Learning to Embody the Radically Empirical: Performance, Ethnography, Sensorial Knowledge and the Art of Tabla Playing

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Abstract: Cultural anthropology has privileged the concept of *experience* over that of *performance*, and as ethnographers, we have also privileged the ethnographic text and inscription over the act(s) of fieldwork or the "performances" of ethnography. Although we have made some improvements toward a different kind of anthropology, one that is embodied, the investigations of the body and performance have ultimately remained on the margins of the discipline. Drawing from my ethnographic participant fieldwork with North Indian tabla players and the teaching of ethnomusicology labs at an American university, I argue for a turn to what Sarah Pink (2009) has called sensory ethnography.

Keywords: performance, ethnography, embodiment, radical empiricism, tabla

Résumé : L'anthropologie culturelle a longtemps privilégié le concept « d'expérience » par rapport à celui de « performance ». Quant aux ethnographes, ils ont longtemps privilégié le texte ethnographique et l'inscription par rapport aux actions du travail de terrain et aux « performances » de l'ethnographie. Bien que des progrès aient été réalisés vers un autre type d'anthropologie, une anthropologie incarnée, les recherches sur le corps et la performance sont restées cantonnées aux marges de la discipline. Sur la base de mon travail de terrain ethnographique auprès de joueurs de tabla de l'Inde du nord, ainsi que de mon expérience de professeure d'ethnomusicologie au sein d'une université américaine, je plaide pour un tournant vers ce que Sarah Pink (2009) nomme l'ethnographie sensorielle.

Mots-clés : performance, ethnographie, incarnation (embodiment), empirisme radical, tabla

Introduction

Cultural anthropology has privileged the concept of *experience* over that of *performance*, and as ethnographers who work in anthropological fields, we have also privileged text and inscription over the act(s) of fieldwork or the "performances" of our ethnographic encounters. Although some theorists (Csordas 1990; Jackson 1989; Pink 2009; Stoller 1995, 1989) have shown us the way to a different kind of anthropology, one that is embodied, the investigation of the body and performance has ultimately remained on the margins of the discipline; however, they have seen significant growth in interdisciplinary and artistic branches of scholarship. The ethnographic encounter and its subsequent communication of what we highly prize as "anthropological knowledge" relies upon sustained, intensive fieldwork and our reflections of performative, embodied moments as part of a "lived experience" with others in cultural ways. Drawing on my ethnographic *participant* fieldwork with North Indian (*Hindustani*) tabla players in India, Canada and America (1994–present) and my reflections as a teacher of this musical way of life in an American university (2007–present), I argue for a turn to what Sarah Pink (2009) has called *sensory ethnography* and what Paul Stoller (1989) termed, some time ago now, *sensing ethnography* as a way to bring into focus necessary discussions of performance and experiential knowledge as central to ethnographic inquiry. Acknowledging (and theorising) that how we learn anthropologically is based upon the performance(s) of the body can help us get beyond viewing performance as something that is "specialised knowledge," accessible only to the bodies and embodied minds of researchers who have knowledge of arts-based disciplines or those who train as artists and anthropologists simultaneously. In other words, I do not subscribe to the notion that performance and embodiment (as both analytic categories and ways of being in the world) be reflected solely within anthropological studies that focus on the performative or the sensory as subject matter. Rather, in this article,

I explore how the performing-sensing body both serves as the site of our ethnographic discoveries and provides us with a path toward a closer ethnographic understanding of our work with all others. Acknowledging the performing-sensing body as the foundation of our anthropological "fields" can indeed lead anthropology toward embracing a concept of William James' radical participation or the *radically empirical* as central to developing ethnography.

Learning to embody cultural ways of doing and knowing through apprenticing as a tabla drummer/performer has taught me that ethnographically what we can know as scholars, teachers and performers comes through the act(s) of learning to embody the radically empirical. Although our discipline has allowed space for a growing discussion of what Stoller (2009) calls the *power of the between*, or what cultural phenomenologists following James refer to as the *radically empirical*, in recent years, it has also been various scholars in the area of performance and imaginative ethnography (e.g., Conquergood 2013; Culhane 2011; Denzin 2003; Madison 2005) who have envisioned the ethnographic (and the performative) in relation to the radically empirical in unique and successful ways. Madison (2005, 166), in particular, defines the space of the radically empirical as one that is "an embodied mode of being together with Others on intersubjective ground." And as a practising anthropologist, ethnographer, performer, musician and teacher, I suggest that a move toward the intersubjective (embodied in the performative) is key for the larger discipline in realising its potential to produce relevant and desired forms of knowledge. It is these emerging forms of knowledge – increasingly communicated to others in non-textual ways – that are worth pursuing, along with our traditional, privileged writing forms, which are beginning to gain attention in scholarly dissemination of the ethnographic at learned conferences, symposia, colloquia and public presentations, as well as through our online presence (see the Society for Cultural Anthropology), as part of our expertise in anthropological fields.

