



Entrevista / Entrevista / Interview

**Ellen Koskoff. *Opening the Door to Difference: Questions of Gender, Identity, and Ethics in Ethnomusicology***

by Jennifer W. Kyker (The University of Rochester)\*

Born in 1943, Koskoff was raised in Squirrel Hill, a predominantly Jewish area of Pittsburgh. A senior figure within the field, she is currently the editor of the journal *Ethnomusicology*, and has previously served as President of the Society for Ethnomusicology. Joining her service to the field and her research on Jewish-American and Balinese music cultures, Koskoff has recently completed shepherding a new book manuscript, *A Feminist Ethnomusicology: Writings on Music and Gender*, through the publication process. Finally, Koskoff has a deep investment in mentoring younger generations of scholars. She has participated in multiple mentoring initiatives sponsored by the Society for Ethnomusicology, ranging from “speed mentoring” sessions at conferences to the Diversity Action Committee Mentoring Program, which pairs recent Ph.D. mentees with senior ethnomusicologists. Since I arrived at the Eastman School of Music three years ago, I have witnessed Koskoff’s dedication to mentoring in her commitment to meeting with me weekly for lunch. Reflecting the many hours we have spent together, the following interview is an extension of an on-going conversation between two generations of ethnomusicologists.

**Jennifer W. Kyker:** I find the story of how you became an ethnomusicologist particularly fascinating, yet it is absent from your description of becoming an ethnomusicologist, either in *Music in Lubavitcher Life* (2001), or in your new book, *A Feminist Ethnomusicology: Writings on Music and Gender* (2014). To begin, I ask you to share your story of discovering the field of ethnomusicology, and to reflect on how this moment opened new intellectual horizons for you as a music scholar.

**Ellen Koskoff:** I was a graduate student in historical musicology at the University of Pittsburgh from 1971 to 1976. And I was playing the harpsichord then. By that time I had

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basically moved away from the masterwork rhetoric of musicology. I really loved Baroque and Renaissance musics; I loved Bach keyboard music the best, and Bach in general. So, I had switched over to the harpsichord, and I was now playing in and around Pittsburgh, and working on a PhD in historical musicology. And I recognized that I was really interested in early music before there was such a thing as “early music”. Part of the reason was that I loved the music; I was very attracted to the intricacies of how the music was put together structurally, but I was also very happy to read different kinds of discourses, which weren’t so weighted down by the heavy, valuative language of historical musicology discourse. So, I began to move away from my concentration in musicology.

At the same time, I became quite involved in the early women’s movement, and in the civil rights movement, where I marched against the war. And I was beginning to have an inkling that there were bigger forces at work than simply people writing histories of Beethoven. I know this sounds funny today, because we live in times where we are much more conscious of power issues, but at the time, it was all a huge surprise to me that there could be such things as power dynamics that cause certain groups of people not to have access to education, and so forth. So, at the same time that I was veering toward Bach and Binchois, I was also becoming politically conscious. I had come out of the civil rights movement being fairly politically conscious, but when I came to the feminist movement, it suddenly made sense to me in a way that no other issue had, because I quickly recognized power imbalances based on gender. It was an “A-ha!” experience, like I say in my recent book. It was like a kaleidoscope that suddenly morphed into a completely new pattern, and my whole world was completely changed. And that was a very huge moment for me.

However, I had not figured out that political rising consciousness and the study of Bach’s keyboard works could inform each other, because they seemed so far apart. I used to say things like, “Well, okay, so Bach is a dead white composer, but you know, it’s Bach! And I love his music, and what can I do?” So, I have now finished all of my courses, and I have now finished my exams, and I’m ready to cough up a dissertation proposal. And I’m resisting this for some reason, and I keep thinking, “Why am I resisting this?” In retrospect, I think I was resisting because I was trying to find a way to integrate these two perspectives. And so, as I was resisting writing this dissertation proposal, I spent most of my time in the music library at the University of Pittsburgh.

And one day, I was cruising around in the library, and I was totally in a zone. I was absolutely not conscious of what I was doing. And I happen to look up, and this bright, disgusting color yellow book was sticking out from its peers on the shelf. And somehow, that annoyed me, so I took my hand, and I pushed the book back, so it would be flush with the others. And I looked at the title, and it said *Anthropology of Music*. And I thought, “You can do that?”

I had not heard of ethnomusicology, or of anthropology of music, and I didn’t realize such a field even existed. Of course it had been written in 1964, and this was 1972, so it was a fairly new publication, and I took it home and opened it up. I tell my students all the time

that I'm not a religious person, but I do understand religious conversion stories, because that is precisely what happened. I read this book, and it completely stunned and amazed me –it changed me in the same way that the civil rights and feminist movements had done. And I saw, finally, a way to connect them. And at that point, I began to have memories of my very early childhood, before ten, when I lived in Squirrel Hill, which is the so-called Jewish area of Pittsburgh.

When I was about six years old, a group of very Orthodox Jews, Hasidic Jews, moved into the neighborhood. They were right at the corner. And I knew this was causing trouble at my house, because my father would get nervous and talk about these people. I had to pass their school on the way to my own school; and sometimes, I would just be incredibly attracted to what I could see going on in the basement, through the window, as I passed – performances of music that were being done by men and boys, who had a relationship to music that seemed to be similar to my relationship to music. I was starting to play the piano, and I loved the little Bach pieces I was playing, and I saw these men and boys dancing, their incredible joy and freedom, I felt attracted to that. I felt connected. Because I sensed at some level that they felt about music the same way I did.

And now we go fast forward, back again to my encounter with Alan Merriam's book. As I was reading the book, I started to think about these memories of the Hasidic school, and I knew that that was the way to go. I wanted to write a dissertation that explored the relationship between people's view of themselves, and of their environment, and of their religious beliefs, and how this played out musically. However, the University of Pittsburgh did not have an ethnomusicology professor at that time. And so I went back into school, and I told Don Beikman, the professor that I had been working with. "Well," I said, "I think I want to be an ethnomusicologist".

