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Essay:

*Resisting Sameness: À propos Kofi Agawu's  
Representing African Music*

VEIT ERLMANN

“Opposition is true friendship.”— William Blake.

Although its subtitle modestly suggests that *Representing Music* (New York: Routledge, 2003) is but a mere collection of “notes,” “queries” and “positions,” few books in recent years have pursued a more ambitious agenda than this, Kofi Agawu’s third book. To put it in a nutshell, Agawu is out to set African musical scholarship on a radically new course, one he hopes will lead towards the undoing of the violence ethnomusicologists have done to African music by decades of institutional exclusion and conceptual “othering.” The range of charges brought against ethnomusicology is startling: from the rather moralizing indictment against ethnomusicologists who are sending copies of their videotapes to the “natives” while the continent faces war, disease, and famine (154), to the more serious claim that their construal of African musicians’ learning methods is not that far removed from the crude and aggressively essentialist mode of representation adopted by tourists (158 *ff.*), and that ethnomusicology’s insistence on the distinctiveness of African musical experience is a “patronizing and pernicious form of conceptual violence” (163).<sup>1</sup> Clearly, ethnomusicologists

working in Africa are out “to deprive Africa of full participation in global critical acts” by conferring a sham (and exclusionary) uniqueness on Africa. There is a “will-to-difference” that barely camouflages the more sinister drive it is named after, Nietzsche’s will-to-power.

Card-carrying ethnomusicologists such as myself might be prompted by such statements to write a counterpolemic, but the fact is that many of Agawu’s accusations ring awfully true. There is no denying that ethnomusicology has been largely supportive and reflective of colonial pursuits. And yes, many of ethnomusicology’s historical blind spots have continued to shape our conceptions of African music in the postcolonial era. Being for the most part in sympathy with the idea of mounting a more principled and radical critique of ethnomusicology’s implication in colonial and post-colonial power structures, in this essay I am not going to defend my “tribal” loyalties and will thus also pass over some of Agawu’s more outlandish claims about ethnomusicology’s presumed failings, such as the one that “Africanist ethnomusicologists have so far shown little interest in thematizing their colonial filiations and affiliations” (155). But I am reluctant to endorse Agawu’s critique of ethnomusicology at the price set by *Representing African Music*. For what Agawu suggests in his book is nothing less than an impossibly sweeping, radically universalizing solution to ethnomusicology’s post-colonial quandaries, one that cuts against the grain of just about everything currently running under the rubric of post-colonial studies. For Agawu the future of African musical scholarship is not a question of conjuring up a new “model” or of fixing what he considers to be a broken discipline. His

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they could improvise, he could not. He could read music, they could not. Agawu is not content with pointing out that what his colleague—“who was, after all, a tourist” (159)—had overlooked in his construal of Africans’s difference was less owed to natural circumstance than to enculturation and sometimes individual differences. He also questions his motives for being so hung up on difference, which (for Agawu) upholds notions of Africa as a “dark continent.”

1 Agawu here narrates an encounter he had in 1998 with an American professor of mathematics at the University of Ghana. The professor claimed that Africans learned music very differently from Europeans;

is ultimately a denial of the fundamental premises of the ethnomusicological project itself. Ethnomusicologists, he proposes, instead of carrying the celebration of difference to ever higher levels or refining their methodologies—such as becoming more fluent in African languages, devising better systems of notation, staying in the field longer or becoming ever more sensitive to local forms of knowledge, and so on—should commit something like disciplinary suicide and unreservedly adopt western-style structural analysis and what Agawu describes as an epistemology of “sameness.” They should treat African music as though “there is ultimately no difference between European knowledge and African knowledge” (180).

At a time when interest in ethnomusicology seems to be growing among musicologists and a handful of music theorists, such an assertion and what looks like a complete reshuffling of the cards in the intradisciplinary game might easily be dismissed as petulant. Yet whatever one may think of the author’s provocative stance, *Representing African Music* should not be taken lightly for two reasons. First, the book is without any doubt the most powerful theoretical intervention in African musicology in a decade or more. And it is, by a long stretch, one of the most edgy and stylish pieces of writing on the politics of culture in postcolonial Africa to have appeared of late. Most importantly, though, Agawu’s coupling of music theory and African music carries particular significance not just for readers of this journal and music theorists in general, but for anyone interested in the conundrums of postcolonial Africa, because the author’s credibility is enhanced by the fact that he is speaking from a subject position as an African intellectual in Western academe and has published authoritatively on both Western traditions and the music of his native Ghana.

Another reason why neither ethnomusicologists nor music theorists are likely to set aside Agawu’s book easily is because there’s nothing inherently wrong with wanting to get rid of a failed discipline. Just as it is not all that inconceivable to appropriate discursive strategies and analytical

methods with the aim of widening the comparative framework in which music may become a subject in its own right. What is problematic is the assumption that one can supplant one discipline’s representational dilemmas—in this case ethnomusicology’s—with the methodology of another without also interrogating its own epistemological premises. Thus, I worry little about Agawu’s desire to “advocate the eventual disappearance of the ethnomusicologist” (166); nor do I find it ludicrous to want to draw African and Western music together within the framework of a set of shared characteristics to be delineated by the conceptual parameters of one discipline, be it music theory or any other field. In other words, it is fine—at least at this level of generality—to “universalize” African music and to base this move on the assertion of having at one’s finger tips the right method to represent it as such. (After all, what is wrong with saying that plants and humans are living beings and suggesting therefore that both might as well be studied by one discipline?) But I do wonder about the terms of Agawu’s reclaiming of African music when his recuperative labor largely passes over in silence the peculiar will-to-power of the chosen master discourse, in this case music theory. I beg to differ when it comes to accepting wholesale music theory’s supposedly superior claims to objectivity and grounding the new African musicology in the rather doubtful notion of music theory as Agawu advances it—*as a set of unexamined a priori assumptions* about how best to answer questions raised by musics from South Africa to Siberia. If a critique of ethnomusicology’s Orientalist legacy is to succeed and if Agawu’s goal of re-orienting African-music studies from a rhetoric of difference toward a discourse of sameness is to be taken seriously, it would appear that music theory, too, is in need of scrutiny for many of its ready-made ideological foundations and tacit assumptions.