Performance, Body, Anthropology and Its Others

My intent in writing this article is to argue for a return to an anthropology of performance located at the heart of cultural anthropology that investigates the intimate relationship between performance, the body, embodied knowing and "the cultural." While significant work has been accomplished in the areas of language and performativity (beginning with Bauman and Briggs 1990), gender, body and performance (Butler 1990) that focuses on the linguistic, material and semiotic perspectives of the body in/as performance, as an analytic category, the sensing-performative body is currently located on the periphery of the discipline but is seemingly alive and flourishing in academic areas such as performance studies, theatre, dance, music and beyond. And though we anthropologists may note the obvious, that the work in fields with selves and others is embodied, our discussions of and training in ethnographic methods, our ways of collecting data, are primarily discussed under the rubric of "experience" rather than in wider discussions centred around a systemic reflection of how we "perform" as ethnographers as we live our lives *with* others. My call for a return to thinking about performance as central to how we create our knowledge, and, subsequently, how we produce our knowledge in whatever creative ways we can, stems in part from my reflections on fieldwork in India and other parts of the globe as an apprentice tabla player for the past 25 years. As an ethnographer in the field, whether that be in India or elsewhere, I have always paid attention to ideas and practices of the body and, more specifically, to a concept of the body in/as performance (e.g., see Nuttall 1997, 2013). We need to seriously consider the significance of performance in the work that we have created and that we continue to create, whether that be work in the field, the writing up of that fieldwork, or in teaching or performing as cultural anthropologists. These ethnographic performances, whether they focus on learning a performative cultural tradition or the performances of everyday life in learning to survive as a human being in other cultural worlds, require our ultimate attention to an enduring question in our discipline: How do we know what we know? Performing as ethnographers, as we all are if we engage in the method of participant observation, requires that we pay attention to the ensemble of sensory-embodied ways of knowing and doing prior to, during and following the "field."

Until a serious dedication toward the study of the senses becomes part of the larger theoretical project of anthropology (Samuels et al. 2010) and is not merely seen as a set of issues to be tackled within the senses subdiscipline, we will continue to describe and analyse others in disembodied and non-performative ways. How do we revise the ways in which we collect data in the field to include the embodiedness of being human? How, as teachers, do we transfer this knowledge to our students? How can we reconceptualise performance as central to imaging and communicating our embodied subjects and anthropological selves to others? A sensorially informed ethnographic approach necessitates

that attention is paid to all of the senses as part of our embodied being in the world – more specifically, to the initial acquisition and repetitions involved in acquiring sensory knowledge as part of the larger fieldwork process. Indeed, ethnomusicologists such as Feld (2004) and more recently Samuels and colleagues (2010) have been advocates for an "ethnography of sound," of attending to sound as part of the fieldwork process and as something crucial to a representation of a peoples (or community) as any other part of culture. Recent work in ethnomusicology (Feld 2004) and hearing studies (Erlmann 2004) remind us that as ethnographers, we must tune in and become avid participant-*listeners* as well as observers. But are anthropologists listening to these arguments? Why or why not? Could a turn to the sonic or, as Veit Erlmann (2004) has suggested, a "sonic tactility," which privileges sensory knowledge in ethnographic writing, lead to critical discussions in a revitalised anthropology of performance? Tuning in to our "ethnographic ears" requires training ourselves and our students to be careful listeners (participant-*listeners*) as well as observers (Forsey 2010) as we live with and then write about, film or perform our representations of our lives *with* cultural others.

Elsewhere (Nuttall 1997), I have argued, as have others, that in India, sound takes centre stage as a primary sense in cultural ways of knowing and practice. This is clearly evident in the musical and other performing arts of India, as well as in everyday life. One of the most overwhelming aspects of living in Mumbai, for example, is the constant bombardment of multiple layers of sound emanating from every nook and cranny in daily experience. But while I and others have experienced and described (primarily in text) this significantly distinct cultural way of being, focusing on the primacy of sound over other sensory forms of knowledge, we need to go further and investigate its relation to the ways in which the senses work together to form both individual and cultural knowledge. Attention to sound, then, would constitute only one part of the larger whole in our ethnographic stories, films, performances and so forth. Common *sense* tells us that attending to other types of sensory knowledge as anthropological learners and bodily performers will also help to shed light on how and what we know as ethnographers. We cannot afford to continue to ignore the reality of the body, both physical and cultural, as our vessel or "tool of understanding" other lifeways. We can, at this delicate juncture in our discipline, where many other disciplines are producing ethnographic accounts of some kind, acknowledge this and revise how we research, teach, write and perform the ethnographic – and we are closer to doing so than we have ever been before. Many of us in the past did not have the luxury of acquiring anthropological skills in ethnographic methods courses, either as undergraduate or graduate students. We were expected to "pick it up" in the field, away from our mentors. Today, however, our story takes a different path, becoming one where ethnographic methods are now taught as part and parcel of our professional tool kits. Discussions of how we embody cultural ways of doing and knowing can indeed be taught as part of our larger expertise in ethnographic methods today and in future generations. Samudra's (2008) work on the martial arts, body memory and "thick participation," a playful twist on Geertz's thick description in interpretive anthropology, draws deeply on the notion of kinesthetic knowledge (as anthropological knowledge) and provides an excellent example of how we can incorporate bodily ways of knowing into our larger methodological tool kits.

