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Activism, advocacy and community engagement:

Ethnomusicological Responses to Contemporary Dynamics of Migrants and Refugees

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Angela Impey's work on forced migration in southern Africa and with refugees from South Sudan in East Africa and in the UK reminds us that the current "migrant crisis" is perhaps only named as such because it is in Europe. Her research on music as oral history and public testimonial has sought to highlight local responses to forced displacement and post-conflict social integration, and explores new epistemological approaches to re-center the needs, interests, and agencies of affected people.

I would like to start my talk with two scenarios. The first involves a concert that I attended recently in a small church in London that was hosted by the Anglo-Azerbaijani society, whose membership comprises some of the 7000 ethnic Azeri refugees who settled in Britain in the 1980s and 90s following the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan-Armenian border).

The first thing I noticed upon entering the hall were the massive speakers located on either side of the stage. As expected, when the music finally began – two accordions, keyboard, tar, darbuka and singer - the volume was indescribable. Yet I seemed to be the only one in the audience who was physically cowering under the force of the sound. When, after a couple of numbers, every musician on stage indicated to the sound engineer to *increase* the volume, the distortion became so unbearable that I politely escaped through a side exit, leaving behind a spirited crowd happily singing along to their favorite tunes.

The experience was a persuasive endorsement of ethnomusicology's premise that music is much more than the sound it makes, and made particularly evident the effect of the emotional, social and historical on our perceptual judgements of sound. In this instance, volume was invoked as the actuating register of enunciation, its extravagance testimony to the persistence of transnational rupture and to the corresponding tenacity of national, territorial and home identifications.

The second scenario relates to a Masters dissertation recently submitted by one of my students, Karen Boswall, whose work with Syrian women refugees in Jordan explored their use of mobile phones to facilitate daily listening rituals: prayers and recitations in the morning, patriotic songs late at night when the children were in bed and it was safe to weep. She cites an example of a woman whose listening included recordings made of rockets exploding outside her house while still in Syria, the sounds providing an immediate portal to a past world and to relationships, helping to ameliorate – if only momentarily - the guilt of survival.

Both scenarios invoke Kathleen Stewart's (2010) rendering of "atmospheric attunements": to those 'tuning into' moments that become fully sensory and that attend to "the quickening of nascent forms" (4). In both instances, sound is implicated as a purposeful strategy for self-transformation, "pushing circulating forces into form, texture and density that can be felt, imagined, and brought to bear" (2): the first experienced as intimately public, the other, as intimately alone.

It would be reasonable to suggest that the call for ethnomusicology to attend in new ways to the contemporary dynamics of refugees and migrants is associated with the proximity of the so-called "migrant crisis" to our everyday lives in the global North. Forced migration is not a new phenomenon, of course, and nor is ethnomusicology's consideration of aesthetic

agency in relation to displacement or violent rupture. However, given the apparent alliance between "Brexit" (Britain's exit from the European Union) and "Trump's America", with its drive toward higher walls and deeper divisions, and its patriotic determination to restore a fictional identity by disallowing or delegitimizing *certain* migrants, this conversation could not have come at a more pressing moment.

If there was anything to be learned from engaging in research in apartheid South Africa in the 1980s, as I did, and amongst black citizens who were subjected to systemic forced displacement – often rendering them permanent refugees in their own land– it was the importance of active, intimate listening.

The proximity and the everyday accountabilities demanded of that environment summoned in certain scholarship an inventory of concerns that resonate with much of the academic discourse about refugees and migrants today: boundaries of belonging and limits of inclusion; excessive administration yet legal exclusion, intense surveillance yet public invisibility, silence, alienation, insecurity, trauma.

At the same time, however, it turned our attention to the everyday "atmospheric attunements" that animated people's expectations, recognitions, judgments and dreams (Stewart 2010, 11), to the place of music "to fill out and fill in" (deNora 2000, 74); to resilience, resistance, rights and justice.

Equally, it impelled many to develop a research approach based on certain commitments: First, rather than focus exclusively on problems and incapacities, it supported a listening strategy based on strengths and agency, using these creative strategies as the substance that directed our enquiry. Second, was to focus on ethnography as the basis for constructive action, regardless of the ambivalence demonstrated by the academy at the time toward public engagement.

Attempting to work across the academic-public sector divide has not come without its challenges, however, the greatest being how to build 'credible' evidence from communication modalities that are widely regarded as oblique outside of our own disciplinary environment. Information gleaned from the sound-affect-embodiment nexus is considered way too abstruse to have practical impact in the technocratic world of public administration or humanitarian aid – i.e. the sectors that dominate much of the refugee, forced migrant and post-conflict social integration environments - where prevailing economistic and speech-text hegemonies retain muscular authority over what is considered tangible, 'proper', and policy-relevant knowledge.

This position was made particularly evident in a recent interview conducted by one of my graduate students with a senior program officer at Overseas Development Instituted (ODI), Britain's preeminent independent think-tank on international development and humanitarian issues, who stated:

> 'When we are making policy recommendations, the stakeholders want to see hard evidence, and they want to see value for money. When we talk about arts and culture, it can seem wishy-washy. Social welfare response mechanisms are based on a professionalization of language, policy and practice, [which are] not conducive with words like 'arts', [and currently] there is no delineation [in the development sector] between arts for art sake and arts that have real impact within development models.' (Personal communication: Sylvia Harrison, 2014, London).