I equally part company with Agawu on another set of tacit assumptions. These are in many ways the exact mirror-image of Agawu’s music-theoretical claims and appear potentially to undermine the poignancy and indeed entire rationale of his argument in favor of a will-to-sameness. This

set of assumptions stems from what I would call a “tactical” Africanism. For although Agawu shares with Anthony Appiah, Achille Mbembe, Mahmood Mamdani and other leading African intellectuals a deep distrust of any attempt to essentialize Africa, he does allow for a certain anti-essentialism to taint his argument in ways that at times lack the critical force of the somewhat parallel position articulated, for instance, by Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic* (1993). All too often, as I shall show in more detail below, African forms of knowledge, African aesthetic practices, and African ethical norms are posited as given, thus actually diminishing the potential for the African continent to enter the global game as an active player—making and remaking itself, as it always has, in its own image and on its own terms and not from an immutable position of alterity. I do not intend this as a denial of the fundamental justification for a view that seeks to shift Africa materially, culturally, and politically to a more central position in the global order, but rather to highlight some of the (mostly unspoken) rhetorical moves underlying Agawu’s provocative posture. For to advocate an unabashed universalism—bolstered by music theory’s putatively superior symbolic capital and highly developed disciplinary tools—alongside a withdrawal into a genuine African sphere complete with its own, deeply ingrained communal ethics, aesthetics, and forms of knowledge is not only a form of “opportunistic pragmatism,” as Agawu calls it. In the form he imagines for it, the marriage of universalism and Africanism—although not necessarily an unhappy prospect in and of itself—is also disturbingly under-theorized. And as such it signals something more fundamental: namely, the troubling refusal to critically engage the fact that “the pursuit of cultural difference has become a candidate for a universal, regulative idea like global law or human rights.”<sup>2</sup> Conflicting goals which they in many ways are, universalism and Africanism cannot be left at the mercy of the shifting winds of our institutional politics, careers tactics, and audi-

ence appetites. They require the most painstaking, theoretical labor imaginable.

The book’s nine chapters are relatively self-contained essays reflecting on a wide range of topics. There are detailed structural analyses of rhythmic patterns and particular high-life songs alongside discussions of song texts and trenchant reflections on the imbalances in the institutional politics and economics of knowledge production about African music—all topics which would require a much more detailed treatment than the scope and intention of my brief intervention here permit. Agawu’s voice, too, comes in a variety of timbres and registers. For the most part, the book’s tone borders on the polemical, though some of the chapters also strike a more conciliatory, “factual” note. Still, though all chapters can be read (and savored) independently of each other, readers are more likely to be swayed by the full force of Agawu’s formidable reasoning if they allow themselves to be taken by the hand and follow the line of reasoning tying the chapters together and gaining momentum (and possibly clarity) from about the last third of the book as Agawu’s argument gains density and sharpness. And thus, even while I do not intend the following as a summary of *Representing African Music*, I have tried to observe as much as possible the order in which Agawu makes his case.

#### KNOWING/THEORIZING

How, then, do ethnomusicologists know and theorize? And what might be the advantage, if any, in bringing music theory’s own universalizing brand of knowledge production to bear on African music? How opposed are the two modalities anyway? Questions such as these pervade *Representing African Music*, and enable Agawu to probe a stupendously broad range of research paradigms, intellectual traditions, and political agendas. But they do not always get resolved, perhaps deliberately so. While Agawu’s anti-essentialism leads him to question and ultimately reject ethnomusicology’s epistemological basis, it also allows for a type of

2 Harootunian 2004, 401.

knowledge that seems to reside outside of both ethnomusicology's "othering" discourse and music theory's analytical gaze, and whose embeddedness in specific cultural systems is itself hardly ever thematized. In the "Epilogue," Agawu calls this paradoxical configuration of universal truth claims and more local types of knowledge "opportunistic pragmatism" (223), a "strategic" deployment of critical categories that of necessity arises from the situation of scholars like Agawu himself, "whose sense of intellectual location is frequently in flux" (224). Yet the extent to which the contradictions between such representational strategies are more than matters of personal choice that might themselves be the result of specific historical configurations, imposing their own dynamics and dilemmas on the discussion, is rarely at the forefront of Agawu's narrative.

Several examples from the two opening chapters illustrate this. In Chapter 1, "Colonialism's Impact," Agawu tells the story of the largely detrimental effect colonial domination has had on Africa's musical heritage. But in doing so, he not only recapitulates for the general reader some of the bread-and-butter issues a younger generation of Africanists has been dealing with for some time now, he also sets up a rather stark contrast between two themes that recur throughout the book and whose mutual interdependence remains unaccounted for. The first theme is what I would call, following Jean-François Bayart, the "Africa under the yoke" theme; the idea that Africa is the more or less passive victim of European domination.<sup>3</sup> This theme contrasts with the position, equally widespread if not always put forward with equal zest, that Africa's colonial legacy cannot simply be erased from the record and that the cultural forms it spurred are neither aberrations nor a panacea for underdevelopment, but a challenge to any binary thinking that sees modernity running up against tradition, European values clashing with African systems of belief, and so on. Colonialism, one might say, in legitimizing itself through a discourse of opposites, at the

same time leveled the playing field on which such dichotomies could be meaningfully maintained.