As a scholar and performer, my anthropological and ethnomusicological work primarily focuses on the area of how we embody the cultural as anthropologists, ethnographers and apprentices in the field of study, and how the teaching and learning of performance reflect embodied, culturally specific ways of doing and knowing. Recently, I had the opportunity to create a small world-music program from within an anthropology department, where in teaching ethnomusicology labs, students essentially apprenticed in the art of global tabla,[1] as well as experiencing music making in non–South Asian areas. The ethnomusicology lab is offered as one of three types of subdisciplinary labs in our department, the others being biological/bioarchaeological and archaeological. The lab encourages students to apply their knowledge gathered through ethnographic methods to a specific musical-cultural context, envisioning both the learning of an instrument and the cultural ways of understanding it as an anthropological field. The labs have become a meeting place between European- and American-based models of learning and the Indian way of learning in the area of musical performance, bringing together musicians, anthropologists, dancers, environmental studies majors, writing majors and others in a unique learning environment. Learning anthropologically through performance in an experiential way furthers our discipline as a viable place for a revitalised anthropology of performance. In other words, we should embrace performance widely conceived both as the subject of study and as part of our method of study. The performances of ethnographers are seen here as being crucial in both the process and product of ethnography and as engaging with performance and experience as part of a forward-looking anthropological enterprise.

In bringing anthropological fields to the classroom, such as in the teaching of tabla as an ethnomusicological lab, scholars/professors/performers provide a compelling opportunity/location from which to teach and theorise about the anthropological perspective and other cultural lifeways. Acquiring anthropological knowledge – that is, learning to see, hear, feel and think in culturally relativistic ways – demands that we pay attention to the successes and failures of our performances as ethnographers and students. The ways we teach our methods and theories can be more reflective of how we as ethnographers learned in the field as *participant*-observers and apprentices, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the knowledge that anthropologists seek as sensing-embodied humans. As such, the teaching and learning of *Hindustani* music, and more specifically tabla, in an anthropological classroom draws our attention to the experience of teaching ethnography as a lucrative site for theorising the ethnographic method. The process of teaching and learning the ethnographic as an anthropological field demands a complete engagement of both the teacher and the learner and opens an area of inquiry for us to rethink how the ethnographic can transform its participants, and how we can innovatively teach and perform the ethnographic. Ultimately, to move toward an understanding of the relation between performance, body, sensory knowledge and ethnography, in a variety of anthropological fields, including the classroom, requires an exploration of anthropological knowledge as something that transpires between the ethnographer and those under study and between students and teachers.

Learning to Embody the Radically Empirical

What does it mean to embody the radically empirical? As anthropological scholars, teachers and performers, why should we be interested in or concerned with recent discussions of the empirical? Jackson (1989) best describes William James' concept of the radically empirical as "one which is different from traditional empiricisms which assume 'that the knower and the known inhabit disconnected worlds'" (quoted in Nuttall 1997, 79). James' radical empiricism is "thoroughly embodied, lived and he would say 'experiential'" (Throop 2009, 377). The knower and the known, then, are seen to exist in the same time and space together, and as such, the radical empiricist "posits experience as something which is actively created rather than passively received" (Jackson 1989, 5, quoted in Nuttall 1997, 79). What can be known is that which is performed or experienced between self and other. As Fabian (2012) has recently reminded us, the question of what we can know anthropologically should serve to guide us into the future, past the colonial trappings of our shared history with others as scholars and researchers. Fabian's concept of *coevalness* did much to redirect our thinking toward a more Jamesian approach, focusing on the knowledge that we gather and produce as being intersubjective. Fabian (2012, 443) stresses that the recognition of "relations between researcher and researched as intersubjective and *coeval* makes ethnography not less but more objective" (emphasis added). In other words, our attention to the shared space of the anthropological field (with others) and the acknowledgment of that space as *coeval* directs us to more accurate ethnographic data and analysis. The success of the ethnographic product, Fabian (2012, 443) writes, lies in producing "reports, stories, and commentaries that are capable of making present the knowledge they represent." In returning to Geertz's version of the knowledge question, "how do they know you know?" Fabian posits that we should now think more along the lines of the following: "What [do] we know about how they know what they know?" (443). Moving away from issues of representation that have captured our attention for decades as part of the post-colonial project, Fabian goes further with his thinking and suggests that our epistemological path should focus more on "*why do we know and they believe*?" (444; emphasis added). We are a "pragmatic" discipline, he states, and even though the anthropological enterprise "involves analysis and semiosis, explanation and interpretation, it requires interaction and communication" (447). Fabian argues that our program differs from others – it is pragmatic and points to the important objective of communicating our lives *with* others – that when all is said and done, "the kind of knowledge we seek changes the knower" (447).

It seems critical, then, that as performing ethnographers in various fields of ethnographic inquiry, we should focus our attention on how the radically empirical is indeed embodied.[2] Understanding the radically empirical by learning to embody other cultural lifeways (which, I maintain, is one of the most significant objectives of our lives as ethnographers) moves the analyst toward the importance of the senses and a sensory ethnography as part of our *coevalness* of our lives *with* others. It also nudges us closer to what Taylor (1995, 55) has declared as "the basic issue for the future human sciences." According to Taylor, we need to work toward an epistemology that "is able to engage in a meaningful philosophical dialogue with non-western systems of thought" (55). The knowledge question as envisioned by Fabian (2012, 444) – "*why do we know and they*

