Interview with Steven Loza

By Jessie Vallejo and Nolan Warden

On December 9, 2010, PRE editors Jessie Vallejo and Nolan Warden sat down to talk with Steven Loza, Professor of Ethnomusicology at UCLA. We were interested to know his current thoughts on the changing field of ethnomusicology since the publication of his article "Challenges to the Euroamericentric Ethnomusicological Canon" (2006). The transcribed and edited interview below covers diversity in ethnomusicology, critiques of academia, issues of diversity in academic publications, and the role of graduate students in the field.



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Professor Steven Loza in front of UCLA's Powell Library.

PRE: Could you tell us a bit about the development of your article (2006) that critiques what you call the Euroamericentric ethnomusicological canon?

LOZA: Well, I've been writing this material for quite some time. If you go back to an article I published in *Heterofonía* (1994) way back in the 90's—it was called Masked Phantoms—and it was thoughts on the field of ethnomusicology. It was published in Mexico about the time I was going up for tenure and I remember people warning me—"don't publish it before you get tenure"—because I was attacking the field. I was, at that point, looking at the issue of theological belief and also art, the making of art, and how distant those seem to be from the field of ethnomusicology.

The other issue was keeping belief systems totally out of what we do because there were conflicts about it. And my question is how can we keep something out of anything, especially if we're doing a complete intellectual job? So in

essence, as the years went on, I just started noticing the standards and how Eurocentric—or as I would say, Euroamericentric—they were, and it was just something that started to grow and grow.

We have these reading lists we compile that are just European and American—and a Canadian or two in there—and that's it! So my point—and the point of some of my colleagues like Jacqueline DjeDje—was that if you're a student of color, Black, Latino, or Native American, how are you going to react to that? Where am I? Where are my people? Isn't there a contradiction there?

So I started to think about what some alternatives would be [to a Euroamericentric canon]. I mean, that's a very important topic for the field—what are we teaching our students? And I guess I really started to react.

Of course, sometimes when you say this stuff you're considered sort of radical, highly political, but we have to be candid. We have to say this stuff. I would imagine that there are a number of people who don't like what I'm saying. The problem is that they don't say anything. And part of—I think—what people think about me and maybe others is that we complain a lot, that we whine a lot. Well, we have something to complain about!

Connected to that article is a more recent work in the *Religion as Art* anthology (2009). I actually use a good portion of that original article (1994) where I assess Merriam's approach and then I come up with a more subjective-based, non-positivist-based alternative to Merriam's whole notion of sciencing about music instead of, you know, arting it. That started to emerge as a huge contradiction to me, especially to those of us who studied here at UCLA and were inspired by the legacy of Mantle Hood. I started noticing a distancing of that philosophy as the program went on, so that now I feel the gap is wider than ever. The performance aspect is just more of a utilitarian side bar.

PRE: Many of the alternative readings that you suggested in your article (2006) are now part of the core graduate curriculum at UCLA. How did you move the reading list in that direction?

LOZA: I started putting them in there on my own as I got more established, and as I thought about the problem more. It wasn't like that at the beginning, because the first list I ever taught with—which was like 25 years ago—was a list that another professor had developed, and it was just devoid of any of that stuff. So I eventually crept in there with it and I started putting that stuff in at least ten years ago, if not more. Here at UCLA we're also finally trying to make some changes in the music program with the [undergraduate] core curriculum class that Tim Rice has been initiating, but it's not an easy animal to handle.

PRE: Could you talk about things that have changed since your article on the Euroamericentric canon came out after the 50th anniversary of SEM?

LOZA: Well, for one thing, the theme of that year's conference was something like War and Reconciliation. But in Hawai'i the theme was Decolonizing Ethnomusicology. Then, two years later at Wesleyan, they had a president's roundtable by Debora Wong on SEM and American imperialism. I mean, obviously this theme sort of took off. Also, at the 2009 SEM conference in Mexico City, there was a voluminous amount of panels on Mexican and Latin American topics. There was a reaction and it really changed the dynamic. For one thing, it doesn't all have to be in English.

