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Commoning in Sonic Ethnography (or, the Sound of Ethnography to Come)

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ABSTRACT | When considering an ethnography commons, it seems that there are at least two sorts of boundaries that commoning has the potential to reconfigure: 1) boundaries within the academy between disciplines and 2) boundaries between the academy and ‘the rest of the world.’ Admittedly, these boundaries are often constructed (or imagined) from within the academy itself, and seeking ways to re-draw them may result in yet another navel-gazing exercise that reaffirms particular modes of knowledge production disproportionately beneficial to those ‘in’ the academy. In this essay, I focus on ethnography grounded in sound and how it both productively traverses disciplinary boundaries and usefully brings into relief the unevenness of commoning. I examine a number of discourses in ethnomusicology dealing with sonic epistemologies and interaction, music making as ethnographic method, and intellectual property, all the while grappling with my own work as an ethnographer involved in the production of collaborative sonic texts.

Keywords: sound; sonic ethnography; acoustemology; collaboration; value



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Introduction

In the late nineteenth century, European and American folklorists, scholars, and composers began travelling the world recording on their not-so-portable phonographs, producing sonic and written texts as an arm – or perhaps an ear and loudspeaker – of the colonial enterprise. The discipline of ‘comparative musicology’ grew out of this project, and largely focused – as one might guess from its name – on comparing musical traditions to one another and to European art music. Ethnomusicology emerged as a field in the 1950s, in part as a challenge to the Eurocentrism embedded in comparative musicology at the time, and in part, because of the new and fascinating questions a discipline rooted in both anthropological and musicological concerns could ask about music, culture, and society. Since then, ethnomusicology has become grounded in ethnography attuned to sounds, particularly sounds constructed and labeled by communities as ‘music’ (for more on these histories and discourses see, e.g., Nettl 2010, Nettl and Bohlman 1991, and Rice 2014: 16–23).

Ethnomusicology, with its interest in musical and other sonic worlds, has long interrogated sonic modes of knowledge production and the fraught nature of ethnographic collaboration in sound, both live and on recordings. In this essay, I bring the idea of the commons into conversation with this work in ethnomusicology, hoping to foster interdisciplinary and multi-directional pathways as scholars from a number of fields pursue the rich, textured meanings that sound offers, not only as it is interpreted, but as it is produced, co-produced, reproduced, and distributed.¹ I suggest that while ethnography grounded in sound can foster the kinds of boundary crossings that the commons promises, it also reveals some troubling aspects of the commons, in particular, some of the unevenness that commoning projects can produce with regard to value. To flesh out this argument and move towards a concept of commoning in sonic ethnography, I will first briefly examine two key discourses in ethnomusicology – one on how knowledge is produced and/or communicated through sound and another on theory and method for musical collaboration by ethnographers – and bridge those discourses to methodological challenges posed by the idea of an ethnography commons. Then, I will touch on how varied conceptions of ownership and intellectual property across music cultures trouble the concept of the commons. Last, I will reflect on the current relationship between recording technology and distribution with regard to disparate regimes of value and layered positionality for ethnographers vis-à-vis ethnographic sonic texts. At various points in the discussion I will reference my own work as an ethnographer in Macedonia, where I have conducted long-term research in several modes of collaboration that have, among other things, involved the co-production of live musical performances, recorded albums, radio broadcasts, and other sounds.

What I hope to avoid is reaffirming the category of ‘music’ (or even ‘sound’) as something only certain kinds of trained musicians and scholars in the musicologies can engage with or understand. While the ethnomusicological discourse (and especially the earlier discourse) that I examine focuses on ‘music’ per se, some of the concepts that emerge from that discourse – interpretive moves, interactionally produced texts, intermusical relationships – do not necessarily have to be bound up in music as a constructed category of sound only ‘truly’ comprehensible to trained experts. Rather, these kinds of concepts can point towards a sociality in sonic practice broadly speaking (including listening) that is

necessarily and inextricably joined with materiality. Sound, then, can be understood as being involved in the making of all kinds of social-material worlds, as humans produce and co-produce sounds in relation to one another and to the sounds they are encountering.