believe?" – reminds the analyst of the pragmatic value of anthropological inquiry: our task is to communicate that relationship between knower and known, a relationship that *changes* those involved in the process. It is crucial that we as a discipline continue to unpack the space of the intersubjective to reveal (in a variety of communicative forms) the common ground between knower and known and the embodied ways of learning and relearning the "cultural." This does not necessarily require that we abandon our insider and outsider perspectives, as noted recently by Jackson (2009) in his writing on ethnographic verisimilitude. Jackson argues that the ethnographer's pivoting between insider and outsider modes of experiencing social fields should not be "construed as competing domains, the first belonging to the psychologist or phenomenologist, the second to the social scientist" (13). His insightful comment – that in order to move ahead as ethnographers in a sound, ethical way, we must "put ourselves quite literally in the place of the other, seeing the world from his or her own standpoint, bringing together insider and outsider perspectives" (17) – provides an important guideline for the performing ethnographer and, subsequently, the development of a sensory ethnography. Jackson goes further and stresses that the ethnographic method of participant observation is simply not enough to sustain us in our endeavour. Rather, he believes that we need "novel forms of academic writing and interdisciplinary thought that place non-European and European epistemologies and theologies on the same footing" (17). As ethnographers, we can do more than create "novel forms of academic writing" (beyond that which we produced in the postmodern turn), but this necessitates a move away from our attention solely on the product of our efforts toward a more concerted engagement with cultural performance and embodied ways of knowing, which emerge in the common ground between knower and known.

The Apprenticeships: Gurus, Disciples, Teachers and Students

The journeys we embark upon as ethnographers, fieldworkers, performers, communicators and students in learning cultural ways of doing and knowing are often profound, deeply moving and transformative. In my journey as a tabla apprentice, which began in the 1990s in Mumbai, where all of the students in my school were male and quite young (aged 5–15) compared to myself (early thirties), I often questioned both my purpose of being there and how I could ever learn one of the most sophisticated rhythmic systems known on earth adequately enough to communicate ethnographically the ins and outs of a South Asian musical community. I had never learned to play percussion classically in a conservatory-based setting, but I had, throughout my life, taken up various percussion forms and therefore had some prior knowledge of other drumming traditions before travelling to India to learn from tabla masters. Early on, I realised the relationships between the gurus (or masters) and their students were significant in unlocking both the symbolic and embodied meanings of the performing body in these musical communities. My fieldwork on tabla players (Nuttall 1997, 2007) is located within what is termed as the *Punjab gharana* or style of tabla playing under the supervision of a celebrated family of Muslim musicians, which includes Allah Rakha Khan and his sons Zakir Hussain, Faizal and Tauffiq Qureshi. This particular family of tabla performers has been instrumental in creating what I tend to call the *global art of tabla*, having travelled extensively in Europe, Japan, North America, South America, the Emirates and beyond. Their high position and influence as learned masters in Indian classical music has given rise to world music institutions and has, as well, provided the impetus for many young South Asian diaspora community members around the globe to take up tabla as a way of life. The learning of tabla or any Indian performance form necessitates a lifelong commitment to the teacher of the tradition. Tabla is not an art form that can be learned from reading a book. Rather, the relationship developed over time with one's teacher forms the basis of one's career in every possible way. The guru is seen as the pivotal centre of a larger community of artists and performers that guide the student in instruction in rhythm (*tal*) and melody (*rag*), on the art of performance, and in the students' daily life, including their spiritual life. The guru provides the basic essentials of a possible performative identity in this lifetime and into the next, as the student is expected to imitate the teacher in all that he does. These intimate relationships are highly valued within Indian cultures and demand from the learner a loyalty toward the teacher, and the school (or style of performance), which may result in doing "service" for the master, such as making him tea, cooking meals, paying bills and so forth. The traditional relationship is one built upon a series of rights and obligations for both teachers and students, allowing for the success of the young learners and tying all members of a musical community together in intensive ways. The guru/teacher is believed to hold absolute knowledge (Nuttall 2011, 51), and the seeker of that knowledge is to show respect toward the teacher, the art form, the school and any community members of the same stature of the teacher through appropriate cultural ways, such as the touching of feet or by cupping the hands in the *anjali* position

(palm to palm in front of the chest as individuals are expected to do in a typical *namaste* greeting).

As an outsider looking in, this drumming tradition and the cultural knowledge system (*guru-shishya-parampara* or *ustad-shagird*) from which it originates seemed overwhelming and made little sense to me. It is a musical-cultural drumming tradition that demands every ounce of energy from its learner to focus and reorient the body and the embodied mind toward a specific musical and cultural field. Typically, as young students in India, tabla apprentices begin between the ages of three and five years and are expected to hone their skills for a lifetime, working toward their own mastery of rhythm or *tal* much later in life. In my own learning from the masters, I was allowed to work on only three or four sounds for upwards of three months before I graduated to more sounds and began to increase my repertoire of knowledge to eventually form something rhythmically coherent. However, as an anthropologist teaching the ethnomusicology labs, I train students using an accelerated version of my own learning, allowing for the possibility for students to move toward a more comprehensive understanding of how this cultural knowledge system works. This requires a dedication from my students to acquiring a certain level of musical skills in the body and the embodied mind, first by adjusting their ethnographic "ears" in order to listen intently to the sounds of the tabla; second by performing *bols,* or the drum strokes that form the basic language of the instrument on a daily basis; and third by learning to sit cross-legged on the floor in front of the instrument for longer and longer periods of time.[3] My intent in teaching tabla through what could be considered a "performative ethnographic" approach is not to produce percussionists who will go on to create their careers in *Hindustani* music (although they could if they continued their training) but rather to allow for an anthropological space of engagement with an Indian way of knowing and doing. Performing ethnographically in this case, though it demands a sustained commitment by the learner for a four-month period or one full semester, often leads to an embodiment of another cultural way of learning and skill acquisition, which in my class culminates in a performance given for a larger academic audience or within the Ithacan community.