Agawu expands this rhetorical strategy of saying one thing in the first sentence and denying it in the next in Chapter 2, entitled "The Archive." Here the author examines the wider framework in which knowledge about African music is produced: the institutional practices, material conditions, methodologies, and repositories of knowledge that are inextricably linked to the very idea of African music itself and—as Agawu usefully reminds us—are heavily imbricated in the perpetuation of past and present power imbalances between Africa and the West. Much of the criticism Agawu here levels against metropolitan discourses is based on the notion that the archive of African music, as a material institution, is not only overwhelmingly housed in the West, but despite its vastness is also fundamentally partial and incomplete.

While all this is undeniable, Agawu also—more problematically, I think—further obscures the dichotomy set up earlier between Western material hegemony and a helpless Africa by introducing a distinction far more inscrutable than that produced by the politics of empire (and thus, also implicitly denies the colonial legacy described in Chapter 1). While the institutions, practices and discourses of Western global power here and throughout the book receive ample critical attention, the African side of the divide is made impenetrable and hence near-unassailable by being granted an almost ontological status as a naturally given set of characteristics. For instance, reviewing coverage of African music in the *New Grove*, Agawu notes the uneven representation of countries and the excessive concern expressed in many of these entries with differences between particular regions, musical idioms, ethnic groups, and so on. To remedy these shortcomings, Agawu recommends the study of African music "as a unified practice," alongside "studies that do not ride roughshod over the particularities of individual expressive forms" (31). The latter, one would assume, is of course the genuine domain of music theory, while a way of

3 Bayart 1993.

addressing the first problem according to Agawu would be for ethnographers to work more closely with “in-country personnel” such as “government officials” and to draw on things such as “surveys compiled from commissioned regional reports” (29). In other words, there is the ethnographer’s knowledge—incomplete, tilted toward the particular and clearly the product of colonial perspectives—and an African knowledge, enshrined *inter alia* in texts issued by national governments. Thus, while Agawu historicizes the Western type of knowledge and thereby (correctly) deconstructs its claims to absolute truth, the same contextualization is missing for state-generated, bureaucratic knowledge in Africa. The post-colonial state hovers over “Africa,” unchallenged as an all-knowing subject. To ask, then, how surveys might themselves not only be flawed at a purely factual level, but more importantly perhaps, to ask whether a politics of “representative coverage” might be in operation in numerous African countries would have added a whole new dimension to the question of how the archive of African music is organized less along structuralist lines, but rather—like the relationship between oral and written forms of knowledge—situated more “within a larger economy of knowledge contestation” (25). In other words, might such state-controlled practices of representation be anything but representative (not even “in principle,” as Agawu asserts), and reflect certain class interests instead? Are such forms of supervision being contested—musically, politically, violently or all three together at the same time? And, finally, why is it that some Africanists question such state-driven politics of representation, while others do not? When I was invited a decade or so ago to collaborate in a bilateral project involving the German government and an African state, I declined the offer for the simple reason that the African partners had already decided how the demographic distribution of the country’s ethnic groups was to be mirrored in, for instance, the percentage of audio tape to be used or in the time spent in each given field site.

Finally, elsewhere in the same chapter Agawu criticizes what he perceives to be Western researchers’ ignorance of

Africa’s “wealth of . . . multilingualism” and their reliance on interpreters (41). The implication here, as in the previous example, is that a Western practice—the pervasiveness of colonial languages that require the “native” to report back to the colonizer in one of a handful of metropolitan languages—and Western researchers’ mediocre command of African languages are the result of a long history of power disparities, while Africans’ multilingualism, for instance, is simply a “gift” (40). Of course, the point here is not whether Agawu’s claims about researchers’ monolingualism and inadequate knowledge of Ewe, Hausa, or Zulu are justified. (My professional instincts and, admittedly, clumsy efforts at juggling two metropolitan languages and two African languages at the same time tell me that the majority of non-African scholars working in Africa do indeed operate on a reduced level of communication in local languages. But at the same time I wonder how many music theorists actually master, say, Languedoc or speak Italian with a seicento Venetian accent.) Rather, it is to interrogate the validity of a rhetorical strategy that subjects Western hegemony to critique while at the same time shielding African practices of statehood or forms of linguistic communication from similar historical analysis by a priori assigning them rather static attributes, such as exhibiting plurality or being somehow “overlooked” and “undervalued.” While there can be no question that African languages are currently undervalued in our universities, media, and communities (even if much less so, I might add, in the rich ethnomusicological output of recent years on Africa’s oral and musical traditions), Agawu’s well-substantiated defense of Africans’ “greater understanding of our own languages” and call for “strategies of mental emancipation” also begs the question of how African multi-lingualism came into being in specific places in the first place and why it is effectively being undermined and coming under pressure in others. In other words, it will not diminish the historical oppressor’s responsibility or in any way excuse current researchers’ incompetence to show that African social and cultural practices are not immutable or the result of victimization, but are

every bit as historical, contradictory and shot through with power inequalities as are Western constructions of Africa. But it might alter the conditions under which the “archive” itself may become the grounds for reflecting and possibly altering the terms of trade.

To music theorists, the points I am raising here might appear as bickering and one more reason to refrain from venturing into the messy realm of postcolonial academic politics. But the fact is that such questions do not solely alert us to the “darker side of knowledge ordering” within the field of ethnomusicology (53). They also pertain to music theory’s own claims to truth and the grounding of such knowledge in under-problematized forms of cultural habitus. Agawu’s discussion of Western and African listening habits in Chapter 7—by far the most polemical in the book—is a good case in point.