Sound, Interaction, Interpretation, and Collaboration

One of the early (and ongoing) discourses in ethnomusicology concerns the question of how to communicate in words about knowledge that is sonic, and the nature of knowledge that is communicated in musical sound. In a 1961 essay (a classic in ethnomusicology), Charles Seeger grapples with communicating about music, distinguishing between ‘speech-discourse’ (i.e., speech about music) and ‘music-discourse’ (i.e., communication in music itself) (1961: 78). He warns scholars that ‘research should be continually on guard against the encroachment of the hidden assumption that speech-knowledge can comprehend all knowledge and can or should control the use of all knowledge’ (1961: 80).² He situates this ‘linguocentric predicament’ (1977: 62) as a dichotomy between music making and speech, considering them mutually exclusive modes of discourse, and calling the predicament the ‘biggest problem of all’ and ‘insoluble’ (1977: 133).

Beginning in the 1980s, Steven Feld explores this predicament from a more optimistic perspective, positioning metaphor as mediating between speech and music. He departs from Seeger’s focus on only referential aspects of speech and considered both speech and music as having figurative capacities, both existing as ‘feelingful’ activities (see Feld 1984). Listeners use metaphor to engage in what Feld calls ‘interpretive moves’ wherein they attempt to ‘recreate, specify, momentarily fix, or give order to emergent recognitions of the events that take place so rapidly and intuitively when we experience musical sounds’ (1984: 15). He also re-thinks Seeger’s question ‘what does music communicate?’ asking instead about the shape of a music communication process and its implications for interpretation, questions that point in the direction of a collaborative-interpretive and processual epistemology.

Ingrid Monson builds on this line of thinking, exploring improvisation and interaction in her ethnography of New York jazz rhythm section musicians, *Saying Something* (1996). As she unwinds the ways musicians talk and play together, she explicitly follows Feld (1981, 1984, 1990) in emphasizing the significance of music as a metaphoric process and the necessity of understanding the linguistic mediation of musical concepts in order to interpret the cultural aesthetics of a given musical practice or society (Monson 1996: 75). Monson highlights the way human relationships form, strengthen, and change among musicians and audiences and thus contribute to the way ‘interactionally produced texts’ develop, adding that ‘these interactionally produced events structure both musical and social space’ (Monson 1996: 190). She argues that intermusical relationships layer on top of these texts, and involve references – in the case of jazz musicians – to additional compositions, quotations of classic jazz recordings, and/or timbral, dynamic, rhythmic, or stylistic signals that can signify much about identity, class, race, and politics.

Seeger, Feld, and Monson theorize how musicians and listeners mediate between language, sound, music, and meaning as they interact and collaborate. Their own sonic-ethnographic praxis flows beneath the surface as an undercurrent in these particular instances,³ but they are, in a sense, laying the groundwork for

grappling with the implications for ethnographers participating in processes of sonic collaboration. If listeners make interpretive moves, certainly ethnographers making music or other sound collaboratively are listening and making such moves as well, adjusting the sounds they are producing in response to, and perhaps in dialogue with, other collaborators. By the same token, the interactionally produced texts and the intermusical relationships layered on top of them that happen in collaborative music making are still being made and formed when an ethnographer is one of the collaborators. When I think about my own sonic collaborations as an ethnographer – especially in playing saxophone with house and techno DJs or with jazz musicians – I become more and more aware that the interpretive moves, interactionally produced texts, and intermusical relationships are constantly being made through complex negotiations of sound, sound that is inextricable from the positionalities and subjectivities of those producing it.

In another discourse, ethnomusicologists have interrogated these kinds of issues with musical collaboration in the ethnographic process itself, examining the roles and implications of ethnographers participating in the production of music and other sound. Ethnomusicological studies where scholars theorize their own role in collaboration stretch back to Mantle Hood's (1960) discussion of the concept of bi-musicality, which advocates for a researcher's musical aptitude in multiple musical traditions, including the native tradition of the researcher and the tradition constituting the basis for research (the slippery nature of concepts of 'native' and 'tradition' notwithstanding). Typical in ethnomusicology since the 1990s have been in-depth analyses by scholars reflexively detailing processes of learning a musical practice in a master-student relationship.⁴ Other scholars have explored the position of a 'professional' musician as ethnographer: jazz ethnographer Paul Austerlitz seeks to break down dichotomies by asserting that 'musical thinking is scholarly and academic work is expressive' (Austerlitz 2005:xix); in his study of salsa bands in New York, Christopher Washburne writes that 'participation through performance served as [his] principal means of collecting data' (Washburne 2008: 32); Michael Bakan spends the final two chapters of his 1999 ethnography of *gamelan beleganjur* in Bali detailing his 'intercultural musical encounter' with his *beleganjur* teacher Sukarata, emphasizing 'the reflexive study of musical experience as a significant form of intercultural dialogue in which all who participate, including the researcher, are relevant contributors to meaningful music-making' (Bakan 1999: 332).

