# Theory “Between Inside and Outside”: A Response to Zachary Wallmark’s “Sacred Abjection in Zen Shakuhachi”

James Rhys Edwards

Assessing the *shakuhachi* tradition of the Fuke sect of Zen Buddhism through French psychoanalytic optics, Zachary Wallmark engages in a type of scholarly practice that many ethnomusicologists would find problematic—if not, indeed, abject: the application of Western theoretical paradigms to non-Western music cultures. Wallmark is aware of this problem: after introducing Julia Kristeva’s concept of abjection as reliant upon “a strictly policed binary logic founded on the fundamental duality between ‘I’ and ‘not-I,’” he asks whether this logic can be credibly mapped onto “cultures and musical systems that reject binary logic,” an appellation which Japanese Zen Buddhism might seem to exemplify. Rather than attempting to answer this question through etic theoretical maneuvering, Wallmark, a shakuhachi player himself, turns to fellow tradition-bearers Bill Shozan Schultz, Kentaro Idemitsu, and Watazumi Doso (among others); scholar Tsuneko Tsukitani; and, most revealingly, a set of early nineteenth-century manuscripts by Hisamatsu Fuyo; “virtually the only [premodern] sources for the spiritual background of the musical practices of the Fuke-Sect” (Gutzwiller 1984:57). The resulting dialogue between practitioners unfolds a multifaceted insider exegesis of the nuanced relationship between sound and spiritual practice, the dynamics of which are modified in each instance by personal as well as subcultural, cultural, and transcultural values.

Wallmark’s emic turn facilitates a suturing with ethnomusicology’s cultural relativist theoretical doxa; in light of recent calls to re-examine the place of theory within ethnomusicology, however, I would like to temporarily re-open the suture (see Rice 2010, etc.). Setting aside Japan for a moment, it is interesting to note that the emic/etic binary—anthropological shorthand for insider/outsider—can itself be juxtaposed with Kristeva’s concept of the abject. Critiquing the classical Freudian assumption that an *a priori* opposition exists between subject and object, Kristeva hypothesizes that in order to establish a “defensive position” of bounded subjectivity, we must constantly abject, or cast away, that which recalls the primal indeterminacy “between I/Other or, in more archaic fashion, between Inside and Outside” (1982:7). Whereas for Freud, primary repression is the repression of the already-constituted subject's forbidden desire for a particular relation to a particular object (the mother), Kristeva suggests that primary repression is the repression of the original ambiguity of the subject-object relation itself, and posits abjection as an almost autonomic response to objects which portend a return to this repressed proto-subjective condition. Bodily fluids, wounds, vomit-inducing foods, and the act of vomiting: such things do not provoke unease because they recall specific psychological traumas, but rather, because their quality of in-between-ness recalls the fragility of the Inside/Outside border on which our individuated existence depends.

Because Kristeva's concept of abjection is not bound to any one general theory of psychodynamics, it can serve as a pivot point between microanalysis of the subject and macroanalysis of any social field in which affectively over-determined Inside/Outside binaries come into play. As previously hinted at, academia itself is one such field. There is significant social capital invested in the disciplinary criteria by which areas and methods of inquiry are deemed legitimate or illegitimate, and the disciplinary vocabularies with which we represent our ‘informants’ and ourselves. For all the debate within ethnomusicology over the transcultural portability of certain culturally loaded theoretical concepts—“the aesthetic,” for example, or “the abject”—other concepts are often exempted from interrogation; perhaps, to borrow from the contemporary pop-political vernacular, they are implicitly regarded as “too big to fail.” At the root of our own disciplinary vocabulary, of course, there is “music”—a word that is itself far from unproblematic. To write about “Japanese music” as if the term were transparent, for example, would be to ignore the fact that “before contact with the West, Japan had no all-embracing term referring to any [and all] humanly organized sound, religious or secular, vocal or instrumental, aristocratic or plebian” (Hosokawa 2012:2).[1]

