

**Notes on a Postcolonial Musicology: Kofi Agawu and the Critique of Cultural Difference [Agawu, Kofi. 2003. *Representing African Music: Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions*. New York and London: Routledge, 304 pp.]**

*Martin Scherzinger*

Kofi Agawu's new book *Representing African Music: Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions* stands in a consciously awkward relationship to traditional ethnographic writing on music. Ethnomusicological discourse is characterized by a carefully plotted regimen of priorities, which tends to conduct inquiry away from Western-style music analysis towards anthropological models. The strength of ethnomusicology is its sensitivity to cultural *differences* across the globe (demonstrated by the insistence on fieldwork, the methodological priority placed on musical 'contexts,' and so on). Thus, ethnomusicological premises serve as a persistent reminder of the limited historical and geographical scope of certain naturalized forms of thinking about Western music (primarily in the West). The concrete practice of ethnomusicology largely debunks the habituated Western notion of music's aesthetic autonomy no less than its analytic support system. And yet, to borrow a thought from J. M. Coetzee, the strength of ethnomusicology is practically definitional (much like saying the strength of the chess player is chess), which, for a variety of its own reasons, it tries to instill at the center of all inquiry into non-Western music. Non-anthropological thought about non-Western music, for example, is rarely published in the pages of most ethnomusicological journals.

It can be useful to define the ethnomusicological project in terms of a founding prohibition, thereby problematizing its aspiration to better access non-Western reality than alternative projects. This position is problematic on practical grounds; it ensures that the most efficient way for non-Western music studies to gain academic acknowledgement would be to join ethnomusicological ranks. As a result, work on African music driven by purely musical considerations or work driven by strategies to alleviate current political predicaments (instead of the customary epistemological commitment to describing remote contexts) is rare. Work driven by an *unpopular* cause is rarer still.<sup>1</sup>

*Representing African Music* is one of these rare and valuable interventions. Drawing on the work of various postcolonial writers, yet in a distinctive and unique voice, Agawu launches a devastating critique of Western scholarship on African music. At times frankly informative, at times darkly

ironic, and at times passionately earnest, *Representing African Music* reads like a resource text, satire, and manifesto all at once. The book's central themes range from mapping the general archive of knowledge about African music to advancing critical assessments of representations of African music and staking out viable options for future inquiry. Agawu's basic strategy is to describe the relationship between various conceptual figurations of African music and the tilted institutional terrain that supports them. The book's impressive grasp of the mechanics of power and domination across the globe today makes possible the trenchant critique of otherwise neutral-seeming representations of African music. Along the way, Agawu makes many daring statements and reaches a series of alarming conclusions.

Take the chapter "African Music as Text"; here Agawu unequivocally claims that "the idea that African music is functional in contrast to a contemplative European music is a myth" (104). This deceptively simple statement has devastating consequences: it undermines the very possibility of a certain brand of mainstream ethnomusicological discourse, which fundamentally regards music both *as* and *in* culture. Agawu links the incoherent belief in the myth of a functionalized Africa to an ideological desire to see Africa as "intrinsically different" (106). This kind of "anthropological ethos built on a search for difference" (simply put, "an epistemology of difference") is foundational for ethnomusicology (119,153): "Ethnomusicological knowledge may be defined as knowledge produced by scholars from the metropolis (Europe or America) about the musical practices of less-privileged others (in Africa, Asia, or Australia) often (but not always) on the basis of (brief) periods of so-called field work." By polemically redefining the field, Agawu demonstrates how ethnomusicological discourse is implicated in the knowledge venture of colonialism (155). His argument goes beyond critique, offering a host of solutions to the basic predicaments identified. Sometimes these solutions are technical correctives to widespread misconceptions about African music. Other times Agawu offers future-oriented solutions, which imagine *possible* African musical practices under more equitable material conditions than today.

Basic to Agawu's political imagination is an insistence on the presupposition of epistemological sameness on the terrain of musical culture. Only through sustained acknowledgement of our shared humanity can African subjects become genuine political agents in the drama of representation. "It is time," he argues, "to shun our precious Africanity in order to participate more centrally in the global conversation. It is time . . . [to] free it of dense layers of attributed difference. It is time to restore a notional sameness to our acts of representation" (171). The question is: can one afford—even in a political conjuncture desperately calling out for it—

to represent African music under the pure rubric of epistemological sameness instead of difference? Can one establish a hypothesis about the absolute value of a particular epistemological method? In so doing, does one try to work against the ruling hypothesis in one's writing, or does the rule triumph? Marked by their special forms of ignorance and knowledge, textualized accounts of African music necessarily recoil from and add to the complexity of the experiences they attempt to depict. Writing, it seems, is a surrogate and a substitute for the elusive transparency of participation in these experiences. How does one resist the irreducible limit of writing? Does a double perspective allow opportunities, or does it shut them down? This review essay concerns itself with the *value* and the *quality* of the insights afforded by Agawu's methodological commitment to sameness as it is elaborated in his *Representing African Music* and elsewhere. In particular, I attempt to stake out the far reaches—the limits, the contradictions, the flaws, the failures—of the claims made on behalf of this commitment. My counter-arguments are advanced to better illuminate the socio-musical ideals in Agawu's text with which these claims identify.

### **From the Politics of Difference to the Politics of Sameness**

This review will focus on those aspects of African music usually granted only secondary status in ethnomusicological accounts: namely, African *music* (its structures, details and procedures) as it intersects with politics. Herein lies the strength of Agawu's polemics. As a reputable music theorist, Agawu does not shy away from musical minutiae. On the contrary, he detects a host of broad cultural tropes and institutional biases within the textual fabric of existing analyses of African music. The problems Agawu identifies in much writing on African music are both structural and moral in nature, as representations of African music are intrinsically bound up in the economics of the institutions producing and sustaining them. Concomitantly, Agawu's own moments of structural listening are harnessed to an urgent political project aimed at dissolving institutionalized inequity on a global scale.

The target of my critique is *not* the value of Agawu's musico-political project. Rather, my critique emerges in direct relation to Agawu's aspirations; flaws and contradictions are located insofar as they undermine these aspirations. Let me introduce the issue by way of a general example. I have already mentioned Agawu's suggestion of the colonial attitude inherent in the promotion of the concept of difference in the analysis of African music vis-à-vis European music. This suggestion echoes a position forwarded over twenty years ago by Paulin J. Hountondji (1983) regarding how the conditioning ground for various disciplines in the humanities is falsely predicated on an *a priori* projection of cultural difference between the

West and the rest. It is this institutionalized will to difference that Agawu scrutinizes and ultimately debunks in favor of sameness.

The question is: should “sameness” become the overarching gauge for musical analysis? There are good reasons for it. In his chapter “The Invention of ‘African Rhythm,’” Agawu shows that African “rhythmic complexity” is fabricated within a discourse “defined by Euro-American traditions of ordering knowledge” and signals less a musical fact than a mark of difference (2003:58). This imagined phenomenon, producing a strange and exotic Africa necessarily separate from the West, resonates with imperialist discourse. Consequently, Agawu is less concerned here with the problem of “familiarizing” African music by imposing on it “Western” categories of communication than he is with the problematic desire to persistently *defamiliarize* it or with the *refusal* to bring African music into the realm of Western discourse and its “distinguished intellectual history and undeniable institutional power.” By encouraging the “hunt for sameness rather than difference” in our approaches to African music, Agawu implies that we may indeed bring traditional European conceptual tools to bear on African music instead of insisting on an *a priori* incompatibility between traditions (64). Instead of dismissing the use of these conceptual tools as an inherently Eurocentric imposition on African music, this view recognizes their potential political benefits in a postcolonial context. At the least, the use of these tools would resist a certain *a prioristic* production of cultural difference across these respective terrains of musical culture.