More recently, Deborah Wong, while recognizing that ethnomusicologists have been experimenting with alternative and experimental ethnographic products since before the 1980s,⁵ brings this discussion back to the problems of ethnography that anthropologists have been working through for more than 30 years:

The problems with ethnography aren't new and haven't changed: they include the false binary of the insider/outsider, colonial baggage, and the empiricism still lurking behind a solidly humanistic anthropology and ethnomusicology. But ethnomusicology still struggles with its own relevance to anthropology because it hasn't sufficiently theorized the relationship between participatory research and the specific kind of ethnography that we do, which is very similar to anthropology but, in fact, not quite the same (Wong 2008: 77).

She perhaps gestures towards how ethnography in ethnomusicology has already been scrambling the boundaries in ethnography, pointing to an ongoing commoning where any lines between would-be researchers and would-be informants are blurry.⁶ Through the lens of her own participation in North American *taiko* ensembles, Wong focuses on the overlap where modalities of experience and interpretation (and maybe others) are engaged simultaneously and in a self-aware manner by the ethnographer. I wonder, though, whether this also extends beyond the ethnographer, and that perhaps all people making music are always also engaging at least the modalities of experience and interpretation in this point of overlap. Perhaps they do so without the same ethnographic self-awareness of an ethnographer, but with different types of self-awareness engendered by local conditions of cultural production or any number of other concerns.

When I'm performing collaboratively with others, when I'm commoning in sonic ethnography, I'm producing a sonic text (among other things) in real time and space. As an ethnographer, I am constantly experiencing, constantly making interpretive moves, and perhaps constantly reflecting and responding to my experience and my interpretations concurrently in an ongoing process of simultaneously knowing, understanding, and being. When I'm playing saxophone with a DJ in a nightclub, our intermusical relationship is positioned towards creating the appropriate sonic environment for that particular moment in a particular locale – the DJs I've worked with rarely consider themselves musicians, but pride themselves in their deep sonic knowledge and skills for deploying that knowledge. The idea that I am also a researcher of some sort is present, and is most likely structuring the sonic moment to some extent, but it slides into the background in a way that makes any line between researcher and informant even fuzzier and suggests that a sonic commoning might be happening. In addition, my collaborative work with DJs, jazz musicians, and other musicians in Macedonia has resulted in formal concerts, live radio performances, informal gigs in bars and cafés, and the recording of an album involving recorded sound, marketing materials, physical design, and liner notes – all interactionally produced texts in one form or another. In the sonic and discursive negotiations involved in processes of production and sonic commoning, those I'm collaborating and commoning with are also experiencing, making interpretive moves, and engaged in processes of simultaneously knowing, understanding, and being as we make sound together in real time or construct a recorded artifact that may resound across future times and geographies.

In moving towards conceiving of commoning in sonic ethnography, then, I suggest that this kind of ethnography is partly about an awareness of the multiple subjectivities involved in the experience of ethnography in combination with the interpretive intersubjectivity of co-produced texts. It is partly about the increased access to particular epistemologies because of collaborative proximity to performers or other people involved in sound production. It is also partly about reflexivity, dialogical editing, and collaborative production of texts (written, musical, visual, and others). And while I agree with Wong that 'the mere act of participating in performance will not necessarily achieve, cause, or produce anything in particular' (Wong 2008: 80), I suggest that this act always achieves, causes, or produces *something*, and that something is always at least some kind of

(perhaps new) sonic way of knowing the world, akin to what Feld would call ‘acoustemology’ (1996).

Feld’s conception of acoustemology as ‘local conditions of acoustic sensation, knowledge, and imagination embodied in [a] culturally specific sense of place’ (1996: 91) is grounded in a sensory interplay among human actors and the places they inhabit. He demonstrates that through poetics and bodily performative practice, places are ‘voiced,’ ‘made sensual,’ and become cultural entities (1996: 134). For Feld, human participation is always present in productive and interpretive aspects of acoustemology as people continually give meaning to and shape places through their poetic and perceptive interactions and conceptions of those places. Although he situates acoustemology around acoustic dimensions of experiencing place, he positions it as a ‘relational ontology’ (see again 1996, but also 2012: 126) that is relational not only between people, but also among people and the meaningful sounds of their environments, pointing toward the joining of sociality and materiality.⁷ In his more recent work, Feld himself engages in multiple modes of collaboration in sound, a process wherein, as he describes it, acoustemology is an ‘intimacy-making bridge’ (2012: 10) and ‘the agency of knowing the world through sound [. . .] the imagination and enactment of a musical intimacy’ (2012: 49).