As a university professor teaching in the American academy, I am necessarily limited to offering tabla training within a one-semester segment. As such, the goals and objectives of this course, of learning to learn within an anthropological field based upon a musical-cultural system of knowledge, are not exactly the same as being in the field as a scholar/teacher. However, bringing the field to the classroom, which in this context locates the site of the field as the performing-sensing body and embodied mind, encourages students and teachers to embrace an embodiment of the radically empirical in the teaching and learning of anthropological knowledge and an insistence of the *coevalness* of all peoples, cultures and ways of life.

Many limitations and adjustments are present in the teaching of tabla as a cultural way of learning or as a field of anthropological inquiry in the classroom versus the cultural field I sought to engage with in India and around the globe among *Hindustani* musical communities. Part of the classroom experience involves discussions around how I was trained within the *guru-shishya* tradition in India and how I have adapted the process of learning for students in a college setting. As a student in India, I was one of many foreigners in the musical communities seeking out the knowledge from learned Indian masters alongside many Indian students. For all foreigners, learning to become a "disciple" or a student in a performative tradition included all of the obstacles anthropologists may encounter in the field such as language barriers and daily survival in a foreign cultural world. In many respects, we were all beginning from a similar place, seeking similar knowledge, though those from the inside of the culture(s) had been hearing the music from childhood, had been educated in the school system in India and had already performed and practised respect toward those elder to them within their communities in culturally appropriate ways.

As a professor in a classroom, my relationships with my students cannot completely mirror my relationship with my guru (nor would I expect them to), as it would not be culturally appropriate to expect the showing of respect in subservient ways that are demanded within the Indian and diaspora-based global contexts of tabla teaching and learning. The guru-disciple relationship is typically a lifetime one, whereas my relationship to my students may end when the course is completed, or it may continue on with advanced learning for another year. The expectations of the anthropological and ethnomusicological students in the classroom revolve around respectful engagement with a cultural-musical system of knowledge, necessitating that students follow through with this course as a field of inquiry, as an anthropological field, which is simultaneously both musical and cultural. Therefore, attention is paid to some basic cultural patterns practised in India in daily life and in the learning of musical traditions. For example, as feet in Indian cultures are seen as a polluting part of the body, many rules and regulations concern the uncovering and covering of the feet before any learning can

ever take place in a musical context. Respectful engagement of the tabla translates into taking off your shoes outside the room where the class is to be held so that the tabla and the teacher cannot see them! To sit cross-legged in front of the tabla, students must learn to sit without their shoes on, to sit without their feet touching the tabla, and to keep their backs straight and their knees as low to the ground as they can. Respect for the instrument, the teacher and fellow students begins with a removal of shoes that have walked outside the sacred space of learning. If students struggle with sitting cross-legged for hours at a time and recline their feet and legs, they are expected to cover them with a scarf; otherwise, this action can symbolise disrespect toward the instrument, the musical system under study and the teacher. Additionally, the tabla is to be placed on a rug and must sit within a set of rings, which essentially separates it from the ground that feet have walked upon minutes before.

I ask my students to follow this routine before we begin each and every class and to continue to follow these cultural rules every time they set up to practise their instrument. In this way, students are expected to learn in a similar fashion as I did in India from the beginning of my learning by creating a defined, sacred space of learning. In India, this ritual may be taken further by offering *puja* (worship) flowers to the tabla, burning incense before sitting down to practise and learn, covering the tabla at night and removing the cover in the morning as ways of respecting the presence of the instrument.

Once the space of learning has been transformed from an ordinary class filled with tables and chairs to a more traditional space of learning with only rugs set out on the ground, the students set up their tablas in a semicircle facing the front of the room, and my assistant and I, with our tablas, face them at the front of the room for instruction. The sound of the *sruti* box (*sa, pa, sa* or *do, so, do*) plays in the background, orienting students toward a special learning format. We discuss, one by one, how and what we practised since last we met, including both the successes and the failures of our practice individually and within groups together. Eventually, I begin musical instruction for the week, which can take the form of learning a few specific sounds/strokes on the tabla, or, as the semester continues and students have developed some skills, I move the class toward performing part or full compositions. Important to note here, as part of my overall teaching methods, is that I instruct as much as possible in the traditional/cultural way, where students learn through repetitive imitation of the teacher, which limits the use of any externally based symbols such as musical notation or words of a language. The emphasis for much of the semester focuses on learning by, with and through the body and the embodied mind in performance.

Sensorial Knowledge, Performing Ethnography and Tabla Playing: The Classroom as an Anthropological Field

