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Response to Lam - 1

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Response

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Music has often been described as the most noise conveying the least information. This International Roundtable lifts a skeptical eyebrow to such an assumption. The essays presented here demonstrate the critical role that music plays in human exchanges and in making us human. They engagingly foreground the significance of music as a multilayered text that can be “read” and interpreted outside of its subjective, formal, and sonic qualities. They also emphasize the power of music in shaping the symbolic dimension that permeates all facets of life, from the imaginative-emotional to the politico-social. I am very pleased to see how academic dialogue actively confronts the harmful prejudices which hold that the arts are less useful disciplines than, say, politics, economics, anthropology or sociology, to understand and engage with the world and its phenomena. Dr. Joseph Lam is a scholar who demonstrates how useful indeed the study of the arts can be in understanding the mechanisms of globalization.

In his essay, Dr. Lam argues that music has an uncanny capacity to help us imagine ourselves and the “other” because music reifies abstract notions and identity categories, such as the “historical and spectacular,” “the modern and international,” “the exotic and ethnic,” and “the young and lovable.” He shows us how music makes the invisible tangible through its aural quality by providing a privileged space mediated by a multiplicity of actors where cultural discourses unfold.

I will start this response by highlighting three major contributions in Joseph Lam’s piece but will also share my concern about some of the shortcomings in his argument. This critique will be the platform that I will use to apply Lam’s insights about the discursive nature of music to Galician music and the contradictions in the creation of a contemporary nationalist self. I will conclude with reflections about the way in which music can help us subvert and transcend the paradigm of the nation and the need for the construction of a global self.

Dr. Lam’s essay presents three finely tuned insights. Firstly, he helps us think of music as one of the battlegrounds in which identity is shaped. His analysis takes us to China but I think his contribution has universal

appeal, albeit with regional qualifications. More than political projects, historical conditionings, and religious and ethnic associations, music plays a privileged part in the imagining of the global self because of its immediacy and because it contains, reifies, and is informed by all of the above. By highlighting its discursive nature in its practice and its products, Lam shows that music is not an innocent and “unembedded” object meant solely for aesthetic pleasure, but that, in fact, it carries meaning and provides an aural venue for the intangible threads of identity to be woven. Eduard Hanslick, summarizing the tenets of formalist criticism, has said that, “music has no subject beyond the combinations of notes we hear, for music speaks...nothing but sound.”¹ Lam’s essay refutes such a premise. He argues that music is defined by what it signifies, and not by its sounds alone. Music acts as an epistemological palimpsest of critical importance in a confused age when individuals and communities are searching for ways to re-imagine their souls; when they are seeking a coherent articulation of their desires, subjectivities and yearnings that will infuse their political and historical projects, and their presence on this planet, with meaning.

Secondly, the constructivist assumptions behind Lam’s meditations logically focus his analysis on the means of music making. When he asks about what is global and what is Chinese, he calls attention to the way in which practitioners construct music by borrowing and incorporating foreign elements and practices, a trend that defines any global exchange. Lam uses the example of a Chinese tour guide merrily singing American tunes on a barge over the Yangtze River to illustrate the quasi-alchemic process of transforming the foreign into the Chinese. This requires “disciplining the foreign as something universal, learned, and owned,” which can subsequently undergo a process of autochthonous assimilation. The main point is that there is nothing nationally or culturally authentic; cultural practices are but an alloy of influences and currents from diverse sites.

Finally, I would like to highlight the political implications of Lam’s essay. If music is a battleground in which the self is built and negotiated, then it provides a rich, subversive, and accessible platform for individuals living under an authoritarian regime. Music allows them to express their agency and to compete and bargain *vis-à-vis* their international *other*. By applauding this insight, I simultaneously begin my criticism of Lam’s piece.

The central point of my critique is that Dr. Lam fails to thoroughly address the political dimensions of his argument. It is true that politi-

cal implications pulsate underneath his arguments, but Lam avoids questioning how, for instance, the creation of a globalized Chinese self actually coincides with or is in dissonance with the agenda of Chinese national institutions; what the consequences are of “exoticizing” Chinese sonic textures for tourists; or how global market dynamics affect the production of Chinese folk music. With minimal comment on these matters, we are left to wonder whether globalization leads to an instant commodification and a painful reductionism of complex and ancient musical traditions. Although Lam looks at the music of an ethnic minority, the Yi, he does not explore how other minorities, such as the Tibetans or the Uyghur, imagine and express a contrasting self in relation to their national counterparts. Similarly worrying is his focus on a Chinese self that, although multifarious, is defined nationally and in opposition to an international *other*.