Of course, this is no longer the case: beginning in the 1880s, the Japanese state proactively introduced the word *ongaku* as a translational equivalent to “music,” largely to facilitate the implementation of standardized music education programs in the newly centralized schools and military. It is telling that the concept of “music” entered Japan as a matter of policy; indeed, the lack of a premodern concept-word for anthropogenic sound applicable across stylistic and social boundaries speaks eloquently to the Meiji government’s monumental task of forging “a new concept of a national people that would overcome . . . the painful realities of a nation divided by class and regional differences” (Doak 1996:94). While certainly useful as a classifier, this concept-word did not enter the Japanese language without friction, nor was it devoid of baggage. In part due to the circumstances of its

introduction and in part because it had been used in the past to refer to musics of Tang Chinese origin, ongaku initially carried a connotation of foreign-ness (Western-ness) that made scholars of Japanese music hesitant to adopt it (Hosokawa 2012:6). To others, this very connotation ennobled the term: when prewar ethnographer Tanabe Hisao asked a Japanese colonial official in Taiwan whether the aboriginal population had ongaku, “the officer’s reply was categorical: ‘they have songs but no ongaku’” (7). His meaning, of course, was that the aboriginals had no *civilized* music. Introduced as a means of nationalizing structures of feeling, the concept of “music” quickly emerged as an index of the new Japanese nation-state’s progress toward a Euro-American standard of civilization, as well as toward the realization of its desire for geopolitical parity with the Western imperial powers—a desire of which Tanabe’s and the dismissive colonial official’s very presence in Taiwan was symptomatic.

Ironically, Western visitors to Japan had been making similarly dismissive pronouncements for centuries. Portuguese missionary Luis Frois wrote in 1588 that “Japanese music, since they all howl together in one single voice in falsetto, is the most horrid that can exist” (Eppstein 2007:192), while the first British minister to Japan, Sir Rutherford Alcock, asserted in 1863 that “the discord they make, when they set themselves to produce what they call music, is something that baffles all description” (195). Japan was not the only non-Western society to be judged by its humanly organized sound: Western scholars have long deployed the music/non-music binary as a means of marking the border between the civilized and the savage, the human and the non-human worlds. The first work of comparative transcription, a 1636 study of Canadian and Brazilian indigenous songs by Marin Marsenne, introduced “a logical-analytical chain of reasoning that linked the sounds of nature, inanimate objects, animals, children, and women with non-European people and their music” (Ellingson 1992:113); just over two centuries later, in his canonical work *On the Musically Beautiful*, Eduard Hanslick lamented that “when the South Sea Islander bangs rhythmically with bits of metal and wooden staves and along with it sets up an unintelligible wailing, this is the natural kind of ‘music’, yet it just is not *music*” (1986:70). Hanslick’s quasi-Hegelian speculation on the progression of “the musically competent Spirit” from “the natural kind of ‘music’” to proper "*music*” foreshadowed early comparative musicological narratives of a linear evolution from inarticulate noise, through various "primitive" stages (of which non-Western musics are vestigial traces), to mature Western polyphony. Remarkably, this evolutionism persisted in musicological discourse well into the twentieth century, as evidenced by Curt Sachs’s 1943 exclamation that “it is exciting to learn that the earliest known stage of music reappears in the babble songs of small children in European countries. For once the ontogenic law is fully confirmed: the individual summarized the evolution of mankind” (44).

It is, of course, the impulse to reject the violence implicit in such statements that drives contemporary ethnomusicologists to police against theoretical imperialism.[2] Yet might the very vehemence of our rejection—or abjection—testify to the uncanny realization that our Eurocentric past is not as external to us as we would like to think? In a structural sense, after all, it is very much alive; imperialism established the historical preconditions for the development of the social structures and contradictions which we, as students of contemporary non-Western cultures, have set ourselves to decoding—as well as the institutionalized Euro-American privilege which affords us the luxury of doing so within the relatively autonomous social field of the academy. The "line in the sand" often drawn between cultural relativism and (Eurocentric) universalism dissembles the fact that both ideologies are discursive constructs of a particular expansionist political-economic system—identified by Jameson as late capitalism, by Wallerstein as the modern world-system, etc.—which has achieved a previously inconceivable degree of global saturation. When we ontologize cultural difference as it appears at any one point in time, we unwittingly occlude the dialectical interplay of systemic historical forces within which real and imagined differences (in ideology, artistic practices, the practice of everyday life, etc.) take shape. As Jameson, Wallerstein, and others have pointed out, this occlusion cripples our ability to formulate meaningful anti-systemic critique.