It is the political implications of Agawu’s revision to which I will turn shortly. Before doing so, however, I would like to briefly explore the cultural context of musicological practice in the north Atlantic and interrogate some of its recent preoccupations in light of various African political predicaments. In particular, I will focus on the concept-metaphor of *invention*, a category drawn from cultural studies upon which much of Agawu’s argument hinges.

### **Musical Thinking After the Paradigm of ‘Invention’**

The late modern awareness of the contestable nature of previously accepted axioms such as tradition or culture—along with their supporting concepts involving notions of nation, gender, race, sexuality, the purely musical, and so on—seems to have produced a widespread, anti-essentialist intellectual paradigm in recent years. It is as if the invention of culture has become what Ruth Solie might call a “key to all mythologies,” a cultural invention all its own. Witness the titles of book releases in the 1990s, which include everything from the invention of sodomy, race and heterosexuality to the invention of communication, tribalism, society, capitalism, and the West itself.<sup>2</sup> The insight afforded by the idea that all those things that

seem important in life are really fictions or “social constructions” risks becoming as blinding as it is binding. Besides the point that calling everything a social construction entails a notion of the “social” as an essence—that the “social” itself is treated as a fact instead of as a negotiable determinant—it is increasingly difficult to envisage forms of resistance and contestation without some kind of provisional essentialism. That is, if nothing can exceed invention because invention applies “all the way down” (with deference to Susan McClary [2000]), then the manipulation of signs and conventions making up the traditions by which we live (in spite of our inventive insight) may be increasingly left in the hands of those who insist on tradition as an authentic (not invented) experience.

If Agawu’s text opens a door to strategies that transcend the critical impulse driven by the logic of “invention,” what is gained and lost via these strategies? Let me begin by commenting on what is gained by one such strategy, namely the implicit call for employing Western analytic methods for studying African music. By insisting that the use of Western notation for African music is institutionally empowering or by encouraging the use of theoretical frameworks that can capture both Western and African music, Agawu draws attention to the problem of power/knowledge in the constitution of disciplinary divisions. While scholars are beginning to regard the anthropological study of Western music seriously, the concomitant aesthetically-oriented formalist study of African music is not considered as a progressive option—at least, not yet. Meanwhile, immanent formalist accounts of Western music have hardly disappeared because *some* musicologists are suspicious of their superstructural ideological significance, leaving the disciplinary terrain structurally lopsided once more. Agawu’s contribution is empowering because it creates a space for an African music that no longer rests on “*a priori* presumptions of *difference*” (Qureshi 1995) that stood in the way of many Western accounts of African music up to now.

The role music theory might play in the future prosperity of African music has been increasingly noted by other African scholars as well (often inspired by Agawu’s example). Akin Euba, Willie Anku, Zabana Kongo, and others have recently called for an approach to African music studies in which the musical material implies the methods and not vice versa. At a recent symposium, “Revitalizing African Music Studies in Higher Education” (2000), Kwabena Nketia called for an expansion of analytic tools that would confront the music directly, while Kongo endorsed the formal study of transcriptions of African music. Sometimes this general view is coupled with a critique of ethnomusicology. In the words of Euba,

The current philosophy of ethnomusicology stresses music as

culture, music in culture, music in society and other issues surrounding music rather than music itself. The theory of music (which is the core element of music-making) receives little or no attention from ethnomusicologists. I would even venture to say that, judging from the current attitudes of ethnomusicologists, the theory of music is at variance with the philosophy of ethnomusicology. A field of study that avoids the central core of music making (i.e. creativity) is of no use to Africans. (2000:2)

Euba is illuminating a general institutional problem. Broadly speaking, the study of African music encourages exclusively anthropological approaches while the study of Western music is multifaceted. Euba writes, "I find it baffling that anthropological dissertations that have little or no musical content continue to be presented at departments of music. This is a position that is unsuitable for Africa" (2). It should be clear from these remarks that the new musicological figuration of the "purely musical" as an ideological invention is also unsuitable for Africa. In fact, such a "critique" of ideology has the potential to become still more virulently ideological because it blocks African music's access to a certain elite discourse.

### **The Problem of "Functional Versus Contemplative" Music**

I turn now to a more detailed examination of Agawu's interrogation of the opposition between "functional versus contemplative." Noting how African music "is not normally described as contemplative art" (but as "functional" instead), and how European music, in contrast, is "unburdened of attachment to external function," Agawu menaces the opposition from both ends (98). First, he identifies and describes the *contemplative* aspects of African music. Agawu addresses both various contemplative genres (such as Gbaya and Ewe music), and the contemplative mechanisms at play in songs (such as popular lullabies and dirges) normally considered purely functional. Second, Agawu identifies and describes the *functional* aspects of European music. Using examples such as classical operas and twentieth-century compositions, Agawu demonstrates that the external functions, no less than the inner functional workings of music, are often considered purely contemplative. Finally, Agawu challenges the views of writers that seek to uphold the form/function distinction across the continental divide.

Among these writers is John Miller Chernoff, who in the early 1980s asserted that a performance of African music "cannot be judged by . . . an abstracted formal model of 'musical' properties or structures as defined by the Western tradition" (1981:30). Given the startling formal qualities of the Ghanaian drumming that was the object of Chernoff's study, his con-

clusion, based entirely on his belief that Africans reject “analytical” modes of thought, is inadequately prepared. It is as odd to claim that Western music is structured on some abstract model as it is to claim that African music has no underlying structural patterns at all. Any examination that wants to find differences between African and Western music is obliged to engage the question of form differently—to establish the points of affinity and difference within a continuum of abstract structures and contextual functional factors—if it is to avoid merely replicating the disciplinary split sustained by the form/function binary in the West. Paradoxically, Chernoff even extends the reach of “functional integration” to the very “form” of African music: “There are so many ways to recognize and describe what scholars call the ‘functional integration’ of music and culture in Africa that this integration can be considered a formal and general musical characteristic in its own right” (1981:33). Without denying that the communal dimension of African music is essential (no less than in the West, however differently organized in its details), this is a case of the “social” being reified into an irreducible essence.

We should not trivialize the prevalence of such false binaries. For example, John Bailey (1985) has argued that the perceptual focus on musical structure is an exclusively Western idea that cannot be readily applied to non-Western music. Using the *kalimba* music of southern Africa as an example, Bailey identifies the physical patterns of fingering (instead of the sounding forms) as central to the organization of the music. His emphasis on the kinesthetic dimensions of African *kalimba* music above the formal-perceptual ones resonates with the words of Gerhard Kubik, who asserts that whereas “in Western music the movements of a musician playing his instrument generally have meanings only in terms of the sonic result, in African music patterns of music are in themselves a source of pleasure, regardless of whether they come to life in sound in their entirety, partly, or not at all” (quoted in Bailey 1985:241).