We've been talking about this stuff for years, you know, the “underworld.” And it has to come out. But I would think it's very threatening to the old boys, the old system. And it's a system that isn't all just white boys. So I think there has been some major movement, and you guys were here at the Crossroads committee conference [2009]. We discussed these issues at length. At the SEM conference in Mexico, [the Crossroads committee] came up with a list of issues that we wanted to address.

PRE: You and others have also been somewhat critical of top-down methods of addressing diversity, pointing out that it can sometimes seem patronizing or a case of being used to fill some perceived quota. Do top-down actions work, or is there another approach that should be taken?

LOZA: Well, this whole thing is top down! And again, going back to the issue of why people conform to that, well, because it's coming from the top and “if I want to make it in the system, I better conform to it.” And sometimes you don't even think about it, especially if you're not critical. What makes some of us critical is our experience, our negative experience, unfortunately. So when you express that, when you articulate that, when you try to make it part of your work, you're considered to be a rebellious person, a non-conformist. But I’m not suggesting we have to

get rid of everything, for example, classical music. It's not a matter of getting rid of that, it's a matter of adding this other stuff. That's what's going to make us more diverse. We're not going to be diverse if we just get rid of something to learn something else. It's not a matter of trying to destroy what is there, what is good. It's about hegemonic standards of gender, age, class, race, ethnicity, and religion. That's what the Crossroads thing was supposed to look into, issues of underrepresentation, of difference, of diversity.

There are things that I'm still very disappointed with. I feel that many universities are reverting or regressing back to a more privileged class. It's got a lot to do with economics, but also with apathy, even by some of the marginalized groups of people. Maybe they're just tired, or lost that passion, or feel that it was already done. But I don't think that I have been critical just for the sake of arguing. I don't think that's the reason. I think there's definitely a philosophical basis.

PRE: Could you talk about how you feel your critique of ethnomusicology connects to academia in general? How does the SEM Crossroads Committee fit in?

LOZA: They're very related issues, because they're moral issues, whether it's discrimination and prejudice, or underrepresentation. There's also a problem of not wanting to talk about metaphysical issues or about non-rational issues. Yet, I would question a lot of hard science, or certainly social science, as being rational. What is rational? We're afraid to say what we believe in or who we are, even though we expect our so-called informants to tell us those things. We want to know what they believe in and we want to explain it to the world, but "don't ask me what I believe in!" We go into the field with masks, but what are you masking? It's that very issue that is missing.

But there's also the issue of "publish-or-perish." All these books are being published and they sit on the shelf. So what's going on here? My interpretation of it is that academia has become sort of like "well if you want to get tenure, you have to have a book." That became a big issue in the Crossroads discussion. Why does it have to be just a book? Why couldn't you do some fantastic documentary that's shown on PBS? Or why couldn't you do some kind of other work within the community that you're working with? Why can't you get tenure based even on your teaching pedagogies, or maybe trying to develop some educational plan for K-12 through higher education—really trying to change society instead of just writing a book with all the current theoretical, you know, citations!

We are in the field of ethnomusicology, which really has taken the lead in trying to study different cultures of the world. So wouldn't it behoove us to be the ones who are changing these standards? We're the ones who can do this more than anybody.

I also think one of the most critical areas of the academic system that we really have to debate and examine is the competitive nature of what we're doing. Do you know how competitive the system is? So, if you're a graduate student you say "I'm going to write an abstract for a paper, and I better include all the right citations and names so that I'll get accepted because I'm competing against all these other abstracts." So there's this competitive nature—there's something morally wrong there. Are we doing this to prove how great we are as individuals? Now, sometimes, I hate to admit it, but I think my ego has certainly affected a lot of my work. A lot of times I found myself wanting to publish another essay just to have a big publication list, just numbers, just to be heavy.