#### LISTENING

Under the title “Contesting Difference,” Agawu here reiterates the point made throughout the book about ethnomusicologists’ “hunt for differences,” this time homing in especially on the notion, put forward by John Chernoff and Peter Cooke among others, that Africans might have different aural sensibilities (160). As Cooke has argued in a study comparing Ghanaian xylophonist Kakraba Lobi’s indigenous auditory experience with the listening experience of Western classical music, Africans do not experience instrumental music as pure or absolute, but always hear it through the filter of an “implied” text.<sup>4</sup> Although in the article in question the evidence on which Cooke rests his claim (rather unconvincingly, as Agawu rightly points out) was gleaned from a rather superficial engagement with Lobi’s work, the real origin of this hypothesis (which Agawu chooses to ignore) lies elsewhere, in an article on Amadinda xylophone music from Uganda that Cooke had published earlier as part of a debate

with Gerhard Kubik. Amadinda music, he had argued there, does not prompt the audience to listen for instrumentally produced and thus in a sense more “absolute,” “inherent patterns,” as Kubik claimed, but clues its listeners in by hinting at meaning-producing parallels with well-known texts.<sup>5</sup> As this suggests, the construction of African listening practices is more than a simple twentieth-century promulgation of Hegelian ideas about the utter impenetrability of the African character. And it is a much more intricate affair than Agawu’s somewhat hasty critique of Cooke, the omission from this critique of Kubik’s contrary findings, and the denigrating equation of the search for understanding with a hunt for prey suggest. This is not to say, of course, that one should not take Cooke to task for making too many undocumented inferences (about European listeners, for instance) or for “under-complicating” Western music, but I suspect that the gist of Agawu’s condemnation is rather meant, perhaps unconsciously, to serve quite a different agenda: that of preserving as unproblematic and unquestioned a series of key notions routinely held in music theory about the relationship between analysis, listening, and the work of art.

It is probably not oversimplifying matters too much to say that subjective listening experience in music theory is something of a non-issue. Unlike ethnomusicologists’ insistence that listening and subjective experience matter and that music becomes meaningful through sensorially- and culturally-patterned processes of inscription and negotiation, the majority of music theorists see the listening habits of Europeans as inherently idiosyncratic and inscrutable, while Agawu himself considers such habits, when articulated verbally, as merely indexing “word-based conceptual schemes.”<sup>6</sup>

5 Cooke 1969, Kubik 1969.

6 Of course, there are a number of important traditions within music theory that have been concerned with the subjective dimension of musical experience, such as David Schwarz’s *Listening Subjects* (1997), to give but one example. Ultimately, though, the tension between subjective experience and the musical work remains seriously undertheorized in this

4 Cooke 1999.

Subjective listening experiences thus leave the work's objectivity—and, hence, music theory's object—fundamentally unaffected. Because (Western) works of art are pure consciousness in mediated form, they reveal their essence only to those who are ideally equipped with the analytical gaze or, in the absence of such a specialized skill, to a category of person more vaguely glossed as the “knowledgeable listener” (162). How such knowledge is constituted in the first place remains about as mysterious as how the surveys produced by African government officials become repositories of African collective knowledge, or how African multilingualism is a “gift” of nature. In fact, one may wonder whether the tight fit between knowledge as the basis for aesthetic judgment and listening as a profoundly individual experience is a thoroughly nineteenth-century idea, little more than the “occidentalizing” mirror-image of the notion of radically different African listening practices. Both fail to register the complex interplay of power, knowledge, and the work done by expressive forms in shaping subjective identities and cultural practice. Seen in this light, it comes as no surprise that all it takes for Agawu to contest Cooke's “othering” of the West is to question Kakraba Lobi's qualifications as a “knowledgeable listener” of Western music.

#### ANALYZING

The mirror-dance of “orientalizing” and “occidentalizing” discourses underpinning ethnomusicology and music theory has important repercussions for what both disciplines regard as their most prized objects of scholarly desire and for the nature of the methodological investment they are prepared to make in the pursuit of this object. In a sense it might even be said that this mirror-dance constitutes both fields' real

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literature, not to mention the paucity of empirical evidence to elucidate the concrete nature of subjective listening experiences thus admitted as more than mere exemplars of a subjectivity constituted a priori in theoretical discourse.

raison d'être. Structural analysis, one of the biggest bones of contention supposedly keeping the two disciplines apart, is a perfect example for what in reality are rather closely intertwined strategies. If African music, according to ethnomusicological consensus and popular prejudice, is by definition different, and if that fundamental difference is said to reside primarily in its rhythmic intricacy, any justification for the ethnomusicological project would have to be framed in a comparison between alleged African rhythmic complexity and alleged Western rhythmic simplicity. Conversely, music theory's insistence on Western music's unique status and, consequently, its privileging of pitch relations, comes from the assumption that few of the world's musical traditions can rival Western classical music in harmonic sophistication. While the latter comparison—a firm, albeit by now conveniently forgotten component of music-theoretical discourse since antiquity—these days is rarely ever ventured within music theory itself, the construction of major differences in the rhythmic organization of African and Western music is gradually coming into view as being at the very core of ethnomusicology's will-to-difference.<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Agawu's sharpened sensibility as an African-born intellectual who has a major stake in both Western music and African musical scholarship, we now have a better sense of how analytical domains and thus realms of scholarly competence and representational power are always staked out on the basis of a priori dichotomies between self and other. And yet this keen

- 7 A reflection on music-theory's “othering” discourses has long been overdue. It is stunning to observe, for instance, how *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory* (2002), an authoritative and presumably also up-to-date overview of the field, manages to pass in silence over the massive importance of evolutionist thinking—and the attendant denigration of non-Western music—for the construction of Bach and the eighteenth-century canon in Forkel's *Allgemeine Geschichte der Musik*. On the redeeming side, the compendium does devote two full pages to F. J. Fétis' “essentialization of race in terms of pitch repertoires,” suggesting rather bravely that “the practice remains part of the genealogical heritage of tonality.” See Christensen 2002, 749.



eye for the estranging, exoticizing strand in ethnomusicological analyses of African rhythmic organization at the same time allows Agawu to look the other way when his home discipline's role in the colonial mirror-dance is being queried. That this is so can be demonstrated by a careful reading of the more hidden narrative thrust of Chapters 3 to 6, arguably the centerpieces of the book.