But does this distinction successfully divide musical-cultural continents? As Suzanne Cusick (1994) and Andrew Mead (1999) have argued, “kinaesthetic empathy”—in which listeners identify with a sound as an embodiment of physical work done—is a central factor in the experience of Western music. In addition to examples that bring the mode of production of sound into explicit formal play (like the backstage oboes or horns in symphonies by Berlioz or Mahler), even the music of one of the West’s ostensibly most formalistically-minded composers, Anton Webern, is saturated with extreme expressive directions, *ponticelli*, harmonics, rhythmic complexities, difficult bowings, sudden dynamic changes, and angular voice-leading that cannot but invoke a kinesthetic hearing and sometimes even obscure the formal mirrorings and symmetries that generate the pitch-

structure. Formal considerations are not necessarily antithetical to kinaesthetic ones. Mead demonstrates, for example, how the physical hand-crossings in the second movement of Webern's *Variations for Piano*, op. 27, play a structural role in articulating the principal motivic returns (1999:13).

Mead's example, taken from the heart of Western music, serves as well as any African example to illustrate Bailey's idea that physical considerations and not simply sounding forms matter equally to the organization of music. As Mead notes,

Music, in large part, is indeed something we do . . . That the mind can be ravished by the patterns we perceive in sounds I would never deny. But how we perceive those sounds, and how we make those sounds, cannot help but carry part of the message . . . The study of music has its own rewards, but it is good to remind oneself occasionally that music's path to the mind is inevitably through the body. (1999:15)

It is in equal measure odd to suggest that the kinesthetic dimension of an African piece of music can be figured apart from *any* formal organization. Consider the example of a simple *kushaura* ("leading part" in Shona *mbira dza vadzimu* music) from Tute Chigamba's repertoire (ex. 1). Notice how the anomalous absence of a bass note on the eighth pulse in mm. 3 and 4 coincides with the doubling of D in the right hand. If kinesthetic considerations were logically prior, we would not expect the doubling in the right hand, but we would expect the left hand to play some note or other on those silent pulses; the lower note D, however, cannot be found on either of the two left-hand manuals of the *mbira*. In order to maintain the integrity of the harmonic motion (indicated in dyads) and the registral integrity of the bass line, it is played by the right hand instead. (I should note here that the experience of irregularity in executing this passage is minimal.) In effect, then, a physical fingering pattern is broken to accommodate a formal consideration of the music.

The general idea that kinesthetic—and not formal—considerations are at the forefront in African music while formal—and not kinesthetic—ones prevail in Western music strikes me as false. Indeed, *mbira* performers frequently report a sense of complete disorientation when they perform pieces on instruments with a different tuning layout (Berliner 1971:70–71). This would be unlikely if fingering patterns were as primary as Bailey suggests. Shorthand cultural oppositions of this sort cannot be sustained in the face of rigorous comparative work. By rejecting the "solipsism of noncomparison that has become a permanent temptation for ethnomusicology," Agawu authorizes the kind of comparative rethinking

**Example 1:** *Kushaura* of *Ngozi Yemuroora* by Tute Chigamba, transcription by Martin Scherzinger.



that debunks an array of seemingly obvious commonplaces about African music (2003:xiii).

### The Problem of Inventing “African Rhythm”

The ethnomusicological commitment to anthropological tenets, as well as its reification of the “functional” (at the expense of the “purely musical”), haunts the texts of even its most passionately progressive practitioners. Citing writers from the eleventh to the twentieth century, Agawu argues that all claim that the outstanding feature of African music is its rhythmic complexity. Writing in 1927, for example, William E. F. Ward wrote that, “Africans have not merely cultivated their sense of rhythm far beyond ours, but must have started with a superior sense of rhythm” (quoted in Agawu 2003:56–57). Agawu reads this kind of figuration not as praise but as a “racialist conferral of particular sensibilities on particular groups of people” (55). Contradictory as it may seem, Agawu then shows that some African writers (Kwabena Nketia, Francis Bebey, Philip Gbeho) are also party to this particular construction of African music: “Rhythmic interest [in African music],” says Nketia, “often compensates for the absence of melody or the lack of melodic sophistication” (quoted in Agawu 2003:58). From Nketia’s statement, Agawu concludes that the reproduction of this truism is not a simple Western misrepresentation of Africa but rather a view that emanates from “an intellectual space defined by Euro-American traditions of ordering knowledge.” Within this field of discourse “African rhythm . . . is always already complex” (58).

In his ensuing argument, Agawu harnesses writers who reject such a view of African music in order to indicate the errors implicit in upholding it. He identifies three problematic areas: the problem of unanimism, the retreat from comparison, and the retreat from critical evaluation. Regarding unanimism, Agawu invokes David Rycroft’s criticism of Chernoff for generalizing his claims about African rhythm and sensibility by citing musical practice in different parts of the continent. In agreement with Rycroft on this point, Agawu claims that the unanimist impulse signals an “ongoing resistance to knowing about Africa” and claims that without such an

“all-purpose ‘Africa’” the “practitioners [of the discourse of the West would be] deprive[d] . . . of one of their most cherished sources of fantasy and imaginative play” (59–60). Given the flagrant reproduction of the “metonymic fallacy” in any unanimist construction of Africa, however, Agawu also takes this error to be more rhetorical than real (60).

For Agawu, the retreat from comparison is more serious. Although the designation of a rhythmically complex African music implies comparison with rhythmically simpler music, the second term in this comparison (the Euro-American side) is frequently suppressed. For Agawu, an *explicit* comparison may produce “a picture [of Western music] of far greater complexity than anything that Africans have produced” and thus the possibility of undoing the binary altogether (61). Silencing one side of the implied comparison, in contrast, “ensur[es] that writers’ initial prejudices reemerge as their conclusions” (60). It is as if the very narrative structure already secures a rhythmically complex African music. Related to this is the retreat from critical evaluation whereby the scholar hyperbolically dignifies every kind of musical performance in the name of equality and fairness. This practice, Agawu argues, is the very mystification that deprives African music of the critical element that would give it “scientific and hence universal status” (61). Implicit in Agawu’s view, then, is a call for both comparison and criticism.

Agawu outlines three instances of how “African rhythm” has been invented in various accounts. He begins by pointing out that in most African languages, there is no word for rhythm, which in itself should disconcert “those for whom ‘African music’ and ‘African rhythm’ have always seemed synonymous.” More importantly, however, Agawu argues that this absence does not mean a lack of related concepts in African discourse, only that these concepts have an intricate and unique configuration. For example, “Ewe conceptions of rhythm often imply a binding together of different dimensional processes, a joining rather than a separating, an across-the-dimensions rather than a within-the-dimensions phenomenon.” By ignoring these dimensions of discourse, Agawu argues, ethnographers like A. M. Jones (1959) present as a conclusion their own initial bias about the complexity of African rhythm. Once again, Agawu suggests that the problem may be averted if, instead of building their studies “on the founding premise of difference,” ethnomusicologists reorient their work to the task of discovering sameness (2003:64).

