent contributions, see especially Steven Feld, "Sound Structure as Social Structure," *Ethnomusicology* 28 (Sept. 1984): 383–410, and Marina Roseman, "The Social Structuring of Sound: The Temiar of Peninsular Malaysia," *Ethnomusicology* 28 (Sept. 1984): 411–45. See also the numerous responses to Feld and Roseman in the same issue of that journal, pp. 446–66.

15. See Blacking, review of *Studies in African Music*, by A. M. Jones, *African Studies* 19 (1960): 98–101. See also the reviews by the Reverend Brian Kingslake, Doctor the Reverend Brother Basile, James McHarg, and Blacking in *African Music* 2 (1959): 84–89. It is perhaps symptomatic of this attitude that Lucy Durán's brief entry on Jones in *The New Grove Dictionary* focuses almost exclusively on the "controversial" aspects of his work. See Lucy Durán, "Arthur Morris Jones," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 9:697.

paradigmatic African musics. But only those who interpret the relative security of local history as an invitation not to reckon with "global" trends will fail to appreciate the boldness and value of Jones's generalizations, the most memorable of which is his map of the distribution of interval singing throughout sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁶ Only by placing Jones's eclectic discussions in the center of our own efforts, and then attempting to falsify the paradigms they foster, are we likely to escape the charge of reinventing wheels.

1950–1975

The search for a voice between 1900 and 1950 came to an end with two related events: the formation of the African Music Society in 1947 in South Africa, and the inauguration of the Society for Ethnomusicology in the United States in 1955. Like the African Music Society, which publishes *African Music*, the Society for Ethnomusicology began by publishing a newsletter followed by a full-fledged journal, *Ethnomusicology*. By consolidating previous efforts and isolated tendencies into centralized organizations, both events promised, if not an entirely new beginning, at least a more responsible continuation. *African Music* and *Ethnomusicology* shared one broad aim, in the latter's words: "the advancement of research and study in the field of ethnomusicology, for which purpose all interested persons, regardless of race, creed, color, or national origin, are encouraged to become members."¹⁷ Gone, it would seem, were the days of the amateur; the new era christened and trained a fresh breed of ethnomusicologists whom it sent with the appropriate blessings into the field.¹⁸

By centralizing their activities, the two societies prescribed (with varying degrees of strictness) a mode of discourse for their members. But the gap between intention and execution was especially pronounced in the offerings of *African Music*. The journal remained largely eclectic, continuing much of the amateur and energetic discourse of the 1900–1950 period, but placing alongside this a properly controlled and "serious" body of ethnomusicological writing. The possible dryness of the scholarly approach was mediated by the inclusion of anecdotal pieces, news items, reports of work in progress, competitions, and informal correspondence.

16. See Jones, *Studies in African Music*, 2 vols. (London, 1959), p. 231.

17. Norma McLeod, "From the Editor," *Ethnomusicology* 17 (Sept. 1973): iv.

18. One indication of the confidence generated by this movement is the following evaluation of the UCLA program in ethnomusicology made by David McAllester: "A strong aspect of the UCLA program is the presence of native musicians from the many cultures represented. Equally important is the practice of sending the advanced student to the country whose music he is studying for one or two years of research and apprenticeship. When he returns such a student is likely to be in a position to write *the first definitive book* in English on the music of his area of study" (David P. McAllester, "Ethnomusicology, the Field and the Society," *Ethnomusicology* 7 [Sept. 1963]: 183; emphasis added).

One was not surprised to find, for example, David Rycroft beginning an article in purely evaluative terms as follows:

One of the oddest and loudest forms of African noise to be heard nightly in some of the larger South African towns is described by its makers as 'Zulu Male Traditional Singing'. This is their polite (and inaccurate) description of it when speaking to non-Zulus. Such singing, by small, all male, choirs and the restrained kind of strutting dance or slouch which goes with it is, however, a new tradition, if the term 'traditional' is to be allowed. Amongst the singers themselves it is called 'Bombing', a term coined during the war, as they felt it was just that kind of noise.¹⁹