On the other hand, that competition is a prime motivation that makes you go, that makes you want to do it. But see, sometimes if you're competing you may end up doing something that you really don't want to do, something that's not really part of your creative thrust, but you do it just to compete. "I have to use these theoretical sources, or else." So you patch them in there and it ends up being artificial. Is it really what you were inspired to do, what you feel you should be doing? Or are you doing it in order to compete? Now that's a moral predicament, isn't it?

PRE: You often bring up the issue of morality or moral inquiry.

LOZA: Yes, I do. Yes.

PRE: Often that's seen more as a specialization within philosophy rather than something that underlies all academic work. How do you envision morality within academia?

LOZA: Well, I think that's one of the things I'm citing as a problem. Through the years I've been sometimes reticent to bring up my own moral philosophies. But recently I've been less masked about it because it should be part of what we're doing. That was a big point I made in that article I published in Mexico (1994). What we're doing here is all about morality. Why are we here? We are here to learn so that we can give to society, so that we can have a

positive impact, to make it a better world. That's what we're doing here. Are we here to make a bunch of money? Is that why we're here? I thought we were here to be philosophers.

PRE: How does that fit with the pragmatic side of job training or professionalization? Or does it?

LOZA: We might have to be more practical about the kinds of things we're preparing ourselves for, so that instead of telling graduate students "you have to publish books because that's the way to get tenure, and here's a way to do that, and blah blah blah." Well, wait a minute! We're not even sure there'll be jobs! They're cutting them!

PRE: From our perspective, as editors of *PRE*, the issues that you raise about peer review (2006) are really immediate. There is the issue of *what* should be published, or what is good enough. But then there's also the aspect of being entirely online. It has the potential to break barriers of what is "standard" or "expected" for scholarly publishing, but getting people to wrap their minds around the possibilities is a steep uphill battle. We're still in a 19th century publishing mindset in terms of how the media itself is used to make an argument. For example, we have been trying to get people to submit ethnographic or documentary videos for peer-reviewed publication in lieu of text-based work. But people don't seem to get it, or maybe they're not going to focus on it in case a tenure review board would disregard it.

LOZA: Well, I mean that is precisely why I wrote that essay (2006). And by the way, when I presented that as a paper, the room was packed! And I think the paper created a big controversy—I have a feeling that there was some political response. But the question you just asked was what can we do? Well, we can publish that kind of stuff.

Remember in the article I also made the point that Spanish, English, and Mandarin are going to be major languages in the future just because of politics and economics, not to mention culture. Being in Los Angeles, we're basically a bilingual city—English and Spanish. Publishing in Spanish would be a heavy ideological statement.

PRE: Well, last year we started accepting submissions in Spanish and Portuguese. We even translated the call-for-papers into Spanish, but we didn't get any Spanish submissions. For the past two years we received only English and Portuguese submissions, and this year is our second year with a Portuguese article. But what does that do for our audience? If it were Spanish, there would be a decent audience for it amongst people who already know about *PRE*. In Portuguese, though, it's hard to tell if there are that many people who are going to read it in the U.S. So, is the answer simply to have people trained in more languages? I mean, you mention in the article (2006) about the importance of Chinese, but none of our editors speak or read Chinese. Similarly, German is a huge part of the history of ethnomusicology but it's not a required language in most programs today. How do we deal with all of this?

LOZA: You're pushing the issue of academic standards! So much of this is about standards; those that are mandated versus the ones that are questioned or being challenged. I think that's a bold example of what you're doing, something that the *Ethnomusicology* journal probably wouldn't do at this time. And you know what journals have done in the last twenty years? Some of the multi-lingual journals have now gone to English only. For example, *Worlds of Music*, the German publication. It's all in English now. Twenty years ago, at least the abstracts would be done in English, German, and French. Now they only have English abstracts, right? And back then the articles could also be in different languages. A lot of it is based on practicality, and maybe it's based on the tiny market of academic publishing. But you see, if you do even one or two articles in Spanish or Portuguese, there will be a reaction from Latin America and *PRE* will start getting a different readership. And those readers will also read the English anyway. I wouldn't call it just a token action, it's a step, a bold step. But going towards all English—well, no.