In the section “African Rhythm as Invented by Africans: Ethical Theory or Epistemic Violence?”, Agawu recapitulates an argument made in an earlier article, “Representing African Music” (1992). This is not, as the chapter title suggests, a case of African writers inventing rhythm, but of non-Africans attributing this invention to Africans. When Jeff Pressing

claims that “in Ewe terms” a  $\frac{12}{8}$  conception underlies *Agbadza Kpokpa*, he is appealing to a kind of native authority. Even though the Ewe have no terms for meter or time signature, Pressing’s “foregrounding of native voices” gives the impression that the writer is “engaged in dialogue,” (quoted in Agawu 2003:68). For Agawu, this kind of dialogue is unavoidably an illusion—even in those cases where native informants give explicit African language equivalents for European words—because the histories of these words are often influenced by colonial and missionary discourse and thus of reduced explanatory value. Instead of succumbing to the dialogic impulse, Agawu prefers to keep the focus resolutely political:

Moreover, who orchestrates the dialogue, who owns or signs the text, and who gets paid for it are troubling questions that may not be facilely consigned to the margins of our theorizing, especially when such theorizing results in confident claims about our knowledge of other (living) human beings.

In effect, this reveals the nature of such a text as less of a dialogue than a monologue. For Agawu, unless it culminates in “concrete political action,” a monologue parading as a dialogue results in “a particularly virulent form of political violence” (69). Agawu asserts that any attempt to come to grips with the problems attending the representation of African music must engage these explicitly political questions. Ideally, this work should aim for the “direct empowerment of postcolonial African subjects so that they can eventually represent themselves” (70).

There are reasons to be wary of the predominant focus on rhythmic complexity in studies of African music. Take the popular press. In an article entitled “The Rhythm Century: The Unstoppable Beat,” *New York Times* reporter Jon Pareles casually asserts, “Rhythm is at once primal—as simple as a handclap or a heartbeat—and mysterious in its complexities.” This fantasy takes a political turn when Pareles demonstrates how the “rise of rhythm . . . shows the receding influence of European culture in a global mix, as the Western emphasis on melody and harmony gives way to the beat. Africa, where rhythm rules, has paid back its conquerors and slave traders by colonizing the world’s music” (1998:1). He then elaborates this theory by asserting, “Rhythm is social. . . . It is also, by the same token, tribal; rhythms . . . can be geographical locators, assigning a piece of music to a specific culture and country of origin” (2). Pareles concocts an Africa whose music is irreducibly rhythmic and irreducibly social.

One problem with Pareles’s ideas about African music is that they contradict what various prominent African musicians believe about rhythm. As one Ghanaian-born drummer explains,

I want people to know that the music we're playing is not a music that any Ghanaian or any African can just sit down and play. He's got to learn it, too. See, American audiences are a little funny about me playing African music with white people in the band. But you can get a white person who is more rhythmic than an African. When I first came here, I didn't know that, because I had been brainwashed. . . . (quoted in Darroch 1989:4)

Another problem is that Pareles's fantasies march disconcertingly in step with some anthropological truisms. In contrast, Agawu's recommendations open into the "purely theoretical" labor of challenging the binaries that separate musical parameters into ready-made worlds. Agawu's text also encourages supplementing "rhythmically" oriented studies of African music with technical inquiries into areas outside of rhythmic complexity. Such tactical analysis may have the important political consequence of contributing to a differently focused history of relations between Africa and the West.

The close study of African music may well contribute to questioning the historical and formal opposition between rhythm and harmony. Indeed, some Western theoretical work has explored such undoing on precisely African musical terrain. For example, Benjamin Boretz advances African drumming as an instance of "pure rhythm." He writes,

the contents of a recording of African drums in concert qualifies as not only a classic, but an obvious test: what but 'pure rhythm' is there to respond to? For [an] answer, try a transcription for clavichord, or one for chicken feathers scratching glass: does the response to pure rhythm now seem separable from the responses to drum timbres, pitches, polyphonies of these, or even perhaps extramusical predispositions . . . ? (1971:150-51)

Boretz then demonstrates how musical rhythm, of whatever cultural affiliation, depends on a specific interaction with the other functioning strata of musical activity as a whole. In effect, rhythm is both nothing in itself and also "every dimensional and inter-dimensional substructure" or the whole "musical world" of any piece under investigation (154-55). In short, Western rhythm, as construed here, begins to resemble Agawu's "across-the-dimensions" construal of African rhythm. Perhaps the theoretical work of eroding shorthand musical parameters in this way has a political role to play in rendering the concomitant marking of ethnicity impossible.

### Toward an Africanist Musicology

Theodor Adorno warns that “disaster” ensues as soon as “desiderata are elevated to the level of norms and are dispensed from th[e] confrontation” with the concrete form of music to which they are applied (1973:69). This warning is pertinent not because it endorses some kind of inquiry free of desiderata, but because it reins in the desiderata by allowing musical particulars to impose themselves on their generalities. It is clear that Agawu’s insistence on resisting commonplace generalities about African music answers Adorno’s warning. But do Agawu’s music-theoretical persuasions betray an unquestioning allegiance to one form of resistance to the exclusion of another? What is the cost of his strategic essentialism?

Agawu does not identify which kinds of comparison between African and Western music are “appropriate” and which are not. This would not matter much if his argument did not betray hidden criteria for arbitrating just this issue. For instance, he deems “problematic” Chernoff’s choice of the Beethoven Sonatina in G Major as a point of comparison with African examples. While it may be true that the work of Brahms, Bartók, Carter, Reich, and Stravinsky compare more “appropriately” to African music, I cannot see how this can allay the problem of designating African music as rhythmically complex. Indeed, Agawu asserts that Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* “exten[ds] . . . conventions of metrical articulation,” and Reich’s *Music for Pieces of Wood* is an “undisguised appropriation of the identifying rhythm of a Southern Ewe dance” (2003:61). Is the appropriateness of these examples supposed to be self-evident? For the examples that Agawu implicitly recommends for comparison, on the one hand, embody a conception of rhythm that *extends* ordinary Western usage, and, on the other, merely elaborate another rendition of an African rhythm. Arguably, the European side of these instances of comparison has also somewhat retreated in these examples.

In face of this “retreat from critical evaluation,” Agawu calls for scholarly discrimination and value judgment (61–62). Instead of the “pious dignifying of all performances [including ones that are out of tune or whose performers are deceptive, inattentive or drunk] as if they were equally good,” Agawu recommends a “critical element” for African musicology in order to give it “scientific and hence universal status” (61). It is not surprising that Agawu raises this problem last in his presentation and rhetorically aligns it more with the previous error (the retreat from comparison) than with the invention of African rhythm; he offers no reasons for such dignifying to be “contained in” the characterizations that invent African rhythm (60). The logic is associative. And yet, it is not easy to make the desired associations, for if the inventors dignify anything it is the complexity of rhythm. While the importance of the critique *in itself* is not in dispute, it is

ironic that Agawu's account of northern Ewe culture in his earlier book *African Rhythm* is "fictional" and includes every conceivable rhythmic moment in the Ewe "soundscape," from the rhythms of sleeping and sexual intercourse to those of distant drumming and the chewing of sticks (1995b:8–9). In the apparent effort to "demystify" Africa in *African Rhythm*, to "return our view of [Ewe] musical practices to a 'normal' sphere" and thus to render "those rhythmic procedures . . . of *everyday musical life*," Agawu loses sight of his own "critical searchlights" (195). Hence, according to Agawu's criteria, his *African Rhythm* becomes less the "universal" and "scientific" African musicology the author recommends than a highly particular, albeit intriguing, "fiction."

