Ethnomusicology Review 22(2)

Life, Death, and Humanistic Comparison

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Death is everywhere and nowhere. Counting death has become a national pastime as the number of COVID-19 related deaths in the United States climb past 200,000, 250,000 and upwards on the daily news feeds. For some these are personal and specific deaths. But for many, they are data, quantifications that signify not only death but the likelihood of survival.[1] The latter is a comparative project, in which death and the chance of survival are measured according to age, race, nation, gender, even occupation. Are there more deaths in the United States in 2020 than there were in 2018?[2] Do more men than women die of the virus?[3] Is the per capita death rate higher in Sweden or in South Korea?[4] What is the mortality rate of the disease for Americans age 25-34?[5] How do COVID deaths break down by race?[6] What percentage of total COVID-19 deaths occur in nursing homes?[7] And an old calculation, renewed in this context: do more blacks than whites die per capita at the hands of police?[8]

How did death come to be understood in these comparative terms of survival as a measurement of age, race, gender, place, and nationality? I want to think in this essay about the very beginnings of this question, where notions of identity and difference become entangled with the quantification of life and death. And I want to introduce into this thought the seemingly unrelated topic of animal musicality. At first glance animal music seems to have nothing to do with the quantification of mortality that suffuses our present life. Music scholars are surely more likely to associate animal music with the strange doings of Murray Schafer or with YouTube videos of cats. But since the late nineteenth century, debates about the songs of animals and marginalized human voices have been used to refine broad notions of identity that continue to inform categories of difference such as species, race, gender, and nation. These are, of course, the same categories by which we measure who is likely to live, and who to die, today.

In this essay, I want to raise the possibility that the particular way we calculate mortality is connected to the particular way we calculate identity, and to the ethics that circulate through that broader practice of identifying difference. Studies of animal music from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are only one small part of the history that made those calculations of difference what they are today. But they reveal a practice of connecting the visible world of quantification to invisible sonic evidence based on categorical measures of difference, human and otherwise. Those categories, however, do

not allow for a meaningful measure of survival, life, and death in a world that transgresses imagined boundaries of nature, nation, gender, race, class, and place. I write this, then, in the hope of opening up new conversations about death, life, and survival that are suited to the changing realities of the twenty-first century.

My approach to these questions may seem at first like a call for posthumanism. Posthumanism has shaped my work in profound ways, and I look forward to participating in ongoing conversations like those from the fall issue of this journal. In this essay, however, I am not so much advocating for posthumanism as I am trying to locate it within the broader heritage of twentieth-century thought that we carry forward today in discussions about life and death. The post-human and the multi-species are framed through an exceptional category of species that, in Western cultural contexts, has been cocreated with broad notions of human identity, race, gender, sexuality, nation, and other forms of difference (Wynter 2003, Dayan 2018, Mundy 2018, Jackson 2020). What does this cocreation mean? What are we to do with the fact that to talk about species is to talk about otherness, race, gender, and difference? With the intertwined fact that to talk about these forms of difference is part of long and ongoing conversations about evolution and comparative development? With the fact that to talk about the posthuman, in this context, is to deploy a familiar academic currency of intellectual development, of post-ness, of progress, that derives from older versions of those same evolutionary narratives? And what does it mean when we try to untangle the relationship between such terms and a concept like life?

Let me step back from these many questions in order to address one of the most important words in this essay, "life." What do I mean by this word? This is a word we all use comfortably, even though, like most words, we know it has its limits. Since the early twentieth century, viruses like the coronavirus have been used to teach biology students those limits from a medical perspective, by exploring the virus's partial fulfillment of the scientific criteria for life.[9] That medical awareness of life's limits draws on much older debates about life that have intrigued philosophers, scientists, and theologians since the rise of humanism in the 1600s.

When scholars in the humanities address "life," however, they are often referring not to medicine or theology, but to a tradition of political and cultural research that dates from Michel Foucault's theorization of biopolitics in the late 1970s (Foucault 2008). Drawing on this foundation, "life" can mean Giorgio Agamben's "bare life" of the 1990s, Achille Mbembe's "necropolitics" of the early 2000s, or Judith Butler's more recent "grievable"

life of the 2010s (Agamben 1998, Mbembe 2003, Butler 2015). After the turn in critical philosophy towards posthumanism and new materialism in the late 1990s, authors such as Jane Bennett, Mel Chen, Clare Colebrook, Elizabeth Povinelli, and others developed related ideas to ask whether Western valuations of "life" in a strictly human biopolitical context are enough to account for nonhuman agency in a post-climate change context (Bennett 2009, Chen 2012, Colebrook 2014, Povinelli 2016).