In response to Feld’s suggestion that collaborative sonic practice can build intimacies across acoustemological bridges, I wonder whether, when new sounds reverberate from this practice and are themselves emplaced, new acoustemologies can be made, co-produced by those making sounds together. This co-production of acoustemology could emerge from any assemblage of individuals (not only ‘musicians’ but potentially anyone present in moments of sonic collaboration) as they each exercise the agency of knowing the world through sound and engage in the negotiation of that agency with one another. If commoning in sonic ethnography, then, is about this kind of collective, collaborative, negotiated sonic agency and co-presence, it can also result in the co-production of acoustemology, with the commons as a resonant site for the resounding of new sonic ways of knowing the world that are at once an impetus for and a consequence of building bridges over boundaries both real and imagined.

Intellectual Property and the Sonic Commons

While notions of the sonic in ethnography reveal many of the possibilities for commoning across boundaries, they also bring to the surface some of its hazards and limitations. Discussions surrounding intellectual property related to recorded sounds and related flows of capital demonstrate how even amidst scenes of sharing and co-production – of sounds, of acoustemologies – questions of ownership and hierarchy are always present. Anthony Seeger explores this in his work in Brazil among the Kisêdjê who, like many native Amazonians, have both individual (*akia*) songs and collective (*ngere*) songs, of which Kisêdjê groups are considered the owners. For example, the collective *ngere* ‘Big Turtle Song’ does not fit easily into the individualist spirit of copyright law, whose roots lie in the Enlightenment concept of the lone creative genius. The song was composed over 75 years ago (which means that it is no longer covered by copyright), and is owned by a community who attributes its authorship to a particular type of honeybee (A. Seeger 1997: 60–63). In this case Seeger produced an album in partnership with the Kisêdjê and was able to serve as a mediator to negotiate flows of capital from

the recording itself, especially because it was released before the age of digital distribution, downloading, and streaming and could be situated more easily as a music commodity (cf. Taylor 2007). But since the copyright ownership of 'Big Turtle Song' cannot be ascribed to an individual human and its date of composition prevents it from being covered by copyright, once the recording is 'out there in the world,' neither he nor the Kisêdjê can do anything about flows of capital from borrowings of the musical ideas by others – anyone may re-record, modify, adapt, or re-contextualize the recording without paying royalties to a copyright owner. The monetary profits of this sonic commons are suddenly widely available to many who may be in distant proximity to the acts of commoning.

Examples and conceptions of ownership are myriad. In a recent example from my work, I released an album titled *On the Face Place* in 2016 recorded with and featuring Macedonian musicians playing a number of compositions and arrangements by the bass player and composer Kiril Tufekčievski and me. I found a label that allowed me to decide how all the income generated by the album would be allocated, as long as I made sure all expenses were covered, which I did through a number of grants. In our own negotiation of the issue of the flow of capital, the musicians and I decided that we would all split any proceeds from the album evenly among us. Though Tufekčievski and I composed or arranged all of the tracks on the album, much of the material involves individual and collective improvisation by us and the other musicians. The copyright ownership is attributed to the group, named the CSPA Ensemble, and any capital generated through licensing or royalty collection is split evenly among the members of the ensemble as well (see Wilson 2017 for more on how the project came together). In this case, open and direct conversations with the musicians about fair payment and profits were at times uncomfortable for some of the musicians, and for me. For example, I was hesitant to take a share of the funds at first, but the others thought it would be only fair if we all took a share since we all contributed to the project. At another point, I went with one of the other musicians to drop some CDs at a bookstore in Skopje, Macedonia's capital, and we spoke with the owner to agree on a price point for the sale of the CD. I wanted to get hold of the rest of the musicians so that we could all agree that the price point was fair, so I called or texted each of them. With a few I talked through the price to make sure it reflected the going rate for such a CD, but others seemed surprised I would even bother to ask them what they thought of the price, since they would be fine with anything that was decided. This expression of disinterest (though perhaps masking actual interest) in consensus on the local cost to purchase the CD has at least something to do with musicians understanding that although CDs still sell in Macedonia to some extent, profits from album sales are relatively miniscule in today's landscape. So, if flows of capital from album sales are miniscule and a significant generation of royalties is not happening, how does this kind of work in sonic ethnography trouble the concept of the commons? This brings me to my last point – the fact that even though, in many ways, music is today operating less and less as a commodity for exchange, it still has value, and musical recordings, performances, and other sonic representations and projects exist within a variety of regimes of value.