Moreover, it is not altogether obvious why an aesthetic evaluation (discriminating "good" performance from "bad") issues forth a "scientific and hence universal status" for African music. While classical judgments of taste for European philosophers like David Hume and Immanuel Kant involved an objective dimension, the aesthetic experience was essentially subjective, involving the faculty of imagination instead of reason. In what account then does a value judgment become science? Even if such an account can be found, Agawu discusses a clear case of value judgment elsewhere in exactly the opposite terms. Take the case of Agawu's 1992 essay, "Representing African Music." Agawu illustrates how a nineteenth-century explorer's characterization of African music as "discordant," "barbarous," and "vile" holds an "advantage" over "professional ethnomusicological discourse" (quoted in Agawu 1992:249). This advantage is not the result of the scientific status of the judgment—as one might expect from reading his new book—but precisely the result of the way "the prejudices of [the European explorer's] own musical culture are made clear, his personal constraints situated" (249). Hence, in "Representing African Music," Agawu advances the aesthetic judgment as an accurate measure of prejudice and personal constraint, while in his new book, as in his article "The Invention of 'African Rhythm'" (1995a) he uses it as a measure of science and universality.

I do not disavow the connections between the status of music's perceived "universality" and the assignation of value (particularly of the institutionalized sort), but Agawu's logically impossible formulation of the problem fails to create the opportunity for an authentic transformation of these practices. Part of the problem may be that Agawu relies on arguments made by other writers for different purposes. The question of African music's "universal status," for instance, seems to echo Paulin J. Hountondji's call for an African philosophical literature of "universal value" at the end of his chapter "African Philosophy, Myth and Reality" in *African Philosophy* (Hountondji 1983:70). In his 1995 article, with reference to the issue of

“scientific and hence universal status,” Agawu footnotes this work of Hountondji as “a discussion of an analogous point” (Agawu 1995a:387). But is it analogous? First, Hountondji’s construal of “universality” in this context has little to do with “science.” Indeed, his universality is less a “status” than a “value” that arises out of “free and rigorous discussion among African philosophers” and amounts to “enrich[ing] the common international heritage of human thought” (1983:69–70). Universality here implies no more than an African access to philosophical debate of the Western kind and a suspicion of ethnophilosophy. Second, Hountondji explicitly *unhinges* the dimension of value from the category “African philosophy” by rendering it wholly empirical: “we are merely recognizing the existence of that literature as *philosophical literature*, whatever may be its *value* and *credibility*. What we are acknowledging is what it *is*, not what it says” [emphasis Hountondji’s]. Thus, while he may be less pious than Agawu’s culprits of invention, Hountondji recognizes all African philosophical expressions (whether inattentive, deceptive or not) without reference to how “good” they might be. For Agawu’s “analogous” case of African musicology, the opposite holds.

These theoretical difficulties arise because Agawu omits the crux of Hountondji’s argument. Hountondji examines how the term “philosophy” changes its meaning when it is applied to different continents. While “European philosophy” implies a specific discipline characterized by a set of critical tools, and so on, the conjunction “African philosophy” refers to a shared system of thought, to “a collective world-view, an implicit, spontaneous, perhaps even unconscious system of beliefs to which all Africans are supposed to adhere” (1983:61). Hountondji then advances a new and simple concept of African philosophy: “African philosophy . . . [is] a literature produced by Africans and dealing with philosophical problems” (63). Thus the single and obvious criterion for the definition of African philosophy is “the origin of the authors rather than an alleged specificity of content” (64). Research conducted by Africans on Western philosophy is therefore African philosophy, while research conducted by non-Africans on African philosophy, culture, or thought is not. Projecting this account onto musicology, Chernoff’s work on Dagomba drumming is Western musicology, while Agawu’s work on Mozart is African.

This is one reason several African scholars (such as Kwabena Nketia, Jean Kidula, Akin Euba, and Meki Nzewi) favor the term “African” or “Africanist” musicology instead of “ethnomusicology.” Resisting “the label ‘ethno-’,” for example, Nzewi describes the ideal study of African music as “Africanist” musicology, “not because it has a fundamentally different science of music, but because its logic . . . of basic musicness is authentically unique” (2000). For Nketia, “African musicology” is the ideal term for Af-

frican music studies (although he recognizes that ethnomusicology provides a strategic institutional entrance into the discipline for African scholars). Euba's position is critical: "Ethnomusicology is irrelevant to African culture. What is relevant to African culture is African musicology. . . . Let us not force African music scholarship into the field of ethnomusicology, which is really designed to promote Western perceptions of non-Western music" (3). What these scholars are observing is that ethnomusicological premises are not necessarily suited to African needs, and concomitantly, that scholarship by Africans fits awkwardly into the ethnomusicological paradigm. Thus, Hountondji's origins-based approach to the definitions of philosophy may provide a helpful alternative in the domain of musicology.

Still, Hountondji's view is difficult to accommodate in Agawu's account. Not only are the African scholars Nketia, Bebey, and Gbeho presented as equally culpable of inventing African rhythmic complexity, but Agawu's methodological focus seems to be on structural and discursive dimensions rather than on the identity or the origins of the authors concerned. He claims the "'always already' complex" notion of African rhythm "has been promulgated by both Western and African scholars" and thus orients his critique towards "an intellectual space defined by Euro-American traditions of ordering knowledge" [emphasis Agawu's] (2003:58). It is perhaps symptomatic that in "Representing African Music," Agawu portrays Nketia, "normalizing [not inventing] the exotic," with the implication that his work remains African no matter how "Western" his "theoretical framework" strikes Jones or others (Agawu 1992:260-61). This paradoxical situation is organic to an argument that wants to have its cake of the Hountondjian concept of authorial origins *and* eat it with a discourse-theoretical account!

These antagonistic positions can, in fact, be reconciled, but not without careful elaboration. It will not do, for instance, to overemphasize the scope and authority of the Western disciplinary apparatus; there is an irreducible *mixing* of "Western" and "African" properties in all Euro-American accounts of African material, and such accounts necessarily brush up against some form of African reality. While the American Paul Berliner's *Soul of Mbir* is *Western* musicology, its contribution to African music may be politically and epistemologically significant, just as the African philosophy of the Ghanaian J. E. Wiredu may be a significant contribution to Kant studies (Hountondji 1983). As argued above, figuring "African musicology" simply as research done by Africans, we free such musicology from rendering collective African belief systems. But this simple empirical observation can be made without forgetting that Western musicology may have more to contribute to African music than reactionary navel-gazing, just as African musicology may well replicate the mythological view of an African world.

With Hountondji's origins-based distinction in place, it is thus still possible to assess various kinds of musicological contributions, African or otherwise, in terms of their discursive-structural alliances. But it is crucial to keep these layers of inquiry distinct and (beyond the simple empirical claim) to keep the poles of the African/non-African opposition multi-capillared and imbricated, if we are to avoid what Hountondji describes as "upholding the peculiarities of a so-called African 'world-view'" (69). After all, for Hountondji, "Universality becomes accessible only when interlocutors are set free from the need to assert themselves in the face of others" (68). To this extent, Hountondji's argument is deconstructive: only by limiting "African musicology" to a bluntly empirical definition, instead of a metaphysical one, do we free the conditions for a terrain of knowledge that disengages from the Africa/non-Africa binary and can thus have, in a manner of speaking, universal value.