My point here is not to advocate “the arrogant and wholesale imposition by Western scholars of theories created in the crucible of one culture on other cultures” (Sorgenfrei 2007:312)—this is not a mode of scholarly practice that deserves recuperation. Neither, however, is the thinly veiled racial or environmental determinism toward which radical evocations of cultural relativism sometimes point (313). The concept of dwelling between these extremes is hardly new; few ethnomusicologists today would defend either the grand theories of high modernism or the essentialist models of culture invoked by nationalist politicians. It is, however, a perpetual challenge, one that demands a continual testing and expansion of the limits and norms of discourse. Often, this can be done through tried-and-true (ethno)musicological methods: in graphing the audible difference between recordings made by master shakuhachi players Doso Watazumi and Richard Stagg, for example, Wallmark renders visible the heterogeneity of what non-tradition-bearers might perceive as a unified "Inside," reminding us that difference obtains within the emic and etic as well as between them. Sometimes, however, adopting an extra-disciplinary perspective proves more fruitful: Wallmark’s use of Kristeva and Bataille to illuminate the seemingly paradoxical

relationship between spiritual and aesthetic experience in the Fuke tradition demonstrates this admirably.

The paper’s greatest strength, though, is not these deductions but the discursive framework through which it arrives at them: dialogue. If we are sincere in our desire to attune our disciplinary norms to the intellectual and artistic needs of a rapidly changing and increasingly multi-polar world, we should consider the benefit of treating the bearers of the musical traditions we study as interlocutors rather than ‘informants’; as equally capable of theoretical and methodological inquiry as ourselves, and often invested in applying the fruits of their own intellectual journeys to their musical (and spiritual) practice. Interestingly, Kristeva’s re-assessment of the self-Other distinction as the permutable trace of a continual interplay of internal and external forces rather than an *a priori* binary intersects with the dialogic model of ethnography adopted by Wallmark and other recent scholars. Dialogic ethnography, which assumes an ethical and intellectual (if not necessarily political or economic) parity with the tradition-bearer, seeks to give the Inside/Outside binary an in-between, a space of mediation. In this model, etic theory can be introduced into discourse less as an exegetical fiat than as an incitement to further dialogue and the collaborative creation of synthetic theory: I can testify, for example, to the tremendous contributions my Japanese and Indonesian interlocutors have made to my own understanding and application of Euro-American theoretical and methodological models, and am guessing Wallmark can say the same. At risk of courting the reader’s abjection one last time with an epigrammatic cliché, perhaps the final place of theory in a developed work of dialogic ethnography can be glimpsed in the second half of a well-worn Zen aphorism: once you have seen the moon, you no longer need the finger.

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***Notes***

1 According to Kikkawa (1984), the word *ongaku* was used as early as the eighth century to refer to music of Chinese origin (courtly *gagaku*). During the Edo period, it was picked up by theatre musicians to refer to gagaku-flavored sound effects used in Buddhist temple scenes, for the appearance of Chinese celestial nymphs, and other special scenes. Shamisen music and other popular musics, on the other hand, were referred to as *ongyoku*, a term which excluded religious genres, rural genres, children’s songs, and other styles.

2 I am borrowing this term from Carol Sorgenfrei’s “Countering ‘Theoretical Imperialism’: Some Possibilities From Japan” (2007). While Sorgenfrei does not discuss music per se, she demonstrates how “Japanese critical theories that modify or fuse Japanese and Western psychoanalytic and aesthetic concepts” can offer new perspectives on contemporary and traditional performing arts.

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