

CHAPTER 21

RESOUNDING POWER

POLITICIZING THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF MUSIC

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My research in ethnomusicology, the anthropological study of music, has focused on musicians in brass band ensembles who provide music for funerals and parades, festivals, and concerts in New Orleans. When I began conducting fieldwork in 2006, participation and observation meant marching behind the drums and tuba for miles through the city streets, or standing amidst the dancing crowds at a nightclub while the trumpets, trombones, and saxophone played the melodies of an old jazz standard or a recent pop song. On festival stages, brass bands appeared alongside jazz, blues, soul, and funk bands, hip-hop artists, and Mardi Gras Indian “tribes.” Because these black performance traditions are integral to New Orleans’ identity as a musical city, black New Orleanians serve as ambassadors of local culture and yet they remain vulnerable to the patterns of marginalization that define life for people of color in countless other urban centers.

My conversations with musicians and other New Orleanians about this push-and-pull of precariousness and possibility eventually led me to interview Cherice Harrison Nelson. Cherice was nearing retirement as a public school

teacher and dedicating her time to directing a cultural center in her Upper Ninth Ward neighborhood. I explained to Cherice my method of collecting stories from practitioners so that their own words would not just stand alongside my own but drive the direction of my research and the theories developed in the writing. Looking at me with the suspicion of schoolteacher to student, interlocutor to interloper, black woman to white man, she asked “But what stories are you going to choose to tell?”

Any form of qualitative research begins with a design plan that is then modified as data is collected, the results not only providing answers but also calling for new questions. An ethnographer conducting research through interactions with living people has a usually high degree of agency in crafting their observations into writing or other forms of dissemination. Cherice was acutely aware of the power anthropologists have in representing others, as both an anthropological subject—a “culture-bearer”—and a scholar. Her father, Donald Harrison Sr., was the Big Chief of the Guardians of the Flame, one of the many black Indian “tribes” that parade through the city’s neighborhoods on Mardi Gras day, wearing elaborate feathered suits and beaded masks, singing chants to the rhythm of tambourines and cowbells. Anthropologists, folklorists, and journalists were a familiar presence around the family home, following sibling Donald Jr. as he developed into a leading saxophonist and bandleader, and eventually visiting the Mardi Gras Indian Hall of Fame that Cherice founded with her mother, Herreast. Cherice refers to my “tribe” as “talking heads of tradition,” and she agreed to speak with me because I had demonstrated a commitment to collaboration by volunteering at her school and the Hall of Fame. She was the authority in our meetings but she knew I could exercise ultimate authority in determining what would be written, and she exercised her influence to direct me toward the social problems that condition the lives of so-called culture-bearers.

This chapter uses Cherice’s intervention into my overall research design as a starting point for prompting anthropologists to consider what stories they choose to tell in their musical studies. Her question highlights the relative degree of autonomy that ethnographers have in choosing who to engage with, how the power dynamics of those engagements are scaffolded, and how the lives and experiences of interlocutors and collaborators structure the plans, methods, and outcomes of our research. I will describe the process that ultimately led to organizing my book *Roll With It: Brass Bands in the Streets of New Orleans* around racial justice issues that musicians face as young black men in a twenty-first-century American city. That meant situating the microlevel of musical performance and audience reception within the macrolevel of anti-black racism, economic exploitation, neighborhood gentrification, and interpersonal violence. The larger point of telling you this story is that all forms of

musical expression, from the latest hit song to the traditional chants of hunter-gatherers, are imbricated within structures of power that cannot be bracketed off from rigorous ethnographic research.

WAYS OF ENGAGING WITH MUSIC

I begin with this claim because music is commonly fetishized as a safe space of uncritical pleasure, an escape from the political, social, and economic forces that shape society in all its strenuous gravity. This is a legacy of Romanticism, the nineteenth-century European philosophy of aesthetics that locates the power of music in its ineffable beauty, offering individual listeners a portal to “take us out of the everyday into the realm of the infinite,” as E. T. A. Hoffmann described in 1814. In this tenacious formulation, the idealized figure of the music listener is characterized “by its attentiveness and interiority,” writes Jairo Moreno, “and by the fact that for it musical experience is inescapably immediate.” Environments that draw heightened attention to music—whether lost in contemplation listening to Beethoven in a concert hall, dancing to trance-like rhythms in a ritual space such as a nightclub, or “tuning out” with headphones and mobile devices—can invite an abandonment of social responsibility. And distracted listening—of radios murmuring in the background, “Muzak” in retail shops, or classical music at bedtime—facilitates disengagement of other types.