This kind of writing is unlikely to have appeared in the pages of *Ethnomusicology*. So, although the eclecticism and amateurism of the previous era were in decline, they were never completely eliminated. Indeed, one of the things that discourages too close an association between the two journals, and underlines *African Music's* more explicitly political role, is an astonishing series of editorials that appeared in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This was a period of great political ferment in Africa, as the shackles of colonial rule were broken one after another in what, in retrospect, seems to have been more of a programmatic affirmation of political independence than a genuine—economically based—eradication of dependency on Europe. In the United States, the civil rights movement foregrounded similar concerns. *African Music* took an active interest in these developments, and published editorials condemning the uprisings, and, by implication, the African's search for a voice of his own. Motivated by noble archival concerns, Hugh Tracey, editor of the journal since its inception, advocated a folk tradition in Africa, and preferred to emphasize not the similarities but the differences between men. Writing in 1960, he dismissed "that contentious sentence, written in 1776, which claimed that all men were created equal," and put forward the view that "all men are created *special*" and that "a cultural statement of this kind holds far more promise for future recognition of individual talent in a highly competitive world than the egalitarian shibboleths of popular politicians."²⁰ The statement might have gone unnoticed had it not been for the not-so-coincidental location of its author: Roodeport, Nr. Johannesburg, South Africa.

The 1950s marked the institutionally sanctioned arrival of North Americans on the ethnomusicological scene. Earlier contributions by Melville Herskovits, Richard Waterman, George Herzog, and others in the 1930s and 1940s were supplanted by the more concerted efforts signalled by the institutional production of ethnomusicologists. With an infectious enthusiasm and a concern for positivistic accuracy, and without

19. David Rycroft, "Zulu Male Traditional Singing," *African Music* 1 (1957): 33.

20. Hugh Tracey, "Editorial," *African Music* 2 (1960): 5.

the complicity of empire to contend with, American ethnomusicologists approached the study of African music with the highest of ideals. Alan Merriam's dominating role in this movement was not only to intensify the shift from musicological to anthropological ethnomusicology (for Merriam ethnomusicology was "the study of music in culture"),²¹ but to bring a measure of responsibility to intellectual accounting.

The institutionalization of ethnomusicology brought losses as well as gains. Perhaps the most radical aspect of this movement was the nearly total obliteration of aesthetic and evaluative dimensions in the styles of discourse. Ethnomusicologists could no longer get away with a statement such as "this is a beautiful melody," for they were soon having to explain how it was that they perceived beauty and whether the natives perceived the same beauty in the same places and in the same way. The writer's aesthetic response was no longer a thing to write home about; it remained implicit in the choice of subject.

The 1950s also saw the emergence of the first generation of African scholars of music, trained in the language, methods, and techniques of Western Europe, but also steeped in indigenous traditions. The best-known of these is Nketia, who published several monographs and articles on African music and language.²² Writing in two languages and within a prefabricated intellectual framework, and using this framework to convey whatever "native" insights he had, Nketia ensured that his work was not only immediately comprehensible but judged according to then-"universal" criteria. It comes as something of an irony, perhaps even a hint at academic neocolonialism, to find reviewers berating Nketia and other African scholars for producing Westernized accounts of the music of their own people. The status of the African scholar continues to offer real difficulties to commentators armed with classificatory schemes determined by a criterion of essentialism.²³

1975 to the Present

Since about 1975, with greater political instability throughout Africa, the field conditions have become somewhat treacherous. While

21. Alan P. Merriam, "Ethnomusicology: Discussion and Definition of the Field," *Ethnomusicology* 4 (Sept. 1960): 109.

22. See especially Nketia, *Funeral Dirges of the Akan People* (Achimota, Ghana, 1955), *Drumming in Akan Communities of Ghana* (Edinburgh, 1963), and *The Music of Africa* (New York, 1974). A complete bibliography and a biographical portrait of Nketia may be found in *African Musicology: Current Trends; Vol. 1: A Festschrift Presented to J. H. Kwabena Nketia*, ed. Jacqueline Cogdell DjeDje and William G. Carter (Los Angeles, 1989).

23. A wide-ranging and perceptive discussion of matters surrounding the ideology of knowing as expressed in African literature and criticism may be found in Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Out of Africa: Topologies of Nativism," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 2 (Fall 1988): 153-78.

the actual quantity of fieldwork has decreased significantly, there has not been a corresponding shortage in the quantity of published material. Scholarship outside Africa has continued to ransack material collected during earlier, safe periods, to analyze material collected by others, or simply to turn attention from the nature of the material to the nature of discourse about the material.

