

# Reflections on the Present and Future of BIPOC Musicians and Music Scholars in Ethnomusicological Spaces

HADI MILANLOO

**Roundtable Presentation: Society for Ethnomusicology 2020 Virtual Conference**

**30 October 2020**

**Roundtable Title: Many Voices at the Table: A Conversation About the Need for Equity in Canadian Ethnomusicology**

Of the Table: On Mediation and Inclusion

In what follows, I argue for a version of diversity that offers unmediated and unconditional access to resources and opportunities to everyone who attends the various spaces in ethnomusicology. The discourse of diversity often leads to a *provisional* inclusion. In a way, Sara Ahmed's famous cynicism of academic institutions' claims of diversity and inclusion — evident in her books, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (2012) and *Living a Feminist Life* (2017) — could also be understood through this lens. The inclusion that these institutions promise is always provisional as their doors are held and regulated by those who are already occupying those spaces. In response, I ask: how, as BIPOC practitioners and music scholars — or, however we define our roles in relation to ethnomusicology — can we work against provisional inclusion to establish new ways in which our access to the field of ethnomusicology is not regulated through a variety of filters?

## Around the Table

Many diversity initiatives often concentrate on one question: “who is at the table and who is not?” While this kind of inquiry has merit, I believe we should expand it to see who is talking to whom around this table. It seems to me that within ethnomusicology, particularly in the space of our scholarships, the majority tend to talk to or against white scholars, which inadvertently turns the latter into the discussion hub.<sup>1</sup> BIPOC scholars can’t talk to or about anyone unless they go through that hub, a situation that then makes their participation provisional to that mediation.

In *Hungry Listening* (2020), Dylan Robinson demonstrates that being included is not only about representation but also about representability: to be included, one must go through filters to become representable on a table that already has moderators. The idea that works against this moderation, is what scholars such as Lee Veeraghavan (2017) have practiced within ethnomusicological scholarship. I contend that such works done by a person of colour with another community of colour could potentially break the cycle of performative inclusivity, mediated participation, and demands of representability. In so arguing, I’m also inspired by what Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith (2014) have called “theoretical promiscuity,” as they believe achieving goals such as Indigenous self-determination and decolonization requires, among other things, an effort towards building coalitions with other marginalized groups “Because the conditions of Native peoples are inextricably linked to the conditions facing other oppressed groups” (11). Particularly in the context of Canada and the United States, it is crucial for scholars of colour to build such coalitions to, on the one hand, gain more control and power to shape the discourse and praxis that involve their lives and, on the other, bypass the colonial moderation in our field.

Here, I also find David Garneau’s idea of “irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality” effective: “Indigenous intellectual spaces that exist apart from a non-Indigenous gaze and interlocution” (2012: 33). I respect Garneau’s demand in keeping these irreconcilable spaces exclusive and propose building new ones that allow BIPOC music scholars and practitioners to move away from the white gaze to enable conversations that are not provisional to the aforementioned moderation. In this sense, I see Lee Veeraghavan’s work creating that new irreconcilable space. Of course, I have no intention of suggesting that such spaces will be void of conflicts, struggles, misunderstandings, and miscommunications. Nevertheless, they could significantly contribute to how we imagine, do, and represent our various kinds of ethnomusicological works and interventions.

## The Location of the Table

Many saw former President Trump's Executive Order 13769 in line with his other anti-immigration policies. I suggest that the Muslim ban — as the order is commonly known — and how it holds knowledge hostage, however, carries direct implications for the future of our field and the scholarly communities that we build. In a sense, through that order, the government revealed its role as the ultimate mediating power, which forces us to rethink our position on how we locate our discipline in particular geographies.

After the Muslim ban, a few of my Iranian friends applied for US visas to attend conferences or job interviews. According to the letter of rejection they received, they did not satisfy visa officers' requirement that their entry would be in the national interest of the United States. This sentence shows the power of the state in controlling the circulation of knowledge and making decisions on whose knowledge is useful and should be heard. It is also about who can access the knowledge and power accumulated there. While the Muslim ban was the result of Trump's agendas, the magnitude of its influence in ethnomusicology was intensified by how we have concentrated most of our efforts in the United States.