It all begins, rather innocuously, in Chapter 3, "The Invention of 'African' Rhythm." Here Agawu reviews some of the stereotyped images routinely filling the popular literature of sweating Africans dancing with utter abandon to the sound of incessantly pounding drums. That such images are racist at worst or plain wrong at best, is an idea that without any doubt warrants the occasional reminder. Whether, by the same token, it is also one whose determining influence on the representation of African music is "difficult to overestimate" (58), may be debatable. But is it also an idea that needs to be resisted wholesale as "an invention, a construction, a fiction, a myth, ultimately a lie?" (61). The answer to this question is about as rhetorical as the question itself. For Agawu's critique of the concept of "African rhythm" is guided by a set of political considerations—some more explicitly stated than others—rather than a concrete demonstration of rhythmic complexity in any given musical tradition. The first of these considerations proceeds from Agawu's professed anti-essentialist aim of rejecting any and all attempts to portray Africans as being essentially different. Accusing ethnomusicologists of needing to concoct an "occidentalism" of sorts in order to better support their "orientalist" claims about African rhythm, Agawu especially problematizes cross-cultural comparison and what he calls, paradoxically, Africanists' tendency to "retreat from comparison." This perplexing formulation needs to be elaborated. If I understand it correctly, Agawu's argument goes like this: the choice of a comparative frame in which to play off different degrees of rhythmic complexity in, say, Beethoven against those found in African music is always and already ideologically fraught. But in Agawu's eyes it is not therefore impossi-

ble, because the basis on which such comparisons are routinely being made (in this case to the detriment of Western music's alleged rhythmic simplicity) rarely makes provision for detailed analyses of the tradition thus denigrated as being rhythmically inferior. Were such comparisons ever taken to their logical conclusion, Agawu poignantly asks, might we not then with the same justification speak of something like "European rhythm?"

Having thus brilliantly deconstructed Western mythologies about Africans' innate rhythmic prowess, Agawu next proceeds to a more detailed look at several key features said to constitute "African rhythm," such as "time line," "poly-meter," "additive rhythm" and "cross rhythm." Occupying the better part of Chapter 4, this discussion serves as a useful reminder of the enormous complexity (and partial failure) of past ethnomusicological constructions of African music's temporal organization. (Even though, in my view, Agawu in the process underrates the important objections raised by Kubik against many of the myths decried and thus, at least in part and at the more "factual" level, appears to be barking up the wrong tree.) In terms of Agawu's broader narrative strategy, however, this deconstruction of "African rhythm" nudges his critique toward a full-blown assault on ethnomusicology's ideological premises by positing "European investment in an ideology of difference" (86) to be the true motive behind these constructions. In particular, what Agawu laments here are two failures. African musical scholarship, by ignoring the inextricable intertwining of dance pattern and rhythmic organization, failed to realize that African musical experience is always embodied experience. By refusing, then, to listen to their informants' "emic" interpretations—the very ethnotheories Agawu will later in the book castigate as one of ethnomusicology's key weapons in the "will to difference"—they have missed the boat. Furthermore, ethnomusicologists' tendency to pit an irreducibly "different" corpus of African musical traditions against a "European music, which is ostensibly unmarked, belonging on a sort of zero level of conceptualization" (95), leads to the "denial of nonunique-

ness to Africa” and prevents ethnomusicologists from acknowledging that “African music shares with European music (and indeed much other music) a conceptual space describable in terms of a hidden background and a manifest foreground” (79).

All of this deconstructing of myths in a sense comes full circle in a magisterial demonstration of what Agawu considers to be proper analysis in Chapter 6, “Popular Music Defended against Its Devotees.” Although the chapter is probably the least controversially argued and most fact-oriented chapter of all, in it Agawu nevertheless—and in between the notes, as it were—advances a number of theoretically highly pertinent suppositions. One of these suppositions pertains to the nature of the work of art and the creative subject. While on the surface Agawu’s findings appear as the natural outcome of the liberated structural analysis having at long last admitted into its a priori-free space African music’s “non-uniqueness,” in reality such findings are deeply tied in with the rather unique position of the composer in the Western bourgeois tradition. Briefly, Agawu’s argument goes as follows: up until the 1960s, African musical scholarship has been firmly in the grips of the “difference-producing machine” of ethnomusicology and has thus not taken full account of the continent’s emerging popular musics until the West itself was hit by its own crisis of representation in the wake of the massive wave of decolonization. At the same time, the neglect of Africa’s popular forms of musical expression was shared by its own colonial-bred intellectual elites whose ascendancy to power after 1960 in many ways depended on the successful assimilation of Western values and a hemming in of potentially insurgent impulses contained in popular modes of expression. If this situation has been redressed since the 1980s, in part at least, by the rise of a significant body of literature on South African, Congolese, Nigerian and Ghanaian popular musical styles, Agawu nevertheless seems to believe that something is not quite right about this new curiosity about popular music. What is missing is an attention to the “deep musical stratum