Probably the most striking development since 1975 is the movement away from earlier generalizations about African music toward regional and subregional characterizations (Venda music, Yoruba music, Kpelle music, Ganda music, and so on). And with this obsession with specificity comes a sometimes numbing situating of scholarly constraints: where the researcher has been, with whom, how long, under what conditions, and so on. Ethnomusicologists are thus reminded of something they have always contended with, namely, the inescapably ideological nature of writing. One question, however, is seldom asked: if no discourse is free of ideology, if such ideology can be easily decoded from writing, then why should we continue to ritually unmask our identities instead of simply getting on with the job at hand? Is not the very process of unmasking, itself contaminated by language, a product of certain ideological choices, and therefore likely to produce a distorted “truth”?

One final development since 1975 is a foregrounding of the differences between European and North American ethnomusicologists writing about Africa. Although there is not a unified European view of African music, there is a scholarly culture that links Gilbert Rouget and Simha Arom of France, Gerhard Kubik of Austria, Veit Erlmann of Germany, and John Blacking of the United Kingdom together as humanists who have accepted in varying degrees the intellectual challenges of semiotics/structuralism, hermeneutics, and now post-structuralism. While some of their American counterparts have danced in the same intellectual arena, it is striking that many American scholars have preferred African instrumental music to vocal music as subjects of research. Probably the most important theoretical contributions to the subject of African music by Americans concern rhythmic organization.²⁴ Unlike their European counterparts, proportionally fewer Americans have wished to work with genres that require command of indigenous languages. Yet these very scholars often insist on a “native’s point of view.” How are ethnographers able to distill a native’s point of view—assuming such a thing exists—from a language they cannot speak?

24. These include Richard A. Waterman, “‘Hot’ Rhythm in Negro Music,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 1 (Spring 1948): 24–37; Rose Brandel, “The African Hemiola Style,” *Ethnomusicology* 3 (Sept. 1959): 106–17; Hewitt Pantaleoni, “Three Principles of Timing in Anlo Dance Drumming,” *African Music* 5 (1972): 50–63; David Laurence Locke, “The Music of Atsiagbeko” (Ph.D. diss., Wesleyan University, 1978); and James Koetting, “Analysis and Notation of West African Drum Ensemble Music,” *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology* 1 (1970): 115–46.

2

It would seem from this account that writing about African music is characterized by a healthy pluralism. But that impression is deceptive. Under a pluralistic impulse, a number of theoretical constructs and presentational modes have gained ascendancy, helped along by referees, editors, and reviewers. No one reading books or articles on African music published in the last ten years could possibly conclude that anything goes. Pluralism in practice reinscribes certain reified modes of representation, and it is these that I wish to critique in the second half of this essay. I shall consider, in turn, “the writer in the text,” “us and them,” “ethnotheory,” and “the burden of context.”

The Writer in the Text

One result of the contemporary concern with a scholar’s constraints is a style of discourse in which the authorial “I” exerts a strong presence. In a sense, all ethnomusicological writing, like anthropological writing, is autobiographic,²⁵ but beyond providing the reader with essential background information, the act of situating limits can often accumulate a surplus of authorial signature. Since ethnomusicologists do not normally use this platform to actually acknowledge limits—one rarely encounters statements like, “I was there for only two weeks,” “I lived in a hotel in the city and visited the villages daily,” “I did not speak a word of the language,” “I could not stand the music I was recording; I went home and listened to Mozart”—authorial motivation for such gestures must be sought elsewhere. Often, such motivation resides in a network of scholarly values and their attendant politics.

Consider the following statement from a 1982 study of the principles of Ewe drumming:

My performance training includes: 1969 (Columbia University), Ewe music and dance with Alfred Ladzekpo and Nicholas England; 1971–1975 (Wesleyan University), repertory of the Ghana National Dance Ensemble with Abraham Adzinyah; 1972–1975 (Wesleyan University) Ewe music and dance with Freeman Donkor; 1975–1977 (Institute of African Studies, Legon) Akan drumming with Kwasi Adei, Ewe drumming and dance with Gideon Foli Alorwoyie; 1975–1977

25. See, for example, the claim by George Marcus and Michael Fischer that “the presence in the text of the writer and the exposure of reflections concerning both his fieldwork and the textual strategy of the resulting account have become, for very important theoretical reasons, pervasive marks of current experiments” (George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* [Chicago, 1986], p. 42). Fabian also refers to “the inherently autobiographic nature of much anthropological writing” (Fabian, *Time and the Other*, p. 74).