We have spent decades accumulating knowledge that, as the Muslim ban has demonstrated, is now hostage to the government of the United States. The Muslim ban and the significant limits it imposed reveals the fragilities of our mobility — a privilege many of us can presume — and shows how our access to a society that we, and our lived experiences, have built is always only provisional to the state's approval. Today, we might be able to cross the border but tomorrow is not guaranteed.<sup>2</sup> In response, while I am not inclined to copy Ryan Cecil Jobson (2020) and advocate for burning the Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM), I argue that trying to stop it from burning is not necessarily the only solution, either. The issue is that even when we criticize SEM for its entanglement with American imperialism or institutional racism — as brilliantly and eloquently criticized in Dr. Danielle Brown's 2020 letter to the SEM — we fail to remove it from the centre of our attention. Hence, we see ourselves faced with the decision of whether or not to burn it down.

What if we imagined alternative options? What if we started to look for creating new bodies or expanding other societies that already exist? Societies like International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM), British Forum for Ethnomusicology (BFE), or Canadian Society for Traditional Music (CSTM) could become crucial. This is not to argue that the *British* Forum for Ethnomusicology or the *Canadian* Society for Traditional Music (both intentional emphases) have no roots or connections to colonialism or

imperialism. Rather, I am advocating for a very simple strategy of diversifying our efforts rather than concentrating them in one place.

Perhaps an anecdote could help. When I presented at my first CSTM conference in Sudbury, Ontario, in 2014, the panel of which I was a part included a presentation on Syrian music, one on Vietnamese popular music, in addition to my own work, which was on the revival of Iranian classical music in the 1960s and 1970s. Three disconnected islands; the leftovers, if you will. Only five years later, at the CSTM conference in 2019, I presented in a panel that included four papers that focused on contemporary Iranian music, which is a significant change in a short time. If such a space could be created within CSTM, which in turn expands its reach and influence, then we must seek other spaces that we could and should open. I would even go one step further to argue that this is a potential that might particularly interest BIPOC music scholars and practitioners. We can focus on exploring the opportunities that societies such as CSTM offer rather than pondering whether or not we need to burn it all down. The Muslim ban, paired with Dr. Brown's letter, remind us that we have spent so much time and energy enriching one particular ethnomusicological society that is not fully accessible to all. Although its name claims universality, SEM's American-ness, and the restrictions that come with the United States' constantly tightening security measures, is not really up to SEM itself to accept or refuse.

## The Table and the Societies

What unites the two different parts of this essay is the advocacy for close attention to the creation and expansion of spaces that, in different ways, could work better for BIPOC music scholars and practitioners. In both, I call for decentralization and diversification of ethnomusicological societies and spaces. Whether in the form of making irreconcilable spaces (Garneau 2012) or in trying to transform mainstream ethnomusicological societies, BIPOC musicians and music scholars could engage in the radical act of reclaiming spaces that initially were not meant for them. 🌱

## Notes

1. Even though in this paper I remain focused on race and in particular whiteness, there are other factors such as gender that work in intersection with race and accessibility, among other things.

2. The recent COVID-19 global pandemic also reminded us, in the most horrifying terms, how quickly and significantly our mobility privileges could disappear. However, the Muslim ban is different in that it targets a particular group, hence, the limitation that it imposes might easily escape the attention of others. Through the years that it was effective, on numerous occasions I found myself explaining to people why I am not attending an SEM annual meeting or another similarly important conference. In short, the limitations that Muslim Ban imposed on some people's lives were rather invisible to the most, which sharply contrasts with the effects of COVID-19 immobilities.

## References

- Ahmed, Sara. 2012. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- . 2017. *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Garneau, David. 2012. Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation. *West Coast Line* 46 (2): 28–38.
- Jobson, Ryan Cecil. 2020. The Case for Letting Anthropology Burn: Sociocultural Anthropology in 2019. *American Anthropologist* 122 (2): 259–71.
- Robinson, Dylan. 2020. *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Simpson, Audra and Andrea Smith, eds. 2014. *Theorizing Native Studies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Veeraraghavan, Lee 2017. *Dirty Ears: Hearing and Hearings in the Canadian Liberal Settler Colony*. PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.