–"What is that?" he said.

–"Oh," I said, "It's sort of like anthropology of music". And suddenly, he got up out of his chair, and he went to a bookshelf, and he pulled off Hugo Zemp's book, *Musique of the Dan* (1971). And he handed it to me.

He said, "This is going to help you".

I tell you, I have been really grateful to him, and to the music department at the University of Pittsburgh, for not saying something like, "Well, you know, don't slam the door on the way out". They had invested in me, and I was almost at the end, and they made it possible for me to switch, and to become an ethnomusicologist on my own, basically. So, that is how I discovered ethnomusicology. It was a wonderful "A-ha!" experience, not unlike a religious conversion.

**JWK:** In recent decades, questions of identity have risen to the fore within ethnomusicology, which has increasingly turned its lens to how issues such as race, age, class, occupation, and education inform musical experience (Rushkin and Rice 2012: 308). In a parallel development, the Society for Ethnomusicology now hosts a proliferation of

sub-disciplinary alliances, such as special interest groups in Jewish, European, and Celtic music. In this climate, has gender become simply one among many variables of identity? Or does it continue to maintain a specially marked position in shaping music as social behavior?

**EK:** I do think that gender is a specially marked category, because it is the primary category of differentiation among most contemporary societies. Certainly race, age, religion, ethnicity, and so forth are also incredible markers of identity, but gender seems primary, because it is a way that most societies differentiate. For me, gender has been the primary factor, and I suspect it is so for many different groups of people. So, I do think that gender should be a specially marked category; but at the same time, everything is always interactive, and always part of a larger nexus of identities. So, in these postmodern days, I have come to see identity as an on-the-spot, creative negotiation. Identity is not one thing; nor is it even a nexus of things. It is a set of performances that we do in real-time. And I see it, really, as an improvisation.

One of the negative sides of focusing on gender, though, as has been pointed out to me by many of my colleagues, is that it's too easy to essentialize gender, men, women, and so forth. In other words, age, race, and all these other identity markers, are also important in the moment. To mix up everything is probably closer to the way we actually live, because sometimes I'm just Ellen walking down the street, and I don't think of myself as a woman until someone holds the door for me, or something, and then I go, "Oh, yeah, I'm a woman". So, my belief is that we have a pool of identities that are comfortable, and we perform them when needed. And it's a very seamless kind of performance. Isolating gender is good for one reason, and that is to actually look deeper into one aspect of identity, which does have implications for everything else that we do. I never wanted that to be the only identity marker, but I personally do feel that it is an important one. I do think that having all these other interest groups in SEM dilutes the emphasis on gender, but that's not necessarily a bad thing, because gender may not be the focal point for other people; in other words, race may be more important, or some other marker. And these kinds of foci are often more from the ethnographer than they are from the community. We like to think that our categories rise up from the data, but sometimes we are unaware of how much we are structuring that. I think these issues are often quite personal.

I also want to say one other thing about the identity question. I think in a way these special interest groups are like Turner's idea of the age grade (1967), in that the minute we leave our special interest group at SEM, we're back in the hierarchy of power. But when we're sitting there, we're all about race, or age, or sexualities; we're not about anything else. And so, it's just a different way to shed a spotlight on some issue that is relevant and important to that group of people, at that moment. It does end up complicating matters, because if you actually put together all the different identities that any one person had and then tried to talk about it, what would you do? You would need a flowchart; you would need

a movable object. I don't even know what you would need. It hasn't been invented. And that is not the way scholarship works.

**JWK:** How do we continue to push forward a feminist scholarship when gender has become so decentered among all of these other identities?

**EK:** My feeling is that if identity politics can be used as a way to open up a door for discussions of social and political difference, and valuation, then it doesn't matter what you're choosing. To choose any one, of course, is to separate it from the reality of everyday living. Scholarship often does that, because it's interested in looking deeper at one issue, but it's not the way we live. And so from my point of view, anything that can work towards evening the playing field, and making things not so out of balance, politically and powerfully, is a good thing.

Very early on, I was interested in saving my Jewish sisters from horrible, second-class citizenship, as I saw it. And then I began to realize that the people I was really trying to be political with were people in my own communities. My colleagues, my friends, my family; that I was really trying to look at gender as a political act of social justice, which could be extended beyond gender. I was interested in gender because of the issues that I had faced, but I became conscious pretty early on that I was using that platform to act politically within my own environment. And so I stopped trying to tell Lubavitchers how they should be living, and I started using gender as a way to open up other areas of difference; I saw it as a lens through which you could have deeper discussions. I veered away from race, for example, because I did not at the time have any sense of my own privilege as a white person. It was invisible to me. On the other hand, I did have a sense of my own "non-privilege" as a female, so I tended to use gender as a way to fight my own battles, and also as an opening salvo in the bigger battle, which I think I share with most ethnomusicologists, about social justice, and making a level playing field. I do not think that there is a level playing field for women, yet. I still want to fight that battle. I am a product of the second wave of feminism, so I do see what Spivak (1988) would call an essentializing strategy, of lumping women together, as politically important. I do respect the third wave's idea of local political battles, but the playing field is not level yet, for any of these identities.

**JWK:** In the afterword to Ruth Hellier's edited volume *Women Singers in Global Contexts*, you assert, "Stripped of its theory, feminism is simply living a life guided by resistance (small or large) to inherited gender norms, as found in specific cultural and historical moments" (Koskoff 2013: 214). Yet, you subsequently counsel that we "rarely see the details of this kind of agency in a standard ethnography" (2013: 215). Why is this?