Is it ethical to teach and perform in the lab using an accelerated format such as I have created? Even though I learned as a student through the guru-disciple relationship in India and elsewhere in the world, which demanded years of dedication toward the instrument and cultural ways of knowing and being, within a course taught as part of the American academy, I am encouraged as a teacher to provide enough instruction in the art form to showcase student achievements and performative skills within a semester. By learning in the guru-shishya tradition, I have also been simultaneously learning about culturally approved ways of learning, teaching and performing *Hindustani* music. In the *gharana* (school or style) system of education, it is believed that once you enter into the school, you belong to a family and therefore, through dedicated practice, achieve "ownership" of compositional, artistic or aesthetic knowledge belonging to the family. The relationships formed, in India and around the globe, between student and teacher and the other disciples, constitute an extended family whereby any student could ask for any part of the repertoire if they have the skills to "pick it up" and embody the knowledge given. Appropriate credit should be given to the master who represents the lineage from which the composition originated, either in the moments of teaching to others or in the moments of performance onstage. Important here is that the knowledge is transferred in the event(s) of sitting together, where embodying the knowledge through imitation of the teacher is possible. Once the performer has embodied the composition, it is their own to use, whether that translates into creating classical music (continuing the tradition of the master) or connecting to other musical styles (jazz, fusion, ensemble creation, etc.). What is not appropriate in this system of education is a "selling" on the open market of compositional materials and/or the required ways of playing belonging to a master or school of tabla. In my many years as a student of tabla, I have seen the development of compositional knowledge for sale to students on various internet sites by celebrated masters; this approach to learning would be highly criticised by many in the *Hindustani* community. Ownership of knowledge can only be acquired in the intersubjective space between students and students, and students and

teachers. This way of knowing is discussed and practised in the music labs I teach and forms part of this musical field of inquiry.

As the performing ethnographer or student of tabla learns to embody a new musical system, they simultaneously learn to embody cultural and spiritual knowledge in addition to that of the expert skills required as a performer of North Indian classical music. Part of the everyday work of a tabla student includes confronting their aesthetic and common-sense ways of being in the world and their habitual and other bodily knowledge as cultural and musical humans. Rehabituating the body is a painful thing to do; this is required from the very beginning of training as tabla players, where everything from sitting on the floor to performing "strange" movements with the fingers and the hands demands our attention as learners. As I observe my students learning to play the tabla, I am reminded of my own training, where little by little I became habituated as a performer, forgetting the pain in the body and learning to focus instead on the structure and mechanics of this new musical system in order to progress as a student of the music and learn in the same cultural way that other disciples in my school in India (referred to as *guru brothers*) were learning.

I have noted before (Nuttall 1997, 134) that becoming a tabla player requires a "'tuning-in' to all of the senses," and, indeed, the performances of the body and the embodied mind in the learning of this drumming tradition are only possible if one attends to the ensemble of sensorial experience required to reproduce the sounds and movements of the masters/teachers. In learning through imitating the teacher, students are expected to "pick up" the necessary positions of the hands and fingers, as well as the teacher's repertoire, which consists of family-owned compositions handed down from *their* teachers. To produce any sound from the tabla, students must first learn to position the hands and fingers properly, for if the hand "sits" well, the sound is expected to come. This attention to the touch of the finger on the right-handed goatskin of the drum (both hard and soft) is crucial for a young apprentice to learn, because if he or she does not imitate the teacher's movements exactly, significant frustration can result for the student, as well as a continual failed "performance." Every *bol* (sound or stroke) is produced using one finger, many fingers or the palms of the hands in various positions. For every individual who attempts to learn tabla, there always seems to be difficulty around the learning of one specific bol, which proves to be vexing for both teachers and students. The "na" bol is one of the most distinctive sounds of the tabla, which, when played correctly, produces a sweet ringing sound typically tuned to the *sa* or *do* of the main instrument the tabla player is accompanying. The positioning of the hand on the right-hand drum requires the student to place the ring finger near the top of the drum, lifting the middle finger straight in the air and using the index finger to strike the outside ring of the drum to produce the ringing sound. The "sitting" position of the hand feels strange, the quick strike on the outside ring is very light to the touch, and the wrist action must be forceful enough for a sound to be produced. From the very beginning of their musical training, students become joyful if they achieve the sound and very frustrated if they cannot. And while they may be able to achieve the sound in the classroom to varying degrees at the beginning of their training, during their practice, they often loose the bol, which is not yet "set" in the hand. If, by the end of the semester, students can perform this ringing sound alongside other sounds of the tabla that are more easily obtained, they have achieved something quite substantial.

Counting out compositions in a prescribed rhythmic structure, known as *tal*, also relies upon a visual capturing and an attention to touch sensations. In using the thumb of the left hand as a marker in a 16-beat *tal* or time cycle, beginning with the proximal phalange (first segment) of the baby finger, performers "visualise" a beat by pointing to and touching each joint (four beats per finger) until reaching the same space where they began. Apprentices of tabla are expected to engage in this cultural counting system, which requires a specific way of learning, being and knowing from the very beginning of their training. Teachers will focus their initial training time with students on two major areas within the structure of the *Hindustani* musical system: learning how to count by and with the body, and learning how to "feel" where the beginning and end of the time cycle takes place.[4] Without having the basic infrastructure of practical counting knowledge that privileges the sensation of touch (of one's own hand), and vision (seeing the pulse of the *matra* or beat in relation to the overall rhythmic structure literally marked on each joint of the finger), tabla students would not be able to get the basic rhythmic cycles into the body, nor progress in learning complex, sophisticated sequences of phrases that must be played within the *tal* structure. Without touching even one finger to the tabla, students are already engaged in a way of learning that differs from the European model of music making, which heavily relies upon an external visual system (musical notation). If performed successfully, this new way of counting allows learners/students to progress as artists and to build up their basic skills as *Hindustani* percussionists over time. The performing ethnographer learns to pivot between their known ways

of being and an Indian way of being in the world. This essential pivoting between known and unknown can only be achieved through daily practice or *riaz* performed over time. Riaz is something that ideally must be done both on one's own and together with other students in groups. Pivoting between emic and etic perspectives necessitates that the performing ethnographer engage with both the body and the embodied mind as a single unit and not as separate entities.