(Art Council of Ghana Folkloric Company, Accra), Eye drumming and dance with Godwin Agbeli, Dagomba music and dance with Abubakari Lunna; 1975–1977 (Volta Region, Ghana), the music and dance of Atsiagbeko with dance clubs from the towns of Afia-deniyigba, Aflao and Anyako.²⁶

Why do we need to know all this about the author? Does the listing of teachers, places of study (including several simultaneous locations), and periods of apprenticeship tell us much besides the fact that the author is not an armchair ethnomusicologist, but one with hands-on experience of African music? For this biographical information to be pertinent, some indication of the author's *competence* as drummer or dancer must be given. More important, a necessary connection between possessing such competence and successfully "doing theory" needs to be established. One need not underplay the importance of Locke's particular study in order to hold the view that it is not on the implied opposition between armchair theorist and one with hands-on experience that the success of theory turns, especially where theory includes both speculative and practical aspects.

The "I" that signals hands-on experience also gestures towards authenticity, which in turn gives fieldwork an iconic status. And it is but a small step from there to the claim that research that is not based on the fruits of labor in the field—regardless of its cogency and theoretical sophistication—is somehow suspect. Reviewing Rose Brandel's *Music of Central Africa* (1961), Gerhard Kubik criticizes the author for basing her analysis on recordings rather than on firsthand contact with the music and musicians.²⁷ Similarly, Ruth Stone forgoes every opportunity to confront the main theoretical substance of my analysis of two pieces of West African drumming by focusing on the fact that the music analyzed was "recorded by others."²⁸

The great irony is that one of the major texts on African music, Jones's *Studies in African Music* was researched in the comforts of the School of African and Oriental Studies of the University of London with a single informant.²⁹ Although Jones did have firsthand experience of African music in Northern Rhodesia, he did not have firsthand experience of Anlo drumming in situ. His opponents berated him for not having undergone the fieldwork ritual—those deadly Ewe mosquitoes needed to be

26. Locke, "Principles of Offbeat Timing and Cross-Rhythm in Southern Ewe Dance Drumming," *Ethnomusicology* 26 (May 1982): 245.

27. Kubik, review of *The Music of Central Africa: An Ethnomusicological Study*, by Brandel, *African Music* 3 (1962): 116–18.

28. Ruth M. Stone, "Commentary: The Value of Local Ideas in Understanding West African Rhythm," *Ethnomusicology* 30 (Winter 1986): 54.

29. Jones's single informant was Desmond Tay, the Gold Coast's cultural attaché to London in the 1950s.

appeased! But surely the most important thing is what Jones had to say, what theories he put forward to explain the rhythmic organization of Ewe drumming, not the tattoos on his right shoulder. To keep harping on the fact that he did his research in London is like saying that he had jumped a particular initiation ceremony. And why not?

The illogic of such politicking is exposed by what Fabian calls a “denial of coevalness,” that is, “a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse.”³⁰ Almost all ethnomusicological writing is marked by this feature, regardless of whether the temporal and spatial distances are large or small. The distancing and inauthenticity produced by the act of recording are unavoidable, whether scholars record the material themselves, or use material recorded by previous researchers. Fabian does not suggest ways in which we might avoid this denial beyond acknowledging it. But it would already be a significant step if ethnomusicologists made such an acknowledgement.