**EK:** We have tipped the scale to the degree that we see all of the stuff that we get from

our informants as data to be used in theory. So, the data are like ingredients in a loaf of bread. They're not valuable in and of themselves itself –they are evidence for the bigger scheme of theorizing. I don't know whether this is a good thing or a bad thing, but it is certainly a thing in scholarship, and it is certainly something that one needs, in order to get published, and it is certainly what I tell my students, when they write a paper. Ruth's book was really a reminder to me of how rich people's lives are, and how, when feminism of my generation was starting, we used to see these oral histories as strategies of how to get ahead, how to crash the glass ceiling. But I see them differently now. I see them simply as another person's story, a story of a rich life, spelled out in a narrative by that person. And that is in itself enough. For us to have had the privilege to know that person, and to have that person trust us enough to be able to talk about stuff like this, that alone is a wonderful gift. Now, that's a personal issue. I'm always moved by people's stories, when I talk to them, in interviewing. However, I know that at some point, I have to, as I say, leave scraps on the cutting room floor, because you need to make a theme, and things have to connect. And I've always felt bad about that. I don't know if you've read my article called "The Music Network," where I dealt with that issue of individuality versus groupness (1982). That was in the 1980s. And that has haunted me through most of my life, because I feel it a complete disservice, in a way, to use people who are giving so much to you in that way. On the other hand, how else do you get an article published? People say, "Well, so what? So what that this woman did this?"

And I say, "Well, that's enough". I do believe that we've gone too far on the side of theory. And I think we need to back off a little bit, and have those very rich and beautiful moments of individual agency built into our ethnographies.

**JWK:** I'm interested in your thoughts both on how we might go about doing this work of resituating the complexities of agency within musical ethnography, and on what this enhanced attention to agency could contribute to our knowledge about music, culture, and society.

**EK:** I think the only way to do this would be to have many ways of presenting data, so that along with the formal academic way that gets you tenure, you also have websites that are run by the people that you talk to, in their own words –in other words, conversations that could occur among many people who have had to interact. And I think that's possible now, technically. I don't know if it's at all advisable, or doable. It would make us pretty honest though. It would help us to be as honest as we could be, and it would also give more agency to the people whom we talk with and work with. I know some people have done this, and I think that's probably the best way at this point.

I also think that the academic apparatus has to be deconstructed somewhat. I think we have to really look at what we're doing, and the quick propulsion of these articles that keep coming out by young scholars. You know, it's just too strained, and difficult, and too

arch. It's too constructed to be real. I sometimes read articles where I have absolutely no sense of who the person is they're talking to, even if they're quoting that person. I'm a face-to-face, let's-have-a-conversation-type person. So I think this question is two-pronged. One way is to develop newer ways to integrate all parties in this collaboration, and the other way is to redefine what it is we're doing, in terms of the bigger picture. Of course, that's part of a huge structure that has been around for a thousand years, and I don't know if we can deconstruct it.

**JWK.** It appears that in our desire to marshal our data into the framework of theory, we're doing a disservice not only to the data, but also to theory. Because if we don't see the details of this kind of agency in a standard ethnography, there's a theoretical lack, not only a lack of data; we don't have a sufficiently developed theory of agency and resistance.

**EK.** Yes. Theory is sort of a strange word, and I've come to understand it as an explanation for something, which works only as long as you have sufficient evidence. And theories should be given up regularly; they should be tossed overboard if they don't work. I think sometimes that younger people especially, because they're so desperate to get employment, have a theory that is fairly confining, and some data that seems to work, so it gets constructed too tightly. I know everybody wants to make a name, and have a theory named after them, but that can really lead to a kind of reification or mummification of theories. We don't see how mummified they are until the next generation comes back, and says, "Oh my God! Look at what they did," because at the time, it seemed to answer questions.

And I suspect all the questions that I think motivate most ethnomusicologists, maybe most anthropologists –like "Why is there an unbalance of power in the world? Why do people keep killing each other?"– these questions cannot be answered simply in a theory. So, I think that we need to stop thinking about theory as the goal, as the end of the ethnography. We have to see theory as about this particular data, this particular time, and then let it go. And that took me a long time to figure out, because I inherited, in a sense, this second wave notion of all women being oppressed. I began to look for the answer in music, to answer the question, because I wanted to be able to solve this horrible problem. But I came to realize that that was a fool's journey, and that all you can really do is to be as conscious of social injustice as you possibly can be in every moment of your life, and try to do the right thing. So I've moved from a globalized perspective to more of a glocal one.

**JWK.** That's interesting, because it strikes me that there are parallels with the second and third waves of feminism, the second wave being the global perspective, and the third wave as being the local perspective. So, it makes sense that you would come to that kind of hybrid ground.

**EK:** Right. I don't think the global perspective is as bad as it's cracked up to be, because it does accomplish things. But the collage perspective, or the fragmented perspective, which is that of the third wave, is also good because it is local.

**JWK:** While scholars such as Judith Butler (1990), Sherry Ortner (1996), and others assert that both male and female identities are performed, men are rarely theorized through the lens of gender. In your new books, you introduce a wide range of excellent scholarship on questions of women, music, and gender. To what extent is there, or should there be, an equally broad range of work examining men as gendered subjects?

