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Music as Entanglement: Songettes Toward a Posthuman Ethnomusicology

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PRELUDE: LISTENING OTHERWISE

"What counts as music?" For decades, ethnomusicologists have insisted that sound is never just an aesthetic object but a social practice, a form of world-making (Rice 2018). Following Christopher Small's (1998) notion of musicking as an activity through which relationships are explored, and extending Bruno Nettl's (2005) reflections on what ethnomusicology studies when it studies "music," this essay listens to how these relations exceed the human frame. Steven Feld's (2015) idea of acoustemology frames listening as a way of knowing, where vibration itself carries meaning. Rice (2018) later expanded this, showing how sonic knowledge emerges through relations between humans, environments, and materialities rather than residing in sound alone.

Recent work in multispecies ethnomusicology (Silvers 2020) has extended this call, urging us to hear birds and other nonhuman animals not as symbols but as co-musicians. Our approach resonates with this move, but also shifts: we listen beyond animals to instruments, technologies, and atmospheres as sonic co-actors. As Rice (2018, 5) notes, "English speakers frequently, if metaphorically, speak of bird and whale 'song.' Are the organized sounds of animals music?" This question marks the threshold where ethnomusicology meets posthumanism.[1] Rather than merely

[1] I use *posthumanism* here as a shorthand because it is the most widely circulated label in academic discussions. At the same time, I am aware that many scholars have suggested parallel or alternative frames: Glenn Albrecht's *Symbiocene*, James Lovelock's *Novacene*, Donna Haraway's *Chthulucene*, each highlighting slightly different emphases. None of these terms fully capture what I hope to indicate: a mode of listening and relating where human,

extending "humanly organized sound" to include animals, we suggest that music itself organizes the human: that voice, instrument, and vibration co-constitute what counts as the musical act. If Donna Haraway (1994, 82) once invited us to think cyborgally: blurring human, animal, and machine—our *Songettes* experiment with precisely such entanglements.

Here, the posthuman turn is not a metaphorical gesture but an ontological one: instruments, technologies, and even streaming platforms participate as agents in the production of meaning. They are not neutral tools that extend human expression but co-constitutive forces that shape how music emerges and circulates: wooden bodies that carry common feelings across borders, metal strings that dictate gesture, digital algorithms that compose taste. In this sense, posthuman ethnography acknowledges music's distributed agency: the *morin khuur* (horse-head fiddle) that merges with the player's arm, or the streaming platform that entwines Sumbanese with Mandarin, each acting as a musical cyborg where sound, body, and technology co-become. This emphasis on relation resonates with a broader shift toward relational ontology, the idea that entities do not pre-exist their connections, but become through them. Music, in this sense, is not a stable cultural object but an unfolding set of relations: between singers and families, voices and rafters, breath and wood, listeners and memories.

Beyond the discipline, alternative imaginaries of life after the Anthropocene: Glenn Albrecht's (2016) Symbiocene, Donna Haraway's (2015) Chthulucene—have begun to reshape art, education, and environmental thought. Yet, as Lydia Wagenknecht (2023) points out, such ideas have had little traction in music studies. What might it mean to listen posthumanly? Not only to human musicians, but to instruments, atmospheres, and media currents that also shape sound? Here, "posthuman" signals that the work of music is never only human: instruments and their resonances, the vibrancy of sound itself, and the presences of ancestors act as agents in shaping these encounters.

These questions feel less like abstractions when you are sitting in a room where voices shake the rafters, or when a breath through wood becomes indistinguishable from the wind outside. In such moments, music is not performed about life but lived as vibration, contract, kinship, cosmos. As Luca Gambirasio (2022) argues, ecomusicology proposes a holistic listening that "acknowledges the sonic presence of all living beings" and "binds and connects" them through interdependence. This approach complements a posthuman reading of ethnographic sound: rather than framing music as the product of human culture, we understand it as an ecological relation between human and non-human actants.

While Feld and Rice did not frame their concepts in explicitly posthumanist terms, their attention to sound as relational and entangled with non-human forces resonates strongly with later posthuman and new materialist debates. This creates a space to reconsider acoustemology as already gesturing toward a posthuman mode of listening.

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nonhuman, and more-than-human are already entangled. For now, *posthumanism* serves as a practical and recognizable umbrella term, but the intention is not to reify it as a final label.