### **On the Politics of Analytic Method**

I turn now to Agawu's critique of ethnomusicological accounts of African rhythm (and its relation to theories of rhythm and meter in the West) and assess its usefulness in an African context. Agawu dramatizes the lack of an indigenous African term for rhythm to heighten the tension between African musical reality and the ethnomusicological fabrication of rhythm's primacy in African music. He argues that this "lexical gap" betrays a uniquely Ewe "semantic field of rhythm [that] is not a single, unified, or coherent field, but rather one that is widely and asymmetrically distributed, permanently entangled . . . with other dimensions that discourse about Western music has balkanized into separate domains" (2003:63). The lexical gap is pertinently confusing to the case of inventing African rhythm because it must disconcert any project that aims to analyze African music in theoretical terms that are not (ostensibly) native. What is needed is a distinction between terms and methods within musicological discourse that does not reify the imagined politico-cultural border between Africa and the West. How else is it possible, to "bring [African] music into a sphere that is enabled by a distinguished intellectual history and undeniable institutional power," instead of "imprison[ing] it . . . in an ostensibly 'African' field of discourse?" (67). Agawu's argument is powerful, but it does not tell us when or how a method counts as enabling instead of imprisoning.

Reckoning with the ethical implications of different analytic methods involves more than the epistemological status of their results. Take the problem of the "lexical gap" (62). While the different African language dictionaries Agawu consulted may not have had an entry for the word "rhythm," it is also unlikely that those books would have had equivalents for concepts like "deep structure," "melodic archetype," "metrical struc-

ture,” “topos,” “generative process,” and so on. Yet these are central analytic concepts in Agawu’s *African Rhythm* no less than *Representing African Music*. What kind of politics encourages the music analyst *not* to draw on the theoretical tools she has at hand on the grounds that we have no corresponding dictionary entry as evidence that those who perform it, or listen to it, think in terms of these tools? After all, had Schoenberg heard of set theory, or Beethoven of the *Uralnie*? And would a contemporaneous dictionary have informed us either way?

Let me turn now to a particular case of inventing African rhythm. Agawu’s demonstration of how Jones does so by his methods of transcription is worth quoting in full:

A cursory glance at the second volume of *Studies in African Music* confirms the complexity of African rhythmic systems. A sometimes rapid succession of meters, staggered bar lines tracing crooked paths from the top to the bottom of the texture, and unusual groupings of notes together with other features make it difficult to find the conductor’s beat that would unlock the secrets of African drum ensemble playing. Jones, in fact, believed in noncoincident main beats. The graphic severity and unwieldiness of his transcriptions would seem to confirm the essential difference, the otherness, perhaps even the exoticism of African music. (2003:66–67)

What happens when we cast more than a cursory glance at Jones’s *Studies*? How unwieldy are his transcriptions? In *African Rhythm*, Agawu provides alternatives to Jones’s problematic transcriptions that reveals the stakes. Agawu’s first example, the children’s play song, “Devi mase nua” (ex. 2), illustrates that Jones combines duple with triple with compound time while Agawu notates the passage only in compound time. In agreement with Simha Arom and others, Agawu posits a divisive metric process where the two layers of rhythmic activity “are formed into a hierarchy in which 2 serves as a primary function while 3 serves as an auxiliary but indispensable function” (1995b:189). Agawu explains that the body swings here, “equivalent to hand claps elsewhere, are felt in twos, which is not to deny the many triple *effects* that challenge and ultimately reinforce the basic duple feeling,” and concludes that “Jones’s  $\frac{3}{4}$ – $\frac{3}{4}$ – $\frac{6}{8}$ – $\frac{3}{4}$  succession is . . . wrong” [emphasis Agawu’s] (189).

The first, most trivial, response to this re-transcription is that it seems like a rather small change. While Jones’s coupling of meters is more complicated than Agawu’s, the latter’s speech accents fit less naturally into the governing meter than the former’s (as indicated by the necessity of mark-

**Example 2:** Children's play song, "Devi mase nua," as transcribed by A. M. Jones and Kofi Agawu.

The image displays two musical transcriptions of the song "Devi mase nua." The top transcription is by A. M. Jones, and the bottom is by Kofi Agawu. Both transcriptions feature a vocal line and a piano accompaniment line. The vocal line in Jones's version is labeled "Spoken" and is written in a 3/4 time signature. The piano accompaniment in Jones's version is in 6/8 time. The lyrics are: "De-vi ma se nua de-wo da - ne, ula-ya ula-ya, de wo da - ne". The bottom transcription by Agawu is labeled "re-transcribed" and features a piano accompaniment line with rhythmic accents (marked with ">") under the notes. The lyrics are identical to Jones's version.

ing accents with ">"). At most, their "rhythmic complexity" is of a different sort. Is the information conveyed by the respective transcriptions substantially different? Is it obvious that Jones's version is "graphically severe," "unwieldy"? And is severity always "exotic"? The second response is that Agawu sometimes claims that his version of African rhythm is paradoxically less "elegant" than the invented versions, albeit "truer to the African experience," because of the across-the-dimensions character of rhythm (1995a:395). If meter is not given *a priori*, as Agawu argues in parts of *African Rhythm* (1995b:68,70,71,110), then why is the metric hierarchy in Agawu's re-transcription regarded with such certainty and rigidity? The third response is that Agawu uses Jeff Pressing's assertion that the music of "Agbadza Kpoka . . . is most correctly (in Ewe terms) conceptualized in [unvarying]  $\frac{12}{8}$  time," as evidence for the "epistemic violence" of "foregrounding native voices" (via Pressing's projection of "Ewe terms"). Agawu invokes the lexical gap—reminding us that the Ewe "do not have terms in their language for 'rhythm,' 'meter,' or 'time signature'"—that captures Pressing's assertion "unavoidably in a prefabricated theoretical framework" (68). But how is this different from Agawu's claim that an unvarying  $\frac{6}{8}$  applies to "Devi mase nua" (189)? And how can the latter move be made in the name of "more believable terms" (190)? Has the prefabricated framework perhaps become a native mode of hearing after all?

In his discussion of the politics of notating African rhythm, Agawu takes the factual and political dimensions of the distinction between, say,

“isochrony” and “polychrony,” or between using staff notation and using the TUBS (Time Unit Box System), as self-evident (2003:64–68). Agawu does not explain why the former terms are respectful and appropriate towards African music while the latter are Africanist hyperbole about its rhythmic complexity. Relatedly, there is no explanation as to why designating Schenkerian pitch models in analyses in *African Rhythm* (1995b:79,81,182) or semiotic and generative models in analyses in *Representing African Music* (2003:71–96,117–50) hold the moral advantage over designating complex rhythmic models in the manner of Jones (66–67). The crucial question is: under what conditions can a specific African experience be articulated outside of what Mahmood Mamdani calls a dichotomous “history by analogy?” (1996:9)? Perhaps Agawu’s effort to “de-exoticize” African rhythm, to return it to the sphere of “amateurs: normal, everyday people” (1995b:190,195) should be weighed against Mamdani’s concern that

the swing from the exotic to the banal (‘Yes, banal Africa—exoticism be damned!’) is from one extreme to another, from seeing the flow of events in Africa as exceptional to the general flow of world history to seeing it as routine, as simply dissolving in that general flow, confirming its trend, and in the process presumably confirming the humanity of the African people. In the process, African history and reality lose any specificity, and with it, we lose any but an invented notion of Africa. (Mamdani 1996:10–11).

Is the impulse to exoticize the only way Africa is invented?