Wanting to further examine the relationship between politics, identity, and the musical imagination, I would like to apply Dr. Lam’s discursive analysis to the role of music in the formation of nationalist identities. By nationalism I am referring to “the doctrine that makes the nation the object of every political endeavor and national identity the measure of every human value.”² In the European context, the nationalist forces that punctuate domestic politics in many countries are crucial to understanding the contradictions of a historical moment when the nation-state is under serious attack and when internal national boundaries are being abolished. However, as we learn from a quick glance at the newspaper, borders and nations still matter. Just weeks ago, the Spanish press reported that more than four hundred people attending a nationalist demonstration in Catalonia burned images of the Spanish king while singing *Els Segadors*, the Catalan anthem.³

As Anthony Smith suggests, “in many ways national symbols, customs and ceremonies are the most potent and durable aspects of nationalism. They embody its basic concepts, making them visible for every member, communicating the tenets of an abstract ideology in palpable, concrete terms that evoke instant emotional responses from all strata of community.”⁴ It is in this sphere of the emotive-political that I seek to understand how music articulates a nationalist ideology by building an imagined contemporary nationalist self.

In order to explore this, I have chosen a musical “soundscape” that is very dear and familiar to me: Galician music, the music produced in the northwestern autonomous region of Spain.

Galicia has a distinct character and culture, different from the rest of the regions that comprise Spain. Gallego, a romance language closely related to Portuguese, is the native language. Since 1978 it has enjoyed co-official status in Galicia together with Castellano. From pre-Roman days, Galicia was occupied by Celtic tribes from Ireland and the British Isles, whereas the rest of the people on the peninsula were of Iberian origin. This Celtic past has survived through the ages in its mythological and poetic form and, for some, grants claims of a distinct ethnic identity. Whereas this is arguable, its culture does present many unique features. Galician music, for instance, stands out from the rest of the musical traditions in the Iberian Peninsula. Its flagship instrument is the *gaita*, a version of the bagpipe. The *gaita* has become *the* symbol of Galician national identity. The Romantic poets of the nineteenth century that articulated the nationalist tenets of the *Rexurdimento* movement spoke of the beauty of this instrument and its connection to the land. Its potent melody always accompanies official acts and informal events alike.

The symbolic importance of the *gaita* has an indisputable political dimension. Last year, a group of musicians had the creative but unfortunate idea of performing in an official event a version of the Galician anthem in Flamenco style. The Galician Nationalist Party presented a resolution in the Galician parliament to prevent this from ever happening again. As Dr. Lam points out, “whenever the self is factually or psychologically threatened, the efforts to preserve and to adjust the treasured self promptly emerge.” Indeed, members of the nationalist party argued that it was their duty “to defend our culture, our music and our symbols.”⁵

Since Franco’s death in 1975, nationalism has become a major political force in Galicia and other Spanish regions. The Galician Nationalist Bloc (BNG in Spanish) is the main nationalist political party in Galicia. Based on claims of the existence of a distinct national identity different from the rest of the country, the BNG strives for self-determination and eventual independence. Today the BNG holds a modest number of seats in the Galician parliament but it is now governing in the region, thanks to an alliance with the Socialist Party.

It is necessary to mention that several competing projects of Galician selfhood coexist today in the region. For instance, a large number

of Gallegos, although they have been born and live in Galicia, conceive their self as a uniquely Spanish one, believe in the territorial and political unity of the Spanish nation, and rarely use Gallego (or limit it to the private sphere). Another equally important self is that of individuals who comfortably inhabit a dual or benevolently schizophrenic self, the result of a combination of both Galician and Spanish identities. Finally, there is the nationalist self, which discourages a dual Galician/Spanish identity and favors an exclusively Galician one. This Galician self, however, is often imagined in a global context.

By analyzing the sonic texture of the *gaita* in the work of two Galician pipers, I endeavor to illustrate how music helps to simultaneously articulate and subvert a nationalist identity, while offering a creative way of imagining a Galician global self.

Mercedes Peón is in many ways the symbol of the renaissance of Galician folk music. A BBC World Music award nominee, she has spent ten years visiting Galician villages, collecting and recording the oldest of Galician musical expressions from the rapidly disappearing oral tradition of the Galician people. Her ethnographic fieldwork has yielded more than two thousand hours of musical material, which has crystallized in three CDs. In her work, the rough and primal vocal rhythms of the Galician heartlands can often be heard in conjunction with a hoe, whose blade she beats with a piece of cut flint to provide percussion. The *gaita* plays a central part in her music, but the sonic texture of this instrument is very different from its traditional sound. Peón places the *gaita* in the crossroads where tradition and modernity meet.

A sinuous, primeval sonic quality confers Peón's piece with a surprising, new-age-cum-medievalist flavor. I believe Peón has undertaken the romanticist project of "reconstructing the sounds of the nation in all its concrete specificity and with 'archaeological' verisimilitude."⁶ She goes back to the past and the oral tradition, which are the genuine sources of the *Volksgeist*. Peón thus rescues the "authentic" national character of the land. However, as she herself has stated, her music is not "traditional [but] an evolutionary expression of the people, from generation to generation."⁷ The way she incorporates synthesizers, prerecorded sounds from nature, and other digital technology to create special sonic effects attests to this. By creating such a soundscape, Peón suggests "the nation's antiquity and continuity, its noble heritage and the drama of its ancient glory and regeneration,"⁸ now accomplished through electronic technology and international

global markets. The global Galician self holds the hand of the past while walking confidently into the future.

