I want to begin my discussion of ethnomusicology and power by considering the manifold conceptions of musical value in capitalist social and economic contexts. My guiding questions are these: what happens to music when it becomes a commodity? Is there something exceptional about music commodities in social life? Finding a way to navigate these questions, I would argue, is one way that the field of ethnomusicology might achieve greater theoretical relevance in the broader interdisciplinary discourses about the politics of culture. I will later suggest in this essay that an approach that broadens our understanding of reification and commodification of music as social practice might provide one way to address the problem of “musical exceptionalism” that at once provides us with an entrée into discussing the politics of cultural practice, even as the sometimes overly-specialized nature of our research seemingly dims the perceived relevance of our contribution.

I think of commodities in much the same way that Marx did—that is, as something that has use-value but is produced for the sake of exchange. This does not, of course, apply to all musical practice, but to particular modes of production, distribution, and consumption; social contexts, in particular, do fit this description. I take a broader view of commodities than Marx did, however, since there has been plenty of scholarship that has pointed to the expansion of commodification in late capitalism, including the commodification of social practices, intellectual property, experiences, and so forth.¹

As for the issue of music commodification, my sense is that ethnomusicology has found itself in a bit of a double bind. For a very long time within our discipline, commodified musics were the antithesis of local cultural authenticity, which was perceived as our proper study object. One of the scholarly approaches

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to the discipline of ethnomusicology has a documentary imperative that aligns with Boasian methodological ideologies: to find relatively pure musical traditions, structures, cultural value systems, or traditions for the sake of preservation. For a long time, the discipline largely focused upon the preservation of the heterogeneous musical-cultural expressions of Others—before their music and music makers were exploited, appropriated, and/or homogenized by the cultural imperialistic tendencies of Western-style capitalism.

This approach informed the ethnomusicological critique of the “world music” category in the international music industry and provided a space to critique practices and discourses of musical appropriation and commodification of the sounds of relatively powerless traditional musicians. At the same time, even as some ethnomusicologists tended to deem any form of commodified music as necessarily inauthentic, other ethnomusicologists were among the first to describe the musical transformations wrought by the spread of global capitalism and neoliberal economic transformations. For example, Wallis and Malm’s pioneering *Big Sounds from Small Peoples* (1984) engaged with the consequences of music technology and the reification of musical practice into a physical recording. Nevertheless, underlying the argument of much of their book is the poignant sense that global capitalism is gradually leading to a decline in musical diversity, as Michael Jackson became as much a household name in Papua New Guinea as he was in the United States.

It is also my sense that the longstanding disregard for popular musics—meaning here mass-mediated musics created and marketed for heterogeneous audiences—also emerges from the suspicion about the encroachment of capitalist, if not merely foreign, ideologies into local musics. Similarly, the reification of music into a thing, which Tom Turino (2008) describes in his interactions with his children, suggests a kind of disempowering phenomenon: the transformation of music from *something that someone does* into *something that someone owns*; an anxiety that emerges as a result of ostensibly active producers becoming ostensibly passive consumers. While I am sympathetic to this line of thinking, I am also interested in considering the perspectives of Laurence Lessig (2009), Kembrew McLeod (2007, 2011), Michal Veal (2008), and most recently, Kiri Miller (2012), who suggest that the practices of music-making might not simply be learning an instrument within a particular musical tradition, but also, for instance, the creative manipulation of pre-recorded sounds into forms that might be called music. Lessig in particular has suggested that new musical forms (e.g., jazz, rock, hip hop) have always had to confront negative social valuation. He suggests that in contemporary contexts, remix, mashup, dub, video games, and so forth are frequently portrayed by cultural critics as somehow less musical, less original, less socially valuable emergent musics. Of course, as someone who was trained in the “traditional” music making practices of jazz (i.e., group practice and Jamie Aebersold play-along records), I too have some ambivalence about creating musical collages with computers, as
compared to more traditional understandings of creating music, but I do not deny that they need to be examined as genuine music-making practices.

This reification of music has other interesting facets that ethnomusicologists do not always address. A lot of my ethnographic research takes place in contexts where music is being sold, that is, in the moment in which it is at the height of its commodity status. One of the theoretical problems that comes along with this is the “thing-ness” of music recordings in this context, which Jonathan Sterne (2012) has recently addressed—that is, the concretization of practice into thing broadly defined. This thing-ness might variously include live concert performances, sheet music, cassettes, and/or Internet streaming licenses. It is therefore worth asking: what exactly makes music different from other kinds of commodities? What makes music as a commodity different from, say, soap?