### **On the Problem of Banalizing African Rhythm**

In his chapter “Polymeter, Additive Rhythm, and Other Enduring Myths,” Agawu spells out the specific ways African music has been misrepresented via ideologically charged terms in the scholarly literature. Agawu places the terms “polymeter,” “polyrhythm,” “additive rhythm” and “cross rhythm” under particular scrutiny, arguing that the very plethora of terms registers an “incorrigible urge to represent Africa as always already different” (2003:72). Instead of dignifying these terms in his analyses, Agawu identifies various rhythmic *topoi*, or time lines, to describe common African rhythmic patterns in less exoticizing terms. Here the most significant intervention is Agawu’s inclusion of the dancers’ foot movement to access the metric structure of the various dances. “For cultural insiders,” writes Agawu, “identifying the gross pulse or the ‘pieds de danse’ (‘dance feet’) occurs instinctively and spontaneously. Those not familiar with the choreographic

supplement, however, sometimes have trouble locating the main beats and expressing them in movement" (73). With the choreographic supplement firmly in place, Agawu's time lines unambiguously elaborate basic metric schemes. The so-called "standard pattern" often heard as a bell pattern in Ewe dances such as *Agbadza*, *Agbekor*, and *Adzida*, for instance, falls into four main beats in  $\frac{12}{8}$ ; while the "Highlife" time line, despite being strongly off-beat centered, falls into four main beats in  $\frac{4}{4}$  (75). Agawu considers the Yoruba rendition of the standard pattern as "so close that [it] may be regarded as a variant" of the standard Ewe pattern (74). As it is in Western music, then, Agawu posits a regulative background that enables "the accentual and durational patterns that constitute a particular *topos*" (78). Far from the "clash and conflict" identified by Jones as a "cardinal principle" of African music, Agawu describes a "communal and cooperative" musical situation operating according to the familiar mechanism of "hidden background and a manifest foreground" (2003:79). Agawu uses examples from Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms to demonstrate, *vis-à-vis* the mechanics of rhythm and meter, a kinship between African and Western music.

Agawu's analyses and re-transcriptions are entirely consistent with, if not beholden to, a particular brand of theories of rhythm and meter where the two musical dimensions have been placed in opposition to one another, such as that of Fred Lerdahl and Ray Jackendoff (1983). According to these theories, rhythm is the actual flow of sounding durations, meter the abstract grid of strong and weak pulses. How effectively does the rigid opposition between meter and rhythm capture the distinctive properties of African music? Indeed, how effectively does the distinction capture the distinctive properties of Western music? As Christopher Hasty has argued, in the more extreme versions of such theories, metric beats are actually regarded as durationless instants that can be compared to "geometrical points rather than to the lines drawn between them" (1997:19). These immobile beats are inferred from various sounding rhythmic phenomena, but once this has happened the sound of the music need not always reinforce them and may even conflict with them. Lerdahl and Jackendoff's claim that "even though the two structures [meter and rhythmic grouping] obviously interact, neither is intrinsically implicated in the other; that is to say they are formally (and visually) separate" (1983:26). Likewise, in his discussion of meter and grouping in African music, Agawu insists on a "non-alignment between grouping and metrical structure," an assumption that leads him to hotly contest and ultimately jettison the very concept of "polymeter" (2003:78,84-86).

Agawu does not question the applicability of Lerdahl and Jackendoff's theory to African (or any other) music. To support his argument, Agawu

cites David Temperley's work on African rhythm (2000), which, in turn, was inspired by Agawu's research on the subject and unquestioningly perpetuates Lerdahl and Jackendoff's theory. Likewise, in his discussion of meter and grouping in African music, Temperley insists that "a metrical structure is best regarded as something in the mind of the listener, rather than being present in the music in any direct way" (2000:67).

What, however, is the musical cost of these theoretical assumptions? Agawu seems wholly to endorse Temperley's findings on both musical and political grounds. Citing Temperley at length, Agawu makes a point about the politics of current institutional divisions in music studies: "Ethnomusicology is concerned with the production of differences among world musical cultures, while music theorists tend to produce sameness" (2003:174). Music-theoretical systems, therefore, are put to political work in Agawu's text.

Yet while Agawu rhetorically upholds Lerdahl and Jackendoff's theory, his analyses do not in fact outline a generative process as it is understood in *Generative Theory of Tonal Music*. A generative process *infers* a metric structure from sounding patterns (that largely support it), while Agawu's analyses *posit* a metric structure (identical to the choreographic supplement) on sounding patterns (that largely contradict it). This is not to say that Agawu's analyses of metric structure in, for example, either the highlife *topos* or the standard pattern are wrong (at least in the context of *some* African dances), but that the appropriate use of Lerdahl and Jackendoff's model in this context would actively undermine Agawu's conclusions. Example 3 reproduces Agawu's metric representation of the highlife timeline, wherein the four main beats have been determined by correspondence with the accompanying choreography. However, if one were to use metric preference rules to infer the metric structure of this sounded pattern alone, it would result in a  $\frac{4}{4}$  pattern beginning on the eighth (or perhaps the fourth) eighth-note beat of the sequence. Placed in the context of the (now obviously contrametric) choreographic supplement, this result suggests precisely the *polymetric* structure of this pattern. The appearance of a single gross metric scheme aside, the correct application of Lerdahl and Jackendoff's theory actually creates the conditions for undermining the case against inventing African rhythm. That is, the generative procedure is at odds with the choreographic supplement; the single gross meter implied by the model is different to the factual one embodied by Africans.

Aside from the occasional tantalizing remark, Agawu does not recognize that it is precisely this sort of Western theory of rhythm and meter that lays the conceptual foundations for the fantastical Western views of African rhythmic and metric complexity he aims to critique.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, most of Agawu's analyses bear the mark of this deep contradiction.

**Example 3:** Agawu's metric analysis of the highlife pattern.

Line 1: Main beats  
 Line 2: Highlife time line  
 Line 3: Variant

Perhaps close formal studies of African music can interrogate the separation between meter and rhythm or at least serve as a persistent reminder that such general theories are documents of limited historical and geographical scope. If African music runs the risk of becoming exotic every time it stakes out a unique way to pattern time, how can it ever contribute to the broad musicological debate, let alone offer us startling musical possibilities? Recalling Mamdani, the point is neither to celebrate African “rhythmic complexity” nor to recoil from it in alarm. While the strategic use of Western methods for the study of African music should be vigorously supported on political grounds, the epistemological dimensions of the inquiry should be deeply interested in the moments that do not quite fit the theoretical archetypes. These are the moments where a consideration of African rhythmic processes may force a revision of *general* theories of rhythm and meter in genuinely global terms. For, taken in the context of its broad implications, this is the hope that Agawu’s inquiry inspires.

### **Conclusion: On Representing African Music**

Towards the end of his chapter “The Invention of African Rhythm,” Agawu makes a powerful statement:

There is one possible solution to some of the problems addressed in this chapter, a way of countering the unfortunate effects of invention: eschew the ‘soft’ strategies of dialogism and the solicitation of insider viewpoints and work towards the direct empowerment of postcolonial African subjects so that they can eventually represent themselves. (2003:69–70)

How can Agawu’s words be transformed into reality? There is a risk of taking Agawu’s point to mean that because Western musicology is mired in inventions, it need not represent oppressed African groups, but instead allow such groups to “represent themselves” (70). I do not think that a postcolonial musicology diminishes the burden of representing African music in the West. According to Gayatri Spivak, the subaltern *cannot* speak.

