

Meeting the Table Halfway¹

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Roundtable Presentation: Canadian Society for Traditional Music/Society for Ethnomusicology 2020 Virtual Annual Meeting

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

Preamble

This talk came about literally through *talking*; we wrote with echoes of numerous conversations — between us, between the panellists, and with so many friends and colleagues — in our ears.

We wrote what follows in October 2020, specifically to be spoken into and to be heard in a particular Zoom room at a particular time. We suspected that our colleagues in the Zoom room had been attending some of the same talks we had during SEM/CSTM 2020, including Farzaneh Hemmasi's CSTM keynote, "Doing Our Essential Work," which we reference, and is included in this set of writings.

We had two hopes:

1. To contribute to discussions that would no doubt ripple and ricochet minutes later after all the position statements had been read;
2. To foreground and make a case for *conversation* — as a collaborative modality of thought, as our method, and as our format. In adapting the piece for print, where discussions usually unfold across a longer time span, we have decided to leave this text in its original form: it leans more towards utterance than essay, more riffing-on-the-phone than conference paper.

Approaching the Table

Nadia: “Change is not a single-authored work,” Farzaneh Hemmasi reminded us at the Canadian Society for Traditional Music keynote a few days ago. Building on this reminder, Yun Emily Wang and I wanted our talks to reflect the many in-the-moment, intertextual conversations that have been unfolding during the conference. We thought we would meld our position statements to do some of this work.

Understanding this panel to be a collaborative project, we also won’t focus *directly* on CSTM as an organization, especially since our colleagues Monique Giroux and Parmela Attariwala do this so beautifully already. Rather, we are thinking of ourselves as offering other ingredients that might be useful for whatever we’re cooking up all together, for what we’ll continue cooking in the discussion that follows, and maybe beyond.

The Table

Emily: I feel blood rushing to my head. My face burns; my ears ring. Under the table, fingernails on my right hand dig deep into my left palm. My breaths are shallow at best. Time slows as my heart rate soars.

This is how shame feels to me. It is also, very often, how anger and guilt feel.

These feelings have accompanied me through many different scenarios, including but not limited to:

1. The times when I realized my presence at the table served only a ritual function, that rather than earning a seat at the table, I had actually been a tablecloth;
2. The times when I realized that by submitting to the norms at the table — to ensure I would be included — I had been complicit in reproducing the oppressive structure that made me a tablecloth in the first place (my complicity, by the way, differs in flavour from yours);
3. The times when I realized that my good intentions could not make up for my ignorance, and, facing the anger and pain of others, learned that self-reflection is like brushing your teeth: you have to do it every day, and sometimes you still get a cavity anyway.

I feel blood rushing to my head. My face burns; my ears ring. Time slows as my heart rate soars. This is also how it feels to be moved, mobilized, inspired, excited; how it feels to fervently hope, throwing the caution of what Lauren Berlant calls “cruel optimism” (2011) to the wind; how it feels to be

held accountable — emphasis on held — by someone I trust; how it feels to participate in a network of giving and receiving care; how it feels when a better version of the reality of this table emerges on the horizon of possibilities.

I've felt all of these feelings at the table. A lot.

The table is at best a node in many intersecting trajectories. It is neither the end nor the beginning of the story. Many of us had come to the table with ghosts of one-time travel companions who did not make it, who were turned away, who left to pursue or to preserve something more important. We feel them, too, when we sit, unsettled, at the table.

"It matters how we arrive at the places we do," says Sara Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006: 2), which, incidentally, begins with a meditation on philosophers' writing tables. In the book, Ahmed reminds us that the process of becoming oriented by the objects that appear to us is neither casual nor neutral. What we can see in the first place depends on *where* we face, and where we face is a habitus attesting to embodied histories of dis- and re-orientations. We see only the table and the granularity of its composition when we are oriented by and toward the table. The people around the table fade into imperceptibility, as do the trails of footprints behind us.

What if we put on hold the curation of who is and who is not at the table, and ask instead: to whom does the table appear at all? To whom is the table open, accessible, and welcoming; to whom does the table taunt from beyond impermeable walls? What if we are oriented *around* rather than *toward* the table, as Ahmed might suggest? What if we explore the space under the table, or if we move the table, or if we find ways to be at the table without the strain of the chair and without facing the table?