in popular music that constitutes its essence” (122). Bam! If this phrase sounds like it comes straight out of the jewel-box of music theory’s most cherished articles of belief—and, what is more, is defiantly backed up with the authority of Adorno’s insistence on a musical essence in Bach of all things—it nonetheless yields two intriguing, albeit not entirely trouble-free, results. First, from a purely technical point of view, the ensuing analyses of “205” and “You Call me Roko”—two tunes by Ghanaian highlife star E. T. Mensah—are among the best such analytic efforts I have come across in years, “essence” or no. Second, Agawu’s “self-indulgent” “listening into the interior of highlife,” even where it uncovers a lot of musical stock-formulas, restores to popular music makers a sort of creative dignity and aesthetic self-sufficiency which they have been denied in much of recent ethnomusicological writing. To give an example, Agawu finds an “intuitive rightness” in much of highlife formal structure, meaning that some of E. T. Mensah’s tunes betray a “long-term melodic thinking” and “larger trajectories of musical thought.” If this reads more like a description of a Brahms symphony or any work in the Western tradition exhibiting an infallible sense of (and indeed quasi Schenkerian) goal-directed melodic unfolding and thus, in a manner of speaking, ennobles from on high the creative work of Ghana’s highlife pioneer, so be it. What is more problematic, I believe, is how a proposition such as this (and others like it put forth elsewhere in Chapter 6) that fulfills the long-awaited potential of returning aesthetics to the forefront of many of our critical debates, including postcolonial ones, at the same time brings in through the back door many rather provincial and exhausted concepts, largely as a result of the unaccounted-for, top-down style of criticism adopted by Agawu. Such as the idea of the autonomous artistic subject: for what could be the meaning of a phrase such as the one I just quoted other than to suggest that in highlife just as in the Western ideology of autonomous art, composer and work are on intimate terms with each other? How can anyone seriously imply that a highlife song and a popular bandleader form an insoluble

unity, free of any technological mediation and intervention by (possibly foreign) producers, independent of (global) market forces and oblivious to any agency on the part of an (ethnically and socially diverse) audience?

The question, then, continues to haunt us: what does Agawu set against ethnomusicology's many limitations and blunders? Does he *provincialize* music theory with the same vigor as he *universalizes* African music? To what extent is music theory complicit in perpetuating Western hegemony in Africa simply by positing that "popular music never renounces its ontological specificity as an art of tone?" (149). Is it enough to relegate to a footnote and then dismiss without much further debate Gary Tomlinson's claim that "traditional musical analysis is one of the most aggressively universalizing discourses still in common use?" (238). After having (justly) denounced ethnomusicology's complicity with colonial and postcolonial power imbalances, music theory comes off as having an all-too clean vest. It is worthwhile to follow Agawu's argument more closely in this regard by unpacking some of the explicit and (more often than not) implicit assertions made about music theory's innocence in Chapter 8 on "How Not to Analyze African Music."

In this chapter Agawu relates his experience of submitting an analytical article to *Ethnomusicology*, the journal of the Society for Ethnomusicology. What emerged from the drawn out process of peer review, revision, and revision of revisions, according to Agawu, was a series of familiar positions he believes to be part of ethnomusicology's methodological and epistemological canon. Agawu, his reviewers charged, had neither cared to do fieldwork nor had he displayed any sensitivity to "native" categories—he had treated the pieces under consideration as forms of "absolute music." Agawu counters these criticisms one by one, but the main thrust of his counter-attack is devoted to "celebrating analytical research" and to drawing "attention to a handful of the many promising lines of inquiry while countering potential objections to analysis as such." Though I wonder which ethnomusicologists have in fact raised objections to analysis "as

such" (as opposed to having articulated a principled critique of its pitfalls and underlying epistemologies), it is useful to take a closer look at one of the authors thus celebrated. A. M. Jones, a British missionary-scholar working in the 1950s in Zambia and subsequently with an Ewe musician based in Britain, is the author of the two-volume *Studies in African Music* (1959), a work rich in analytical detail and copious transcriptions primarily of African drumming.<sup>8</sup> The book for many years served as a major frame of reference, both in a positive sense and as the target of criticism as scholars began to explore musical traditions in other parts of Africa. One of the criticisms advanced came from the pen of John Blacking, then a young ethnomusicologist working in South Africa. Blacking chided Jones, according to Agawu, for a number of points, only two of which I wish to examine here more closely.<sup>9</sup> First, said Blacking, Jones's information was unrepresentative, being based on the information provided by only one person, Desmond Tay. (Note that this critique corresponds with Agawu's point about ethnomusicology's alleged systemic propensity toward incompleteness.) Second, Jones's lengthy transcriptions divert the reader's attention from the music's "total pattern." Both of these criticisms pinpoint two of the central preoccupations of the new kind of ethnomusicology Blacking was himself instrumental in forging, namely the insistence on empirical fieldwork as the only method for generating knowledge of what African musicians actually do as opposed to knowledge of what they say they do or ought to be doing. The other preoccupation concerns the notion that the object of ethnomusicology is not, as Blacking liked to put it, music as a "product," but music as a "process." On this view, what Blacking's taking exception with the all-too detailed, score-like representation of a recording or Desmond Tay's playing really says, is that Jones's "monotonous detail" misses the point. Instead of showing, as Blacking himself had proposed in a foundational

8 Jones 1959.

9 Blacking 1960.

article on Venda ocarina duets, what African musicians and their audiences might be experiencing—a “total pattern,” say—Jones's transcriptions present a product, a frozen image.<sup>10</sup>

Agawu won't have any of this. Jones's work has “much to recommend it,” even though Agawu has the reader looking in vain for a more detailed appraisal of what the good reverend had in fact contributed beyond “certain penetrating insights” into “a number of basic features of African rhythm” (191). What readers will find, though, is an entirely different set of criteria which, I suspect, are much less the fruit of some line of inquiry into what “all” musicians supposedly think than of a number of decidedly “culture-bound” notions held dear by some academics. For instance, Agawu finds nothing wrong with focusing on only one individual, because aren't there in Africa, too, especially knowledgeable, talented, and hardworking musicians? Likewise, why not produce transcriptions of 52 pages or more, when “other” orchestral scores run into many times more this number (193)? Clearly, the end justifies the means here. Because it is Agawu's aim to further sameness, Africans cannot be denied the same criteria that Western culture (in its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century versions and then only elite sections of them) uses to allocate excellence: individual genius and a score.

