

## Transatlantic Connections in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Anti-Racist Pedagogies, Community Engagement, and Professional Development in a Canada-Mali Collaboration

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Ethnomusicology is a constantly changing field. New methods, challenges and opportunities arise daily as scholars strive to grasp the myriad ways in which research in music touches people's lives, be they scholars, students, musicians, or community members. Several well-known ethnomusicologists have written, and rightfully celebrated, how applied, or praxis-based research can benefit the people with whom we work. However, the usefulness of applied and community research in the development of graduate students and early career scholars is a topic that is often overlooked and underpraised. This discussion aims to address just that. In the final few pages, I will share some of my experience as a research assistant at a research-creation project based in Cape Breton but whose reach expanded way beyond that location. In sum, this discussion explores praxis-based ethnomusicology and the different ways research-creation projects can be mutually beneficial for communities, musicians, music industry professionals, and, importantly, students and emerging scholars.

As a PhD student in ethnomusicology at Memorial University of Newfoundland, I have worked as the project manager over the past two years for a project titled "Piloting an Emerging Model for Community Music Education in the Time of COVID-19: A Mali-Canada Collaboration," which challenges systemic racism and inequalities in music and education. Our program was led by Fodé Lassana Diabaté, a Mali-based culture bearer, educator, and internationally renowned balafon player and builder, and Marcia Ostaszewski, a specialist in community-engaged research-creation and the founding director of the Centre for Sound Communities (CSC) at Cape Breton University. The outcomes of our project included the creation and distribution of learning resources, an album release and concert, and a program of community engagement and

education in the form of websites and social media campaigns, participatory music-making workshops, and public lecture and performance events. The initiative was based at the CSC, an arts-led social innovation lab that carries out research through artistic practices as well as standard ethnographic methods and more traditional forms of scholarship. CSC associates work with communities to develop connections and access and develop and distribute resources, challenging systemic racism through an approach that serves underrepresented and underserved communities and provides training for students, faculty, and community partners.

The project was guided by two premises related to education. We recognized that education systems are innately inequitable and we wanted to create resources that allowed learners to engage with primary sources through an integrated approach that included discussion, contextual information, and music-making, and that would lead to deeper understanding. Importantly, the anti-racist and decolonial approach of the project extended educational opportunities from youth to graduate students. Specifically, the project was designed to foster the careers of graduate students from underrepresented communities through research training and education.

### Previous Projects, Context, and Goals

Among the projects under the umbrella of this collaboration are the performance and film “The Sunjata Story – Glimpse of a Mande Epic,” which describes the life of Sunjata Keita, the prince who founded West Africa’s greatest empire almost eight hundred years ago and whose story has been passed down for generations through song, spoken recitation, and musical accompaniment on traditional Mande griot instruments, such as the balafon. Another important previous collaboration was the “Singing Storytellers,” a multifaceted public outreach program including a symposium in conjunction with the Celtic Colours International Festival in 2014, community events, workshops, film screenings, exhibitions, and the creation of new performance works, as well as scholarly publications and the creation of digital media for educational and research purposes.

These and other projects allowed Diabaté and Ostashewski to envision possible alternatives to traditional research, musical performances, and touring in response to restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Because these restrictions put the financial sustainability of Diabaté’s own educational project, Foli-Lakana, based in Bamako, at risk, we wanted to come up with possible strategies to continue to support Diabaté, Foli-Lakana, and, by extension, our

own research. To develop and implement those strategies, Ostashewski and the team established a working team of Black, Indigenous, and non-Indigenous partners to create a new operating model to ensure a “sound future” (Grant and Schippers 2016) for Foli-Lakana. The project also included the release of *Bala*, the world’s first, full-length balafon-only album, in 2021, the creation of related learning resources, and a community engagement program that included the creation and dissemination of learning resources, as well as real time online workshops with Diabaté for children and youth in Nova Scotia.

An important outcome of the project is the fact that *Bala* has been chosen to be part of the Smithsonian Folkways Recordings roster, which means it will be re-released, advertised and promoted through Folkways and its partners. That will not only ensure its safeguarding in perpetuity by one of the most respected cultural organizations in the world, but it also allow Diabaté to extend the album’s promotion, strengthening his financial stability through income from touring and album sales. Being part of such a well-respected label will, we hope, also allow Diabaté to have a bigger presence on the American market, boost his streaming and album sales, and have more opportunities for touring and playing festivals in North America.

## The Album Release and Promotion

Since the pandemic meant that live events were impossible, the album release concert was a particular challenge. The initial idea was to have a pre-recorded video by Diabaté and his colleagues, but that seemed insufficient. Here I drew inspiration from my MA research investigating the digital strategies that Brazilian *fandango caiçara* musicians used to sustain the genre during the pandemic. Some of those performers had livestreamed their performances several times during the pandemic. Although their performances took place mostly on Facebook, some of them also used Google Meet during the performance so that musicians could interact directly with the audience. Inspired by those livestreams, we decided to host a roundtable on Zoom with Diabaté, researchers involved in the project, and a broader audience of scholars and global music fans. This proved to be a good way to share our initiatives, engage in meaningful discussion with colleagues, and promote Diabaté’s work. Since expenses with honorarium had been included in the grant proposal, this also worked to provide Diabaté with income for the performance.