An Ecology of Tables

Nadia: Sometimes we act as if there is one table, though I think we need an ecology of tables in our lives. I will get to ecologies by way of the story of another table, the Listening Table.

Rajni Shah, who happens to be a dear friend of mine, used to be a performance artist. But they chose to walk away from the live art table in the UK when they realized that live art audiences could not hear what they wanted to say.² They were tired of making for white audiences, they said later.³ I tell you this to let you know that when Rajni created the Listening Tables and allowed everyone an opportunity to decide for themselves whether to sit at them, they were not being naïve. They were making a choice.

I've condensed the following from a mix of Rajni's written description of the first Listening Table and Rajni's and others' oral descriptions of the Listening Tables as a whole (2020a):

Rajni gathered a group of people to come together, and then to split into two rooms: one room contained the Listening Table, a table with microphones at it, so that people in the other room could listen in.

Before they split into the two rooms, Rajni asked the people gathered to consider whether theirs were voices and bodies that they saw represented in mainstream media. Were theirs the voices that were heard? That had agency in the world? Rajni did not answer this question for them.

If guests answered yes — that their voices were heard, did have agency, were represented — Rajni encouraged them to take a step back from the Listening Table and to listen in from the other room instead. If participants answered no, Rajni encouraged them to take a seat at the table.

Ten, self-selected people assembled around the table. They were invited to let conversation happen, to, as Rajni puts it, “listen across difference.”

Meanwhile, from the other room, everyone else listened quietly to the conversation that was happening at the table.

After this, people from the two rooms came back together, “[re-gathering] around one large papered table ... [to share] food and reflections, still with an emphasis on listening.” (Rajni Shah, email to author, September 20, 2021).

What happened at the first Listening Table was complicated and simple.

Rajni writes, “some people seemed so aware of their bodies and voices in relation to others, and others seemed not to be aware at all, and ... these behaviours fell so devastatingly neatly along lines of racialisation and speaking privilege” (Shah 2020a).

But Rajni is also clear that this was not *only* what was happening, something Emily will later talk about as being undone.

Here's what Rajni says:

White supremacy was present with us in that room, during that first table, in all its hard armour.

Unexpressed pain and anger and grief were present, and they obliterated the possibility of listening.

Tenderness was present, as was warmth, trust, and desire.

Harm was done.

Hurt was felt.

And in the midst of all this, solidarity was present, and listening was present (Shah 2020a).⁴

There is an alternative to spaces like the Listening Tables, as a friend of Rajni's points out (Shah 2020a), and it is important to recognize that there are alternatives: BIPOC spaces. And, within BIPOC spaces, further alternatives, affinity spaces within those BIPOC spaces.

Those spaces didn't always occur to me as an option. And now that I know that it *is* an option, I can *choose* sometimes to show up to open-to-everyone spaces even when heartbreak is inevitable, benevolent microaggressions fly, and practices of privilege resound in the aural space. Sometimes, I might be the one causing heartbreak, releasing microaggressions, ballooning oppressively into the space. And this makes me grateful that there are tables that are closed to me, tables where people can gather before they encounter me at an open table like the Listening Tables and where they are shielded from the shrapnel of my ignorance.

I am ready — with *limits* and I'll say more about this later on — to show up to tables like the CSTM table. But other tables — many of them BIPOC, some of them Asian American affinity spaces — sustain this work: those are often, though not always, the spaces in which I can relax enough to feel how much I've been holding it together. Those are often the spaces in which, as I found myself blurting out in an Asian American/Canadian affinity space, I can wonder about what it would be like “to lie in the sun and eat blackberries and casually say what I think.”

Sometimes, I want *ease*. I want to be able to say a little bit irreverently (and well-placed irreverence is sometimes good medicine): “I'm kind of not

interested in sitting at the table. I'm not *that* interested in sitting in general. My neck hurts. My back hurts. I'd rather lie on the floor, arch my back, roll around, meander into the park a block away and lie on the grass, watching bees at clover."