Let us take an indirect route to approaching this question, first from the perspective of what we might call the materiality of music in capitalism. There is a direct theoretical connection between the reification of music, and Arjun Appadurai’s (1986, 2005) discussion of the social lives of commodities that accrete manifold values (economic, social, religious, etc.) as they circulate. Indeed, one of Appadurai’s most important contributions to the discussion of value and commodities is his notion of the “commodity phase in the social life of a thing” (1986:13), which is an extension of Marxian notions of the commodity form. Even if they were produced in a capitalist system with the intention of being commodities, things do not remain commodities for their entire lives. Rather, Appadurai argues, they oscillate between their commodity status and other roles available within any given cultural system (i.e., as gifts, as religious artifacts, as signs of cultural capital, etc.). It is only in the context of their (potential) exchange that the commodity status of things vis-à-vis other potential statuses are cued in any given moment or context. The cultural value systems that (dis)enable exchange vary from context to context, place to place, and historical moment to historical moment, and some things spend more of their lives in a commodity state than others. In addition, things that are produced with the specific intention of being commodities very often have different form and content from things that simply flit through a commodity phase at some point in their life. In short, things that are produced for the market retain the traces of their mode of production, if not their relations of production. Yet like Mazzarella (2003), I would argue that reification is, in fact, never complete, never possible, because all of the potential statuses of any given commodity are never entirely foreclosed, even when it is in its commodity status. I think most ethnomusicologists have a heightened awareness of this fact, especially since much musical practice tends toward the subversive.

So I return to the question: what differentiates music from soap as a commodity? Is the game already over once music has entered its commodity status? In some senses, music and soap are not as different as one might hope. Inasmuch as they bear meanings, emerge out of particular sets of human needs, enable
participation in ritual practices, and have pragmatic associations in social life, they share many similarities. Like other commodities, music can be industrially mass produced; it can alienate the producers (musicians) from the products of their labor; it can be branded, counterfeited, and genre'd; it can be displayed in stores and ascribed with class, status, or gender meanings; it can be collected by consumers as a sign of status and distinction, and it is the site of ritual and embodied practices. However, despite these shared commodity characteristics, one can argue that minimally, and without resort to romanticizing human practices, music has a special status in the minds of music makers, audiences, and ethnomusicologists alike—that is, as something to be experienced (temporally, affectively); people see some part of themselves in music. They see it as having values that transcend its commodity status. Similarly, some music has an affective quality that, in the right context, can move or mobilize people through performance and embodied experience. I have found that this attitude of musical exceptionalism is pervasive among people in the United States and India, each of whom had a sense that by recommending, selling, sharing, and experiencing music, they were doing something transcendent, something far from mundane.

Moreover, I would argue that it is the instability that exists between use and exchange—and more particularly, the omnipresent potential for use to overwhelm exchange—that distinguishes music from other commodities. I would suggest that through its latent subversive potential, music is only ambivalently a commodity. Its commodity status must be enforced, and is resisted, at all turns by the people and institutions that seek to keep it in its commodity status as long as possible. Only with rigorous policing, lobbying, legislation, and enforcement does music fit, however reluctantly, into the industrial mold that has been cast for it. Adrian Johns (2009) has noted, for example, that the moral panics wrought by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) and the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) about the “protection” of cultural commodities are merely reappearances of the social and legal debates about copyright dating back to the eighteenth century that are revisited by every generation. Indeed, music was one of the first cultural commodities to undergo this kind of legal-corporate enforcement.

Taking a different tack, we might adopt Jacques Attali’s (1986) stance that music and music making are heralds of emergent sociability, that is, that each historical moment in music foreshadows the social values of the age that follows, including what we might call the contemporary age of intellectual property and the social and legal debates that accompany it. Thus, if we watch the contemporary landscape carefully, we might make predictions about future social life. In a global age, I think that ethnomusicologists are best situated to make these observations precisely because of the specificity of the cultural practices that we research.