During the online concert, we benefited from the collaboration of Jon Kertzer. Kertzer is an African music scholar who works as an ethnomusicologist and professional radio broadcaster at KBCS in Seattle. He offered his insights

about ways to promote the album and, together with Ostashevski, acted as a host for the release concert and the Zoom discussion. Kertzer presented important information about Diabaté and the balafon and placed his music within the context of Mali and global music more broadly. As a result of working with Kertzer, we were able to feature Diabaté's music on radio, and therefore connect with world music fans in the United States. Sadly, although the album *Bala* was recorded, released, and inspired by Canada, Diabaté does not reside in the country. We therefore could not apply for any local music awards, which might have helped his work to reach a broader audience.

## The Website and Community Engagement

Our main digital headquarters is the website [balafondiabate.ca](http://balafondiabate.ca). There, users can find information about the album and the project in general. The website works in two different ways. It is a promotion space for the album and for Diabaté's music where users can purchase the album, listen to the songs, and read interviews with Diabaté about the project, his music, and his career. Importantly, the website also allows researchers and educators to find relevant resources on African Nova Scotian communities. Wade Pfaff, one of our team members and Afua Cooper's graduate student at Dalhousie University, is a specialist in Black Canadian history and music. Pfaff compiled a list of resources on the African diaspora in Canada and a list of Cape Breton and Nova Scotian organizations that promote Black music. He also wrote two essays, entitled "Nova Scotia and Cape Breton Black Music History" and "African Nova Scotians' Contributions to Canadian Music." All of these resources are available for download on our website.

We also developed resources to be piloted at the Whitney Pier Boys and Girls Club on Cape Breton Island. The workshops were initially based on the experience that Ostashevski and Diabaté had from workshops they taught at an arts high school in Ontario during the pandemic (Ostashevski in person, Diabaté online), and the content was created with advice from the Smithsonian Folkways Recordings team and based on their new Learning Pathways model. The Smithsonian Folkways Recordings describe the Learning Pathways as "in-depth, curated journeys of discovery that place recordings of discovery that place music at the heart of the educational experience" (Mellizo 2022).

The resources for the Boys and Girls Club include PowerPoint presentations that discuss the context of the music, its history, and include videos, and participatory music making. These presentations are accompanied by a teacher's guide with more in-depth information about the historical and

sociocultural context of the music, as well as visual representations of the percussive patterns, helpful for students who are visual learners.

## Conclusion, or a Few Alternatives to Help Decolonize Our Field

The goal of decolonizing research and education has been at the heart of this project. We thought about how this collaboration would be helpful for Diabaté, for his association Foli-Lakana in Mali, for researchers in Canada and beyond, and for the communities with whom we work. I have had the opportunity to participate in the project since the album's release and to attend meetings in which we debated the best approaches and next steps. In Mali, members of Foli-Lakana contributed by creating content for our learning resources, and Diabaté was consulted and his feedback incorporated throughout the project. Importantly, the project also invited the participation of several graduate students from different universities, including Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador, the University of Toronto, Dalhousie University, and the University of Alberta. Students contributed their knowledge toward compiling and writing content for our educational resources, social media posts, and other content.

Recently, our colleague on the project Hamidreza Salehyar reflected on some aspects that were particularly relevant to him as an emerging BIPOC scholar. He pointed out that our project features collaborative research methods, which work as a way of offering applied research training for students and emerging scholars, especially from BIPOC groups and those underrepresented in academia. Whereas collaborative research and co-authored publications are common in STEM and health science fields, this is not the case in the social sciences and humanities, where co-authored articles and monographs have historically been positioned as less professionally rewarding and prestigious. Therefore, students in our fields often have fewer opportunities to engage with applied ethnomusicology and be part of projects in which they can learn from their peers while conducting research and contribute to publications. Additionally, as Salehyar pointed out, the collaborative methodology that was used, allowed graduate students to share their knowledge and help shape the project, offering opportunities for meaningful contributions. This approach has contributed significantly to the anticolonial and anti-racist objectives of the project, while granting students chances to develop their applied research skills.

As a Brazilian student in North America, this project has given me the opportunity to learn from scholars with different backgrounds, and to gain experience developing a public facing project while being supported by my

mentors and peers. Importantly, the project allowed me to learn from Diabaté; collaborate with Malian musicians, Nova Scotian communities, and a wide range of scholars; and to discover and share the contributions of people of African ancestry in shaping Nova Scotian and the broader Canadian culture.

Most scholars naturally tend to emphasize the ways in which applied or praxis-based ethnomusicology can benefit underserved communities in different parts of the globe; this is an undeniable asset with an abundance of positive potential. However, the benefits that projects like this afford in fostering graduate students' careers and introducing them to the opportunities for and methodologies of ethnomusicological work outside of or parallel to academia are often underplayed. The inclusion of emerging scholars with different backgrounds, ethnicities, and cultures can contribute immensely to adding new perspectives and approaches that can tackle the complexities in which music is immersed — that is, an endless web that connects practices, heritage, musicians, industry professionals, and educators — and to find new ways to build a more democratic, multivocal, and multifaceted field of ethnomusicology.

Graduate students tend to have the opportunity to learn about praxis-based and community-engaged work through seminars and readings, frequently without engaging deeply and in practice with that kind of research. This short piece aims to highlight several ways that such work can be beneficial. Although focusing on the needs of youth in Cape Breton, our project simultaneously served people in different areas, with different ancestry, professions, goals, and needs. In such a setting, scholars and students had the opportunity to collaborate, share experiences, and learn from culture bearers, music industry professionals, and educators in community centres, schools, and other settings. By including graduate students from underrepresented communities, and from different parts of the world, the project not only benefited from different perspectives and experiences, but, also, by inviting participation from emerging scholars who seldom have the opportunity to collaborate in such multilayered initiatives.

May this be just the beginning. 🍀

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