Once again, it is a rhetorical figure that motivates Agawu's argument. Thus, should it occur to an ungenerous reader to dismiss Agawu's insistence on African musicians' individuality as elitism, he or she only needs to look at the “pronounced hierarchies that regulate life in many African societies” (193). It is not clear what Agawu is actually referring to here: principles of seniority, the subordination of Africa's masses to the rapacious appetites of the continent's predatory elites, or the supposedly more benign forms of power exercised by local chiefs acting as the prolonged arm of these regimes? Nor is there any discussion of how such hierarchies might impinge on music makers' value judgments. But either

way, Agawu's flirting with hierarchy is both skewed and dangerous. It establishes Africa's “sameness” with Western criteria of aesthetic judgment on the basis of cultural differences that are said to be non-existent, thus in the end effectively locking Africa into the very backward and “different” space that Agawu's “sameness” strategy seeks to rescue it from in the first place. For, clearly, Western-style contractual relationships between generations, liberal democracy, and many forms of regional and local self-governance *do* differ markedly from Agawu's “pronounced hierarchies,” whatever else one might think of them. (This argument is of course similar to another claim, also heard frequently, that Africans do not give two straws about democracy and social equality as long as there's enough to eat, as if the lack of food and the absence of democracy were not in fact intimately related.)

There is another assumption that underlies Agawu's altercation with Blacking, and like the previous objections its grounds are barely made explicit. By stripping the thus celebrated archetypical “analytical research” of (ethnomusicology's) a priori requirements, Agawu claims that it not only becomes a “livelier” mode of discourse (suggesting that ethnotheory, fieldwork, and so forth, are less “lively”?), it also becomes more empowering. Such “analytical research” enables Africa-based scholars to compete more favorably with their metropolitan colleagues precisely on account of it minimizing certain forms of cultural knowledge. If I understand Agawu correctly, the notion here seems to be that every analysis of an African composition of necessity “compromises the authenticity of the artistic object” and hence ought to be “strategically” brushed aside so that it may be replaced with supposedly less “culture-bound” preferences as enshrined in music theory. Leaving aside the fact that there are far more African ethnomusicologists hung up on “difference” competing (more or less successfully) with their metropolitan counterparts than there are, say, Africa-based music theorists—the notion of “authenticity” here remains just as unquestioned as Agawu's reference to (and acceptance of) Africa's “pronounced hierarchies.” It thus becomes an

10 Blacking 1959.

argument to beat music theory's critics over the head with, precisely because the implicitly made reverse assumption—that the Western works of art are not compromised by analysis—does not itself appear to be worthy of interrogation: the object's authenticity as a work of art always already remains fundamentally unassailable by the outside gaze of the theorist.

Moreover, the move also bears an uncanny resemblance with the very state of affairs it seeks to critique. For is not the assumption here that the fundamental flaw in the ethnomusicological production of knowledge—the fact that it is embedded in and reproductive of relations of inequality—will dissolve into thin air once the music theorist engages “in the act of taking apart” and that by simply getting “away from simple binary divisions of the world” and “strategically overlooking arguments” the truth shall emerge and shall set us free? How akin, at least at this level of abstraction, might all this be to the colonial project of making Africa knowable? Just replace the word “analysis” with “colonialism” and the parallels jump right at us.

#### DOING THE RIGHT THING

The last chapter of the book—not counting a brief “Epilogue”—is Chapter 9, “The Ethics of Representation.” It is the book's most ambitious chapter, for in it Agawu ponders what is probably the most central issue facing Africanist musicology: how to ground an ethical practice—of doing fieldwork, of writing and representing, of securing copyright protection for the musicians recorded—in light of the difficulties arising from the marked discontinuities between metropolitan liberal positions and African ethical worlds, and the obstacles to finding an overarching principle in which to anchor such a practice. A normative understanding of ethical conduct, Agawu seems to suggest, may not only prove to be impractical, but also raises more fundamental issues in its wake. Consider, for instance, ethnomusicologist Steven Feld's article on a Ba-Benzélé song and its pop and jazz-

inflected “borrowings” by Madonna and Herbie Hancock.<sup>11</sup> In this article, Feld not only examines radically different notions of ownership and subject positions articulated through the appropriation of artistic property across musical, legal and cultural boundaries, he does so without explicitly condemning what is plainly theft. Agawu wonders about the consequences of this ethical quietism: will it end up dissolving in broader, and presumably less meaningful and politically expedient, discussions such as about aesthetics? (220). Here we need to pause for a moment and reflect on this rejection of Feld's alleged eschewing of a firm ethical position in favor of a more formalist concern with aesthetics or, as Agawu puts, it a “theorization of mimesis.” And because Agawu indirectly ties this issue to aesthetics—and because I, too, consider the interface of aesthetics and ethics to be one of the key questions affecting the ways in which we write our ethnographies, listen to the music of “others,” and rethink and reshape communities, societies, and cultures across the globe—a discussion of the broader issues is in order.