This essay draws on fieldwork in Indonesia and Inner Mongolia to ask: what happens if we take these posthuman openings seriously through ethnomusicology? What if music is not a bounded cultural product but a practice of resonance across bodies and borders?
Inspired by Feld's coinage of "acoustemology," we experiment with a similar hybridity. We call our fragments "*Songettes*": small sonic vignettes, or song-stories, where ethnographic moments resonate less as data than as lived vibrations. We need a form that acknowledges fragmentation and brevity, like the vignette, but refuses to center only the visual or marginal. The *Songette* put sound at the center of the fragment, affirming that music is not just background but the agentive force that animates the scene.

SONGETTE 1

Seven years ago during my first fieldwork, I attended a wedding on Sumba Island, Indonesia. A room filled with cloth, dim lights. Two families sat on opposite sides of the house, while I stood next to the entrance with my old professor.

They took turns to "sing." The sound was vast and expansive, not smooth, but trembling with a mysterious and ancient texture, like rough bark carried in the lungs. At that moment, I thought of the Mongolian[2] long song (*urtyn duu*) from my own hometown in Inner Mongolia. I am aware that my listening also shaped the moment: what I heard was partly produced through my own presence and curiosity (Bruner 1987).

I asked my old professor what kind of song this was. A Sumbanese friend nearby quickly replied: "This is not music. This is the two families negotiating the number and details of the bride price." That refusal cracked the category wide open. What if this was not music but negotiation, and yet still music? The locals further told me that in this way of negotiation, they are able to get approval from their ancestors. Feld (2015) might call it *acoustemology*, a way of knowing through sound where vibration itself carries meaning. Posthumanist thought reminds us that "music" is not a stable object but a relational practice: here, voice was contract, cosmos, and kinship at once. In the West, early Medieval Period, musical performance was a way for humans to contemplate divinity beyond their mundane life (Rice 2018). If, as Rice suggests, music once bridged human and divine worlds, then here that bridge extends through ancestors who listen back, confirming that the sonic itself mediates across time and being.

This kind of amplitude, rising straight from the lungs, made even my skull tremble along. I took a deep breath, trying hard to suppress the trembling in my chest, reminding myself to act like a "professional" fieldworker.

[2] In this essay, "Mongolian" refers to *Mongolian minzu* within the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region of China. All of the musicians I describe hold Chinese nationality, but their cultural identity is shaped through the category of *minzu* (ethnic group), which is itself fluid, hybrid, and historically situated. For reasons of word limit, I do not elaborate here on the complexities of *minzu* identity (the focus of my master's dissertation), but I use "Mongolian" and "Han" in this essay as shorthand markers for clarity, not as fixed or exhaustive descriptors of personal identity.

Later that night, when it was very late and the ceremony had ended, I walked out of the room reluctantly. A tarpaulin stretched across the rooftop, shading the courtyard. The ancient tremors of bark-like voices still echoed in my bones when, outside, another vibration greeted me: a guitar strumming Bob Marley.

They enthusiastically invited me to join, to sing together. We didn't share a language, so we gestured, muttered, laughed. One boy seemed to have held it in for a long time. After whispering to the others, he pulled out a plastic bottle from behind his back, whispered: "Good stuff. Drink. Don't tell anyone."I took a sip. My brow furrowed instantly. It was like a strong Chinese *baijiu*. Being "professional," I quickly forced a wry smile and said: "It must be very precious, thank you."

The boys said: "What happens inside [the ritual] is old-school and important… but we love Bob Marley." I asked if there were Indonesian artists they liked. Their eyes lit up: "Slank, Dewa, Iwan Fals. You'll like them, if you like Bob Dylan."

So under the shining stars of the night, they sang song after song I had never heard, yet somehow felt familiar. The voices dissolved into the night, forming a strange contrast with the vast and ancient voices inside the room. Their singing was raw and youthful, filled with blood and clarity.

One boy showed me the tattoo on his finger. I used a translator: it meant "Nationalism greater than imperialism."That night was unbelievable. I returned to my host family under the stars. The next day, chatting with my host sister about what had happened, she said: "Those people are the richest and most powerful in the village. Bad arrogant boys. Don't bother with them."

I was surprised, but it was also at that moment that I realized the complexity of the field: categories and hierarchies dividing people and life into many small boxes.

Then she said: "Let me play you a song I like. You must know it." She picked up her phone, played the theme song of a then-popular Chinese idol drama on Youtube, humming softly in imperfect Mandarin. In that moment, the starry voices of the night before collapsed into this pop melody as another vibration of belonging. Arjun Appadurai (1996) once wrote of *ideoscapes*, cultural flows that cross borders; here, the melody was not "foreign" or "local" but a living thread entangled with her being. Sound carried not just lyrics but a way of being young in a global world, where Mandarin phrases could live inside an Indonesian village girl's body as naturally as laughter. Sound here was not bounded by culture but entangled in being.