As learners in the American academy, we privilege vision over other sensory ways of knowing, and we are concerned with notation and text-centred ways of recalling our knowledge. Traditional Indian ways of knowing rely more upon an oral tradition, although not exclusively, and the masters of *Hindustani* music tell us that knowledge is something that is remembered through recitation. Performative knowledge, in the world of tabla players, refers to a vast repertoire of compositional knowledge that can be called upon through the voice and the hands. Knowledge *is* recitation. To acquire mastery of the art form, the drummer must learn the language of the drum, the bol system, by performing physically with the body using the fingers and hands, and be able to recite the compositional knowledge vocally. Compositional knowledge is expected to be learned as embodied knowledge directly from the master in the moments of his and other's "performances." Saying or playing the language of the tabla is seen as one and the same thing in this performative context. If the apprentice attempts to write down the bols or sounds of the tabla in the acts of learning, valuable knowledge is lost, as the student is not attending to the look of the master's hand, the sound of the specific bol phrase or the ways in which the master is gesturing with other parts of the body as they are performing.[5]

In my observations of students learning to perform tabla in my ethnomusicology labs over the past ten years, I have found that the most difficult part of their learning seems to revolve around embodying the compositions through recitation. It is here where western learners/performers confront the boundaries and possibilities within their own way of knowing, which usually relies upon a text-based symbol system using either musical scales or words representing the sounds (e.g., the bols *dha (1)dha ti dha ge na dha ti dha ge na tin na ke na* could be used to represent four beats). They are expected to "catch it" visually, as I was, through visual cues, and to "hear it" by listening to the sound produced by the teacher in the hands and in the voice and to match this to their own sound. Recitation of tabla compositions, which requires both a vocalisation of tabla poetry and the movements of the body counting the poetry in time (or *tal*), provides a powerful space of learning for the performing ethnographer to engage with this culturally specific epistemology. Remembering in the body while playing the tabla drums depends upon a feeling of producing the proper drum strokes on the skins of the tabla, as well as a vocalisation of these same strokes or bol phrases, which are used to form compositions played in various time cycles. Students must rely upon all their senses and remember their newly acquired kinesthetic and sensory knowledge if they are to stay present in the field of inquiry. Only toward the end of the semester in the ethnomusicology labs, before the year-end performance, do I encourage students to learn using the written sounds of bol phrases and compositions. When I present students with written text for remembering their compositional material, they tend to learn more material at a quicker rate, but they do not seem to retain it in the same way as the earlier material taught to them through the methods of recitation and imitation.

Conclusion

Turning our attention to the process of our work in fields to the embodiment of new forms of knowledge, such as that practised by musical communities in India and the diaspora, will allow us to shed light on the necessary correctives ethnographers could make to more accurately communicate the relationship between knower and known. In her explorations on embodied research and Indigenous methodologies, drawing on Pink's (2009) research on sensory ethnography, Magnat (2011) points to a crucial area of concern for the ethnographer (performing and otherwise) immersed in intense fieldwork. The experience of pivoting between emic and etic perspectives in embodied research tends to make present the very disorienting nature of this kind of work! Indeed, as Magnat (2011, 218) and Pink note, this disorientation can be felt as both "jolting and revelatory." Part of developing our embodied research methodologies, which may result in sensory ethnographies of many forms and types, will depend upon the ethnographer's attention to the disorientations experienced, the "jolts" and the "joys" of learning to embody the radically empirical. In teaching the ethnomusicology labs, I confess to speeding up the process of traditional learning in order to show student progress by the end of the semester. Teaching the labs using a more accelerated type of training in tabla also encourages students to experience more of a balance between the jolts and the joys in learning a new form of knowledge so that they will stay in the "field of inquiry."

As I have suggested in this article, the anthropological study of tabla led me to think extensively on issues of embodiment, performance and the necessary inclusion

of sensory ways of knowing as part of how we do what we do, as well as how we think about communicating the ethnographic as something more than purely cognitive. It is in the performances of the ethnographer (or student), through the experiences of learning and performing the culture of others, that the limitations of our own epistemology are realised. In attempting to count, recite and "feel" the *sam* of each *tal* cycle, the tabla performer is engaging in a type of kinesthetic knowledge that does not conform to a split between the mind and body. The relationship between knower and known (the intersubjective field of gurus, disciples, teachers and students), as I discussed here earlier as radically empirical, is also a space of "intercorporeality." And we should attend to how the intercorporeal is taught, performed and felt by those we study, as well as by the students we teach. The intercorporeal and the kinesthetic are key to an understanding and practice of coevalness. As Lewis (2013, 107) suggests, "intercorporeality might help to ground the discussion of intersubjectivity in more specifiable forms of human cultural engagement and might open the way for establishing the usefulness of the concept of shared experience." Attending to the performing-sensing body as the site of our ethnographic discoveries, as the space of our teaching and learning the ethnographic, whether in cultural fields or in our classrooms, moves the discipline toward a closer understanding of our intense anthropological encounters with others, which are at once performative, embodied and located in the moments of intersubjectivity. Any engagement or analysis of the performing-sensing body in the learning of an Indigenous musical system (or in daily ways of living) necessitates a radically empirical approach as a celebrated, desired approach to the teaching and learning of anthropological knowledge.