A parallel but distinct discourse threads its way through animal studies and critical race studies to place one of the central elements of this biopolitical critique into its own context: human identity. Wide-ranging intellectuals such as Bénédicte Boisseron, Colin Dayan, Zakkiyah Iman Jackson, Claire Kim, Eduardo Kohn, and Sylvia Wynter have argued since the early 2000s that measures of human identity are implicitly exclusionary, claiming that humanity is defined against and through comparisons with nonhuman animals and non-white, non-Western human subjects, particularly through representations of blackness (Wynter 2003, Kohn 2013, Kim 2015, Boisseron 2018, Dayan 2018, Jackson 2020). Many of these authors also make the point that artists and creative figures such as Octavia Butler or Patricia Piccinini have preceded scholarly research by several decades with stories and images of hybrid beings whose existence contravenes the centrality of the Western "human" ideal (Butler 1987, Piccinini 2002).

To put these two ideas together, recent posthumanist critique argues that Western valuations of life fail to account for nonhuman agency in an era of climate change. Recent critiques within race and animal studies argue that both human life and nonhuman agency are based on the implicit disposability of non-white, non-Western, and nonhuman lives. Taken together, these two lines of thought beg the question of what, exactly, measures of human mortality mean during a global pandemic if they are defined by a system in which the quantification of death can't be fully separated from animals, from colonial history, or from racial politics. And what, in turn, do measures of species extinction mean at the dawn of a global ecological crisis if they, too, are inseparable from this particular idea of human life that is already entangled with animals, with colonial subjects, and with other Others?

This is where I return to the seemingly unrelated sphere of animal musicality. Music is one of many points of entry to these questions, and it has its own pathways. Since Donna Haraway's work of the 1980s, animal studies scholars have shown how the visual and textual comparison of animals' bodies ordered the Western world in a "natural" history

that extended to gendered and racialized human bodies in the early twentieth century (Haraway 1989). As I have shown in my own work, and as many ethnomusicologists are already aware, these practices had parallels in studies of music, where sonic "specimens" were used to compare thousands of folk songs, "primitive" tunes, and animal vocalizations to determine the relative evolution of nonhuman, non-white, and European performers.[10] One could say that comparative musicology of the early twentieth century was about hearing, defining, and comparing musical identity and difference. Sound's unique contribution to this discourse was its claim to reveal hidden, inner truths that could be heard but not seen through rigorous quantification. And the language that framed this work was one of musical extinction and endangerment, making explicit the perceived connections between cultural, environmental, and biological crises.

This approach was revised many times during the twentieth century, most notably in music during the 1980s under the rubric of the "new musicology." That movement could be described as an attempt to recuperate the rights and worth of those marginalized human subjects who were imagined through categories of difference in the late 1800s and early 1900s. In that recuperative work, scholars redefined the role that categories of identity and difference played in music studies. Instead of a category of comparison, identity served as a category of critical analysis, one that clarified important social and political contexts. That shift, however, retained humanism's core value of human life, including the dyad of difference/identity and its underlying relationship with beliefs about who is, and is not, fully human. The methods of musical study remained, in that sense, tools designed to clarify difference, discover inner truths, and prevent the extinction of endangered cultures.

Those tools serve many uses, but they do not speak of death in ways that address either my experience of a global pandemic, or my understanding of ecological crisis. In both of those cases, statistical death is used as a way to gauge individual survival as a factor of one's identity category. This is occurring today in a context where traditional notions of Western individuality have proved an ineffective response to global challenges. This seems all the more significant if, as recent work in posthumanism and animal studies suggests, our notion of individuality is about humanistic ideals that can't be separated from broader histories of difference, leaving the calculation of one's individual chances of survival entangled with questions about race, gender, nation, and even species.