At that moment, it felt as if all the amplitudes and timespaces intersected. I thought of fieldwork not as a window onto the human world, but as the human world itself: entangled with sound, and with all that exceeds it.

SONGETTE 2

Three years later, I returned to Inner Mongolia for my master's thesis fieldwork. At one moment, I felt a sense of *déjà vu*. Because of the complexity of China's political climate, my supervisor suggested that I focus my perspective on music. I interviewed two Mongolian musicians who

played the *morin khuur*. One of them was Temür, a member of the Ulan Muqir (*a state troupe*), performing at large-scale events with political significance.

Temür was a subordinate of my local gatekeeper, and he also invited his professor friend who sang long songs. By "gatekeeper," I refer to a local official whose authority over both government and extractive industries gives him influence in deciding which musical forms and performers gain visibility in formal events. At that gathering, people sang several traditional long songs. Temür spoke stiffly about "stable jobs, good state policies," while the gatekeeper privately called him a "drunkard," (*jiu mengzi*) yet at the banquet praised him as "Teacher Temür, whose musical talent is among the best here."

Later in Inner Mongolia, I watched Temür lift the *morin khuur* after several rounds of alcohol. His arm seemed to extend outward, merging with bow and wood until the instrument was no longer separate. In Actor-Network Theory, Bruno Latour (2005) might say the agency was distributed: alcohol, wood, hand, air, atmosphere, and social tension all co-acted in the moment. The sound softened hierarchies at the banquet, shifting the room from rigid diplomacy to glowing sincerity. What mattered was not only the "talent" of Temür but how the instruments, body, and gathering negotiated balance together. Only when the music faded did thunderous applause break out, and everyone returned to their emotional diplomatic-ing.

Temür's daughter Lily became another gatekeeper in my fieldwork. A Mongolian girl who couldn't speak Mongolian, with pale skin, neat bangs, and always warm-hearted, she helped me connect with all kinds of people. After that gathering, she said: "Rong-rong *jiejie* (sister), let's take a walk. No, let's go to your place."

In my small apartment in the town, sunlight streamed in through the window. I asked her about the gathering. She said: "I've been hearing that kind of music since I was little. I've heard too much. It's fine, but… let me play you what I listen to." She played Ma Siwei, a famous Chinese rapper; then said: "There are also Mongolian ones, just not so famous." She pulled up a Mongolian rap track with a sentimental pop melody. Slouching on the sofa, she asked: "Rong-rong *jiejie*, can you give me a cigarette? Don't tell my dad."

She slouched deeper, closed her eyes, and said: "This is the music I like." Her words carried not only affect but what Porcello (2004) calls a *techoustemology*: ways of knowing and resonating through technologically mediated sound. The phone, the rap track, the sentimental pop melody, all were part of her resonance. For her, the repetition of long songs felt heavy; rap offered not only release, but a mediated sonic world she could inhabit.

At that moment, she reminded me not only of the Sumbanese sister but also of my Gen Z friends navigating sameness and identity expression through globalization. What kinds of resonance(s) were they hearing in these popular melodies?

Like the Sumbanese sister with her Chinese idol drama theme, Lily found her belonging not by preserving the past but by letting new frequencies, carried through media and algorithms, attach themselves to her body. Both moments remind us that acoustemologies are rarely separable from the technologies that deliver them (Rice 2018). Streaming services and global circulation made it possible for a Sumbanese teenager to hum Mandarin lyrics and for a Mongolian girl to

find herself in Chinese rap. Resonance here is not just cultural or local, but algorithmic, mediated, global. This round of fieldwork made me even more aware of complexity, and how the nuances require conscious attention in both sensing and writing.

SONGETTE 3

Another musician I interviewed was Jargal, who ran a guesthouse and was also a guitarist in a rock band. His band had performed at music festivals in Europe several times, but due to COVID policies, they hadn't performed for a long while, surviving instead by using the guesthouse as an event space.

He was a multi-instrumentalist: after playing the *morin khuur*, he picked up the guitar. Then he said: "There's something I'm sure you'll be curious about." He brought out a flute-like instrument: "This is a *choor*. It's played widely in Tuva and Mongolia."