Moving toward a successful anthropology of performance includes attending to the kinesthetic and sensory experiences of the ethnographer as part of our embodied research methods. In this way, the everyday performances of the ethnographer, in living his/her life *with* others, can bring the analyst closer to a coevalness desired by an ethical anthropology. In her recent scholarship on sensory ethnography, Sarah Pink (2009, 3) maps out a variety of ways social scientists have developed, either collaboratively or individually, "alternative routes to representing sensory knowing." Though these recent developments may have originated through arts practices, Pink is quite vocal in suggesting that collaborations between arts and social science can indeed result in new sensory approaches to ethnographic representation. As Pink tells us, there is no single model or way of proceeding with a sensory ethnography. The field is wide open for the inclusion of all who dare to imagine ethnographic representation in new and exciting forms.

My study of tabla and my reflections on the training of students in the ethnomusicology labs provides one more example of the importance of attending to how our ethnographic research is indeed embodied, and dependent upon sensory and kinesthetic knowledge. By focusing on the process of becoming a tabla performer, which necessitates a pivoting from the outside looking in toward learning to count, practise and perform the instrument, my research contributes to our anthropological understanding of the process of fieldwork itself. Central to an understanding of the "shared space" of the intersubjective are the performances of the ethnographer.

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Notes

1 As North Indian classical music has moved outside of its country of origin and is taught, practised and performed by many in a variety of settings around the globe, including European, North American, Japanese and other contexts, some scholars are now referring to tabla as a global art form in an attempt to capture the wide-ranging nature of its popularity. Although tabla has travelled to the South Asian diaspora around the globe, it has also proliferated in many world music institutes that may or may not be attached to a university or its curriculum. I am currently involved in a study focusing on the rise of *Hindustani* music in Europe and in North America in world music institutes, where tabla has become a significant performative instrument of choice for artists. Additionally, Roda (2015) has written about global tabla as a phenomenon that has changed the tabla-making industry itself. For more detailed discussions on the art of global tabla, see Nuttall (2011–12, 2013).

2 In looking to recent cultural phenomenological perspectives on the relationship between experience, semiosis, explanation and interpretation, I discovered Jason Throop's (2009) work, where he theorises on the limitations of the interpretive model in his revisiting of Geertz's semiotics of religious experience. Throop's perspective on the Geertzian model of interpretation is insightful because he digs deep into the mechanics of what Geertz himself called a "valid 'scientific phenomenology of culture'" (Throop 2009, 364). Throop's discussion of the limits of Geertzian interpretation focuses specifically on his writings on religion (and ritual). It is here where "we find a more clearly articulated attempt to integrate his thinking on the relationship between culture, symbolic systems, and what we might call in contemporary terms, subjectivity and practice" (371). Throop argues that in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, which has come

to be known primarily for its symbolic and interpretivist approaches to the study of culture, Geertz also "works to integrate the practical, experiential and interpretative aspects of his semiotics of culture" (373). In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, we do find that Geertz attends to the issue of experience in religious life, focusing on ritual through motivations, moods and dispositions. Although Geertz's perspective is not one that promotes a radical empiricism, it is an important perspective on experience, emotion and ethnography that we can rethink in relation to the project of performing ethnography – one that pushes against the limitations of interpretation and a purely text-based approach to include at its centre the performances of the ethnographer.

3 The *bol* system – stemming from the Hindi verb *bolna*, meaning "to speak" – refers to a basic grammar available to North Indian classical percussionists. Using each finger or a combination of finger positions on the tabla, artists produce a specific sound known as a *bol*. Bols, however, can have multi-vocal meanings and a variety of uses depending on both the compositional type as well as the specific school/lineage of the artist's training. In this way, bols can be thought of as phonemes. Bols are strung together to create phrases, and these phrases may be used to develop specific compositional types forming something like musical poetry. Though not a "language" that promotes propositional knowledge, this language is learned from the teacher through sound imitation over time, both as part of group and individual practice known as *riaz*. Learning to riaz properly, I argue, is key for developing kinesthetic knowledge of the Indigenous knowledge system.

4 It can be said that *Hindustani* music relies upon a "structure of improvisation," although it is important to stress that this translates into a highly structured type of improvisation. Essentially, rhythm makers (tabla and other percussionists) learn how to play in a variety of cycles (such as 7, 10, 16, etc.) known as *tal* or *tals*, whereas melody makers (sitarists, flutists, sarodists, vocalists, etc.) are trained in *rag* or melody. In order for any two performers to come together and play as *Hindustani* classical musicians, each must have knowledge of both rag and tal, but will be a specialist in one or the other depending upon their instrument of choice. Technically, performers need not rehearse prior to actual performances. What is crucial, however, is an embodied knowledge of *sam*, which is the beat of emphasis marking the beginning and ending of the time cycle, or tal. In *Hindustani* concerts, many learned audience members may perform what is known as "keeping the tal" by marking by and with the hands various beats in the tal cycle. In doing so, the audience can be fully engaged in both the dramatic successes of the musicians coming together on the sam or disappointment when an error occurs. Here, kinesthetic knowledge of the structure of the musical system developed by both performers and audience members encourages a group feeling like no other.

5 For a more detailed analysis of gesture and embodiment in the teaching and performance of tabla, see Nuttall (2013). Additionally, Weidman (2012) provides insight into how cultural knowledge and performative skills come to be embodied in learning vocals in South India. Weidman effectively communicates how gesture is an important part of kinesthetic knowledge transmitted from the teacher to student in the South Indian classical system of music.

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