What does all this have to do with ethics, a word I included in the first paragraphs of this essay? At the end of my last book, I imagined a field of study called the "animanities"

that disentangled these histories of life in part to lay the groundwork for a related history of modern ethics. I argued there that the models of ethics that we inherit in a modern Western context are just as entangled with life as humanity is with difference. Just as human identity and animality served as a ground upon which expansive notions of difference were co-created in the late nineteenth century such that race, gender, nation, sexuality, and species were comparable terms, I suspect that modern life and ethics have co-created one another on the same ground. Thus, to untangle or deconstruct "life" and its disposability in this moment is to confront the ways in which modern ethics are contingent upon that notion of life.

This isn't about the essential character of moral behavior, but about the heritage of history that structures what we ask moral behavior to do. I don't yet know what that heritage is, nor the structures that it provides. But one of them, surely, is the quantification of mortality that so consumes our present moment. And just as surely, life and death are far more, for many people, than a measure of their chances of survival. Music is not at the center of this question; but it offers potential answers, particularly because of its longstanding association with the invisible world—the world in which ethics is traditionally understood to operate.

This is, as I wrote before, just a question, just a beginning. But I hope that asking after the connections between death, ethics, and the quantification of difference raises questions that will be useful for music scholars in a century driven by changing responses to globalization, environmental crisis, and norms of inclusion. I'm at the beginning of these questions myself, and this essay is speculative in character. But I hope that it inspires new ideas and questions about life and death in that work that we call "the humanities."

Notes

[1] For whom are these numbers intended? In media coverage, they are intertwined with both public health and politics [see, for example, https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-boasts-about-misleading-coronavirus-fatality-rate-in-us-2020-7; https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/07/politics/trump-coronavirus-death-rate-lowest-fact-check/index.html; accessed 8-14-20).] But this public discourse extends to work and home, at least in my life, where I receive work-related email announcements about the mortality rates' impact on our unusually diverse student population, and where discussions with friends and family about our various social distancing norms are often grounded in information about

mortality numbers, mortality rates, and assessments of survival but not, interestingly, in the prospect of illness.

[2] In May of 2020, charts circulated on social media in the United States comparing CDC mortality counts in the US from 2018 and 2020 to suggest that COVID-19 was being misrepresented by mainstream media as more deadly than the annual flu. I learned about this claim from a friend at my gym, who was concerned that I was overly worried about COVID. The comparison has been corrected since then; but it's the comparative character of the question that interests me here. [https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-factcheck-death-count-stable-idUSKBN22Q2MT, accessed 8-11-2020]

[3] Many early calculations suggest that men do indeed have a higher mortality rate, but the reasons remain unclear. [see, for example, https://newsnetwork.mayoclinic.org/discussion/why-are-more-men-dying-from-covid-19-than-women/; https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/05/15/covid-19-much-more-fatal-for-men-especially-taking-age-into-account/, accessed 8-11-20]

[4] See, for example, https://coronavirus.medium.com/sweden-vs-south-korea-38acc2b653c8 (accessed 8-11-20)

[5] For example, https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-05-07/comparing-coronavirus-deaths-by-age-with-flu-driving-fatalities (accessed 8-11-20)

[6] For example, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/race-ethnicity.html (accessed 8-11-20)

[7] For example, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/coronavirus-nursing-homes.html; https://www.forbes.com/sites/theapothecary/2020/05/26/nursing-homes-assisted-living-facilities-0-6-of-the-u-s-population-43-of-u-s-covid-19-deaths/#293a10de74cd (accessed 8-11-2020)

[8] https://fatalencounters.org; https://news.northeastern.edu/2020/07/16/the-research-is-clear-white-people-are-not-more-likely-than-black-people-to-be-killed-by-police/; https://nypost.com/2020/07/14/trump-more-white-people-are-killed-by-police-than-african-americans/ (accessed 8-11-2020)

[9] In 1961, Wendell Stanley, whose work on viruses set the stage for this half-life narrative, wrote, "The virus is one of the great riddles of biology. Whether it is "alive" or not is debatable, for it seems to occupy a place midway between the inert chemical molecule and the living organism," [Stanley and Valens 1961:8). His words are echoed in modern introductory textbooks that frame the virus as a "borrowed life" that exists between the definitions of living and nonliving things [see chapter 19 in Urry, Cain, Wasserman, Minorsky and Reece 2016].

[10] I've written about this extensively in my own work (Mundy 2018, 2014). There are other excellent sources besides my own, which include Ames 2003, Brady 1999, Kheshti 2015, Ochoa 2014, and Zon 2017.

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