In the anthropological realm, where methods of cultural comparison and participant observation were designed explicitly as forms of engagement, scholars have analyzed the relationship of sound structure and social structure and demonstrated the power of music in the formation of social identity. With comparative musicology in the early 1900s and then ethnomusicology since the 1950s, researchers demonstrated the integral role of music at weddings and funerals, for work and for play, in spaces public and private. In Alan Merriam’s paradigmatic textbook *The Anthropology of Music*, he argued that musicological analysis of “the music itself” must be situated within and against anthropological analysis of “music as human behavior,” for “[w]ithout people thinking, acting, and creating, music sound cannot exist.” The emphasis on human behavior has since been expanded to include multispecies sounds such as birdcalls, environmental “soundscapes,” and noise “pollution,” as well as the technological mediation of recording and broadcast mediums. Ethnographic and comparative studies have attested to the universality of music while underscoring the relativism and cultural specificity of its production and reception, eventually tracking how cultures and places are reconfigured through the transnational flows of music and people.

In the most general and generous sense, the related disciplines of cultural

anthropology and ethnomusicology were founded on the tenuous premise that an ostensibly objective evaluation of difference would challenge Eurocentric presumptions of biological, cultural, and religious superiority. If research on the music of indigenous, racialized, and otherwise marginalized peoples has sustained an implicit politics of inclusion, ethnographic writings have been criticized for reproducing cultural essentialisms, enabling cultural appropriation, and isolating cultural practices from societal infrastructures. In those cases where there has been an explicit engagement with macrolevel politics, it has been largely limited to specific areas of extreme violence or negligence, resistance or struggle. In South Africa, ethnomusicologists Louise Meintjes, Gavin Steingo, and others have uncovered political dimensions of music in apartheid and post-apartheid states. Studies of music deployed as a weapon in US detention camps by Suzanne Cusick and Martin Daughtry have not only questioned the association of music with beauty and transcendence; they have also revealed how militaries use sound to shatter the will of fellow humans.

In the wake of the Fukushima nuclear disaster in March 2011, Japanese activists relied on music as a medium for mobilizing diverse counterpublics in anti-nuclear demonstrations, alternative festivals, and the virtual contact zones of cyberspace. Noriko Manabe tracked the emergence of protest songs on YouTube that were then re-voiced by activists in street demonstrations, which in turn were documented and posted online, creating a cycle of sonic and visual accumulation. Mostly suppressed in mainstream media, and subject to government censorship and other constraints, antinuclear music circulated through backchannels to “voice anxieties that many Japanese were feeling but could not express in the atmosphere of silence that prevailed after 3.11.” A parallel study by David Novak focused on the Project Fukushima! festival, a performative assembly in which collectivity was expressed through disruptive noise rather than explicit messages of protest in song lyrics. Through the participatory acts of singing, dancing, and creating experimental music, Project Fukushima! attempted to build “the ambivalence of regional culture into a platform for amplifying the noise of political community in the disaster zone.”

To situate music within the expansive and invasive territories of power, ethnographers have undertaken interdisciplinary approaches to integrating data drawn not only from participant observation of expressive culture but also public policy documents, archival materials, geopolitical studies, activist discourse, multisited ethnography, and other resources. In her study of the songs of Rongelapese women from the Marshall Islands, Jessica Schwartz finds references to politics and ethics, health and survival across a spectrum of source materials. Recently declassified documents reveal how survivors of the 1954 “Castle Bravo” thermonuclear test, the largest hydrogen bomb detonation in

US history, were used as human subjects for studying the effects of radiation by the Atomic Energy Commission. Every March 1, on the anniversary of the bombing, the Rongelapese hold a “remembrance day” ceremony and perform songs like “*Kajjitok in aō nān kwe kiō*” (“These are my questions for you now”), which recall the deception and renew the demand for answers to ongoing health problems. Because women are more susceptible to thyroid cancer than men, Schwartz integrates methods of medical anthropology to show how “vocal articulation of this suffering . . . [serves] as a barometer of communal health.” The songs recuperate memories and articulate ethical demands through the sound of the voice as well as the meaning of the text. These examples of music in post-nuclear crises are part of a long, if not exactly robust, legacy of scholars attending to music as a diagnostic of imbalanced power relations.