I need that ease. And also. And yet. Away from the table is where I see the people who never had the option of coming to the table, yes, but also people who don't want to be at the table, who know that the table was built on their and their ancestors' backs and in some cases also on their and their ancestors' land. From this place, a "no" to sitting at CSTM's table might be the opposite of stinginess: a "no" to CSTM might be a "yes," for example, to show up for the Wet'suwet'en's call to work construction at the Unist'ot'en Camp, a place where Wet'suwet'en peoples are reoccupying their land in northern "BC, Canada" and defending their territory from proposed pipelines. If I allow myself to dream, maybe one could say yes to CSTM *and* yes to Unist'ot'en: hey CSTM folks, if you are able, let's go work at the Unist'ot'en Camp!

Maybe away from the table is where I will see the elders of colour who are surprisingly absent from my purview of Canadian ethnomusicology.

Igniting the Table

Emily: Even when we find ourselves *at* the table, there are more questions to be asked. How do I want to be at the table, if and when I do? How do you?

I am reminded of another table. A family dinner table in Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life*, against which Ahmed's figure of feminist killjoy comes into being. The family sits around the table, having polite conversations. Optimistic that the table can be more inclusive, the killjoy names racism and sexism to make them more tangible, "so that it can be more easily communicated to others" (2017: 36–37). She hesitates, at first, to disrupt the smooth flow of conversations, but the racism and the sexism persists, so she speaks quietly and responds carefully and explains repeatedly, and holds the frustration building within her, until she snaps and becomes the person who ruins dinner, who brings the problem by naming the problem. To those wishing for uninterrupted "harmony," the feminist snap is sudden. To the feminist, however, the snap is only one part of a long process. It comes from repetitions of sitting uneasily at the table. It comes from a history of hoping for change and recovering from disappointments.

Ahmed's formulation of a feminist killjoy is by now familiar to many of us. The sense of possibilities enacted by snapping at the table is so compelling,

and yet I can't help but wonder what comes after the snap. Does the table carry on without the killjoy? Or do we slug through the discomfort?

How do we snap out of the deadlock of the table and the designated killjoy? What if we imagine a whole different table where the killjoys' biggest worry is that we need a different name because we are no longer accused of killing the normative joy — because at this table the feminist snap is received not as an attack but rather as a gesture of collective care, like poetry reading snaps?

What comes after the snap? Do we dare to aspire?

Burning

Nadia: I got here because of burning or maybe in spite of it. When Ellen Waterman asked me to be on this panel, I asked to meet. It was the end of July 2020 during the uprisings, and I told Ellen:

1. That I didn't know a lot about CSTM and that I'd been to only one meeting; and
2. That I was probably more in the "burn it down" camp where we divest energy from CSTM and all work on defunding the police in our own communities.

Ellen said that that was "amazing" and, yes, that I could quote her. In other words, I feel absolved of a particular responsibility (or even ability) to speak specifically about CSTM.

"What do you do when your house catches fire?" is something else that Farzaneh Hemmasi asked in her keynote, riffing on a metaphor from Ryan Jobson's 2020 article, "The Case for Letting Anthropology Burn," which itself ignited many conversations and responses. It *does* depend on "how you feel about the house," as Hemmasi says. I am also convinced that it also depends on the other fires around you, some of them that have been burning for a long, violent time.

CSTM has publicly committed to "addressing the ongoing impacts of settler-colonialism." Does this mean spending less time at the table, having less control of a table, and bringing food to other tables even if it might not be appropriate for "us" to sit at those tables?

Emily: It sounds more polemical than it is when I say, yes, let's burn.

Burning is not new. In fact, the table couldn't appear clean and orderly without a whole infrastructure of burning out of sight and out of mind: think landfills and trash incinerators. Burning produces warmth. A small stove tucked

under the table is a popular way to share warmth, for those sitting around the table, in many parts of the world.

Burning doesn't only mean destruction. Burning is also catalyzation, metabolization, and transformation. Burning is the condition of possibility for crucibles, as in Audre Lorde's formulation: "Those of us forged in the crucibles of difference ... know to turn the difference into strength" (Lorde 2015 [1981]: 99).

Many of us have long been burning. The question is not whether to burn (and to burn it down) but rather what and how we burn; whether we allow ourselves to honestly face the burning that's always been around; and with whom we share the harnessed energy of burning.