This is partly a definitional claim—"There is something of a not-speakingness in the very notion of subalterity" (1996:289)—and partly a claim about the way subaltern self-representation fails to catch in elite discourse. Using the metaphor of a speech act, Spivak explains that "even when the subaltern makes an effort to death to speak, she is not able to be heard, and speaking and hearing complete the speech act" (292). Thus "speaking," in Spivak's rhetorical sense, involves a speaker *and* a hearer. The question arises: to whom would one ideally want "African subjects . . . [to] represent themselves?" And why? If the agenda is political mobility for oppressed groups within modernity, then the possibility to "represent" does not rest solely on letting others speak for themselves. Indeed, elite discourse *can* contribute to the upliftment of others. Spivak illustrates her argument with various cases drawn primarily from the work of the Subaltern Studies Group. Instead of trying to merely recover a native account of it (which presupposes a deliberative consciousness and trivializes the dominance and dynamism of the colonial state), the Group has rewritten the history of India without shying from colonial documents and reports—"text[s] from the other side" (1996:291). This maneuver is linked to Spivak's strategic use of positivist essentialism in service of a visible political interest. Arguing that we cannot not essentialize, Spivak places no limit on the kinds of intellectual work that can advance a postcolonial ideal.

"Western" musicology, therefore, has a role to play in this conjuncture. First, it will not do to dismiss the work of those writers who ostensibly "invent African rhythm" as only "construction . . . fiction . . . myth [and] ultimately . . . lie" (Agawu 2003:61). There may be specific contexts where invented concepts of African rhythm are politically beneficial. The political significance of all inventions is not a matter of whether they are absolute truths as much as whether they are taken as such in particular social contexts. In other words, political resistance and affirmation are radically contingent on the contexts in which they operate. Second—and this formulation may seem paradoxical at first—we may want to provisionally downplay the *political* dimension of representation in our studies of African music altogether. While Agawu's disengagement from the false binary between formal studies (for some) and contextual studies (for others) is laudable, his sustained critical brilliance risks inaugurating a more surreptitious opposition between Africa and the West on the terrain of politics. The study of African music under the conditions imagined in *Representing African Music* will be obliged to position itself politically, while the study of Western music will not be so obliged. Perhaps this is why Agawu ultimately jettisons any overarching method for approaching African music:

How not to analyze African music? There is obviously no way not

to analyze African music. Any and all ways are acceptable. An analysis that lacks value does not yet exist, which is not to deny that, depending on the reasons for a particular adjudication, some approaches may prove more or less useful. We must therefore reject all ethnomusicological cautions about analysis because their aim is not to empower African scholars and musicians but to reinforce certain metropolitan privileges. (2003:196)

Transposing this line of thought back to my argument about the dangers of politicizing African discourse: planting political minefields on African musicological terrain can only discourage scholars from working on that terrain. In a global context where Africa is gradually falling below the perception level of the West, a postcolonial musicology might be interested in encouraging as much diverse scholarship on African material as possible. If the aim is to consolidate Africa's unmarked entry into global modernity, postcolonial musicology will need to contest vigorously all methodological binaries between cultural zones, however well intended. Why should the difficulty of getting the worms back into the political can only befall African scholarship? This is why I think the over-politicization of the general African musicological terrain may be, paradoxically, politically disingenuous.

The task of representing African music does not evaporate on account of the economic inequality between the northern and southern hemispheres. It is worth distinguishing two senses of "representation" at this point. Spivak describes these as "representation as 'speaking for,' as in politics, and representation as 're-presentation,' as in art and philosophy" (1999:256). While they are intimately related, these two senses remain "irreducibly discontinuous" because the first sense pertains to persons speaking on behalf of others while the second pertains to (ostensibly) presenting "reality adequately" (257). Ernesto Laclau recognizes a similar logical tension in the concept of representation. Laclau notes that the condition of a good political representation is, "*apparently*, that there is a perfect or transparent transmission, by the representative, of the will of those whom he represents" (1996:38). This entails that the will of the representative does not impinge at all upon the will of those he is representing, or that there is a "full identification of the represented with his will" (48-49). Laclau argues that this condition is impossible to meet and that this figuration of the ideal representation forgets "*why* the relation of representation needs to be established in the first place" [emphasis Laclau's]. He writes,

The answer is, obviously, that it is because the represented are absent from the place in which the representation takes place,

and that decisions effecting them are to be taken there. And these decisions—as any decision—involve negotiations whose result is indeterminate. But this amounts to saying that, if the represented *need* the relation of representation, it is because their identities are incomplete and have to be *supplemented* by the representative. This means that the role of the representative cannot be neutral, and that he will contribute something to the identities of those he represents. *Ergo*, the relation of representation will be, for essential logical reasons, constitutively impure: the movement from represented to representative will necessarily have to be supplemented by a movement in the opposite direction. (49)

Laclau's formulation of the problem is relevant to African music because it casts a different light on various representations that have been deemed distortions of the process of representation. If a certain distortion is built into the very mechanics of the process, the question of what counts as a productive representation shifts qualitatively. Thus, the call for the unfettered self-representation of African subjects in musicological discourse must fail because it runs together these two senses of the term. By suggesting that the representation of African music approximate the condition of a passive mirror (reflecting the pre-constituted musical practices and interests of African people), it raises the stakes on representative purity to impossible heights. I am not denying that there should be more African practitioners informing the musicological scene than there are today; on the contrary, there should be many more! Nor am I denying that some representations of African music are unpalatable manipulations of African people's cultural practice. Indeed, Agawu's critique of the politics of producing cultural difference (and, to a lesser degree, my critique of the politics of producing cultural sameness) in academic writing on African music is an attempt to locate just these moments. Moreover, the urgent concern articulated by Agawu, Euba, Nzewi, and others, that ethnomusicological premises are "unsuitable" for African music studies, reveals less that the representation process has become impure as such and more that the representation process has, in some significant political sense, failed.

The point is not to take any departure from pure representation as an outright failure, but to assess the political implications of an already impure representation. This is important because, in many parts of Africa, social marginalization and economic inequality have shattered certain cultural and musical configurations; therefore, one of the most debated issues today should be how to *constitute* African musicological practices within global modernity. Perhaps the task of Africanist musicologists in the North

Atlantic is to provide the marginalized masses with an adequate language out of which it becomes possible to negotiate Africa's equal place in the international musicological arena. Those in search of a genuinely global musical discourse—one that necessarily involves the concrete uplifting of African music and musicians—could do much worse than begin their quest by reading Agawu's *Representing African Music*. His is the unmistakable voice of authentic hope.

#### Notes

1. Of the academic disciplines, ethnomusicology is arguably the most attuned to music's socio-political contexts. In general, however, the role of politics in ethnomusicological accounts rarely goes beyond outlining music's ideological background; it rarely attempts to delineate political strategies for social change or resistance to unwanted change.

2. See, for example, Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997; Jonathan Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, New York: Dutton, 1995; Serge Moscovici, *The Invention of Society*, Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 1993; Christopher Lloyd GoGwilt, *The Invention of the West: Joseph Conrad and the Double-Mapping of Europe and Empire*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995.

3. In a different context, for example, Agawu asserts that "Western music has balkanized [conceptions of rhythm] into different domains" (2003:63).

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