This politically engaged body of literature extends to studies of social identification—race and ethnicity, nationality and religion, gender and sexuality. In the musical study of black Americans, there is an unbroken lineage that situates performance, recording, and reception within transnational structures of enslavement, segregation, and institutional racism. The formative writings on slave spirituals—such as *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867) by scholar-abolitionists William Francis Allen, Lucy McKim Garrison, and Charles Pickard Ware, and *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) by sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois—laid a foundation for contextualizing musical study in explicitly political realms. Methodical ethnographic study did not begin until the 1930s with the work of Melville Herskovits, Zora Neale Hurston, John and Alan Lomax, and other cultural anthropologists and folklorists who were primarily located outside of music studies. As research on black American music has expanded, politically engaged study has been concentrated in historiography, cultural studies, and literature, with dedicated ethnographers such as Kyra Gaunt and Cheryl Keyes working the periphery. As is always the case with anthropological studies of music in any area, ethnographers must assemble a “toolkit” of analytical materials and methods drawn from multiple disciplinary locations in order to contextualize aesthetic practices within the machinations of power.

MUSIC AS A DIAGNOSTIC OF POWER IN NEW ORLEANS

When I began my research I did not see it as grounded in one particular area so much as distributed across scattered terrains of social theory, critical race studies, anthropological methods, New Orleans history, and research on music and sound. After Hurricane Katrina struck in August 2005, the disproportion-

ate effects of the devastation on black New Orleanians directed me toward studies of disaster, social suffering, and structural racism. Katrina deeply politicized my work because the musicians I was preparing to research were victims of disaster profiteering and urban restructuring. I undertook a fieldwork study that was heavily revised so that the everyday experiences of musicians could be contextualized within the structures of power that condition their lives. On the one hand, the city needed “culture-bearers” to rejuvenate a tourist economy based on music and food, while on the other hand the systems of public housing, education, and healthcare were being entirely dismantled, privatized, and downsized in ways that specifically harmed people of color. How to go about situating such joyful music against such debilitating infrastructures without reducing the complex negotiations of power to rigid binaries of resistance or accommodation? Early in my field study I attended an event that became a launch pad for an inquiry into the political dimensions of musical performance and bodily assembly in the public spaces of New Orleans.

On November 11, 2006, I attended the funeral for Adrienne “Shorty” Chanclay, who had passed away from congenital heart failure at the age of thirty-two. She was memorialized with a jazz funeral, a burial procession that begins with slow marching to a mournful dirge and ends with up-tempo music and dancing to celebrate the life of the deceased. As the band led a crowd of a hundred or so family, friends, and onlookers away from the St. Jude Shrine and back into the Tremé neighborhood where Chanclay lived, the musicians ratcheted up the tempo with the upbeat hymn “Jesus on the Mainline.” By the time the procession reached Chanclay’s house, a dozen musicians were playing an instrumental arrangement of “Shorty Was the Bomb” by rapper DMX and the participants chanted the chorus until the hearse stopped in front of the family home. The band planned to end the funeral there, and Chanclay’s daughter was hoisted up onto the coffin while they played a final dirge, “Just a Closer Walk with Thee.” But when the musicians shouted “Let’s send her away!” and pointed to the interstate overpass looming over the nearby intersection, the crowd moved quickly under the concrete decks, shaking the casket in the air and dancing exuberantly to the Mardi Gras Indian chant “Hoo Na Nae.” After this improvised ending, the casket was put back in the hearse, the cortege drove away to the cemetery, and the rest of the crowd disbanded.