**EK:** That is unfortunate baggage that we have inherited from the second wave, because – what is the group of people that is underprivileged? Women. So, women get the focus. But of course, the real issue, as I have always said, is that women don't live in a vacuum. They live in relationships, whether they're women and women, or men and women, or whatever. And there are men in our culture, and they have gender too. That, by the way, is a quote from Rob Walser –“Ellen, men have gender too!” So, I think there has been a recent movement that has tried to understand why it is that men appear to be in the dominant position in most cultures. And it isn't so much men or women, it's the relationship between men and women, embedded within various political and economic forces, that have perpetuated this uneven balance. So of course, we should be deconstructing men. But although men seem to still dominate in most world cultures, people don't want to examine that too closely, because this, of course, would, they fear, result in a complete chaotic moment. What if we were to actually come up with the notion that men and women have equal power, that no one can dominate another, and that men can be weak, what if we actually said stuff like that? That would be too chaotic. So, to quote my earlier anthropology training, we keep a social order in order to avoid chaos. But I think that both men and women deserve, for their own sake in a way, to have these things deconstructed in ethnographies. I think there are enough men today who see this as a positive thing, who want not to be associated with aggression, and rape, and war. I think there are men that want to do this, and would find this very liberating. But when it comes down to actually doing it, publishing it, saying it, you need courage.

**JWK:** Are there any ethnographies you particularly value for their portrayal of men as gendered?

**EK:** Certainly the queer musicology scholarship has really looked at that. However, a lot of that work is about erotic relationships between men. Henry Spiller has written a nice article, and his latest book about males in Indonesia, called *Erotic Triangles* (2010). And



there's another book, a collection of essays, called *Gender in Chinese Music* (Harris et al. 2013), where they look at male and female at sort of the same level. I think that we're coming to that position. What I find interesting is that most of the people who are coming to that position are either out gay, or women. The non-out males are more reluctant.

**JWK:** What you're pointing to is that the center of maleness has yet to be destabilized, although the margins of maleness have been destabilized.

**EK:** Yes. This is very similar to the way women were destabilized, so I see it as part of a process that will hopefully continue beyond my lifetime. The problem of identity that you mentioned earlier will complicate that, though, because just at the point when we were getting really cool about gender, we fragmented it, which is, of course, a perfectly normal thing, given postmodernism. We moved away from gender as the center, as you said. And some people, like Henrietta Moore (2006), think that the moment where we began to look at ethnography as fiction came right at that moment when women were beginning to become powerful in anthropology. So, although we don't want to blame these people, I often can hear the sound of the status quo sucking back into existence. And I think that has been part of the issue for me. I see a backlash. It's not a complete backlash, but I see why gender has lost its focus, or lost its impetus. Because of these two powerful reasons: one, the fragmentation of the issues; and the other, invisible fear, or invisible discomfort.

**JWK:** I would like to spend some time talking about fieldwork, which you describe in your forthcoming work as "actually living with and connecting to individuals whose complicated identities, musical and otherwise, were constantly in flux and whose lives were lived absorbing and producing similarities and differences of all kinds, aligning them here and differentiating them there from others in their orbits" (Koskoff 2014: 25). Do you perceive ethnography as inherently feminist, or inherently political?

**EK:** Both. Gender is the lens through which I see power inequalities most clearly; feminism is a political act that I do to resist or dismantle this inequity, and musical ethnography is the method that I use to do this. So, I define feminism as a political act by people who resist or try to deconstruct power relations based on gender. Anybody who does that is doing feminist work, whether you're a woman or a man. And because I am a feminist and I concentrate mainly on gender, I see many people as having qualities that make them natural ethnographers. I believe that in general, people who have been on the bottom of a power hierarchy—whether it's women, or gay people, or African Americans in the United States—become very good at reading others, because they are so in tune with uneven power relations. They may not be conscious of this, but they are very much in tune with this. So I think that ethnography is a natural thing for many women and others who have experienced

this in the field, because of these issues. I'll speak for myself here –I have, in my lifetime, had to deal with many situations where I was powerless, or where I understood that I had no agency. That made it easy for me to see impending danger when it was coming, and to learn how to deal with that, and I suspect that that might be true for many women. So, I think that doing fieldwork is an extension of that. That's what, in a sense, underlies a form of compassion that enters into the fieldwork process, because in order to be a good ethnographer, I think you must give up your own identity to some degree, or merge it with the other. I want to say that there's a certain sensitivity that comes with the understanding of yourself as not having complete agency.

**JWK:** Do you think fieldwork itself offers that experience? Obviously, the fieldworker does not have complete agency.

**EK:** Absolutely. The wonderful thing about fieldwork is that you are basically thrown into an environment that you know nothing about, and in some way you have to deal with that. You have to make sense of this world that is not yours, and that takes a lot of courage and "self" consciousness. The fieldwork process itself is so interactive, and based on letting your ego down, and inviting another person in, and having compassion for difference. You don't have to *be* different like that person, or even to like the difference, but you do have to have compassion, you have to have understanding. And I think that is something that could be seen as a feminist act. Like I said before, fieldwork itself is a way to open a door to difference. For me, difference is the major deal here. I chose gender because of my own issues, and I think it's important, certainly. But really, at the bottom of that, I'm about tolerating, or as you say, Jennifer, grappling with difference, and doing it through music.

**JWK:** It seems like maybe one of the subtexts of what you're saying is that women have rehearsed for the ethnographic moment in a way that men have not?

**EK:** Well, I wouldn't say rehearsed, because rehearse implies somewhat of a conscious act. Many women have lived in situations where they are more or less prepared for ethnography, but the problem is that most of this is intuitive, it's not something that people are necessarily aware of, so rehearsal is probably too strong. They've practiced it. They've had to deal with power, and they've had to deal with not getting what they've wanted all the time, or whatever. Not that men do, of course. Yet women have had to deal with certain issues that men simply have not had to deal with. And, that's not men's fault, it's just the way it is. OK. So, I think women have had a lot of practice, let's say practice, in dealing with situations in which they have had to read more deeply into the situation to figure out how to get what they've wanted. And I think anybody on the bottom of a power hierarchy has to do that.