Regimes of Value and Unevenness in the Commons

When ethnographers co-produce recordings, live performances, and sounds of other kinds, the regimes of value within which such products are situated can be quite uneven, can shift over time, and can vary greatly, contingent on the fields in which they are operating. Ethnomusicologist Timothy Taylor (2017) recognizes the limitations and complications of a focus on the music commodity, turning to the literature on value and the work of Arjun Appadurai (1986), Michael Lambek (2013), Fred Myers (2001), David Graeber (2005, 2013), and others to parse out some new types of value creation with regard to music. He builds on Graeber's and Lambek's shared view that action in general is productive of value, not only action that is considered labour in Marx's sense. Taylor re-asserts that 'value is determined by people's actions, which both reveal and confer meaning' and suggests the term 'meaningful action,' as a way that value is created (apart from economic value), defining it as 'a source of meaning, a repository for meaning, a currency of meaning' (2017: 191). He focuses on the current juncture where the de-emphasis on exchange value in music has, as the result of technology, engendered a number of new sorts of value, such as those where value is produced by a number of YouTube views or new notions of 'curatorial value' generated by the making and sharing of playlists.

Turning back, then, to my example of commoning with musicians in Macedonia in the production of an album that is an acoustemological sonic product of an ethnographic process, what regimes of value are in play? I can think of at least four with quite uneven characteristics in terms of value-production mechanisms and value-related hierarchies: (1) the regime of value in the sphere of jazz in Macedonia; (2) the regime of value in the American and New York-centric world of jazz and jazz discourse; (3) the regime of value in European jazz networks; and (4) lurking below it all, or perhaps looming above or waiting in the wings, the familiar regimes of value in academic fields where value in contributing to discourses and complicating methodologies can be convertible, not only to titles and prestige, but also to promotions, higher salaries, and other forms of economic value. As an actor embedded in the production of this and other sonic goods, how do I, in my own meaningful action, pay attention to these uneven regimes of value that co-exist and overlap at the site of my ethnographic sonic practice? In what ways can that attention and its accompanying intention and production circle back to help me grapple with the messiness of ethnography and its multifarious and unevenly situated beneficiaries? Can value produced by the meaningful action of any number of actors – especially when that action is not labour in Marx's sense – somehow serve to smooth out this unevenness, and is that desirable? And to what extent do these questions matter to those that are commoning together from any number of subjectivities? Wrestling with the idea of commoning in sound draws these questions to the surface – questions that I don't pretend to have answers to, but that seem to point to some of the thorny issues that arise for the commons more broadly. As I struggle with these and other questions, I am pushed again and again across clear and fuzzy boundaries of all kinds to – hopefully – build even more bridges and engage in forms of commoning not yet heard or envisioned.

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Notes

1. In recent years, sound, in particular, has garnered attention in a number of fields, with ‘sound studies’ becoming an umbrella term of sorts for interdisciplinary research on sound. Journals and edited collections focusing on sound have typically featured interdisciplinary perspectives and have increased in number over the last ten years or so. For example, the *Journal of Sonic Studies* first appeared in 2011, *Sound Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* first appeared in 2015, and a recent edited collection titled *Theorizing Sound Writing* (Kapchan 2017) brings together scholars from anthropology, ethnomusicology, musicology, and performance studies.
2. Perhaps Seeger was hinting towards alternatives to the written text in music ethnography, though this is not a concern of his argument here.
3. Feld pursues these implications elsewhere (2012).
4. In a special issue of *Collaborative Anthropologies* titled ‘Collaborative Ethnographies of Music and Sound’, guest editor Amber Clifford-Napoleone suggests that collaborative ethnography, as both theory and method, gives researchers new ways to think through and interpret the master-student relationship so common in ethnomusicological research (Clifford-Napoleone 2013).
5. She cites Steven Slawek’s (1994) astute observation of this trend, and its (at the time) lack of recognition as an intellectual endeavor.
6. Wong is also directly building on how Timothy Rice (1997) breaks down the insider-outsider dichotomy in theorizing experience in ethnography. He asks: ‘could theory and method, which take for granted a fixed and timeless ontological distinction between insider and outsider, reordered within an ontology that understands both researching and researched selves as potentially interchangeable and as capable of change through time, during the dialogues that typify the fieldwork experience?’ (1997: 106).
7. Feld connects acoustemology as a relational ontology to other anthropological literature on relational ontologies beyond the sonic including Bird-David 1999, Poirer 2008, and Viveiros de Castro 2004 (see also Feld 2012: 272n5).

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