What are the political dimensions of an event in which a young woman of color who died from a birth defect is honored with a musical funeral in the public spaces of her hometown? Unlike an antinuclear demonstration, a funeral procession does not project an explicit politics of assembly, or at least none was clear to me as I walked away from the scene with a few observations scribbled in my notebook and some pictures and videos on my point-and-shoot camera. It

was around this time that I first met Cherice and she had asked what stories was I going to choose to tell. As a New Orleanian with firsthand knowledge about the black experience and local culture, Cherice was deeply invested in areas that were unknown and even unknowable to me. Mapping the power relations embedded in a funeral procession of the type that occurs hundreds of times per year, her prompt led me beyond participant observation to draw upon numerous other resources: archival data, urban planning documents, media reportage, and studies of racialized geographies.

Having first moved to New Orleans in 1996, I had accumulated a decade of experiences that I began to review in light of the new information gleaned from the funeral procession. In 2002, the funeral for saxophonist Harold Dejan, leader of the Olympia Brass Band, also reached its ecstatic culmination “under the bridge,” as locals refer to the strip carved out beneath the overpass. Come to think of it, nearly every funeral and brass band parade I had attended in the downtown district hit peak intensity in this semi-enclosed space where bodies are pressed close together and the sound of the instruments echoes off the huge concrete slabs and columns. The day after Chanclay’s funeral, the Tremé Sidewalk Steppers Social Aid & Pleasure Club hosted their annual neighborhood parade, which paused under the overpass while a crowd of thousands danced ecstatically to the horns and drums of the Rebirth Brass Band. What was the significance of the bridge and why did the sound of the brass band in this particular spot “get everybody hyped,” as Rebirth bandleader Philip Frazier told me?

Urban planner Robert Moses designed the interstate in 1946 and construction began two decades later, with the primary aim of serving white commuters who were relocating to the suburbs after the forced integration of the city school system. In addition to Moses’s plans, I reviewed oral histories of black residents who recalled the demolition of a tree-lined commercial thoroughfare and the construction of the hulking concrete structure. From newspaper articles and other historical sources, I learned that planners had advanced a multistage urban development scheme in the Tremé at the height of the Civil Rights era. The city forced the relocation of hundreds of black families in the name of fighting “urban blight” that, in actuality, was caused by a dwindling tax base in a shrinking city. This racialized incursion of space had been analyzed by urban geographers and other scholars, and their work provided an interdisciplinary frame of reference for the cultural displays I kept witnessing under the bridge.

In the fields of urban theory and human geography, scholars unpack how space is produced through the dialectic of city planners controlling the built environment and everyday people using those spaces in unintended ways. Henri Lefebvre theorized urban public space as “abstract space,” or bureaucratically

shaped space, which can be reappropriated as lived space, or “concrete space.” The physical and sonic presence of musicians and parade participants in contested public spaces could be interpreted as a way of staking claims on those spaces, commanding what Lefebvre termed a “right to the city.” Conjoining theories of sound and space led to a politicization of soundscape studies or an acoustification of theories of public space. More precisely, the musicians and marchers provided the grounds for analysis, compelling me to assemble a theoretical apparatus that could help me explain what was happening with sound, bodies, and space under the bridge.

Philip Frazier is the tuba player and founder of Rebirth, an internationally renowned brass band that I had seen perform at festivals, in concert halls, on-stage at their weekly gig at the Maple Leaf Bar, and parading in the streets. When I interviewed “Tuba Phil” in 2006 he explained how he directs the mobile ensemble to regulate the movement of the parade as they move through space. “When you get to a certain intersection or a certain street where there’s an opening, if the street is really wide, you know that’s more dancing room for everybody, you want to keep everybody upbeat. When you get to a street where it’s more closed, and the parade might slow down at a pace, you slow it down because you know everybody’s trying to get through that small street.” When the Sidewalk Steppers parade began in the narrow streets of the Tremé, Tuba Phil dialed back the music to keep the large crowds under control, but when the parade turned onto Dumaine Street, past Shorty Chanclery’s house and toward the bridge, the tempo was rising. “When you get under an overpass, because of the acoustics, you know the band’s going to be loud anyway, and the crowd knows that’s going to be like some wild, rowdy stuff and you want to get everybody hyped.” This is a sonic and embodied practice for retuning abstract space as concrete space, and it was the reflections of Tuba Phil and other musicians that directed me to seek out Lefebvre and other theorists to unpack the complexity of the ethnographic event.