The time has come for us to openly admit that although it can provide a valuable stimulus to understanding, fieldwork is not necessary for the ethnomusicological enterprise. I am not suggesting that we follow in the tradition of writing about writing, or of the poetics of ethnography, for example. The nature of our primary material—organized sound—discourages a hasty adoption of such a practice. In view, however, of the increasingly sophisticated technology for preserving material both visual and aural, and with the large extant body of data collected in the past sixty years and deposited in major libraries throughout Europe and the United States, it seems strange to insist that analysis of the materials may not begin until one has undergone the ritual of fieldwork. Perhaps the interests of proponents of this position are not only epistemological but political as well. Instead of creating a public forum for the open confrontation of ideas—such as publishing competing transcriptions of the “same” musical objects, or developing alternative interpretations of the same system of cultural expression—ethnomusicologists writing on Africa have been more interested in establishing ownership of unstudied or little-studied musical areas than in going over previously charted terrain. The imperial urge dies hard.

Us and Them

One of the most persistent and at the same time controversial dichotomies used by ethnomusicologists is the us/them construct. (It is also given in a variety of synonyms: insider/outsider, -etic/-emic, experience-near/experience-far, and so on.)³¹ The construct aims at recognizing the

30. Fabian, *Time and the Other*, p. 31.

31. The -emic/-etic construct, coined by Kenneth L. Pike from the linguistic terms

differences between researcher and researched, between “those who seek knowledge about other musical traditions and those that impart the knowledge,”³² and between colonizer and colonized. There is hardly a study of African music that does not make implicit use of this opposition. What is the value of this dichotomy? Are there things that can only be understood by Africans as opposed to Westerners?

A collective “us,” whether a reference to Westerners, white males, or ethnomusicologists, is no more valid than a collective “them,” which lumps together people with different abilities and levels of knowledge about tradition and culture. It is not, however, in this nominal sense that the us/them dichotomy is problematic. The problem arises when the dichotomy is viewed in relation to the contributions of African scholars, whose work nominally strides the two pronoun areas. Reviewing Nketia’s influential textbook, *The Music of Africa*, A. M. Jones wrote that “the book does not sound like Africa as anyone who has lived there knows it.”³³ Instead of creating a sense of the “other” Africa, Jones implies, Nketia errs by normalizing the exotic. Similarly, Blacking finds the book “rather short on information about African concepts of sonic organization.”³⁴ And Stone finds it “ironic” that I should rely on a “thoroughly Western theoretical framework,” while, perhaps unwittingly, relying nonetheless on “African ideas of musical organization.”³⁵ The insistence on an African epistemology, distinct from European epistemology, but given in European language, shows no sign of abating in ethnomusicological circles.

What lies behind the criticisms of Jones, Blacking, Stone, and others is, I fear, a political issue: the desire to silence the African’s participation in the larger discussion. To insist that African scholars think African thoughts is an exclusionary tactic, harboring the implicit claim that the African is only capable of—or allowed—one style of discourse, and that a departure from this represents a betrayal of sorts.

In *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, Paulin Hountondji lays this matter to rest by arguing against a peculiarly African philosophy and the

phonemic and phonetic, aims to distinguish between insider and outsider accounts, subjective and objective evaluations, and so on. The construct has had something of a checkered history in linguistics, anthropology, and ethnomusicology. For a straightforward general discussion, see Clifford Geertz, “‘From the Native’s Point of View’: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding,” *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York, 1983), pp. 55–70. Of more immediate relevance is Kubik, “African Music: The Dimension of Cross-Cultural Understanding,” *South African Journal of Musicology* 5 (1985): 1–5.

32. Nazir Ali Jairazbhoy, review of *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Twenty-nine Issues and Concepts*, by Nettl, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 42 (Fall 1989): 628.

33. Jones, review of *The Music of Africa*, by Nketia, *Music and Letters* 56 (July–Oct. 1975): 397.

34. Blacking, review of *The Music of Africa*, by Nketia, *African Music* 5 (1975–76): 155.

35. Stone, “Commentary,” p. 55.

attendant concept of ethnophilosophy, and calling for philosophy pure and simple, a philosophy that is to be defined by texts written by Africans and judged to be philosophical by them. Although not everyone finds Hountondji's essentialist definition of African philosophy acceptable, there is, I imagine, less opposition to his effort to counter the academic imperialism symbolized by the desire to see Africans thinking African thoughts:

To require thinkers to be content with reaffirming the beliefs of their people or social group is exactly the same as prohibiting them from thinking freely and condemning them in the long term to intellectual asphyxia. Deep down in such a demand lies radical scepticism and stubborn relativism; and, perhaps worse still, behind the apparently anti-racial and anti-Eurocentric stance lurks a secret contempt for non-Western thinkers, who are thus subtly excluded from any claim to universality—that is to say truth—and denied the right to any authentic research, simply being expected to display the peculiarities of their culture in philosophical form.³⁶

In the same vein, and beyond the political dimension addressed by Hountondji, V. Y. Mudimbe finds that “in spite of the apparent clarity, European knowledge and African wisdom are, as expressions, opaque and thus insufficient to demonstrate support for a process of a computation of propositions and analysis of propositional variables.”³⁷ On epistemological grounds, then, the us/them dichotomy is an illusion; on moral grounds, its use is indefensible.

But we cannot do without illusions. Notions of otherness and difference serve as the observer's mirror, enabling the subject to see him or herself more clearly. In the war of pronouns, however, both sides are not comparably armed. It is unlikely that difference can be eliminated completely in the representation of African music; nor am I suggesting that we do so. However, it seems important to at least acknowledge the self-serving nature of difference—the fact that, at the end of the day, the glance of the ethnomusicological enterprise is on itself—rather than to pretend to be engaged in a dialogue with the Other.

Ethnotheory

Allied to the persistence of an us/them dichotomy is the application of the prefix ethno- to theory to create a species of theory that is claimed to be systematic for the natives, even where theorizing—which essentially

36. Paulin J. Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, trans. Henri Evans and Jonathan Rée (Bloomington, Ind., 1983), p. 129.

37. Mudimbe, “African Philosophy as an Ideological Practice: The Case of French-speaking Africa,” *African Studies Review* 26 (Sept.–Dec. 1983): 139.

means verbalizing about music—occurs sporadically. While there are differences between them, ethnoscience, ethnophilosophy, and ethnoaesthetics all promise a greater sensitivity to the indigenous perceptions and formulations of the makeup and significance of their objects.

Although no single and comprehensive statement about the scope and nature of musical ethnotheory as it applies to African music has yet been made, there is enough in general ethnomusicology to indicate the issues involved. Previous distinctions between a “folk evaluation” and an “analytical evaluation,”³⁸ paralleling the -emic/-etic division, easily legitimize the construction of the former category in such a way that the resulting pattern can be christened “ethnotheory.”

There are two preliminary reasons—one epistemological, the other political—why musical ethnotheory must be contested. The assumption that there is an ethnotheory distinct from some general theory only begins to make sense within a very narrow conception of “theory.” For either all theory is ethnotheory, since all music theory, practical or speculative, uses as primary data material from specific societies and cultures, or ethnotheory represents no more than a change of emphasis, that is, an emphasis on *ethnic* perception within the general category of theory. Neither of these makes a very strong argument for ethnotheory.

Second, ethnotheory reinscribes the dichotomy between “us” and “them” in ways that are not politically advantageous to “them.” Theirs is ethnotheory (overseen by us, of course); ours is theory. And yet, I see no fundamental difference between a theory of sixteenth-century modal counterpoint and a theory of, say, harmonic organization in Mende music where both theories meet the stated requirements for a general theory. Moreover, since ethnotheory is constructed for “them,” we reinforce the view that they need to be spoken for theoretically. We need them as informants, but not as theorists. Thus, by magically stepping outside the temporal and spatial framework of theory making, the musical ethnographer constructs a native worldview as it is manifest in musical production and consumption.

One further challenge to the logical and epistemological validity of ethnotheory stems from language, and concerns, first, the use of colonial languages in fieldwork, and second, the use of indigenous languages.³⁹ It is often assumed that the ethnomusicologist working in English-speaking Africa can get along perfectly well using English. But the status of “standard English” is hardly a stable one. Problems arise in the verbatim transcriptions of conversations with musicians, an act that assumes the transparency of English. Beyond the loading of language itself, the

38. See Paul Bohannan, *Social Anthropology* (New York, 1963).

39. For a thorough discussion of the role of native languages in fieldwork, see Maxwell Owusu, “Ethnography of Africa: The Usefulness of the Useless,” *American Anthropologist* 80 (June 1978): 310–34.