But there's another thing that I want to say, which complicates everything: this is not monolithic, because every context we live in is our own little culture. In my family, for instance, I might act a certain way, in my job I'll act a certain way, in the field I'll act a certain way, but in all of those ways, I am still trying to understand, maybe I'm trying to understand the context and its power dynamics, so that I can live, so that I can find a place for myself in it. And that's what I think fieldwork is, in a way. Maybe not that harsh a description, but it is. You have to give yourself up, you have to learn, you have to be very careful, you have to be reading everything, and you have to try to understand it from the point of view of another person. So, I think people who are on the bottom of this hierarchy are really good at that, and they can be men or women.

**JWK:** In spite of the poststructuralist desire to collapse binary models, questions of sameness and difference have stubbornly remained at the heart of scholarship both in ethnomusicology, and in gender and women's studies. Why has this particular binary, of sameness/difference, proved especially tenacious? Are we in some sense still working within a paradigm derived from early comparative approaches? Or are questions of difference and sameness so richly productive that this binary continues to be an important cognitive model for us?

**EK:** I think the real problem here is that we are stuck with language. We have to use nouns; we talk, we speak. So, we are stuck with this sort of categorization tree, where we move from the tiniest level of specificity to the most general. And that is the problem, because when you start to mix things up at these levels, you can never sort that out one hundred percent. There's always some other thing you didn't say. So, the problem is not the sameness and difference issue, the problem is, what level of abstraction should you be talking at, or should you use to describe this? Because any level of abstraction, up or down, is going to create completely different narratives.

I think difference is what we most confront when we do ethnography, and it does open us up, in the sense that we understand difference better. And then we map out our difference in a narrative, but whom are we writing to? The people we work with? No, they already know that. Are we writing it for ourselves? No! We're writing it for another audience that has not had that experience of difference. So then we're stuck, because those people here, who are reading everything, have not had the same experience. So, how do we actually explain that experience of chaos, when you come up against something really different? How do you explain that, and is it even relevant to these people? So the problem is that sameness and difference just become two culturally and cognitively handy poles to put our theories on, because they are familiar to everybody. It's a good project to break that down, because sameness and difference don't ever really exist without each other, and they overlap. But part of it is the language; we have to figure out different ways to express these things.

**JWK:** I often wish we could do away with both sameness and difference, so that when we dealt with mbira, or with gamelan, we didn't make any claims for sameness and difference, and instead talked about musical practice emically, in its own terms.

**EK:** That's right, in its own world. That has bothered me all my life as an ethnographer, even at the beginning. I used to think of the difficulty of translating a real-time situation into narrative –into writing an article, or a talk. So in that translation comes the problem. Steven Feld's thing that he did at a conference, once –I thought it was crazy at the time, but I loved it afterwards. I believe it was in Buffalo, it was a local Niagara Chapter meeting a long time ago, and Steven Feld gave this talk: he played twenty minutes of Kaluli life, on a tape recorder, and did not make any comment. No comment, no voice-over. What he was saying was, "I can't translate". I mean, of course he chose that portion, and he had it on a tape recorder, but it came closer to his actual in-time life than a paper. But, can we do things like that and get a job? Maybe. The problem is that we sort of hold on, because that's the currency. And, until the currency changes in academic life, we may be stuck.

**JWK:** As your forthcoming work observes, value hierarchies are often woven into our assessments of difference and sameness, yet the work of uncoupling difference from value remains undertheorized. How best might coming generations of scholars fulfill your directive to "finally, and forever, separate difference and sameness from value, especially when it relates to people and their musics" (Koskoff 2014: 186)?

**EK:** It's the value structure that we put upon anything we're privileging or not privileging –we're putting relative value on these things. And that is the problem. And I'm going to quote Dave Thomas again, the founder of Wendy's, who, when holding up a Big Mac in one hand, and a Wendy's hamburger in his other hand, said, "This is different from this. And difference itself is good!" I believe that! I think that we get stuck in the actual content of the difference. And in order to protect ourselves from being eaten by the difference, we set up hierarchies. But if we could simply say, that's just different. I don't have to be like that, this person is not making me be like that, or whatever. It's just different. And difference itself, not the content of difference or sameness, is valued, it's the relationship between, it's the thing itself. Difference itself, or sameness itself, or whatever. So, just as you've said about the mbira, and I've said to my students about transcription exercises, I say, "You are now going to go into a world that is defined by this piece of music, nothing else. Live in it for a week, and deal". So, you're doing fieldwork on this piece of music. And that's how I wish the world could be. I can't do it one hundred percent of the time, either. But it's basically a live-in-the-moment, actually deal with the things that are going on, or that you're doing, in a way that, that you remain open to sameness, difference, and you're not afraid of it, either way. And it may make you angry or frightened,

but you're going to go with it, anyway. Because, I think that if we could get there, then we would be so much more open to difference, or sameness.

**JWK:** In recent years, we have seen the intensification of debate about the social value of the university, with particular anxiety emerging in regard to the humanities. You have been particularly active in carving out space for ethnomusicology, through the graduate program at the Eastman School of Music, and through undergraduate texts such as *Music Cultures in the United States* (2005). In the increasingly contested terrain of the American academy, I am curious to hear your thoughts on the value of teaching ethnomusicology in the contemporary world.

**EK:** Well, I could not answer this more forcefully, in that I feel that we are losing a certain humanity, and I don't mean the humanities. We are losing our relationship to other people. I totally abhor the way our world has moved toward a post-capitalist oligarchy, and I see the world breaking down into the very rich and everybody else. The very things that I thought I was fighting all my life have remorphed into an even more perilous kind of structure. So, I'm one of the people who thinks that anything you can do resist that kind of world is a good thing. I found that I could successfully marry my love of music with issues that I felt were important to me, in terms of social justice through ethnomusicology, and that's why I love it so much. It was a way for me to integrate all of the things that I felt were important to me in my life, and do it as a profession. And so really, for me, it's been a sort of life-saver. I don't expect it's that way for everybody, but I do think that we have a responsibility to resist the social and political structures that are coming, certainly for the next generation. My way is through ethnomusicology; somebody else's way might be through ecology, or some other way. But, to the degree that we can try to stop this forward momentum, our major responsibility is to try to help people who have less privilege, who are undervalued. So, I think the issue is prevalent in the academy because most universities have become so entwined with business, and with technology. They are trying to stay afloat, and the only way they can do that is to join in with these larger post-capitalist forces. And they are creating strings of companies and institutions that are global.