There is a substantial body of academic literature on the relation between sound and space, with a debt to Murray Schafer’s influential conception of the “soundscape,” or sonic environment. In Schafer’s terminology the bridge would be a “soundmark,” or “community sound which is unique or possesses qualities which make it specially regarded.” But Schafer would not have considered the highway overpass a suitable soundmark: New Orleans exemplifies the “lo-fi soundscapes” of congested areas that “suffer from an overpopulation of sounds,” and he condemned urban noise “pollution” while praising the serene “hi-fi soundscapes” of natural environments. Steven Feld retooled the soundscape concept in developing his theory of “acoustemology,” stripping away Schafer’s judgment in a more inclusive understanding of “local conditions

of acoustic sensation, knowledge, and imagination embodied in the culturally particular sense of place.” However, Feld’s foundational case study was of an indigenous egalitarian society in the rural rainforests of Papua New Guinea, leaving open the question of how people experience place through sound when those people are socially stratified and those places are contested.

A comparison to the soundmark of the bridge and the racialized soundscapes of New Orleans can be found in the “Islamic soundscapes” analyzed by Andrew Eisenberg in a Muslim neighborhood in Mombasa, on the Swahili coast of Kenya. In this postcolonial African metropolis, where the liberal-democratic logic of the state maintains public space as an arena of “neutral principles,” the explicitly religious soundscape of the Muslim quarter is emblematic of the symbolic struggle over their right to the city. The key soundmark in Old Town is the *adhān*, the call to prayer broadcast five times each day. Emanating from loudspeakers perched on the rooftops of dozens of mosques, the *adhān* resonates in polyphony with Qur’anic recitations, religious songs, and sermons in Arabic, Swahili, and sometimes English. Eisenberg highlights “the centrality of ritual sounding and listening practices for Muslim subject-formation . . . through which denizens of the coastal city of Mombasa negotiate the literal and figurative place of a Muslim community within the bounds of a heterogeneous Kenyan metropolis.” This lo-fi soundscape does not signify a shared sense of place; there are disagreements over the status of public space enacted through competing acoustemological commitments to space. Subjects with differing orientations must “strategically navigate and negotiate multiple logics of public space,” and sound is a central site of navigation and negotiation.

TOWARD A PUBLIC ANTHROPOLOGY OF MUSIC

Scholars affiliated with musicology, ethnomusicology, the anthropology of music, and sound studies are redirecting intellectual lineages that have romanticized music as an aesthetic and affective mode of expression, autonomous from the mundane and profane domains of society and politics. They offer a progressive response to the question every author faces: What stories are you going to choose to tell? In my own work, I followed musicians into the spaces of their everyday lives, tracking how their physical and social mobility was conditioned by racial marginalization. My discussions with Bennie Pete, bandleader of the Hot 8 Brass Band, alerted me to the economic obstacles that brass band musicians navigated in their attempts to earn a livable wage within a local culture industry that exploits their labor. The tragic murders of other members of the Hot 8 led me back to the jazz funeral, this time to focus on young musi-

cians who were memorialized after suffering violent deaths. The police killing of an unarmed twenty-two-year-old musician and the murder of his twenty-five-year-old bandmate underscore how young black men who are celebrated as culture-bearers are not free from the incapacitating effects of structural and interpersonal violence.