I think we can contribute a number of unique perspectives to this discussion of music, commodities, and value, and, more broadly, the commodification of
culture. We are certainly in a great position to examine the changes of cultural practice that accompany economic transformations in global capitalism (which is, of course, a component of the ambivalence I noted earlier). If one can see seeds of this trajectory of social and economic transformation in what are now seen to be classic ethnographies (e.g. Feld 1982, Qureshi 1986, Seeger 1987, Finnegan 1989), it is worth asking what seeds of future sociability will become visible in contemporary ethnographic work. While not the work of an ethnomusicologist per se, Jacques Attali’s Noise (1985) certainly heralded the transformation of value in the era of intellectual property, where the intangibility of musical practice becomes less of a problem when one media conglomerate can successfully sue another over the idea of “rounded corners” on a mobile phone. Cultural appropriation and disenfranchisement are frequent dance partners with global capitalism, and I think that in many ways ethnomusicology has been a foundational discipline in framing this particular issue, even if we are not always given credit for it. This idea certainly applies to the classic texts that I listed above, but also manifests in the early 1990s’ discussion of cultural appropriation in “world beat.” Musical appropriation of indigenous sounds and the attempts to patent indigenous plants, like turmeric, by multinational corporations arise from the same conditions. These earlier debates infuse the contemporary cultural politics that accompany the discussion of those traditional art forms that ought to remain in the public domain (i.e., un-copyrightable), much less the legal discourses about whether human DNA can be patented.

We are also well situated to critically examine the discourses of intellectual property regimes. Of course, not all of our interlocutors will necessarily disavow the conception of music as property, as some certainly benefit from these new regimes. This is true, for example, when entrepreneurs attempt to brand themselves as authentic musical practitioners for the global marketplace. I have some ambivalence about this, as the Horatio Alger stories of the uplifting potential of capitalism are not always simply a fantasy. Nevertheless, we don’t have to accept such stories uncritically. Accordingly, I would argue that we need discuss the values of music commodities as socially and historically situated human phenomena first, rather than accepting the assertions that social, cultural, or normative values are merely epiphenomena of economic exchange. Marx himself argued that commodities can only have economic value when they possess use value for someone, at some time, in some social context. Moreover, as David Graeber (2001) has rightly argued, we are better off beginning with the perspective that economic exchange is an epiphenomenon of other regimes of (affective, ritual, social) value, rather than the inverse. Economic values cannot operate without co-operation with other value systems. As ethnomusicologists, therefore, we are uniquely qualified to unpack how and why this is the case.

I would like to conclude with a couple of directions that we as ethnomusicologists might take to enhance the relevance of our research within the field.
of scholarly production. First, we need to continue to develop more expansive conceptions of music and musical practice in order to position the relevance of our discipline vis à vis cultural, media, and performance studies. This might mean, therefore, that we have to reconsider our stance of musical exceptionalism in order to articulate with, and perhaps influence other theoretical models. If we understand a broader range of practices as musical (sampling, gaming, perhaps even marketing and other industrial acts), it is worth beginning to discuss the relative uniqueness of music within the field of cultural production and open up the discussion somewhat. As ethnomusicologists, we know that music very frequently—if not mostly—takes place along with other social activities. As such, we might need to broaden our horizons to be more inclusive in what we deem to be musical and/or musicking. As Paja Faudree has recently pointed out (2012), the lines between music and language are quite blurry in many places around the world; classifying whether a practice is language or music is ideological, not universal. What if we were to extend this insight to something that ethnomusicologists already know: music and musicking are only arbitrarily and ideologically separated from other domains of social life. As such, it might not be helping us from a disciplinary perspective to insist on music’s exceptional status. On the one hand, this might make us less special; on the other hand, it opens up the field to new kinds of theoretical and ethnographic innovations.

Another direction we might travel to enhance the relevance of our discipline is to take more seriously Attali’s notion of music as herald. By looking at the world in and through music and musicking, not only should our work address the historical and present circumstances of music in social life, but taking a page from science fiction writers (many of whom have a solid ethnographic sensibility), we are well situated, I think, to make predictions about future music and future human sociability, even if these predictions are sometimes wrong.

Notes


2. See Burke (1996) for a fascinating discussion of the layered meanings of soap in African colonial contexts. Of course, it is possible to aestheticize nearly anything, as Berger and Del Negro (2004) have discussed.

References

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