PRE: It's interesting to consider what some journals related to indigenous issues are doing. *AlterNATIVE*, for example, which is based in New Zealand, publishes in all sorts of languages. Of course, they're doing it more to make a space for languages that are falling out of use or have the potential to become extinct, but it vastly diversifies their audience and connects academia with other communities.

LOZA: That's what you call humanitarian or a humanist approach! Take an article that's written with all this high-powered theory. You think anyone beyond academia is going to read that journal? Don't you think being concerned about transmitting concepts is important? It's humanist. And it's also an intellectual goal, a mission. That should be the basis for a lot of the way we publish and for even the way we think. So to whom am I writing? Am I just worried about the possibility that some big name in the field is going to read it? Should that be our goal?

PRE: Do you suggest, then, that scholarly articles or scholarly journals should be written with a different audience

in mind?

LOZA: Well, no. I think [journals] should be diverse. Why not mix the genres? I would highly recommend that it be multi-format, and not just in terms of the technological medium like *PRE*, but in terms of the intellectual standards and content. Why not invite an artist, for example, to write something and also have one of his or her performances to go with it? So that is where *PRE* or similar journals can take the lead.

PRE: Does that entail changing the editorial process and peer review? Would editors be selecting artists or non-academic scholars and giving them that opportunity to put their voice out there without intervening in the normal peer-review manner?

LOZA: Well, I think peer review is fine, but if you bring in some piece that is non-traditional for an academic journal, have it reviewed by a person representing that context. And that's where you are thus recognizing a different intellectual standard.

PRE: What is the role of graduate students? You mention in your article that you became sort of politicized when you were a graduate student but that graduate students today are dealing with a more conservative atmosphere. Can you expand on that? Do you mean intellectual conservatism? Has the academy regressed since then in some way? Put on more of a mask?

LOZA: Yes, I think it has regressed. And the mask is on really tight now. Before, the masks seemed to be falling off—you could see them or see that there was nothing behind the mask because it was a phantom. But now, the masks are very firm, so you can't even tell if they're real or not. I'm being rather sarcastic but when I was a student there were a lot of people like [J.H. Kwabena] Nketia who were very sympathetic to this issue. And then, [Nazir] Jairazbhoy, Jihad Racy, Charlotte Heth and, of course, [Jacqueline] DjeDje.
And I think it's all still there but it’s become so institutionalized. It’s just like the diversity thing. Back then it was sort of more hardcore. It was a movement, or the end of a movement. But it was still there and as an undergrad I had seen it. It was politics. I would say that, yes, people are afraid to get too political now. And they're afraid to not use the current fashion or vogue of theories because their paper won't be accepted, or your book won't be published, or you won't get a job! To me, it's almost like we're developing robots.

Look, I’ve learned more from students than anybody else—from graduate students especially. Why? I can't read all of this stuff [pointing out the immense number of books around his office]. That's why I'm such a great fan of [Paulo] Freire's dialogic, and I use that. I use that more every year as my teaching pedagogy. So, we should be learning from each other.

But this field, more than any other, should be at the head of this thing, because we automatically are anyway. But I don't think that we’re at the head in terms of academic standards. We're at the head in terms of what we study and the incredible diversity of things we do. Consider the diversity of topics in the *Garland Encyclopedia*. Yes, incredible. But, again, look at the authors. We have to diversify at both levels. Sometimes people might say “but those native authors aren’t up to the academic standard to write a book.” But what are we doing to recognize *their* standards? Are they really *lower* standards? Especially if we're studying those people to learn what they do? How can it be lower? So of all the academic fields, we should be the one really integrating the standards. If you can do that with *PRE*, I would say “yes.” Yes! I think if some of the Western greats like Mozart or Beethoven were alive today, they would be on our side. That's what I think.

PRE: That’s a great quote. Maybe we’ll end with it.

LOZA: Yeah, that's a good one!

References

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