**JWK:** Your earlier comments about how younger generations of scholars now produce very quickly, marshaling their data into theories so they can get published and get tenure, seem relevant here. In a way, we seem to be falling into the current paradigm of productivism within the academy, possibly as a way of asserting the validity of the humanities. Yet we continue to be seen as inherently unproductive in a larger sense.

**EK:** Sometimes, when I'm really stuck for words and I'm talking to people who are science-trained, I say, "You know, ethnomusicology is fuzzy. Science is not". Of course

that's ridiculous, they're both fuzzy and they're both not. But, in a sense, most people do not want to live in fuzzy anymore. They think, fuzzy is a '60s idea, you're just this hippie left-over who loves people and just wants to hug them. So, I think that there is this drive to unfuzz the humanities, because the prevailing paradigm is hard. And hard boundaries are ultimately measured by money. If you become a center and everybody brings in money – that is a good thing in academia.

**JWK:** What does fuzzy mean?

**EK:** To me, fuzzy means flipping one's consciousness and one's identity, and constantly questioning your position, and another person's position. Hard is the scientific method, it's searching for the ultimate proof, or the capital T truth. I don't know if scientists are constantly questioning their own position. They may be constantly questioning their assumptions. But I don't think they're saying, "Well, what is my white male privilege? How does that position me vis-a-vis this culture that I'm studying, under the microscope?" Versus an ethnographer who says the same exact sentence, and means something completely different. And so for me, when you're in the field and doing this, you're overlapping constantly, and flipping back and forth. And so that creates a real-time context that is not clear, because you can switch perspectives. Why are you smiling?

**JWK:** Well, I feel like we've left the bounds of the interview, now. But I feel like you might be covering up ethnomusicology's radical potential by using the word fuzzy. Is fuzzy, in a sense, a refusal of work, a refusal of productivism? I feel like maybe there is something in the modalities that we use as ethnographers that are inherently outside of productive work. If one of our modalities is storytelling or narrative, that may fall outside of productivism. If one of our modalities is play, that is outside of productivism.

**EK:** We're lucky enough to do something we love, and we call it play. But it's work!

**JWK:** When you first entered the discipline, it was possible to become personally familiar with every scholar in the field, and to read the entire body of literature in ethnomusicology. Since this time, scholarship on music and culture has proliferated to an extent that this is no longer possible. Given your long history in the field, I'm curious as to how you see the evolution of the field since its consolidation in the '60s in relation to changes in how ethnomusicologists work to produce knowledge.

**EK:** My first SEM meeting was 1975, and it was small; there might have been a hundred people, or a couple hundred people at the meeting. There was a sense of excitement about it because it was new, and because it was born out of this break with historical musicology,

and with anthropology, which didn't look at music. And that really sang to me, because I was coming out of historical musicology at that time. Indeed, it was much easier to talk with, and get to know, people that I looked up to, who were my heroes at the time. And when I gave a paper, which I did the first year; I felt that we were breaking new ground. We were doing something that no one had done before. Those anthropologists can't deal with music, and those historical musicologists can't deal with contemporary culture. And it was very exciting. And this just tapped right into my budding feminism, and, my budding understanding of value judgments, and power hierarchies, and things like this.

I remember coming home and just being so high, because I finally had found a family that understood, at some deep level that I didn't have to articulate, things about music and social justice combined that were so powerful that I just loved it. I couldn't wait for the next conference. Of course I had the same issues that people face now. I needed to get published, I needed to meet people, I needed to network—a term I have learned later, and have hated ever since—but I was just so happy to find a group of people that I could talk to, and who were fun, and who weren't stuck up, and who wore cotton, as I like to say. Who liked to dance, who liked to play, who didn't take themselves too seriously. I enjoyed that, a lot. And I continue to enjoy it. I still love going.

There are some differences, now—but they're good differences. The field has grown tremendously. The so-called theories and assumptions of my generation are being deconstructed, looked at, questioned, and interrogated. And that's a good thing. There were some moments, as I describe in the book, especially with feminist writing, where I was worried that we were going to go into a historical musicology moment. That seemed to start to happen, and it is continuing, in popular music scholarship. And I have some ambivalence about that because to me, fences make good neighbors, as Robert Frost said. And we are different from historical musicologists, who look at texts, and documents. And vive la difference! But I am not so worried anymore that historical musicology is going to eat us up, like Pac-Man. Even though the fields are getting closer, or at least that's what the students say, the methodologies are not getting much closer, and the value system is still not even. So, I'm still into boundaries until there's a level playing field.

I have seen much more of this integration happening at the meetings, and a lot more professionalism. The young ethnoids look a lot like the young historical musicologists. And for me, this was a marker. You know, "Oh, God, I can wear cotton! And I can wear a t-shirt at an SEM conference!" You can't get away with that now at a SEM conference. Now, the young folks are dressing for success. It's not a bad thing, it's just really different. For me, in 1975, this group of people that I found and loved, it was like, "Oh my God, this is where all the hippies went! This is where all the people who were in the Peace Corps went!" Do you know how many people in the older generation were in the Peace Corps, before they became ethnomusicologists? These are the people who used to play the harpsichord; these are the people who had paths like mine. Now I don't know. It's more standardized, it's more formalized. That doesn't mean it's bad, and most people would say, well, ethnomusicology

came of age, and it's now recognized as a separate field –and this is good! Sameness and difference again.