Though deeply dispiriting, this statement is a stark warning that in order to move beyond the rhetoric of activism or public engagement within our own community of practice, we need to begin to explore new methodologies that build on strategic collaborations and

embrace multi-dimensional approaches to knowledge accumulation, dissemination and action.

In attempting to find ways to reposition my own research to this effect, I have been particularly interested in emerging discourses in the environmental sustainability sector on "imaginative transdisciplinarity" (Brown et.al., 2010, Brown and Harris 2014). The aim of transdisciplinarity is to jump the deep epistemological grooves that define our specific specialisms and to generate innovative ways to tackle global problems such as climate change. Such an approach necessarily proceeds from recognition of the equal value of different kinds of knowledge, drawing on perspectives from a range of actors, including specialist institutions, public agencies, the private sector and civil society. Its commitment to working across boundaries does not necessarily presume the rejection of former modes and tools, but accommodates an understanding of knowledge as multiple, mutually valuable and based in application. As elucidated by Brown et.al. (2010) in their volume, *Tackling wicked problems through transdisciplinary imagination*:

> "The task is … to draw on all our intellectual resources, valuing the contributions of all the academic disciplines as well as other ways in which we construct our knowledge. And that brings the challenge of developing open transdisciplinary modes of inquiry capable of meeting the needs of the individual, the community, the specialist traditions, and influential organizations, and allows for a holistic leap of the imagination." (Brown et.al., 2010, p. 4)

By way of example, I would like to briefly share some of my thinking about the potential application of a transdisciplinary approach to my work in South Sudan, a country in eastern Africa that suffered the global dispersal of more than four million citizens in the

1980s and 1990s during its last civil war with (the previously north) Sudan. Following formal secession from Sudan in 2011, many thousands of refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) returned to home to South Sudan, generating new economic challenges and political tensions locally. This contributed to the fresh outbreak of civil war in 2013, which has precipitated the flight of many returnees back to the refugee camps in neighboring Kenya and Uganda.

When conducting research in a fledgling state such as South Sudan, whose formal infrastructure is almost entirely dependent on international aid, one becomes intensely aware of the persistent Euro-centric prescriptions that frame such foreign development interventions. Yet equally evident are the potential contributions that can be made by ethnography to transformational thinking and to policy design and implementation.

While analyzing a large repertoire of songs of Dinka pastoralists--one of several related Nilotic groups in the country--I became intrigued by their role as citizenly engagements in the dialogue about war, peace and nation-building. Yet while these publicly performed testimonials may carry rhetorical authority at the local level, and are invoked in customary law, they remain largely invisible to those responsible for the establishment of a central judiciary, as well as those engaged in deliberating a formal post-conflict transformative justice process.

Experience has taught me that there would be little practical benefit to talking *at* the legal establishment about how aesthetic forms and processes cultivate precise sensibilities in Dinka culture (as indeed, other Nilotic cultures) -- i.e. receptivity, respect, empathy, self-awareness -- which are considered a necessary precondition for reconciliation. Any proposition to accommodate within a state-based reparation process sung testimonials and extended "justice rituals" -- i.e. contingent, multiply encoded rhetorical practices that convey

and sustain "feelings of justice" -- would undoubtedly be dismissed as "wishy-washy", to reference our friend at the ODI.

However, repositioning my work under the more inclusive rubric of "legal humanities", whose expressed aim is the generation of multi-epistemological dialogue between disparate actors, may well be a more achievable pathway toward a hearing. Transdisciplinarity in the context of transformative justice would conceivably involve collaboration between legal scholars and practitioners, religious and customary leaders, civil society members and researchers, who would work together toward the design and implementation of locally apposite processes of arbitration and reconciliation.

While ethnomusicologists have become increasingly involved in managing performances and workshops with migrants and refugees in various localities in the world, and in exploring music's psychosocial capacities in relation to traumatic displacement, I argue for ethnography as a form of intervention. As scholars and activists, we have what most public agencies seldom have, which is the privilege of protracted exposure and the purpose to listen. Through the intimacies afforded by ethnography, we have the capacity to draw attention to the resourcefulness and agency of displaced individuals. We can contribute toward the humanization of the often highly technocratic humanitarian landscape by sharing people's stories, songs and aspirations. We can draw on interviews, recordings and fieldnotes as evidence to lobby for more equitable policies and practices. However, rather than working exclusively within our disciplinary silos and talking *at* other sectors, it would be far more effective to integrate our work from the very outset within collaborative frameworks of research and action.

As a final word, I would say that as teachers, one of the biggest impacts that we can make at this moment of rising right wing politics, much of it driven by the so-called "migrant crisis", is to produce a new generation of scholars who are capable of critical thought, who

have the courage to challenge prejudice and hate, and who have the conviction to galvanize others towards a more just and tolerant world.

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