regional varieties of English in Africa, especially those that are spoken by semiliterate musicians, are often motivated by indigenous languages, making it necessary for the ethnographer to translate material from such English into a "standard" English. Such translation would improve, for example, James Koetting's interview with a Ghanaian musician, which appears in an introductory article on African music, and in which such matters as "talent" and "perfection," introduced by the researcher and discussed freely by the informant, desperately need elucidation.⁴⁰

The technical problems raised by using indigenous African languages as media for collecting musical data are constrained by a more fundamental question regarding motivation: are the categories provided by informants *willingly* developed by them? "Working with musicians who have nothing to say is frustrating," writes Klaus Wachsmann in his 1982 Charles Seeger lecture.⁴¹ So why bother? The relentless effort to get natives to name instruments, describe parts of song, articulate aesthetic responses to musical performances, and compose oral texts on the meaning of music places all of the material thus collected in a particular—dare I say suspicious?—light. If the Yoruba or Mende do not, of their own accord, produce a theory of rhythmic organization, then surely any theory that is constructed from information attributed to them must acknowledge the very circumstances that made such theorizing possible. For it is likely that the creativity of local musicians extends to the invention of metaphors to describe musical practice. While we should not seek to deprive the researcher of an opportunity to build an entire theory on the basis of "systematic deception,"⁴² we should expect to be warned of such deception.

One final way in which ethnotheory wreaks havoc is in the impression it gives that approaching musical material from another culture must be mediated by some form of theory over and above our own ineradicably theoretical constitution. The gap between an educated ear and an uneducated one may not always be as big as those who use ethnotheory for political purposes would wish to have it. Hearing a piece of West African drumming, for example, we are likely to notice different instruments playing different rhythmic patterns; the resulting hierarchy would probably be lost only on the deaf. No amount of ethnotheory will enlighten the listener who cannot perceive these patterns. It is dishonest to ignore or underplay their accessibility in order to introduce an artificial distinction between what we hear and what they hear. This is not to deny that, in a detailed analysis, additional information regarding, say, the performer's

40. See Koetting, "Africa/Ghana," in *Worlds of Music: An Introduction to the Music of the World's Peoples*, ed. Jeff Todd Titon (New York, 1984), pp. 64–104. The interview with William Alban Ayipaga Connelly appears on pp. 77–83.

41. Wachsmann, "The Changeability of Musical Experience," *Ethnomusicology* 26 (May 1982): 198.

42. Owusu, "Ethnography of Africa," p. 315.

conception of movement, may aid an appreciation of the piece. But this extra tutelage must not be allowed to obscure the level of the music's immediate accessibility. Ethnotheorists wish to appropriate both the natural (or "semiotic") and the learned (or "symbolic") aspects of this activity, but the end result is often a further distancing of the musical object from the listener.

The Burden of Context

An enduring prejudice about ethnomusicological research is that it does not deal sufficiently with the music. It is said that researchers are so wrapped up in the intricacies of context (social situation, dynamics of performing space, instrumental symbolism, audience makeup, and so on) that they somehow never get around to the thing itself. Joseph Kerman, responding to a comment of Seeger's, argues that "contextual studies . . . are usually tilted much too far towards the consideration of contexts. They usually deal too little with the music as music."⁴³ Ethnomusicologists have been quick to point out, however, that to equate the music with sounds is highly problematic. There are many languages that do not have a single word for what in English is meant by the word *music*. That is why the "music sound" is considered by some to be only one parameter among many.⁴⁴

If context is simply more text, and if there is no limit to the production of such texts (especially if one includes all subsequent performances in the definition of a work's ontology), then it is clear that no single model for musical understanding can capture all of the complexity of the musical object. Pragmatic limitations on what to include in a model are therefore dictated by practical or pragmatic concerns. This simple lesson continues to elude those who cannot accept an analysis of pitch without a consideration of rhythm, an analysis of harmony without a consideration of timbre, or an analysis of a song that says nothing about the occupations of its performers. Arguments about what is legitimately isolatable strike me as uninteresting precisely because it is only after examining the results of the particular restricted mode of inquiry that we can judge its usefulness. To refuse to isolate is to refuse to do research. The method of throwing everything into the sack (as practiced by Lomax, for example) often produces a residue of undigested information. Rarely does it lead to a pursuit of interdimensional equations; it is satisfied with an argument for coexis-

43. Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), p. 180.