Despite their connection to the land, modern Galician people are also global nomads. Over the last 150 years, at least 2.5 million Galicians (roughly the population of contemporary Galicia)⁹ have migrated in massive numbers to Latin America, to the point that nowadays Spaniards in the American continent are referred to as Gallegos.

This global presence is best captured in the music of Cristina Pato. This twenty-seven-year-old piper belongs to the “Erasmus generation,” that growing group of European students who, thanks to the educational policies of the European Union, have become more aware of the cultural diversity beyond their national borders. As Pato has stated, her musical project consists of “mixing the *gaita* with other musics. [She wants] to drink and eat from other cultures.”¹⁰ This thirst for hybridity led her to collaborate with the Silk Road Ensemble in New York last year. More importantly, it can be appreciated in the eclecticism of her last two works, in which she combines traditional musical codes from Galicia with Latin music, jazz, and blues.

Adjusting the *gaita* to the musical codes of other traditions alters its sonic texture in surprising and inspiring ways. In conjunction with electric guitars and a piano, the *gaita* transcends its melancholic, lyric, and martial tonalities. It becomes explosively sensual and enticing. It achieves a cosmopolitan dimension that projects the desires of the global Galician self.

This transcultural process of music making, however, is not totally devoid of a nationalist agenda. Pato states that her goal is “to bring the *gaita* to the same level with other instruments...because I am a woman of the world, but first of all I am *gallega*.”¹¹

The hybridity of Pato’s music is not new. As some of the Galician immigrants returned from Latin America in the 1930s, they brought with them Cuban rumbas, Argentinean tangos, and Mexican rancheras that were adapted and incorporated into the *gaita*’s repertoire. Ironically, the proponents of Galician nationalism in the pre-Franco years despised these “sins of the art...this profanation of the Galician *gaita*.”¹² Both in Pato’s work and that of her predecessors, we see how the foreign is not disciplined, as Dr. Lam suggests, but is emphasized and made salient, either to embrace or to despise it.

The two examples I have used reveal the inherent contradictions enmeshed in the formation of a contemporary nationalist identity. On the one hand, musicians project a global Galician self, confident in dif-

ferent cultural codes and embracing global technologies and markets. At the same time, they participate in a nationalist project that rejects the idea of a world community in its moral unity. Nationalism, as Smith argues, “offers a narrow, conflict-laden legitimation for political community, which inevitably pits culture-communities against each other.”¹³ I am perfectly aware of the need to actively preserve and cherish traditions and cultures but I cannot condone the radicalism and insularity that is often used to defend such postures. Similarly, I understand that individuals and communities need to have an identity core that centers them and allows them to meaningfully interact with each other. However, the narrow-mindedness displayed by these tendencies can be harmful.

If music allows us, as Dr. Lam deftly shows, to re-imagine ourselves and our relationship with the rest of the world, why not transcend parochial attachments and truly embrace a global identity? After all, as Benedict Anderson has said, communities and nations are constructed through acts of the imagination. In order to encompass a more accurate reflection of the global Galician self, it is necessary to create a global identity that is not bound to national imperatives. As Macalester College President Rosenberg, quoting Shelly, appropriately reminds us, artists “are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” Their duty, I believe, is to legislate ethically and responsibly.

I would like to conclude by inviting Dr. Lam to reflect on how Chinese practitioners might transcend the Sino-nationalism that propels some of the musical projects he describes. Although Chinese citizens might not approve of their government’s policies at home or abroad, thinking of the self along strictly national lines and in terms of competition with the international *other* can make it harder to empathize with people elsewhere. This might lead to indifference toward the plight of people from other countries and might contribute to the maintenance of China’s stance in global matters, such as its policies on Darfur and Burma. I am aware that currently the chances of transcending the paradigm of the nation-state are slim at best. Music and the arts, however, provide a critical site from which to start re-imagining ourselves in relation to our multiple collective identifications.

Notes

1. Eduard Hanslick, quoted by Wolfgang Sandberger in the liner notes to the Julliard String Quartet's *Intimate Letters*, Sony Classical SK 66840 (1996).
2. Anthony Smith, *National Identity* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991), p. 18.
3. "Unos 400 independentistas queman fotos de la Familia Real en Gerona," *El Mundo* (14 September 2007), accessed online at <http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2007/09/14/espana/1189722476.html>.
4. Smith, p. 78.
5. "El BNG protesta por una interpretación del himno gallego en versión gallega," *El Mundo* (21 December 2006), accessed online at <http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2006/12/21/espana/1166707683.html>.
6. Smith, p. 92.
7. Mercedes Peón, *Global Village Idiot*, accessed online at <http://www.globalvillageidiot.net/peon.htm>.
8. Smith, p. 92.
9. Xose Ramón Barreiro Fernández, *Galicia-Historia* Vol. V (A Coruña: Hercules, 1991), p. 35.
10. "Encuentro Digital con Cristina Pato," *El Mundo* (18 April 2001), accessed online at <http://www.elmundo.es/encuentros/invitados/2001/04/36/index.html>.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Luis María Fernández Espinosa, "La Instrumentación de la música gallega," *Faro de Vigo* (15 July 1930).
13. Smith, p. 18.