



Texts and Disciplining (A Brief Reflection)

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In the *Call and Response* section in volume 54 (2) of *Ethnomusicology* (2010), Timothy Rice critiques American ethnomusicology on the basis of a scrutiny of the articles referring to the relationship between music and identity, published in that journal between 1982 and 2006. He draws his conclusion without any delay and early on in his paper he declares: “we are limiting the potential of our field to grow in intellectual and explanatory power” (318). Rice makes this inference through a series of considerations. On the one hand, he observes that the relationship between music and identity is among the most dealt with topics and that an evaluation of the research carried out on the subject may show valid conclusions to describe the state of the discipline itself. On the other hand, he warns us that those who express an interest in the subject usually shun the theoretical discussion, show little interest in previous results of ethnomusicological research, remain indifferent to other areas of knowledge attracted by the same question, avoid adopting “great theories” –“grand theory or large-scale paradigms”– and evade formulating a general interdisciplinary theory. Rice’s criticism, also made as a call to revert the situation, is followed by several comments, most of them disagreeing with the critical tenor of his observations (Kofi Agawu, Ellen Koskoff, Suzel Reily, T.M. Scruggs, Mark Slobin, Martin Stokes, Jane Sugarman y Tyler Bickford).

Although his commentators show disagreements, all of them very well founded indeed, it is difficult to deny the reading which Rice does of the ethnomusicological scene. His diagnosis, although limited to an only journal, seems capable of being verified not only in the United States but also in other places where what prevails is what Jean-Marie Schaeffer denominates “compulsion for the ontologization of reality” (2012: 54), a sort of fondness for substantializing the object of knowledge and invisibilizing the audition and observation devices. Rice’s diagnosis also seems to be valid to portray not only the research on the fetishized relationship between music and identity but also other research subjects that captivate us. Rice’s idea deserves much more discussion than that which can be seen in the writing of his commentators and what can be said in this editorial. However, it is worth highlighting, even if briefly, a question which arises, mainly, from the comments by Kofi Agawu and Ellen Koskoff. Agawu, among other critiques, reminds Rice that ethnomusicology is a plural discipline and alerts us to the risk which is involved in the transformation of a local knowledge (mainly conceived in the institutions of the United States) into a synthetic theory with universal aspirations. Koskoff, in harmony with Agawu and other detractors (Reily, among them), attacks the idea of disciplining and, in seeming opposition to Rice’s idea, claims for an expansion of dialogue and knowledge (let’s



remember that Rice's text is entitled "Disciplining Ethnomusicology: A Call for a New Approach").

In disagreement with his critics, I think that Rice is claiming for a maximization of dialogue, with all the consequences that this may involve, including a certain undisciplining. However, beyond the way Rice understands the concept of disciplining, the discussion may be redirected from the following question: How can a call for disciplining be understood from the South? How can a call for disciplining be understood from a set of multi-sited geographies which in the last decades scholars from different countries have tried to get on their feet, globalize and at the same time tear off the north –the global South–, decolonize, equate their efficacies with those of the north and show that its alleged condition of underdevelopment is an imaginary invention and at the same time a real creation of the centers of power –economic, political, media and also academic? This question incites us to think about who the subject of that disciplining is (who disciplines whom?) and the means through which disciplining can be possible.

If Michael Foucault lived and were invited to participate in this discussion, he would probably understand that disciplining as a taming of knowledge, which would lead him to speak about institutions, their discourses and the effects of truth they create by means of a sustainable sequence of statements. But, which are the material forms that feed that taming? Or, to say it in terms of another French scholar, close to Foucault: which concrete instruments are those which recruit ethnomusicologists and turn them into disciplined ethnomusicologists? Ethnomusicology is inhabited by various tensions. One of them manifests itself between a force which prevents us from going too far and another one, revitalizing and in a permanent state of opposition, which invites thinking and writing against the grain of hegemonic traditions. There are different areas where both forces reproduce themselves. A particular kind of texts, composed of manuals, encyclopedias, dictionaries and the famous "Key concepts in..." constitute one of the areas – there are many others, obviously– where the first of the forces materializes itself. Written by disciplined authors, these "disciplining texts" discipline their readers both in the use and interpretation of concepts and in bibliographic consultations. Their effect can be enormous in terms of their homogenizing and expansive power, as they are generally developed in the centers which fix the direction of the discipline and its condition of commodity gives them diffusion at global scale –favored in several cases by their legal or illegal presence in cyberspace. It is surprising to see –see ourselves– not very docile authors disciplining themselves in order to write dictionary entries: The editor generally gives precise instructions for the author to be brief and restricted, thus giving rise to enunciations in the present tense of the indicative mood, such as "Tango is...". Besides, these type of texts, aseptic and at odds with doubt and opposing opinions, constitute a big reservoir of theme agendas which replicate themselves in other texts, congresses and workshops. Of course, there are exceptions, as not all the "disciplining texts" are edited in those centers and for some which are, it is usual for researchers from different countries, with different backgrounds and perspectives, to be invited. However, the theoretical and methodological entries, those which constitute the most transversal and influential knowledge, are usually left in the hands of mainstream authors. It must also be admitted that

disciplining is not unidirectional; it does not operate only in the north-south axis. Local canons (this may seem to be an oxymoron), with their “heroes” and procedures, also generate “disciplining texts” which can close inquiry universes. Luckily, some colleagues do not allow themselves to be disciplined so easily and are producing an abundant bibliography, both inside and outside the discipline, which counterbalances any type of taming. Let’s say that there are big liberated areas where thought and writing flow with low levels of disciplining.

Undoubtedly, it is not possible to write turning your back on the “disciplining texts” or the disciplined texts which they generate –articles, essays, monographs, etc.–, or any others. There is not a text vacuum. If we did, we would run the risk of saying what has already been said. Although we would have the advantage of saying without the conditioning presence of what has been said. But this seeming advantage does not justify their exclusion. Thinking and writing from what has already been enunciated poses a challenge. As it is well known, every object of knowledge presents itself with a series of questions and answers attached which define it as such and which are the marks of its construction –sociological, humanistic, philosophical or other. The challenge consists in tearing off every attachment by means of some insurgent thinking in order to think and write with and against the “disciplining” and disciplined texts, thus originating an inter text knowledge which, more than looking for different answers to the usual questions, generates new questions. In this aspect, *El oído pensante* invites its readers to play that game, to expand the liberated area of disciplining. This is the challenge for the colleagues who send us their texts and who, together with them, make it possible for our publication to be a reality.

References

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