**JWK:** Now that *A Feminist Ethnomusicology* is in press, where is Ellen Koskoff turning her scholarly energies?

**EK:** She is going to let her theory geek emerge! When I first entered the field, I was blown away and drawn in by the ideas of anthropology, and the open tolerance of anthropology as a driving force. That's what brought me in, and it's served me very, very well over many decades. In other words, unlike many of my peers, I did not initially come in to ethnomusicology because of an interaction with any music as a performer, or as a scholar. The only music I really knew well was Western classical music, namely Baroque music and earlier, because I played the harpsichord for so many years. So, it was the ideas, and the paradigms, and the ways in which anthropology sounded, and structured life that really drew me in. But then, in '90s, when the Eastman School of Music purchased a gamelan angklung, I fell in love with the music. That music fed my musical heart, and it fed my politics because it's a group effort; it wasn't an individual thing like piano, or harpsichord. But it also fed my theory mind, the mind that likes puzzles.

The music I fell in love with was gamelan angklung music, which if performed in its proper context in Bali is used for cremations. And the music that was originally intended for this ensemble is very interesting; it's not like any other Balinese music. Scholars who have studied this, like Ruby Ornstein (1971), Gertrude Robinson (2003), and Michael Tenzer (1991), have essentially positioned this as an older form of music that's had revisions in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, to conform more with modern aesthetics. But, there are elements in this music that are very old, and we know this because they're not cyclical; the meters aren't isometric the way much gamelan music is in the modern world. There's hardly any use of drum, and the melodic grammar is very wander-y, and not tonally centered. It's really interesting music. So, I remember my first encounters with this during that first year, and I kept thinking, "God, there are just a huge amount of pieces like this", and, "Listen to this, how this works!" and, "How could they do that, with only four tones in the octave? There must be some way that people memorize these things, because they are not cyclical in the same way that other gamelan music is, nor are they metered in a strict meter, in the way others are".

So, I got curious about this in the early '90s, and I began to visit Bali. And the first time I went to Bali, this was a nascent idea in my head. I had no idea what I was going to really do with it. But on the third trip, which was just before 2000, I stayed with our teacher, Nyoman Suadin, and his family. And I had no idea how this had been accomplished, because I didn't speak any Balinese at the time, but one day, all these musicians showed up at Nyoman's house, carrying their angklung instruments, and they presented a concert to me. And I had this really strange moment of going back in time, thinking I was Colin



McPhee, or Mantle Hood, or Jaap Kunst, or whomever, where concerts were being presented for the white outsider. It was a total surprise that Nyoman's father had planned for me, because he knew that I loved angklung music. And so it turned out that right next door to Nyoman's banjar, which is a small neighborhood, lived a wonderful gamelan angklung group that was in the next banjar, and they played this concert. Now, I have to say, though, that the music that they played, and most of the music that we learned here in the United States on the angklung ensemble, was not originally intended for the angklung. It wasn't the cremation music, it was music that had been adapted from mostly slendro, the five-tone scale, into a four-tone scale, which made it fairly awkward from the Balinese point of view, although we didn't know better. But when I began to isolate out the pieces that were actually intended for cremation, not these other arranged ones, I really thought, this is just fantastic music, and I've got to understand it. So that's when I developed the idea of going to live in Bali, and I had to work it out with Nyoman, and with this banjar, Banjar Baturiti, and with the men of Gamelan Taman Sari which is their angklung group, how to make this work. And that's what brought me to live in Bali from 2007 to 2008. And I joined the group. They let me in, oddly enough. I was the only woman ever to play, or white person ever to play, and they allowed me to do it. And once in the group, you have to play for every cremation, so I did. They would run and tell me, "Bu, Bu, we need to play for cremation in two hours". There were no phones. It was just the most wonderful year of my life, in that I got to play with really fine musicians at a level that I couldn't really do here in the United States, and the groupness of it was just wonderful for me. But the music was also just even more and more interesting. And now I have many, many hours of recordings of pieces of gamelan angklung cremation music that I'm transcribing, and I'm trying to figure out how it all works. I am interested in the social aspect of this, but I have to confess, at this point I'm more interested in the music itself.

So, I had a sort of crisis, because I see myself as an ethnomusicologist who's interested in social and cultural ideas as they intersect with music, and performance, and I felt rather guilty that I was abandoning a humanistic, social, cultural, anthropological perspective in favor of a music theoretic trajectory, God forbid! So I talked to my close friend in ethnomusicology, Michael Tenzer, who of course is the leading Balinese music scholar today, and has written some great books about Balinese music, and he, you know, basically patted me on the back and said, "Let your theory geek emerge". And so, I think that's what I'm going to do. I'm not trying to justify this too much, but within ethnomusicology there has been a recent move toward analytical studies of world music that can apply cross-culturally. I'm on the board of the online journal *Analytical Approaches to World Music*, and this journal eschews Western music theory, it adopts the music theory of the cultures that people have worked with, and it tries to generalize. So, I think we're in a transition period in ethnomusicology, to some degree. There's some resistance to this, of course, because for fifty years ethnomusicology has studiously avoided "the music itself". As Jeff Titon has often said, "The word ethnomusicology contains the words 'no music'!"

But people like Michael Tenzer, and other scholars who have done fieldwork and who are interested in theoretical issues –Robert Morris is another one who’s a true expert of South Indian music, and also an analyst– these folks have made a small path that I think I can follow and not totally give up my connections to social science.

But I still do feel guilty, and sometimes I actually feel guilty about making a transcription. Because it is, after all, an imposition of a Western structure upon a non-Western music, for the sake of the non-Western scholar (me). And the people that I worked with don’t read music or English. They think that my study is funny, or they don’t understand why I would be interested in this. I don’t want to completely ignore their perspective here, but I don’t know how to include it, either. So I’m faced with an ethical and disciplinary issue that I will have to solve. But meanwhile, I’m having fun making transcriptions.