In *Roll With It*, stories about the perilous lives of black New Orleanians pushed me to analyze music as a diagnostic of power relations within imbalanced racial hierarchies. After completing the manuscript in 2012, a black teenager named Trayvon Martin was murdered in the Florida community where he lived by white “neighborhood watchman” George Zimmerman. When Zimmerman was cleared of all charges on July 13, 2013, protesters organized demonstrations using the social media hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, which grew into a national movement in 2014 after the police killings of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York. Though my research in New Orleans preceded the movement, the experiences of musicians and the stories they told me support the central claim made in the “Movement for Black Lives Platform”: “Despite constant exploitation and perpetual oppression, Black people have bravely and brilliantly been the driving force pushing the U.S. towards the ideals it articulates but has never achieved.” As I continue to become more attuned to music’s entanglements with political and economic forces, my research about expressive culture becomes increasingly inseparable from research about social justice.

For all my commitment to foregrounding race and racism, my work thus far has generally not attended to intersections with gender and sexism. Brass bands in New Orleans are almost exclusively male, with one all-female band disrupting the gendered norms of this patriarchal community. Subsequent research by Kyle DeCoste focused on this band, The Pinettes, to demonstrate how “gender identity has been neglected as a category of analysis, reproducing the bias of the scene at large.” Disregarding the intersectionality of race and gender, as I acknowledged in my book, closed off an entire domain of power relations in a way that “perpetuates the marginalization of black women in scholarly studies.” It is a story that needs to be told and by choosing not to tell it I failed to provide a full and accurate accounting of struggles over power.

Cherice’s provocation underscores the agency of scholars in choosing their objects of study, structuring their interactions with subjects, and sustaining engagement throughout the process of research and writing. If my book was based on the premise that picking up an instrument is a political act, it was Cherice and others who urged me to model my own creative work as a call to action. These are stories of people and events caught up in contemporary critical issues that are central to public policy and discourse but have mostly hovered above

the purview of musical ethnography; that is, governmentality and the lives of individuals shaped by its most powerful institutions. Philippe Bourgois urges anthropologists not only to take up contemporary struggles over power but to use writing itself as a form of activism to “engage with political stakes that matter to the people who bear a disproportionate toll for suffering caused by the inequalities that power imposes.” In the book *Why a Public Anthropology?* Rob Borofsky calls upon scholars and students to undertake ethnographic study in service of the public and advocate for the communities and societies granting the privilege of studying them. In each of these formulations, music studies would provide a kind of limit case for engaging with the contemporary and creating publically engaged scholarship because for so long the discipline has curated a space for disengagement.

In stressing the potential for ethnographers who make uniquely intimate engagements with people to open up more possibilities for social justice, I am not making a grand claim for the power of academic writing to transform society. Like many other scholars loosely affiliated with “applied ethnomusicology,” I have collaborated with musicians and activists to combine research with community engagement. I consult with the Music and Culture Coalition of New Orleans (MaCCNO) to advocate for equitable pay and better working conditions for local musicians. I am a board member for the nonprofit organization Roots of Music, an afterschool music program for middle school students, and I coordinate students from my university for volunteer tutoring. I teach courses on “Music and Politics,” “Black Music, Black Lives,” and my class on “New Orleans Music” is structured around the complex history of racial identity in the city my students and I live in. I mention these activities only to highlight some ways in which music research, writing, and teaching can be integrated within broader initiatives aimed at ameliorating suffering and building equity. These initiatives can be undertaken in even the most unlikely places, including music studies.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READINGS

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Cusick’s study of the use of music in torture challenges asks us to consider at what point does music shed its association with beauty and become “sheer sound”?

Feld, Steven. 1988. “Waterfalls of Song: An Acoustemology of Place Resounding in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea.” In *Senses of Place*, ed. Steven Feld and Keith Basso, 91–136. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.

Feld’s research on the Kaluli in the rainforests of Papua New Guinea shows how different cultures have different understandings of what constitutes music.

Gaunt, Kyra Danielle. 2006. *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop*. New York: New York University Press.

A deep ethnography of black music and dance from the perspective of a scholar and practitioner.

Schwartz, Jessica A. 2012. "A 'Voice to Sing': Rongelapese Musical Activism and the Production of Nuclear Knowledge." *Music & Politics* 6(1).

Schwartz situates song lyrics and performances alongside policy documents to show how survivors of nuclear disasters use music as a form of social activism and healing.

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White's ethnographic study of Congolese music, which under the Mobutu dictatorship could both contest and support regimes of power.

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