44. Conceptions of music among various African peoples sometimes include drumming, dance, words, melody, rhythm, and so on. While care is needed in transferring the Western term *music* to these contexts, it should also be said that there is often little doubt about what constitutes music as opposed, say, to walking or sleeping. We must guard against the urge to exaggerate the difference between Western and African conceptions of music.

tence. Context, in this view, comprises a potentially infinite number of existing elements and processes. But this is not a theoretical position, only a description of initial conditions. For context to cease to be a burden, we need to go beyond the lists of elements (that is, the number of factors that impinge on a single musical event) and develop algebraic equations that capture all the bases for connection between events. We need, in short, a syntax of networks.

The emphasis on context breeds another problem, namely, the quietly assumed and increasingly utilized homology between musical structure and social structure. The research of Lomax, Steven Feld, Blacking, and others leaves us no choice in the matter: we must always look out for possible alliances or purposeful nonalliances between musical organization and societal structure.⁴⁵ Had the homology been theoretically valid, however, it would by now have produced, if not an analytical model that successfully integrates matters musical with matters extramusical, then at least some specification for making the transfer from social structure to musical structure, or vice versa. But there is no such model. Nor has anyone seriously disputed the possibility that there is a level of musical organization that is autonomous, in other words, a level that is *not* reducible to a particular social construct, but is made up of a purely musical and relational deep structure. Emphasis on context has the negative effect of discouraging the search for such purely musical deep structures.

Ethnomusicological writing about Africa has shown a marked ambivalence to the issue of musical structure versus social structure. Wachsmann is careful to credit only "the hypothesis that the structure of all music depends on social organization."⁴⁶ Similarly Blacking, although largely concerned to provide as much context as is necessary, contends that "the meaning of music rests ultimately 'in the notes' that human ears perceive."⁴⁷ Yet the pursuit of purely musical deep structures has not been the priority of anthropologically oriented ethnomusicologists working on Africa. Writing on jùjú, an urban West African popular music, Christopher Waterman has recently proposed that the overall profile generated by individual performing units within the jùjú band "metaphorically predicates an idealized social order: a congeries of localized networks focused on big men."⁴⁸ The difficulty here is not with Waterman's interpretation of the dynamics of interaction in Yoruba society; it is rather with the nature of the metaphorical transfer from society to music (or vice versa). Oppositions between big men and small men, or between hierarchical and egalitarian societies, are far too fragile and predictable to support such

45. See Lomax and Feld's studies cited above in n. 14.

46. Wachsmann, "Folk Music," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 6: 693.

47. Blacking, *How Musical Is Man?* p. 19.

48. Christopher A. Waterman, "'Our Tradition Is a Very Modern Tradition': Popular Music and the Construction of Pan-Yoruba Identity," *Ethnomusicology* 34 (Fall 1990): 374.

transfers. To alleviate the burden of context, it is necessary to undermine the last vestiges of anthropological ethnomusicology not by showing its irrelevance to the field of African music but by contextualizing its relevance, by showing this relevance to lie in a hierarchical formation whereby the music sound becomes the point of departure as well as the source of the “ultimate meaning” of a work. That we can ever decode such meaning is of course open to question, but to retain such an illusion may prove far more productive than resorting to simple dichotomies.

Representing African music is of course a complex affair, and it has been part of my aim in developing this critique not to suggest that there is a single, proper method of representation. I am especially conscious of the many gaps left in this essay. The contributions of numerous scholars have gone unmentioned, there has been little discussion of African popular music or so-called art music, and no reference has been made to the semiotic aspects of musical notation, an area of representation in which musicians can claim a “native” interest. I hope, however, that the narrowness of focus has not obscured the underlying view that we are our discourses (just as we say “the clothes make the man” or “you are what you eat”). This means that we have to be careful not to fall prey to simple dichotomies, especially those propped up by a vulgar essentialism. Differences between North American and European ethnomusicologists writing about Africa, between African scholars and their Western counterparts, between musicologically oriented ethnomusicologists and anthropologically oriented ones, between armchair ethnomusicologists and those who have done fieldwork: these and other identities change with time, circumstance, and occasion. And this is as it should be, for the musical object is far too complex to allow a satisfactory view from only one angle.