Love as Cacophony: Loving Cacophony as a Political Practice

Emily: If there is one thing that ethnomusicologists with some sort of Canadian experience have in common, it might be a sensitivity towards the many thorny undersides of multiculturalism.⁵ One of the thorns that have stuck with me is sociologist Richard Day's critique of Canada's iteration of state policies designed to manage diversity (1998). For Day, the insidious cunning of state multiculturalism lies in its insistence on unity: that perspectives fundamentally different from one another must exist *in harmony*. This is a self-perpetuating double-bind: it coerces some bodies into performing alterity, and then demand those tagged as diverse to contort and fit into someone else's idea of difference-in-harmony. Day puts it succinctly: the fact of diversity justifies the act of continued governance over difference; the act, in turn, proves the fact.

This is also the self-perpetuating recursion of diversity of the table. The killjoy's snap proves to the family the uncomfortable fact that difference exists within the family, and justifies the act of disciplining such difference away, or at least into a palatable kind. The appearance of peace and warmth is made possible by the burning the family doesn't want to see.

So how do we snap out of this?

I find clarity and inspiration in Jennifer Nash's politics of love in *Black Feminism Reimagined* (2019). Nash describes love as committing to a willingness to "come up" against each other, and to embrace the possibility of being undone by each other (115–17). Being undone is not the same as being wounded or injured but rather to look straight in the face of the unpredictability and unknowability of an Other; to sit with the discomfort of relinquishing control — to let go of what Richard Day calls "fantasies of unity" (1998, 4) —

to be each other's witnesses when we are subjected to violence, to sink deep into webs of human relations and to radically interdepend.

I imagined this love in slightly more concrete terms: being undone means to question who and where we face, how we are oriented around or towards the table. It means to examine those naturalized, habitualized practices — not only in seeking policy changes, but also in

1. How we talk about ourselves — what if we relate to one another in terms beyond institutional affiliations or areas of expertise?
2. How we talk about our work — what if we reimagine ways to write and to share our ideas (as urged by Dylan Robinson in his *Hungry Listening* [2020], and by Beverly Diamond in this year's SEM keynote address when she reimagined the conference program committee as a source of feedback and mentorship rather than gatekeepers)?
3. What if we no longer accept unqualified "work" to mean scholarship but rather to discursively prioritize the work of mentoring and caregiving around the table (as Farzaneh Hemmasi demonstrates in the CSTM keynote by acknowledging that the people who provided childcare and assistance in daily life are *also* crucial to her being able to do academic work), and in snapping every so lovingly as a killjoy?
4. How we talk about labour — what if labour is not just about what and how much we are working, but also a way to feel the pleasures, despairs, and what José Muñoz calls "hope in the face of heartbreak" (2019 [2013])?

What if, in other words, we let go of the vision of a harmonious chorus of many voices around the table, and instead embrace the unknowability of the many noises at the tower of babel? What if the table is the barometer of our loving cacophony, rather than an end in itself?

I feel blood rushing to my head. My face burns; my ears ring. Time slows as my heart rate soars.

This is how it feels to be undone, to be at once terrified and uncomfortable — to be burning — and thrilled for what lies ahead. This is how it feels (dare I say it) to *love* the collectivities around, or atop, or under the table, in all of its many discordances. These feelings are not easy for anyone to sit with. We might have to be compassionate towards ourselves and each other as we learn to accept their messiness.

Nadia: And compassion and care might look different for different bodies, different experiences. For some people, compassion might look like a "no." Compassion might look like finding ease.

We want to leave you with our version of a quote from activist adrienne maree brown.

In *Emergent Strategy*, she writes:

What are you practicing? (Include anything you practice/repeat in your life, things you feel positive about, things you feel negative about — from meditation to burn-out, listening to interruption, community accountability to public takedowns, exercise, escaping, etc.) // We spend our lives in unconscious practices, practices that make us deny our ... selves, our true power, our collectivism ... What do you need to practice? (brown 2017: 188)

Which tables are you sitting at? For how long? With whom? How do you feel there? What kinds of things do you need to push through? What do you need to confront? Where do you need to find ease? 🍀

Notes

1. This title is a playful reference to Karen Barad's (2007) *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.
2. "Live art" is the British term for what we in North America might call "performance art."
3. Of course, this is a summary of deeply complex dynamics. See Shah (2020b) for a nuanced fleshing-out of these.
4. For more on the work of relational listening, broadly conceived, see Shah (2021).
5. As a political principle for social organization as diversity management.

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