The opposition Agawu sets up in this discussion of Feld's work between ethics and aesthetics might make sense when we confine, as Agawu appears to imply, the meaning of these two terms to a mutually exclusive set of normative rules regulating irreproachable, “politically correct” behavior, on the one hand, and a “blind,” apolitical belief in art's autonomy on the other hand. Of course, not only is neither definition self-evident, the ethics-aesthetics dichotomy comes as a bit of a surprise when read in conjunction with other statements made earlier in the chapter and again at the very end in the last paragraph that hint at the intertwining of ethics and aesthetics both in Africa and in the West. It is worthwhile to carefully untangle Agawu's partly overlapping and at times even contradictory lines of reasoning to become aware of the centrality of the issues involved for the project of outlining a new kind of African musical scholarship. Thus, Agawu begins with a discussion of how African performance practice

11 Feld 2000.

might amount to what he calls an “ethical performing attitude,” how in coming together in performance drummers, singers, and dancers “avow to a certain ethical stance” (206). According to Appiah, whom Agawu summarizes, such an ethical stance entails an emphasis on corporate rights as opposed to the rights of individuals.<sup>12</sup> It is based, unlike Western universalist thought, on a mode of thought whose ethical reach extends only as far as the next village. Furthermore, although this ethical stance is guided by religious beliefs, it is centered entirely on the here and now. And finally, ethical principles are often articulated through everyday practices and aesthetics, rather than being sequestered off into a distinctive realm of their own as in the West. Luckily, Agawu on the whole is only too cognizant of the fact that this image of a tightly knit community emerging and reaffirming itself in the performance of shared values is a fiction, glaringly illustrated by the relentless onslaught on “tradition” by what he calls “modern imperatives” (207). (Which does not, however, stop him from discerning “conflicting imperatives of tradition and modernity” in the adulterous behavior of a married lead drummer, as though African villagers had not been sleeping with their neighbor’s wives for millennia.) Still, Agawu asks, could there not reside in such tradition-based, performative ethics clues for scholarship? Or, differently put, might African aesthetic practice provide a model for reforming a global practice rife with discontinuities and inequities along different lines, where individuality is relinquished and truth does not depend on status? (209–10).

Ethnomusicological practice, alas, does not allow one to indulge in such utopian dreams. For as Agawu reminds us once again, fieldwork is inherently deceptive, ethnographic reports incorrigibly artificial and constructed. And to assume that it could be otherwise would be the ultimate inethical behavior. Even the most of self-reflexive accounts—Agawu here enters into a detailed discussion of Michelle Kisliuk’s *Seize the Dance*, an ethnography, or rather narrative, of her

involvement during fieldwork with BaAka communities in the Central African Republic—are essentially marred by the “irony” of always having to make choices about what information to include or what potentially embarrassing details to suppress, about being in the field and being “out.”<sup>13</sup> As an aside, if indeed it is an essential condition of ethnomusicology to “get out,” to turn experience into knowledge and subjects of discourse into objects of writing, one might reversely ask whether music theory is ever “in,” which is to say admitting of the theorist’s own rather regressive form of libidinal investment in his object of study. My instinct is that rather than always being “out” and having one’s shirts ironed, one learns more from being “in,” being hopelessly condemned to deceitfulness at times, and otherwise hoping for an approximation to truth somewhere down the line. Most importantly, though, the experience of fieldwork is also one for both researcher and informants to inhabit, enabling the latter to draw their own conclusions and in the process become subjects themselves.

But what, then, is the right way? Short of falling silent, the only alternative for Agawu (and here I need to quote in full the remainder of the chapter’s concluding paragraph) is to adopt what he calls an “ethical attitude”:

a disposition toward frameworks and styles of reasoning that finally seek—actively, rather than passively—to promote the common good. An ethical attitude cannot be defined in terms of praxis, as a set of prescriptions for social action. Concrete prescriptions risk betraying their own thorough imbrication in the intricacies of local context; they risk undercomplicating the historical, social, political, and ideological factors that must attend any worthwhile development of an ethical environment. To the extent that knowledge-producing subdisciplines remain aggregations of individuals rather than genuine communities, an ethical study of African music will continue to elude us. Perhaps, then, our best bet is simply to enjoin all actors to pursue, in as intense a fashion as they can manage, the said ethical attitude.

I have quoted this passage at length for two reasons. For one, it illustrates in rather striking terms the aporia inherent in

12 Appiah 1992.

13 Kisliuk 1998.

Agawu's project of de-essentializing African music while at the same time marshalling an African community-based ethics into universal service. But the passage also warrants a close reading because of the way in which aesthetics re-emerges and rejoins ethics in a different, distinctly global and postcolonial guise as "styles of reasoning." For to argue that a new ethical attitude should be based on a concern with style—rather than on the more conventional pursuit of truth tout court—entails the recognition of several facts. It suggests, at the very least, that different subject positions can enter into dialogue with each other in ways that do not presume the a priori existence of "genuine," closed communities à la village X, Y, or Z in, say, the Ghanaian countryside. It further means that knowledge and truth, even though they remain essentially indissoluble as the basis for any meaningful discourse on modernity, cease to be the product of a distanced strategy of "othering" and remain in a state of fluidity and negotiability as long as the lines of communication are kept open. But above all it seems to allow for a type of pluralistic scholarship and ethnographic writing that see themselves as forms of poetic practice—as the very kind of poetic practice, in other words, ethnomusicologists are increasingly embracing and which Agawu, all too quickly, dismisses as a sham. Voilà, this is how close music theory and ethnomusicology could really be, espousing or rejecting as they might, each in their own way, sameness and difference.

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