When Jargal showed me the *choor*, he laughed at disputes over origin: "It doesn't matter where this comes from. People always want to fight over it."

Then he began to play. The choor's breathy tones were neither Mongolian nor Tuvan, but elemental. It seemed to come from heaven and earth itself, between real and unreal. Its vibration drew a different kind of line: not a boundary on a map, but a thread of resonance. Ingold (2016) reminds us that lines can enclose or they can weave. The *choor*'s vibration is the latter: not a cartographic line of ownership, but a resonant line of connection, collapsing disputes of origin into shared breath and sound. Where political geographies emphasize separation and distinction, the *choor*'s tones enacted a shared line of becoming: breath, wood, body, and air extending across Tuva and Mongolia, joining musicians in co-resonance rather than dividing them.

Jargal said the piece was called *The Waves of the Irtysh River*. The Han Chinese I interviewed often expressed apologies for "not being as musical." Yet when asked about their favorites, they mentioned "grassland songs," performed by Mongolian singers in Mandarin, praising harmony with land and kin. Stuart Hall (1990) might have described this as hybridity, but more than mixing, I heard what Jane Bennett (2010) calls *vibrant matter*: lyrics becoming carriers of longing, binding people to rivers and animals. Through borrowed voices, they stitched themselves into the grassland's breath, finding kinship not through bloodlines but through resonance.

One famous example is *Father's Grassland, Mother's River*, blending nature and kinship, as a connection between people and land. Across instruments, songs, and voices, I began to sense that music is not only melody itself, and not even simply the "expression of culture" as traditional academic perspectives often claim. It is the pathway for negotiating dowries at kinship weddings, the magic at a banquet that softens the atmosphere and awakens sincerity, the resonance that young people seek across borders, the vibration that crosses national boundaries, and above all, the similarity among people of different backgrounds, rather than emphasizing segregation.

Urna, a Mongolian singer living in Germany, told me: "When I sing, I think of nothing. The voice is spontaneous. Both Chinese and German audiences are moved." Her metaphor was

ecological: we are like countless trees in a forest, one falling, others crushed, yet the forest continues. Posthumanist theory gives us language for what she already knew: symbiosis without return.

Two days before writing, a clarinetist told me: "Music is inside my bones. I feel the music is good or not with how my bones vibrate with my clarinet. I am the instrument, and the instrument is me." Music here is not representation but vibration, what Karen Barad (2007) calls intra-action, what Donna Haraway (2015) might call becoming-with. Humans, instruments, and forests: boundaries melt; resonance remains.

Humans and music, nature and music: within all these differences lie connections and co-existence. Perhaps these boundaries were never shattered, but quietly melted into resonance.

CODA: TOWARD A POSTHUMAN ETHNOMUSICOLOGY

If ethnomusicologists once asked "what counts as music," my encounters suggest the more urgent question now is: what does music count as? In Sumba, voices negotiated contracts while trembling like the cosmos; in Inner Mongolia, a *morin khuur* dissolved political tension; on a teenager's phone, rap resonates more vividly than ancestral long songs; a *choor* blurred nationalism into vibration. Each moment unsettled the notion of music as a stable category and revealed it instead as a relational force: binding lungs to skulls, instruments to forests, kinship to global flows.

Posthuman thinkers like Haraway (2015) and Barad (2007) give language to what musicians already know in practice: *music is not an object we observe, but a field of resonance we inhabit*. Humans, instruments, atmospheres, and histories intra-act, producing vibrations that exceed representation.

To listen otherwise, then, is to acknowledge that boundaries are never final, not between "song" and "speech," tradition and pop, or human and nonhuman. The task of ethnomusicology is not to decide which sounds count, but to trace how sound itself counts: carrying vibration as agency: carrying kinship, politics, and planetary entanglement.

In this sense, a posthuman ethnomusicology is not a break with the field's past, but its amplification: taking seriously what musicians across worlds already tell us, in voices that tremble like bark, like breath, like forests still becoming. If ethnomusicology has often claimed we "need music to be fully human" (Rice 2018), then these *Songettes* suggest the reverse: that music itself reshapes what "the human" can be, entangling us with sounds, instruments, and presences that exceed our control.[3]

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[3] This essay was inspired in part by encountering *Rising Voices* itself. I first came across the journal, and then found Lydia Wagenknecht's (2023) essay on the "sonic post-Anthropocene." Her work resonates with my own attempts to listen otherwise, and this piece can be read as building in dialogue with hers—another small voice added to the growing chorus.

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