**JWK:** Do you feel that that imposition of a Western framework, in the form of a transcription, is substantially different from the imposition of a Western framework in the form of a book, or an article?

**EK:** No, I don’t think it’s substantially different, but it is different in that on a continuum of how much input one culture gives to another, if you’re writing an article about a group of people, there are checks and balances you can develop between cultures. The people that you work with may not be able to read it, but you can talk to them about what you’ve done, and get their impressions. Reading Western music notation is a very specialized language; most people who speak English can’t read that language. So it’s farther away than the written word, and it’s using a very Western way of looking at music. Scholars in Indonesia also write articles, so writing an article or a book isn’t a foreign idea. But notating a piece of music is a fairly novel idea in Bali, except at the large conservatories, where people have begun to do this. But in the village, when I was talking about my work, there was no deep understanding of what I was doing. They wanted to help me, and they were extremely generous to me, but they did not really get what I was doing.

**JWK:** The dilemma that you’re raising seems to be the ethical dilemma of what fieldwork is for, and how we relate to the material we collect in the field. One particularly interesting debate to surface in the last few years about fieldwork ethics is that about repatriating culture, and particularly field recordings. I’m curious whether your work on Bali has been repatriated in any sense, and what possibilities you see for repatriating transcriptions, which is of course very different than repatriating recordings.

**EK:** Well, first of all, I have sent all of my recordings to the heads of Gamelan Taman Sari, and I have kept in touch with certain people through the Internet since 2008. The men

that I worked with are not on the Internet, so I'm communicating with a younger generation. I have sent recordings, and the only article that I've written about Bali –it's really not about the music, it's more about cultural interactions, the almost humorous interactions between me and the Balinese community I worked with about what I was doing there. So when I did send this article and the CDs, I emailed Nyoman Wira, my contact there. I said, "Nyoman, what happened to the things I sent?"

And they said, "Oh, Ibu, we are going to put them in the offering room with the costumes, and the offerings and the incense, because we are so proud that our *angklung* has reached a wider audience". So, I have learned over many years of fieldwork to accept at face value what informants say. I try not to question that. I indeed feel that it's important for everything I write, or do, to also be part of that community. I don't know what use they will put to it, but that's not my responsibility. I do not want it, though, to be something I send to the conservatory people, because my whole goal in going to Bali and in studying gamelan *angklung* music in its actual context of cremations, was to get away from the conservatory model, which I love, and am part of, and have been for so many years. I wanted to see what music was really like among people who play it because they love it, and because it's their responsibility as good Hindu citizens.

So, I have always promised to give back everything I've done, including any money that I earn. I also give a yearly sum of money to this community at Christmas, to help maintain the instruments. And I'm happy to give back. There was a moment about two thirds of the way through my fieldwork that is interesting here; it's when I learned the Bahasa Indonesia word *exploitasi*. OK, so one night I show up, and we had agreed to have "rehearsals", a gathering of the guys once a week. They would play for me, or I would play, or they would teach me something. And so one night this happened, and the head of the village showed up, which was pretty unusual. Since he didn't play in the group, he never showed up. And it turned out that someone had complained, or shown concern that Ibu was going to take their music and somehow profit from this. And indeed, I am taking their music and profiting, to the degree that I use it as cultural capital for myself. And so, this fellow had been concerned that this was going to happen, and the head of the village comes, and there's this huge conversation going on. It's all in Balinese, so I don't really understand it much, but I know that it's not good, you know.

So, it comes down to, they want to make a bargain with me. The bargain is this: they would let me continue to do my work, if whenever I spoke about or wrote about anything that I learned, I said precisely, "Gamelan Taman Sari of Banjar Baturiti, Tabanan Kerambitan, Bali, Indonesia". That I would absolutely identify, exactly, this group, because they had seen so many other Westerners coming in, and running with things, and making a lot of money. Their view was that because I was writing about them, the minute I wrote something or spoke, thousands of people would rush over and want to learn gamelan *angklung*. I sort of laughed internally, because I doubt that would ever happen, but on the other hand, I certainly agreed with the premise. And I promised them, and hold to that

promise, that the only thing that I would gain would be currency within my own culture, and that I would try, to the best of my ability, to give back any money that I earned, and certainly the material objects of a book or recordings. And they seemed happy. So that was the bargain. I also paid them every week, when we had these meetings. They wanted to pay me too, because they got paid for playing cremations, but I didn't accept the money. I wanted to give back as much as I could, because they were just giving me tremendously important and very intimate information. And I could give! They were very carefully protective, especially of these fifteen pieces that they saw as their core repertoire, and they had not ever done this before, and they were really worried. I tried as best I could to reassure them, and I don't know how it will play out, but I hope to go back next year and bring everything.

**JWK:** So what do you think about the second part of the question, of the possibility of repatriating transcriptions?

**EK:** Well, I don't know if repatriation's the right word, since there's been no patriation. As my young friend Nyoman Wira said, they will see a material thing, like a book, or a recording of their music, to be a high status item, and they will protect it, and take care of it. While some do read English, those who understand music notation are probably very few, if any. Even the teachers at ISI (Institute Seni Indonesia) don't really read Western notation. If I publish anything about the music, I'll be putting it into Indonesian notation also, but that again is a specialized language that only the people at the conservatories know. So to the degree that I can do that, I will. But obviously, the materials that I give back have been changed into materials that are valuable in our world. They may also be valuable, for different reasons, in their world. Or, for the same reasons. But I suspect that the value will be negotiated differently. So, I can give what I think I can give back, but whether or not that translates into something that they can recognize as their own, I don't know. We shall see.

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